

Two Stories of Reunion

A Review by Susan Ito

This is a Review of the following works:

Red Dust Road: An Autobiographical Journey
by Jackie Kay

Resilience
Directed and produced by Tammy Chu (2009)

Jackie Kay's poetry collection *The Adoption Papers* used brief vignettes to give readers a beautifully nuanced glimpse into her life as a transracial adoptee (half Nigerian, half Scottish and adopted by Scottish parents). Her recently published memoir *Red Dust Road* widens that glimpse into a fully realized and gripping tale that spans from childhood to the complexities of adulthood and reunion with her birth family.

The book opens with no preamble: we are thrust immediately into the heart-stopping moment when she first meets her birth father in Nigeria. We soak in every detail, from the "depressed-looking buns" on the coffee counter, to her observation that the man she's been waiting for "is wearing black shoes. He's wired up." Their first meeting is one of the most dramatic accounts of reunion I've ever read, and by the end of eleven pages readers will be left both exhausted and riveted.

Chapters alternate between present-tense snapshots of Kay's childhood, reflections on her past, and descriptions of her current adult life, creating a complex and layered journey. We are invited into the moment when she is seven and first understands what "adoption" means:

Mummy why aren't you the same colour as me? My mum says I'm not really your mummy. I am crying for real now because I love my mum so much and I want her to be my real mummy and I'm worried she means she is not real and that something is going to happen to her, that she is going to disappear or dissolve.

These moments are fiercely immediate and, like the later suspenseful accounts of her reunions, emotionally intense. Perhaps as a breather for herself as well as for her readers, Kay sandwiches these moments with periods of reflection on what it means to be adopted, to be transracially adopted, to be a woman nearing forty.

One of the most moving aspects of the book is Kay's deeply loving and complicated relationship with her adoptive parents, particularly her mother:

My mum all those years ago sensed a child who had been adopted was a child who could feel terribly hurt. And no matter how much she loved me... there is still a windy place right at the core of my heart. The windy place is like Wuthering Heights, out on open moors, rugged and wild and free and lonely... I struggle against the windy place. I sometimes even forget it. But there it is...you think adoption is a story that has an end. But the point about it is that it has no end. It keeps changing its ending.

Passages like this are scattered throughout the book, achingly beautiful and spot-on in their emotional accuracy. As an adult adoptee, reading this memoir made me feel more understood and seen than almost any other I've read.

As Kay moves through years and layers of unfolding relationships with her birth family, she experiences both the exhilaration of knowing, and the disappointing reality of trading in fantasies for the reality of flawed human beings. The final section of the book is a rollercoaster of drama and suspense as, by chance, incongruent pieces of her life suddenly fit together and she races the clock for the chance to meet a final member of her birth family.

It's complicated. Tracing [her word for "searching"] suddenly asks someone who has had one life to have two, and you can't have two lives, you can only have one. The empty ghost, the wraithlike figure that has stalked me for years seems to be taking off her pale polka-dot dress... She opens a locker, with her own key, found after years of fumbling, and disappears into its depths.

Jackie Kay is gifted –not only for having had an extraordinary experience, but to have the capacity to reflect upon and understand and share that experience with great specificity and wisdom. She holds so much complexity with such grace. She loves her adoptive parents and is loved by them beyond doubt; yet she needs to undertake this journey to another family. She tells us over and over, page by page, that adoption is indeed a lifelong path, one that it is both painful and wondrous, disappointing and expanding. She tells us all these things with a poet's exquisite eye and the most open and vulnerable of human hearts.

Resilience, a heart-wrenching documentary by Tammy Chu (herself adopted from Korea by an American family), is unique

in the way it tells two sides of one international adoption story. In a genre where birthparents are too often invisible, *Resilience* introduces us to a remarkable birth mother who embodies the film's title.

The film opens with Brent, a grown man with a family, who was adopted from South Korea as a baby by a South Dakota family. As the filmmakers describe, Brent had an "all-American" upbringing and didn't give much thought to his Korean origins or identity. When his oldest daughter is diagnosed with a medical condition, he decides to try to find out more about his medical history. It feels like a long shot. For most international adoptees, searching for birth family is a long shot—the trail to reunion is full of obstacles, complicated by the language barrier if the adoptees have never been taught the language of their country of origin. However, with the assistance of GOA'L (Global Overseas Adoptees' Link), a support organization for adoptees in Korea, Brent does eventually meet his birthmother—an astounding scene that takes place live on Korean national television.

Myungja, Brent's birthmother, has wondered about her son for decades, since she last saw him as an infant. Each of them, birthmother and adoptee, have been told stories that unravel when they meet and have the opportunity to learn the truth. Each of them must deal with new knowledge, and with a new relationship that suddenly changes both their lives. The film follows them over the course of several years as they slowly forge a bond, as they struggle to communicate, as they learn about each other and themselves.

It is a terribly moving journey to witness. Mother and son's longing and frustration are palpable as they deal with the challenge of being a long-distance family that does not share language or culture. As is so often the case in adoptions shrouded in secrecy, both of them struggle with a sense of deception. Secrets and untruths, once unearthed, can have devastating repercussions.

For Myungja, her new understanding of international adoption is a kind of awakening. The most powerful part of the film is seeing her blossom into an outspoken advocate for the rights of adoptees as well as young single women in Korea. We see her cuddling a newborn baby as she tells a new single mother, "it won't be easy," but encouraging her to keep her child if that is what she truly wants to do. She becomes a force for eradicating the social stigma of single motherhood in Korea, and for supporting adoptees who return to their homeland. She becomes emblematic of that bumper-sticker command: "Don't mourn, organize." She turns her grief and longing into powerful, positive action.

Resilience is a deeply personal film; it feels like a privilege to get a glimpse into these two individuals' lives and their developing relationship, and to see how adoption has affected both of them. At the same time, we realize that the forces that shaped Brent and Myungja's lives—in Korea and in America—shaped the lives of countless others as well. It is a story sensitively told, one that will resonate with those touched by adoption, and will be an invaluable education for those who are not.

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