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Against Biocentrism: Blood, Adoption, and Diasporic Writing

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Blood lies

In the summer of 1979, the Canadian writer Lawrence Hill travelled as a young man to Niger to work as a volunteer with Crossroads International. As well as enabling him to help those in one of the poorest parts of Africa, the trip allowed him to address more private concerns as "a person of biracial ancestry" (Hill 188). Like many others in North America at the time, Hill had been provoked by Alex Haley's book Roots (1976) and its television adaptation. The chance to visit Africa was for Hill an opportunity to indulge his perceived African heritage, accessed through his father's ancestral genealogy. "[A]s soon as the plane landed in Niamey," he recalls,

> and I stepped down onto the tarmac, I felt not just an oven of heat but also an explosion of unanticipated emotion. My very molecules, it seemed, screamed with desire to connect with the people of Niger. I longed for their acceptance, and for their recognition of my own ancestral history. [...] I had grown up in a mixed-race family in a white suburb. By the time I was twenty-two, I had been searching for years to cement my own growing sense of black identity, and this was my first opportunity to travel meaningfully in Africa. (Hill 135)

If Hill thought that his physical being forcefully demanded an intimacy with Africans, a yearning as much molecular as affective, he was soon disabused of this perception. Not long after arriving, he fell ill with gastroenteritis and was hospitalised. Attended to by his concerned white Francophone Quebecois friends, Hill received a blood transfusion which

probably saved his life. Lying in bed, staring at the hanging bag of blood emptying slowly into his veins, Hill ruminated on the possible transnational and transcultural passages which underwrote his transfusion: "I imagined the person or persons who had donated the blood. African? European? North American? [...] Now that I was on a hospital bed with blood to absorb, I no longer felt preoccupied by the idea of having my own heritage—my own blood, or so it felt—accepted by the people of Niger" (Hill 139). Rather than helping him secure stabilising encounters with consanguineous kin or share the permanent pulse of African cultural filiation, Hill's time in Niger delivered a different "gift" (140): a demythologised comprehension of human relations no longer understood in terms of narrow arterial blood-lines. It was a hard lesson, never forgotten, of the endangering rhetorics of race and identity which deal so frequently in blood. "I made a promise to myself," he remembers, "that when I recovered and left the hospital, I would never worry again about how people imagined or interpreted the nature of my blood" (140).

Blood, bodies, belonging—the presentation of bodily matter as biogenetically coded in terms of racial, topographical and cultural origins remains a familiar manoeuvre, mobilised by those who would promulgate as much as contest divisive and prejudicial behaviour. Although this figurative connection predates modernity, it is a distinctly modern move, one that propels sinister articulations of human collectivity and sometimes shadows those forms of democratising nationalisms that inevitably bound themselves to bloody limits. As Jean-Luc Nancy notes:

> "nationality" [...] began as an emancipation from foreign tyrannies but ended up in imaginary or even mythological fixations. Fascisms were nothing other than a hypertrophy of identities inflated with the very idea, an empty one, of identity. Into this idea it was possible to throw anything and everything, all mixed up: blood and soil,

> terror and mirage, military ambitions, symbols of all kinds, annexation, a new order. (Nancy 26)

The modern confection of identity as a consanguineous concern has been inseparable from national interests of colonial dispossession, enforced land acquisition and racial hierarchisation, one which has animated state policy in profound ways. Cathy Hannabach's recent powerful study of "blood cultures" attends to the role of blood-banking in imagining America and the racialising procedures of blood transfusions during the Second World War: "white women's blood only went to white male soldiers, and Black women's blood only went to Black male soldiers" (Hannabach 20-1). She exposes, too, the rules of blood quantum in dispossessing Native Americans and Native Hawaiians, as well as contemporary notions of "blood security" that have contributed to the medicalisation of migrant and refugee bodies as threatening to pollute the "good blood" (117) of the "healthy" nation. The material and psychological consequences of these myths of blood are famously betrayed by Frantz Fanon's memory of being interpellated as "Negro" by a frightened white child: "What else could it be for me but an amputation, an excision, a haemorrhage that spattered my whole body with black blood?" (Fanon 112). The absurdity of the idea of "black blood," a biological impossibility, has never inhibited its agency to discriminate and to wound: emotionally, mentally, physically.

The idea that bodies carry in their veins a fixed racial and cultural provenance, whether it be the "humours" of the blood or the stamp of racial degeneracy, has not disappeared despite the scientific disproval of racialisation as a biological truth and the scholarly revelation of identity as performative and essentially cultured. Yet, even in the realm of diasporic thought and writing, biocentric and consanguineous notions of personhood remain, often surprisingly, to animate representations of being, belonging and cultural

provenance. In her discussion of the impossible desires of queer diasporas, Gayatri Gopinath has noted with concern "the tendency toward patrilineality, biology, and blood-based affiliation that lies embedded within the term 'diaspora'" (Gopinath 34). David L. Eng has also argued, conscious of the etymology of diaspora as meaning to disperse or sow, that received understandings of the term endorse biocentric ideas of fixed or proper origin:

> diaspora is firmly attached to genealogical notions of racial descent, filiation, and biological traceability. Configuring diaspora as displacement from a lost homeland or exile from an exalted origin can thus underwrite regnant ideologies of nationalism, while upholding virulent notions of racial purity and its structuring heteronormative logics of gender and sexuality. (Eng 13)

Given Eng's important reminder of the term's seminal and geneticist leanings, in this essay I wish to expose and critique the problematic presence of biocentrism in some much-lauded diasporic literature, with particular reference to the writing of Zadie Smith, Jane Jeong Trenka and Jackie Kay. To this end, adoption studies has much to offer. For those inward of or interested in the so-called "adoption triad" (birth-parent, adoptive parent, adoptee), the significance of consanguineous relations and models of personhood is particularly acute and contested, especially in transcultural families, not least because adoption materialises ways of family-making that do not require biogenetic legitimation and dispense with the security of blood-lines—although, as we will see too, adoptees can sometimes cling with particular force to the sanctity of biogenetic kinship even as their lives call into question its relevance.

In the present century, where the precarity of bare life has been soberingly borne by those migrants and refugees propelled towards the tragedies of diasporic dwelling or drowning, bloodied by neoliberal states as infrahuman matter rather than people in crisis, it

remains an urgent task to think of bodies beyond their discursive normalisation, not least in the context of Hill's reminder that blood "has become such a powerful metaphor for personality that we have forgotten it is an idea—not a reality. It helps us imagine ourselves" (Hill 142). This mode of imagining remains remarkably ingrained across the contemporary epistemic complex, from media accounts of adept sportsmen or virtuoso musicians whose talents reside "in their blood," to the popular pastime of discovering personhood through ancestry websites or DNA testing which trace one's origins to a particular terra firma, epitomised and indulged by television programmes that feature "reunions" of genetically related people separated by adoption. Diasporic peoples are especially susceptible. Marianne Hirsch and Nancy K. Miller have written of the recent penchant amongst African Americans for tracing their genetic connectedness to African locations, through website services like www.africanancestry.com and encouraged by Henry Louis Gates's television series African American Lives which "attest both to the seduction of the quest for a direct link to deep roots and family bloodlines, and to what appears to be a widespread longing that crosses the boundaries of ethnicity, gender, and social class" (Hirsch and Miller 12). In our increasingly liquid modernity, the pull of ideas such as biogenetic ancestry may well offer an important means of stabilisation and anchorage in an increasingly turbulent milieu where the virtual comforts of "roots return" steady the self. As Hannabach has argued, "blood has long been a key site for the negotiation of intersecting anxieties regarding citizenship, gender, sexuality, and race" (Hannabach 85), and its propensity to stabilise unsteady or precarious modes of personhood and belonging is long-standing.

Robert J.C. Young's well-known study of the colonial legacies of hybridity, Colonial Desire (1995), memorably exposes the complex Victorian assumptions and fears about the connections between raciological ordering and the differential nature of blood, with the threat of degeneration linked firmly to vile ideas of racially-mixed relations driven by

contradictions of colonial desire. As Young shows, ideas about race and blood were "never simply scientific or biologistic" (Young 27). The consolidation of blood quantum and the mathematicalisation of miscegenation was attempted through absurd, ever-expanding vocabularies of consanguineous computation in which the normalisation of "possessing" a half, quarter, or eighth measure of foreign blood, etc., was attempted (but never fully fixed) through the tabulation of racist nouns: "half-blood, half-caste, half-breed, [...] octoroon, puchuelo, quadroon, quarteron, [...] saltatro, terceron" (181). One of Young's key arguments, that the enthusiasm for hybridity in postcolonial theory redeploys rather than repeals these unpalatable legacies, was quickly questioned by Stuart Hall as an "inexplicably simplistic charge," and Hall also chided Young for suggesting "that the post-colonial critics are 'complicit' with Victorian racial theory because both sets of writers deploy the same term—hybridity—in their discourse!" (Hall 259). While Hall, perhaps wisely, was less sceptical than Young about the risks involved in recasting hybridity as a means of postcolonial critique, some of Young's caution seems particularly germane today and might be requisitioned fruitfully, especially as regards the presence of blood in the confection of diasporic personhood. The shift from an essentialist to a culturalist understanding of race, as he argued at the end of the last century, "has not been so absolute, for the racial was also cultural, the essential never unequivocal. How does that affect our own contemporary revisions of the imagined past?" (Young 28). Given that the notion of blood has long been a key means of figurative transport for assumptions about racial and cultural provenance—indeed, it is the very substance in which, imaginatively, the realms of race and culture are transfused—we might ask a related, contemporary research question of our own: to what extent do diasporic texts today sustain rather than surpass received ideas about the nature of blood?

Blood matters, 'birthrights'

Recent scholarship in adoption studies has sought to dissolve the admixture of race, culture and consanguinity often in the light of transcultural and transracial adoptions which expose the synthetic if seductive nature of modernity's solution of selfhood. In his compelling study Claiming Others: Transracial Adoption and National Belonging (2010), Mark C. Jerng discusses how adoptive family-making makes visible the ideological crafting of normative personhood. As the matter of one's birth "acts as the implicit norm behind the consolidation of categories like nation, family, and race," he writes, "[a]doptees engage the world with neither a sense of continuity nor entry into a specific history that is one's own, bearing uncertainly the projections of national and societal forms of birthright" (Jerng x). The assumption that birth equates with origin, rather than enacting a beginning, usually places (non-adopted) subjects within perceived knowable racial and cultural genealogies—the legitimate provenance bounded as "birthright" or "birth culture." But many adult adoptees in First World locations have had no such ready access to "birthright," due to the practice of closed or sealed adoptions in which names of birth-parents, adopters and adoptees are withheld from each party as part of the adoption contract. The resulting personhood appears as incomplete, with family relations understood as synthetic not authentic, due to the lack of knowable biogenetic lines of connection that normatively function as exalted cultural and racial origins. These normative notions of personhood have acquired remarkable legal and moral reach, as suggested in Jerng's discussion of those Articles of the 1989 UN Convention of the Rights of the Child which addressed intercountry adoption in terms that clearly underwrote the notion of "birthright":

> they conflate genetic, historical, and legal identities by identifying all three with some notion of birth. [...] Biological identity here stands in for the reality of one's

> personhood—but not as the simple valorization of genetics. Rather it stands in for a placed-ness in nation, family, and race that exceeds the biological. The biological is a spatio-temporal projection in which the body is situated properly, given the conditions that provide a corrective against displacement and unreality. The legal construction of children's rights implicitly relies on the psychoanalytic construction of adoptees as lacking reality because of displacement and separation from not simply biology but also from the normative development and identifications of personhood. (145)

Given the ideological matrix of modern personhood, the confection of identity in terms of uninterrupted genealogical continuity has become a source of grievance for some adoptees, whose wish to locate themselves racially and culturally has been proferred in terms of authentic selfdiscovery, of who they "really" are.

Jerng's sympathetic suspicion towards these procedures of personhood invites us to think about how their pursuit "might limit the range of possibilities and relations through which adoptees become legible" (142), not least because this way of thinking "accentuates the importance of nation and race and fixed and bounded entities in determining personhood. Nation and race become repositories for this conflation of genetic and cultural 'histories'" (143). In other words, while adoption has the capacity to challenge theoretically the primacy of biocentric relations and normative modes of personhood by pointing out alternative examples of family-making and fresh opportunities for thinking (and) being, adoption's legal framing and societal comprehension practically uphold the notion that racial and cultural identity are molecular matters of biological descent, written in the blood.

To be sure, and as my discussion of adoption writing suggests, there is nothing immediately radical about the practice of adoption per se. Indeed, it is often an assimilative activity that upholds the patrician norms of family and selfhood, and in which adoptees and

their parents can be complicit. Jerng's work is a compelling example of how the critical comprehension of adoption can assist wider postcolonial challenges to consanguineous ideas of the cultural and racial provenances of personhood. As adoption scholar Margaret Homans puts it when commenting on transracial adoption, "the assumptions that race is the same as genetic inheritance and that genetic inheritance is the same as cultural heritage are open to question" (Homans 11) as a consequence of the alternative practices of family-making which adoption embodies. Those keen to laud certain diasporic texts as launching radical modes of being and belonging critical of the modern technologies of personhood or statecraft might pause for a moment and notice instead the extent to which biocentric norms survive. These discoveries do not necessarily betray a political conservatism on the part of the writers I discuss below, and should not be taken blithely as such. Rather, they evidence just how tough it can be to dislodge modernity's biocentric thinking even when writers seek to formulate diasporic personhood in terms of the polycultural particulars of everyday life.

For example, in her essay "Speaking in Tongues" (2008), Zadie Smith vacillates unsteadily between conceiving of diasporic personhood in terms of polyvocality, the acquired capacity to speak in and across more than one voice, and as a matter of biocentric racial admixture, where one's speech is not the outcome of cultural acquisition but is more exclusively the result of biogenetic provenance (as in Hill's figure of the body's molecules "screaming" for Africa). Smith's essay discusses the changing timbre of her voice as she moved from her Willesden childhood to her undergraduate years at Cambridge, where she learned to speak in a mannered accent she believed was "the voice of lettered people" (Smith 2009, 133). As she travelled between University and home during the vacations, her voice shifted accordingly: "at home, during the holidays, I spoke with my old voice, and in the old voice seemed to feel and speak things that I couldn't express in college, and vice versa. I felt a sort of wonder at the flexibility of the thing. Like being alive twice" (133). Smith's

articulation of personhood as a matter of "being" is at the heart of the potentially exciting possibilities promised in the early stages of her essay, not least in the ways it prepares her reader for a rendering of diasporic life beyond the precepts of stable singularity. Her sense of moving between divergent English locations of class, learning, language, and letters would seem to endorse Nancy's sense of culture as at heart polyvocal, multiply (in) vested, more multifarious than nations usually allow. "[A] people," writes Nancy, historically have "been constituted in one way or another, one that speaks Basque or Finnish, which counts the days or knits the clothes in such and such a way. However, behind this people, this language, its customs [coutumes], or stitching [couture], there are always other peoples and other languages, other ways, other inventions" (Nancy 33). Smith tracks the everyday ups and downs of such experiences and tongues with reference to the figure of George Bernard Shaw's character of Eliza Doolittle in his play Pygmalion (1913) before turning to Barack Obama's Dreams from My Father: A Story of Race and Inheritance (1995), which she reads wittily alongside Shaw's play as a book portraying "a many-voiced man" (Smith 2009, 137). She notes the potentially patrilineal problem of Obama's title, "with its suggestion of a simple linear inheritance" (137), but claims that Obama rejects it in his portrayal of his white mother and black father's failed relationship. She asserts instead his distinct position as someone who stands amidst the stitching, in an intermediate space of projection where his parents' "dreams had been" (139). As the daughter of a Jamaican mother and English father, Smith recognises this "Dream City" as close to home:

> It is a place of many voices, where the unified singular self is an illusion. Naturally, Obama was born there. So was I. When your personal multiplicity is printed on your face, in an almost too obviously thematic manner, in your DNA, in your hair and in the neither-this-nor-that beige of your skin—well, anyone can see you come from Dream

> City. In Dream City everything is doubled, everything is various. You have no choice but to cross borders and speak in tongues. That's how you get from your mother to your father, from talking to one set of folks who think you're not black enough to another who figure you insufficiently white. It's the kind of town where the wise man says "I" cautiously, because I feels like too straight and singular a phoneme to represent the true multiplicity of his experience. (138-9)

At one level it seems that Smith's singular plural selfhood is the product of, and set against, familiar forms of cultural and racial interpellation. Her intermediate location in "Dream City" appears as the outcome of normative perception ("anyone can see") that declares cultural plurality as unhappily liminal, franked by the sordid social machinery of racialisation: "printed on your face," "neither-this-nor-that beige." Filial relations seem a struggle of speech and representation, a tense "talking" that ties tongues rather than binds relations, where the certainties of singularity cannot contain the tonal range of "multiplicity." But at the same time, and contrariwise, Smith's membership of "Dream City" sustains in a contradictory fashion the notion of birth as exalted origin, a kind of virtual jus soli that presents "multiplicity of experience" in terms of birthright. The promise of "being alive twice," reborn through acquiring a new tongue, that would disconnect the idea of birth from natal origin, is quickly forgotten. Smith's "place of voice" is firmly aligned with her nativity—"Obama was born there. So was I"—which pushes "speaking in tongues" towards the realm of natal origin rather than conceives of it as an unfolding matter of coutume or couture where the seams of selfhood might be unpicked or cross-stitched. People tend to be born with voices—the new-born's first cry is a vital sign of life—but never with language. "Speaking in tongues" is acquired, not assured. When Smith writes that "personal multiplicity" is "in your DNA, in your hair," it is not fully clear if she presents ironically the

synchronisation of molecular structures and cultural provenance as a discursive myth, peddled by "those who figure you," or if she regards it biocentrically as an inevitable ontological given: written in, not on, the body, the consequence of so-called mixed parentage, not mixed parenting.

Smith's indecision is marked most notably in the tension between the simultaneous rendering of "Dream City" in bifocal and polyfocal terms—"where everything is doubled, where everything is various"—with the former term sustaining the intimation of her personhood as the biogenetic solution of two blood-lines, maternal and paternal. As such, "Speaking in Tongues" leaves unanswered some key questions which appear especially susceptible to adoption scholars' mistrust of notions of birthright and birth culture as profoundly oxymoronic. Is "Dream City" a kind of birth culture, or can anyone inhabit its realm in due course? Must you have a particular kind of DNA to access a singular plural self, to "cross borders and speak in tongues"? If, as Nancy says, "'[m] ulticulturality' is the condition of each culture [...] a point of departure and a send-off, also a kind of drawing, a style, a turn or a twist" (Nancy 34), does Smith's "wise man" possess the exclusive capacity to speak in tongues due to his "mixed" natal origins? Can "Dream City" only be written up by a "birthright"? While we must never play lightly with the challenges or the pain that Smith may have faced when dealing with the racializing figurations of others that may have propelled her to embrace "the true multiplicity of experience" as a matter of "no choice," at the same time we need to ask questions of diasporic writing that risks sustaining biocentric transfusions of race and culture.

A similar rendition of biocentric personhood makes its way subtlycbut insidiously into Smith's first novel, White Teeth (2000). As the novelccloses we learn of Irie Jones's pregnancy, the biogenetic paternity of which is left uncertain as Irie has enjoyed intimate relations with both the Iqbal twins, Magid and Millat, and does not know for sure which of

the two is the father. This curious fact, that "[s]he could not know her body's decision, what choice it had made, in the race to the gamete" (Smith 2000, 441) is positioned preferentially against the constraining pedagogical obligations and cultural protocols that families present to their children through parenting, as exemplified in the novel by Samad Iqbal with his obsessions with Mangal Pande and his decision to send Magid to be raised in Bangladesh—a form of parenting the consequences of which Irie animatedly describes in terms of an "endless maze of present rooms and past rooms and the things said in them years ago and everybody's old historical shit all the over the place" (440). The novel's tilt at the possibilities of polycultural futurity, freed from these prologues of the past, is expressed in its maverick embrace of biogenetic indeterminacy, comically captured in the escape of Futuremouse at the novel's end, as well as in the figure of Irie's "fatherless little girl" (462). Futuremouse is intended as a genetic experiment to produce a creature whose every move can be calculated and predicted, a perfect form of "anatomy as destiny" wittily satirised by its unexpected getaway at the novel's end. Archie's response as he watches the mouse escape—"Go on my son! thought Archie" (462), the book's last words—keeps the matter of unpredictable futurity, symbolised by Futuremouse, phrased in ironic terms of uncertain colloquial paternity. His quip supplements the figurative significance of Irie's child "who writes affectionate postcards to Bad Uncle Millat and Good Uncle Magid and feels free as Pinocchio, a puppet clipped of paternal strings" (462). Irie's child promises a new kind of polycultural possibility fit for the new millennium: a future imperfect where the present defies the paternalistic lines and ligatures of precedent and antecedent.

Smith's advocacy of polycultural futurity embodied by the mixed-race child might be thought to depart, in Gopinath's phrase, from those nostalgic "fictions of purity that lie at the heart of dominant nationalist and diasporic ideologies" (Gopinath 4). Yet, in figuring this futurity in terms of unspecified blood-lines, Smith reinforces cultural provenance as a

consanguineous matter and keeps stable the idea that blood is an exalted origin of personhood. The alignment of cultural plurality with racial admixture and biogenetic indeterminacy sustains a biocentric imagination. Such futurity is still a version of *"birth culture"* that keeps proximate the realms of DNA and cultural provenance by making an unknown yet clearly "mixed" biogenetic past the biocentric guarantor of unpredictable polycultural possibilities that are unstrung from blood-lines. As such, Smith does not question the normative notion that cultural polysemy is sourced in, explained by, and commensurate with biogenetic particulars, because she makes a metaphor of a mixed-race child whose figurative value seems but the inverse of the kinds of racial degeneration tracked by Robert Young. The transfusion of race and culture—that "old historical shit"—remains to the novel's end to foul the future. Why can't Irie's unnamed daughter obtain something like that "Dream City" future, where "everything is various," with her paternity known and settled? Why must her hopeful humdrum diasporicity be reflected in her biogenetic particulars, conveniently not co-incidentally "mixed"?

Bloody words

Diasporic representations of adoption do not automatically challenge the biocentric and consanguineous norms of personhood which transfuse race, culture, biogenetics and the body. Biocentrism also emerges in the writing of transcultural adoptees for whom growing up without the normative security of knowing one's blood-lines can be a source of emotional upset, especially in a milieu which anchors identity to fixed knowable biogenetic origins. To be sure, adoptees are often obsessed with blood and blood-lines precisely because they have been led to believe they cannot obtain whole personhood without this information to hand. In her memoir The Language of Blood (2003), the Korean-born American-raised adoptee Jane Jeong Trenka reflects upon her adoption by white parents and her early years in Minnesota.

Racially abused at school, she struggled to answer the questions of her peers who asked her what it feels like not to know her birth-mother: "I did not know how to explain to them, 'It feels awful. Weird. It feels like I was never born. [...] What does it feel like when you hug your mother, and you're just the right size so that your face comes up to her belly, where you came from? [...]'" (Trenka 35). Trenka's yearning for normative personhood and biogenetic familiarity is pitted against the everyday disorientation she experiences, denied ready access both to unremarkable American personhood through the racist epithets of others and to the potential stabilising compass-points of Korean culture that might help her route her way through the multiple contexts of her young life. Like many parents of transcultural adoptees, Trenka's pursued a strategy of colour-blind parenting as a means of assimilation to the norm. "There were no books about adopted children, no celebrations of adoption day or naturalization day," she records, "no culture camps to attend. They raised [my sister and I] like they were supposed to—like we were their own" (35).

It is moot whether sending the young Trenka to a "culture camp" would have provided her a meaningful or sustaining encounter with Korean culture. Such attempts, however well-intentioned, to connect adopted children with a cultural heritage perceived always to be their birthright by way of biogenetic inheritance keep snugly aligned biocentric notions of appropriate cultural provenance. And as Vincent J. Cheng (himself an adoptive father of a Chinese-born child) has argued, these usually traffic in casual cultural clichés of Chineseness, Koreanness, and the like (Cheng 74-5). Either way, Trenka grows to adulthood concerned that she is persistently identified with a cultural horizon (variously "Asian" and "Korean") of which she cannot speak. At college in Minneapolis she initially avoids Pan-Asian student events:

> I couldn't think of anything more uncomfortable than going to a Lunar New Year Party. When the hell is Lunar New Year anyway, and how did they come up with that calendar, and what year is it? My knowledge of the Chinese zodiac was gleaned from paper mats in restaurants. [...] What was I supposed to do if I went in there? Introduce myself as Jane the Twinkie, the Pan-Asian fraud? Stand around with an egg roll in my hand and wait for someone to talk to me in English so accentuated I couldn't understand it or, worse yet, talk to me in Korean? Excruciating. (Trenka 66)

Against this cultural illiteracy, Trenka claims a different kind of language which her adoption has stifled but not silenced. In a tender passage about her American parents, she sympathises with their perceived predicament of raising a Korean-born child who inevitably brought to Minnesota

> the inescapable voice of generational memory, of racial memory, of landscape. [...] They did not know this emotion or the word for it—han—but nevertheless it climbed up from the other side of the earth, through the bottoms of [the child's] feet, through her legs and body like columns of a building, and was crystallized in sadness at an impasse in the throat, where a new and forgetful life became a tourniquet. (208)

This striking image of an earthbound "inescapable voice," transported by the uprooted body but throttled at the throat by adoption, legitimates the idea of a primal personhood of which the body can speak once the chokehold of adopted life is loosened.

Trenka claims to find that language, and the self-literacy it delivers, in meeting her birth-mother, Umma, a relationship presented very much as a tryst of blood given added poignancy by the sombre fact of Umma's fatal decline from cancer—even though they

struggle to communicate due to their respective poor English and Korean language competence. Caring for her ailing birth-mother, Trenka takes solace in her sense that "I am made in the image of you; I am daughter after your body and after your heart. Even if I fail to create you with words, I will carry you with me, in the language of blood" (140). As in the image of the tourniqued throat, the failure of voice cannot ultimately silence a biogenetic language which signifies beyond and before words. Later Trenka claims that "I think I absorbed things in your womb, Umma" (163), including Umma's mysterious Korean speech, and wonders if this is why her Korean pronunciation is so good even though "I cannot understand what I say. I am babbling in Korean, like I did as a baby. My words are frozen in that place, an infant's language, an infant's comprehension" (164). Once again, problems of language acquisition, of speaking in tongues, are resolved by a different kind of biocentric speech: "even without language, through the amniotic fluid and the faint light coming through the walls of your belly, I understood the brute emotions of fear and hunger. I absorbed them, made them part of my life's fabric" (164). Trenka's quest to establish a "language of blood," before and beyond linguistic understanding, may be a psychologically crucial strategy, one we might respect, that has helped her cope with the difficulties of her adoption, the challenge of meeting her birth-mother and Umma's fatal illness. But when Jerng claims that "Trenka's notion of blood is not deterministic but rather an open metaphor, a form of transferring meaning or of registering unspeakable and unexperienced loss" (Jerng 151), it is very difficult to support this view. Trenka's rendering of blood is a profoundly biocentric one, described in Margaret Homans's reading as a "wordless bond between mother and daughter that transcends their geographic and linguistic distance" (Homans 171). Trenka tropes a mode of molecular speech, akin to Hill's Afrocentric bodily "scream", that refuses both the problems and possibilities of adopted life by transfusing the natal provenances of

land, parent, and culture in one compensatory consanguineous image of sure origin—a "birth culture" replete with its own language, never to stick in the throat.

Finally, let us assess the extent to which biocentric thinking remains faintly to structure representations of diaspora and adoption that seem squarely to reject the modern nature of blood. A mixed-race adoptee raised by white Scottish parents, Jackie Kay is one of a small number of writers of transcultural adoption who attempt refreshingly to think personhood beyond consanguineous norms. In her novel Trumpet (1998), blood and blood-lines are reconceived as metaphors for transcultural and transpersonal transport, of fluid filial connections to others which are invented and inscribed rather than exclusively clotted. Yet at the same time, the novel's determined challenge to the agency of myths of blood leads it towards dispensing entirely with the significance of biogenetic connections to the formation of human personhood, in a seeming reversal of the old adage that blood is thicker than water. Lauding nurture over nature is not necessarily a progressive standpoint. It is one thing to say that biogenetic attachments do not constitute the primary matter of selfhood; it is quite another to suggest that they do not matter at all. As I have argued elsewhere (McLeod 23-29), adoptees have the right to full knowledge of their biogenetic ancestry and particulars, not to secure normative identity via blood-lines, but to discover vital "life lines" of connection to the cultural and social contexts which shaped their nativity and subsequent surrender, and with which they can reckon (or not) as they might. Although Kay's later work seems more attuned to this way of thinking, as evidenced in her memoir Red Dust Road (2010) and poetry collection Fiere (2011), her fictional exploration of adoption in Trumpet threatens to close down the revelation of such life lines in its steadfast antipathy towards the authority of consanguineous relations.

Trumpet is the posthumous portrayal of jazz musician Joss Moody, conceived by an African father and a white Scottish woman, who is born as female but lives and marries as a

man, and who with his wife Millie adopts a mixed-race son, Colman. As the narrative progresses, Kay exposes the inadequacy of the normative languages of identity to capture fully Joss's being through the scandal created by his perceived transgression when the "truth" of his female body is made public after his death. Joss is delightfully, troublingly liminal. As a so-called mixed-race person he muddles the tidy genealogies required by race and nation, while as an adoptive father to his mixed-race son Colman he breaks the blood-line crucial to myths of authentic personhood. His life as a man calls into question the authority of one's nativity as definitive of the ensuing life—why should being born female limit one's subsequent gender(s)?—while his marriage to Millie troubles the language of sexuality: is theirs a lesbian relationship, or is "lesbian" unable to capture exactly the nature of their love? As adoption often suggests that family-making need not require the presence of biogenetic attachment, the novel turns at key moments to images of blood as culturally inconsequential and capricious in order to reach towards new conceptions of being. Wittily, Kay has Joss and Millie meet each other in a blood donor centre in 1950s' Glasgow, quite possibly one of the most prosaic locations in contemporary fiction for a romantic encounter. Millie's recall of their second meeting is instructive for the novel as a whole:

> We talk about giving blood, how we both hate it, but like clenching our fist and the biscuit afterwards. I ask him if he watches the blood being drained out of himself. He says he looks away at anything else. He says he is quite squeamish. What about you, he asks me, what do you do? I tell him I like to watch the blood filling up, the wonderful rich colour of it. (Kay 1998, 12-13)

As in Lawrence Hill's account of his hospital stay in Niger, this scene emphasises the transferability of blood rather than its racialised limitations, its capacity to nourish the lives of

unknown others whose racial or cultural particulars may be entirely different to their donor's. Joss's squeamishness captures the novel's wider distaste for blood rendered in exclusive, primary terms, and his emptying veins symbolise the novel's attempt to drain blood of this significance. At the same time, Millie's perception of blood as aesthetically sustaining keeps buoyant a sense of blood as giving sustenance, and opens the way for the reconstitution of imagining blood and blood-lines as possessing a different value.

Joss's life as a mixed-race musician, descended from migrant and diasporic paternity, challenges the racist biocentric cliché that black folks are naturally inclined to music and dancing. In Kay's memorable description of Joss's trumpet-playing, she toys with the public perception that there is "music in his blood" (134) by presenting his creative performance as breaching such bounds. Joss brings music into his dissolving body rather than finds it already there: "The music is his blood. His cells. But the odd bit is down at the bottom, the blood doesn't matter after all. None of the particulars count for much. [...] The horn ruthlessly strips him bare till he ends up with no body, no past, nothing" (135). This "nothing" is not empty but is figured as a pinpoint of himself. "A small black mark" (131)—one that recalls a musical note, perhaps, or a full-stop in a sentence. Its blackness is not inherently racialised but specifically voided. Atomised as such, Joss's musicianship has the capacity to rephrase the body which is sounded not through the constricted speech of normative selfhood or the dubious language of blood but by a different vocality, intimated in the notes of the trumpet vitalised by his breath: "His whole body is bent over double. His trumpet pointing down at the floor then up at the sky. He plays another high C. He holds on. He just keeps blowing. He is blowing his story. His story is blowing in the wind. He lets rip" (136). It is a scene of ontological conception in which Joss appears reborn, "blue in the face" (132), not racialised as black; where music occupies and animates his cells not as a birthright, but as the consequence of his musicianship, so that both body and consciousness are refashioned: "He

explodes. Then he brings himself back. Slowly, slowly, piecing himself together" (136). This constitution of reborn being appears both cellular and cognitive and is crucial to Kay's important rebuttal of biocentrism.

Yet, when the novel presents Joss's relationship to Colman as an adoptive parent, its sensitivity to the materiality of adopted life is bypassed by its enthusiasm for liquidating the normative agency of blood. Instructively, Joss mobilises a refreshed metaphor of the blood-line as the means for Colman to improvise filial connections. Early in the novel he counsels his son to forge relations with those to whom he feels inclined, just as Joss chooses politically to commit to the Pan-Africanism of the postwar years. "My father always told me that he and I were related the way it mattered," remembers Colman: "He said you make up your own bloodline, Colman. Make it up and trace it back. Design your own family tree—what's the matter with you? Haven't you got an imagination?" (58). This revamped idea of blood-lines as postured, not predetermined, reflects a perception of blood akin to Millie's, a rich substance of sustenance to be freely handed out to those who require it. Nonetheless, Joss's concern with the "matter" of Colman leaves out the material particulars of his son's biogenetic provenance: the people who conceived him and the grim social or cultural contexts which compelled them to surrender him. None of this seems to matter as Colman grows to adulthood, careless, like his parents, of these additional lines of connection which might form key aspects of the jazzy, improvisational personhood the novel so prizes and that is gifted to Colman as Joss's legacy. This personhood is clinched near the novel's end when Colman reads a letter from his deceased father in which he is gifted the agency of improvising a new personhood for Joss as part of their made-up filial blood-line: "I am leaving myself to you [writes Joss]. Everything I have got. [...] I will be your son now in a strange way. You will be my father telling or not telling my story. (I wasn't born yesterday)" (277). Although this is a highly moving and in many ways laudable refiguring of family

relations beyond the consanguineous, one story definitely not available for "telling or not telling" is that of Colman's nativity—a story of bodily creation and connection which does not have to be originary or exalted, but might still be made to matter.

In other words, Trumpet is unable to think of biogenetic relations as anything other than biocentric. The best it can do is negate biogenetic connections entirely. In positioning itself against biocentrism so squarely, Kay's novel loses the full capacity to think of the enriching ways in which adoptive and biogenetic relations might be brought and thought together differently, beyond the good and evil of nurture and nature, as concomitant filaments or life lines of polyvalent personhood open to all (not just to adoptees or the mixed-race custodians of "Dream City"). Instead, these polarised terms remain, in reverse.

As Barbara Yngvesson has observed in her discussion of transcultural adoption, "the difference of the adopted child takes shape against a back- drop of assumption that 'blood,' 'genes' or 'descent' constitute 'natural' identity'" (Yngvesson 25). As I have argued, "natural" consanguineous personhood holds fast in diasporic writing more often than not, both in those texts which take adoption as their subject matter and in those which do not do so but which seem to promise an enlightened postcolonial rendition of personhood beyond modernity's norms. As we have seen, the prevalence of tropes of blood in such texts remains a sticking point for postcolonial and diasporic critical practices alike. We need to confront what is at stake when we sustain consanguineous thinking in our critical and creative practices, from whatever vantage, and admit exactly what we risk when we choose to support—or, at the very least, not to censure—those cultural and political discourses which mobilise blood as a substance of entitlement or exalted origin. At the same time, we must also wilfully avoid passing by the mystical rendering of "the language of blood" as a biocentric given, no matter how emotionally compelling this idea appears, as Lawrence Hill admitted on landing in Niger. To my mind, we require a wholesale reimagining of the ever-

entangled relations between biogenetic and cultural life lines of connection beyond biocentric norms, one which refuses too the glib lauding of nurture over nature, as if bodies didn't matter. Otherwise, the prized "language of blood" will continue to drown out so many other tongues with which we might learn to speak (of) ourselves and others, and catch incipient ways of adoptively voicing diasporic personhood in the throat.

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