

Metacinema as Diasporic Postmemory in Justin Chon's *Blue Bayou* (2021)

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ABSTRACT

Blue Bayou (2021), a film by Justin Chon, presents issues of imagination, postmemory, and identity through self-referential techniques. Referring to Marianne Hirsch's theory on postmemory, this article examines how this film represents imagined moments and how they serve as a postmemory of the history of Korean immigrants, and how this kind of forgetting constitutes the American shared experience. The findings and discussion show that imagined moments in Antonio's subconscious function as postmemory for Antonio, while the film itself serves as a postmemory for America's imagination. It can be argued that *Blue Bayou* deliberately acknowledges itself as a film and as fiction to present the world that America imagines and understands. We argue that *Blue Bayou* conceives memory, fosters imagination, and acts as a documentation for the audience as well as for America's fragmented memory.

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INTRODUCTION

Blue Bayou (2021), a film directed by Justin Chon, with the main protagonist played by Chon himself, tells the story of a Korean adoptee, Antonio, who is on the brink of getting deported for not having complete legal documentation. In *Blue Bayou*, following the tragedy of being brutally beaten, which leads to Antonio failing to show up to court, he drives himself into the water, followed by a scene where he seems to be embraced by his mother, which is only his imagination. This is an elaboration of the film's opening scene, which presents an image of a woman in traditional Korean dress on a boat set in a marsh. We believe the moment Antonio is embraced by his mother during his despair is the climax of the various and similarly repeated scenes. These similar scenes are repeated in minutes 00:42:00, 00:51:00, 1:04:54, 1:30:13, and 01:35:42. When Antonio's imagination of himself and his mother on a boat is shown, the colors are visibly more dreamy in the style of a somewhat watercolor painting. Despite Antonio's imagination being not of reality in the film, it is important to consider the fact that the film itself, as a cultural product and media engaged in contemporary popular discourse, is real and inhabits the social reality of the viewers. Therefore, its presentation of the issue of the legal status of Korean adoptees in the United States on the thematic surface of the film; and, thus, the fictional world, enforced by the film's metacinematic elements, is arguably brought to the proximity of the audience's imagination. In other words, the film provides a narrative and images to fill the gaps in America's fragmented memory and imagination regarding the problem of Korean adoptees.

The topic of Korean Americans in America is common for Chon, as he has previously directed films exploring this particular topic, namely: *Gook* (2017) and *Ms. Purple* (2019). In *Gook*, Chon plays Eli, a Korean-American who shares ownership of a shoe store with his brother in a predominantly African-American community. *Ms. Purple* tells the story of two Korean-American sisters living in Koreatown, Los Angeles, with their single-parent father. Unlike Chon's two previous films, *Blue Bayou*'s main character, Antonio LeBlanc, is alone with his Koreanness.

In *Blue Bayou*, Antonio has no ties with his Korean roots except for the letter his birth mother sent him. He grew up with white foster parents, and he is married to a white woman. The film reveals that both Antonio and his foster mother are victims of domestic violence perpetrated by the foster father, leading to Antonio's running away from his foster home and his scorn for his foster mother for not joining him. In this light, not only is Antonio alienated from his forgotten Korean origins but also from any kind of stable American family customs. There is no one to expose Antonio to Korean culture and, more importantly, no one to tell him about his time in Korea. Antonio's solitude in his Koreanness leads to his imagination about his birth mother that appears multiple times throughout the film. Consequently, the audience can identify with Antonio's imagination because the illusion of the film as fiction has been unmasked through the metacinematic traits of *Blue Bayou*.

Similar to *Blue Bayou*, in *Gook*, Chon explores the metacinematic techniques where both films acknowledge their film-ness. This technique is a common style that Chon uses, as seen from the execution of both films, where the audience knows and consciously realizes they are watching films about reality. In *Gook*, Chon deploys the use of a black-and-white filter for the film, which makes it obvious to the audience that it is a film and is fictional. Meanwhile, in *Blue Bayou*, Chon uses a more subtle metacinematic technique and experiments with watercolor-style images and visible scratches on the screen, which will be explored further in this article.

In *Blue Bayou*, the process of documenting is intentionally shown to the audience, though not as bluntly as how a proper documentary film would. Even though *Blue Bayou* is not a documentary film, its aim is not much different from one. Shibolet (2021) believes that the fundamental aim of documentary filmmaking is "to capture something 'true' about reality." *Blue Bayou* does not capture, but it documents the problem of the Korean adoptees and their struggle with their identity in America. By presenting the case of Antonio, the film suggests and points to the reality of Korean adoptees having scattered roots and being separated from their memories of their cultural origins.

There are several out-of-place and fragmented elements depicted in *Blue Bayou*. Firstly, there is the element of having to leave from one place to another, not only in the sense of moving from America to Korea but also in Antonio's precarious position in society in which he holds no steady ground. Everything in Antonio's life is discontinuous and fragmented. Each aspect of Antonio's life is a rupture within the social order. The film opens with Antonio in the middle of a job interview, followed by the scene of Antonio and his stepdaughter running to the hospital where his wife is having an ultrasound for his baby. This shows that what is presented in the film has no beginning or end. Antonio is constantly and continuously in the middle of a myriad of events, yet he never initiates or concludes them, as he never has any agency over the situations in which he is engaged.

Secondly, this film shows Antonio's rootlessness, as well as that of the people around him, estranged from their respective individual pasts, suggesting that each of them is merely a fragment gathered in one location but never actually forming a complete society. Antonio's friends, as shown in the initial tattoo parlor scenes, are people introduced to the audience with no intention of disclosing/exploring their roots.

Thirdly, there are elements that show the presence of leaving behind a past in an effort to begin a new life in America as the new world of opportunities and possibilities. In the scene where Antonio attends Parker's family

cookout, Parker discloses to Antonio that the reason her family was split in two when migrating to America was to get "the better chance that half of us live." This shows that the American dream of starting a respectable life is viable. However, it is ironic that in the film, Antonio becomes the site for hopes of a new life. Kathy, Antonio's wife, left her partner to begin a new life with him. In addition, Antonio's stepdaughter, Jessie, also chooses Antonio and, therefore, leaves behind her birth father in the past. However, Antonio would not let his family come along with him to Korea because there is no future there. Ultimately, the quality of focusing on what is visible in the future is seen in every character, yet the ending is still unknown. The film does not show the future. Instead of presenting the conclusion of Antonio's predicament at the end of the film, it goes back to the issue of undocumented adoptees by showing a passage informing their present condition as if to verify the factuality of the narrative. Yet, closure is provided for neither Antonio nor for the issue. That is to say that the film leaves behind a past but not heading to any future.

The perception and interpretation of *Blue Bayou* rely on America's perspective and imagination of the issue of Korean adoptees, specifically their lack of memory and struggle with identity. America's perspective and imagination indicate the American collective amnesia. In other words, the missing fragments of America's collective memory are a result of the absence of narratives that hinder their ability to remember. Due to the missing narrative to build its memory, America struggles to find the foundation of its identity. It is not in America's culture to conceive and foster a narrative about the past because the focus is on the American dream narrative, which, according to Graham (2019), promises success and prosperity. The American Dream vision believes that "all citizens can improve their circumstances, however deprived their origin" (Graham, 2019, p. 117), supporting the immigrants' spirit to start a new page without looking to the past.

The narrative in *Blue Bayou* is a manifestation of collective imagination, together with tragedy and glimpses of optimism in the eye of America. Holl (2017) argues that cinema "is a message that can be consciously perceived by anyone who wants to receive it" (p. 31). Antonio's imagination is seen and understood as a message that represents hope in the viewers and Americans in general whose memories of origin are incomplete due to the absence of narrative.

The people and events are shown in *Blue Bayou* through the process of mediation—mediated by the film itself as a kind of social document, however fictional it may be. Furthermore, on the diegetic level of the film, the problems in *Blue Bayou* involve the presence and absence of documents. A document is also a form of media because documents substitute events. The film is, then, both a document and media connecting the audience with the knowledge of the issue of undocumented Korean adoptees while simultaneously acting as a barricade that keeps both the audience and Antonio from accessing his memory, specifically his past before moving to America. The film mediates America's experience with the story because *Blue Bayou* is a film that works to document the factual problem of undocumented Korean adoptees. However, in another sense, the (legal) documents also separate Antonio from his home due to its incomplete state.

In the film, we see that Antonio has recollections of neither his Korean heritage nor his time in Korea. The only language used in the film is English; although Antonio is originally from Korea, he does not speak Korean or understand it. The film as a whole is very Louisiana, as seen from how the use of the English language is attached with a Cajun accent. Both the film and Antonio himself articulate and process their understanding of Korea in English because Antonio does not possess a first-hand and real memory of Korea. In essence, Antonio struggles with his Korean identity, as he only remembers and knows of things that happened during his time in America. While Antonio himself does not explicitly identify as a Korean-American, as he on several occasions refers to himself as a man from Baton Rouge, Louisiana, he has no choice but to concede to his Korean identity because figures of authority such as ICE officers and the garage owner interviewing him in

the opening scene insist that he is from Korea, not Louisiana. As the viewers may also notice from the very beginning, there is a discrepancy between his name and his physical appearance.

The discussion on the creation of memory to fill in the gaps in both collective and individual memory is conducted by primarily referring to the theory on postmemory as articulated by Hirsch (1993) with the film creating postmemory for Antonio and its audience, as it shows the purpose and value of postmemory, especially in the case of immigrants in America. Hirsch (1993) believes that postmemory acts as artificial memory derived from narratives of previous generations that have first-hand experience that enables a connection between an individual and their pasts by relying on the importance of memory, which can result in narration and imagination. Furthermore, Hirsch (1993) proposed that the creation of narration and imagination through postmemory leads to the process of inherited trauma that can never be truly understood by the one creating the said postmemory.

This study also refers to Seo-Young Chu (2008) in discussing postmemory han, which is postmemory that refers to Korean grief. In addition, in discussing the matter of metacinema, we refer to Siska (1979) and Setka (2015) in their elaboration on the significance of films that talk about films and the problematics of cinematic self-referentiality and self-reflexivity. The problems of diaspora and immigration are placed within the theoretical framework, as elaborated by Bhabha (1994), pertaining to in-betweenness and liminality.

This research focuses on issues of Korean adoptees' struggle with identity as depicted in *Blue Bayou* and on the idea of the film as a postmemory to replace a lost memory. Following this, we analyze how the metacinematic technique utilized in this film delivers the issue of America's collective amnesia, which sets in motion the discussion regarding the film as a memory and/or imagination of the world that American society maintains and understands.

FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

Blue Bayou is a film that shows the audience that they are, in fact, watching a film. The film's self-referential quality proves its fictional nature, using metafictional techniques to create a postmemory for Antonio and the viewers. *Blue Bayou* blatantly shows that it is a representation of imagination by conveying that what they are showing is an imaginative view of the issue, as seen from the watercolorish palette in the film and how the narrative about reality is depicted. Even though the events presented are fictional, the issue is not.

Blue Bayou serves as a counter-narrative for the fantasy that Hollywood offers about Korean adoptees and the Asian American experience in general. Let us take the film *Crazy Rich Asians* (2018) as an example of Hollywood's cliché happy ending where the main protagonist does not have to make a sacrifice, and she gets to have the best of both worlds: love and the American dream. Despite resisting Hollywood's wishfulness, *Blue Bayou* makes it clear that what it offers is an imagination that will not necessarily affect reality. By situating itself within historical discourse without surrendering its autonomy as fiction (Setka, 2015, p. 143), *Blue Bayou* questions the image that it depicts instead of offering a testimony of reality.

There are several ways in which *Blue Bayou* presents its metacinematic quality. First of all, it is apparent in the scenes depicting Antonio's imagination, like his mother on a boat in a bayou wearing a hanbok and singing a Korean folk song to him (Chon, 2021, 01:04:54). When presenting reality, the film's color tends to be muted and not as colorful as Antonio's imagination. By using more vivid colors in presenting imagination, this film successfully creates a dreamy trait for those imagined events, in contrast with the dull colors of reality, for the

social reality in this film is less than desired. This technique of using watercolor is a form of the film's craft to show the presence of distance in the narrative. According to Pence (2018), cinema's monumental moments, figures, and styles offered a set of strategies and mnemonics to frame the past and to imagine the future. In *Blue Bayou*, the monumental moments supported by the use of certain styles and techniques, such as the use of watercolor and metacinematic quality is a strategy and mnemonic to frame as well as imagine Antonio's past.

In discussing the editing of light and color in the post-production process, Prince (2004) argues that it gives filmmakers instruments to manipulate image elements. The opening scene of *Blue Bayou*, where a watercolor painting is shown, is a result of editing during the post-production process. The use of a watercolor palette, the grain-like texture of the painting, and the dreamy and blurry nature of the scene are examples of how the image on the screen is manipulated by working with the light, color, and composition to achieve the director's vision. Such a technique highlights how the scene is not reality but an imagination of Antonio's instead.



Figure 1. Opening Scene: Antonio's imagination. Blue hues emphasize the scene's imaginative nature



Figure 2. Antonio's reality is depicted through muted and dull colors

On the other hand, the muted color of the scenes depicting events that Antonio experiences shows how the event is close to Antonio. Both in spatial and temporal senses, Antonio is in proximity to the event. Meanwhile, during what the film presents as imagination, the lively watercolor shows Antonio's palpable distance, both in spatial and temporal sense, from the event. As seen in the opening scene (Chon, 2021, 00:01:46), what appears to be Antonio's imagination of his mother on a boat is presented with a dreamy watercolor palette. Meanwhile, less than a minute later, when Antonio and Jessie appear on screen, the colors are muted and dull, meaning that the film is presenting Antonio's reality. It is also worth noting that Antonio's

imagination of his mother on a boat appears several times with different backgrounds and details. For instance, when Antonio is sitting on his patio and looking outside at the lake, he imagines seeing his mother on a boat with a lively colored fog surrounding his mother with the lights reflecting onto Antonio (Chon, 2021, 00:18:32). The contrast between the vivid colors of the imagined, desired events and the dull colors of social reality corresponds to the way the film, in general, makes a distinction between wishful imagination and tragic reality.



Figure 3. Yarn-like scratches show the film's metacinematic nature

Another way *Blue Bayou* intentionally gives away its metacinematic quality is through the visible scratches that appear several times on the screen. In minute 00:33:39 (Chon, 2021), the scratches on the bottom half of the screen first appeared. The film deliberately shows that Antonio's life is being documented, as proven by how the audience can see and assume that the camera is put inside a bag, resulting in the appearance of the scratches. Holl (2017) believes that there were rules that teach correct montage in order not to tear the audience out of their film trance. However, contrary to Holl's belief, *Blue Bayou* breaks the audience's trance by successfully creating some kind of out-of-body experience for its audience that prevents them from entirely immersing themselves in the story.

Furthermore, the scratches' other purpose than breaking the audience's immersion in the story is to mark a shift in the plot and ruptures in Antonio's life. In the scene where the scratches first appear, Antonio is handing out flyers to attract more customers for his tattoo business, and no one takes an interest in his service other than Parker, a Vietnamese woman whom he met in the hospital earlier in the film. Sensing that his marketing efforts are not bearing fruit, Antonio decides to go back to stealing motorcycles with his friends. Antonio's decision to go back to his criminal ways shows his despair and highlights how distressing his situation is that he is willing to risk tarnishing his already awful record and reputation in society even further.

Blue Bayou creates a depiction of America's hope and imagination regarding Korean adoptees struggling with identity and agency because of the absence of real and self-made memories. Hirsch (1993) notes that "postmemory should reflect back on memory, revealing it as equally constructed, equally mediated by the processes of narration and imagination" (p. 6). On that account, the film's postmemory is constructed and mediated carefully through the process of narration and imagination.

Antonio's imagination fills the absence of his memory, just as how the film creates postmemory to fill the absence of its audience's memory. *Blue Bayou* shows that documentation is needed not only to remember an event but also to legitimize people. The film's mediation shows that Korean adoptees are experiencing issues

not only because of their lack of memory but also because of the lack of documentation. In discussing Korean adoptees, Nelson (2009) notes that "many parents were not aware that their transnationally adopted children were not already automatically receiving citizenship" (p. 13). Hence, adoptees who do not have citizenship become "subject to deportation (like other non-citizens) if they were ever convicted of a felony" (Nelson, 2009, p. 13). The film creates postmemory as a documentation for America through Antonio's character because, according to Holl (2017), cinema could be understood as a tool to transmit experience from one individual to another through technology. Furthermore, Felman (2021) believes that memory is essentially conjured to, amongst other things, address another and to appeal to a community. By conceiving and fostering postmemory about the issue of the undocumented Korean adoptees because of its role as documentation that addresses and appeals to America about this issue, *Blue Bayou* successfully transmits the audience's experience to Antonio.

Postmemory emerges as a central theme in the film, shaping its narrative and prompting viewers to reflect on the constructed nature of the depicted events. The understanding of postmemory explored in this article is that postmemory is based on something narrated or a secondhand memory. Meanwhile, the term *han*, according to Kim (2023) is "an untranslatable Korean affect associated with historical unresolved grief, separated families, and loss of collective identity." This understanding of *han* is further emphasized by the fact that the Korean language is not used at all in the film. Therefore, in this discussion, postmemory *han* is understood as a secondhand memory related to grief from family separation and the absence of identity. According to Chu (2008), postmemory *han* is a paradox because the experience (memory) being remembered is both secondhand and familiar as well as long ago and present. Antonio's experience of being adopted is undoubtedly real. However, at the same time, since he cannot recall that experience himself, it was also secondhand because it was told to him through the narrative of his birth mother (the letter) and, presumably, his adoptive parents. Antonio's experience of being adopted was long ago, but at the same time, it is also present as in the present, he is still a Korean adoptee living in America.

In *Blue Bayou*, Antonio's memory is incomplete. In her discussion about photographs in postmemory, Hirsch (1996) notes that we "provide (story) to fill what is left out of the image" and that "for each image we provide the other, complementary one" (p. 27). With that in mind, what Antonio thinks he knows about his history is told to him through a narrative. However, not through photographs, Antonio provides a complementary story based on the letter from his birth mother. Antonio's incomplete memory, without his imagination, would be filled with missing fragments.

Our understanding of postmemory in discussing *Blue Bayou* is a variation of Marianne Hirsch's theory, where her concept of postmemory is memory "of the child of the survivor whose life is dominated by memories of what preceded his/her birth" (Hirsch, 1993, p. 8). In discussing *Blue Bayou*, the concept of postmemory is that Antonio's life is dominated not by what preceded his birth but by what preceded his time of remembering things. Antonio was a three-year-old boy when he was adopted and moved to America. He does not know anything about the time before he was born. What dominated his life are memories that he does not actually own but memories that he conjured based on what other people have told him in order to create a narrative that perhaps makes him feel better about not knowing anything about his birth family or his origins in general.

In analyzing Antonio's imagination, it is important to bring to mind that Antonio does not actually recall any of the memories he had with his mother. Hirsch (1996) argues that memory is not only an act of recall but also an act of mourning, which can be reflected through anger, rage, and despair. Therefore, we believe that Antonio's act of imagining memories can be seen as an act of mourning. Antonio mourns the fact that he was never chosen, that his birth mother gave him up for adoption and that his adoptive parents did not love him enough to commit to their actions. Specifically, Antonio's imagination and the film's postmemory of Antonio's

mother “saving” and “embracing” Antonio in the water is an act of mourning from Antonio because he mourns the lack of comfort and love that he has.

Amid the film's fragmented elements, Parker is the only character to have a distinct and definite community. When Antonio is invited to the cookout at Parker's home, Antonio realizes the contrast between his life and Parker's. Despite being an Asian immigrant herself, Parker's stance in society is tangible because she is part of a family and community. Parker's life in America is stereotypical, where she has a family, a support system, and a community to share her Asian-ness or Vietnamese-ness, which is very much different from Antonio's situation.

“Blue Bayou,” a song with the same title as the film, has a nostalgic mood that talks about going back to a place and leaving someone behind. The song was sung by Kathy, Antonio's pregnant wife, during Parker's family cookout, which we believe holds some significance in Antonio's tendency of constructing imaginations. Harris (2009) believes that a song can be recreated and reclaimed imaginatively. When listening to his wife singing that song, Antonio's mind drifts into an imagination of his birth mother, which shows how he recreates and reclaims a new and imaginative narrative about the song.

Synonymous with Hirsch's (1996) argument that postmemory seeks connection and creates where it cannot recover, Antonio's postmemory is his way of creating a connection that he craves but never has. Moreover, Hirsch (1996) states that “postmemory is a powerful form of memory precisely because its connection to its object or source is mediated not through recollection but through an imaginative investment and creation” (p. 662). The similar and repeated scenes of Antonio and his mother on a boat in a bayou are post memories created to recover a memory that he has lost, a memory that preceded his memory. The memory that Antonio has of his mother is a result of his creation and imaginative investment as a way to cope with reality and as a vehicle for him to feel the absence of connection with his mother, his roots, and his absence of heritage. This is also in line with Hirsch's (2001) argument that postmemory is “a mostly helpful vehicle of working through a traumatic past” (p. 9) because Antonio's imagination is a vehicle to help him come to terms with the fact that his mother gave him up for adoption and his adoptive mother choosing to stay with her abusive husband, or in his words, ‘did not choose’ him (Chon, 2021, 1:21:57). Thus, Antonio's postmemory is one that mourns a loss (a mother, a love of a mother) that cannot be repaired.

Antonio's postmemory has been evident because of his separation from his birth mother. Despite losing a mother that he never had, Antonio still feels grief. Essentially, Antonio loses something that would have been, not something that was, because Antonio's birth mother is only a figment of his imagination and not because he actually has any memory of her. Antonio refuses to acknowledge the reality of his foster mother and decides to focus on someone out of reach and something that never happened instead. Even though Antonio's imagination of his birth mother never actually happened, it is ever present in his mind, ergo, Antonio's imaginations keep showing up in the film.

According to Candidatu (2021), in migration, mothers are usually the ones who try to execute the diasporic transmission of their host countries' culture. With the absence of his birth mother, Antonio is deprived of diasporic transmission of his Korean heritage. On top of that, Antonio's foster mother clearly could not provide any “heritage transmission, identity formation and diasporic community building” (Candidatu, 2021, p. 41) that would help Antonio's understanding of his Korean roots and shape his identity.

According to Bhabha (1994), there is “the unbearable ordeal of the collapse of certainty” in the space of liminality (p. 149). From start to finish, Antonio is always depicted as being stuck in between. Antonio's life

in America is full of uncertainty, as shown in his struggle to earn money for his family and for the possibility of staying there. Despite having LeBlanc as his last name and having a Louisiana accent, he still does not belong in America because both of those things are ineffective in legally preserving his place in America. His life in Korea is uncertain and unimaginable because he cannot picture a viable future for himself and, more importantly, his family. On top of that, he knows no one, has no place to live, and does not even speak the language. In essence, Antonio's survival is uncertain because he is stuck in a liminal space. The ending scene of Antonio in the airport shows how, ultimately, he is still embedded in between. Furthermore, Bhabha (1994) suggests that the emergence of people in the finitude of a nation marks the liminality of cultural identity. Thus, we argue that Antonio's finitude marks his in-betweenness of cultural identity which prevents him from staying in neither America nor Korea. Therefore, the film does not offer the viability of Antonio's getting out of liminality.

According to Sohn (2020), Korean-American literature writers' use of speculative fiction that is impossible under physical laws and in the ordinary world is a result of searching for representational possibilities and historical excavations. Furthermore, Sohn (2020) believes that the use of speculative figures to confront traumas is fundamental in understanding social complexities. Taking that into consideration, Antonio's imagination of his birth mother's present figure, which is physically impossible, when he is drowning is a form of speculative fiction in order to confront the trauma of being nearly drowned by his birth mother and being given up for adoption. However, in his search for historical excavations, Antonio is unable to look back toward Korea because he does not have any recollection of his ethnic homeland.

Hirsch (1996) notes that "postmemory characterizes the experience of those... whose own belated stories are displaced by the stories of the previous generation, shaped by traumatic events that can be neither fully understood nor re-created" (p. 662). On top of that, in discussing the postwar generation of Korean-Americans, Chu (2008) believes that, "they are exiled from the very experiences that haunt them, exiled by their belatedness, by the fact that the tragedy preceded their births" (p. 97). Antonio's belated stories are shaped by traumatic events that Antonio himself can never fully understand, such as his mother almost drowning him because of desperate times and also by the more general experience of being given up for adoption. We believe that Antonio constructs imaginations and creates postmemory as a result of being exiled from the previously stated important but traumatic shaping experiences. Antonio's construction of imagination is his way of trying to understand and recreate the events that dominated his life but preceded his memory.

What Antonio imagines is not from his own experience but from the telling of the experience. The memory of Antonio's mother on a boat does not belong to him as he is only able to construct that imagination because of inherited cultural memory and not based on an experience that he remembers. Just as how Palis (2021) believes that Hugo in the film *Hugo* (2011) inherits cultural memory and thus, identifying and remembering a film through his father's eyes, Antonio is constructing imagination and "remembering" a memory about the regrettable occurrence through his mother's eyes because he is only privy to the event due to the narrative given to him through the letter that his birth mother wrote.

Antonio does not know anything about Korea. To Antonio, Korea is a foreign concept he only knows about through other people's narratives. He does not grasp the significance of Korea in his life other than the fact that he was born there. Korea to Antonio is a fragment of his own history that he cannot take in and understand. His imagined memories of Korea, a country with a language foreign to him, add an additional layer of complexity to his quest for identity. By creating this postmemory, the film provides solace for Antonio and, more importantly, for its audience.

Within the discussion of the character Anja Spiegelman as a memory in *Maus* by Art Spiegelman, Hirsch (1993) believes that "as a memory she [Anja] is mystified, objectified, shaped to the needs and desires of the

one who remembers...” (p. 19). As for *Blue Bayou*, the film’s postmemory that takes the form of Antonio’s imagination is mystified, objectified, and shaped according to Antonio’s desire. Therefore, the postmemory presented in the film is shaped by the film’s desire with the hope of supporting and complementing the narrative of filling the gaps of America’s fragmented memory and imagination about Korean adoptees the film wants to deliver.

According to Oksman (2020), both Hirsch and Morrison believe that

A careful fostering of imagination, or of transparent mediation from within the “palm” of history, is what might help us maintain powerful and evocative associations between then and now, between here and there. It is what might help us feel more proximate to a distant past we think we already know (p. 134).

Antonio’s imaginations help him maintain pleasant associations between then and now, between here and there. They help him to feel closer to his distant past (his life back in Korea before being adopted). However, it is important to note that in Antonio’s case, it is ‘distant’ in another sense, ‘distant’ in spatial terms. In other words, Antonio is able to feel closer to his distant reality because it is imagined. Subsequently, Antonio’s imagination, because of his distant reality, leads to imagined information. As seen in the film, when it represents Antonio’s imagination of his mother, everything about that is imagined information. The clothes she wears, her hair, and even her face are imagined information because Antonio does not know what his mother actually looks like.

The common way of understanding a distant past is to recognize the past as something with a significant amount of space from our grasp. It is not incorrect to assume that Antonio’s distant past means a past that is far behind Antonio’s current life but also a site foreign to him in both the geographic and cultural sense. Antonio’s distant past in Korea is something unfamiliar to him. Therefore, it is logical to assume that Antonio’s imagination not only helps Antonio feel closer to a distant past that belongs to his life prior to moving to America, but it also helps Antonio to feel familiar with his birth mother, as if she knows him enough for her to love him and provide him comfort when needed.

An additional factor as to why Antonio fosters these imaginations and creates postmemory is to feel close to his mother’s unattainable love. The matter of being chosen is brought up several times in the film because, presumably, Antonio felt like no one had ever chosen him, not his birth parents, not even his adoptive parents who brought him from Korea. Therefore, Antonio constructs an imagination where he can feel love and comfort from his birth mother.

Blue Bayou also shows what America has forgotten about Korean adoptees. This film acts as a reminder of a situation within the Korean adoptees’ community where the threat of being deported exists. Laybourn (2018) argues that deportation increases the precarious position of vulnerable people where they lack financial, social, and cultural support. Also, Nelson (2009) argues that the deportation of Korean adoptees due to incomplete legal documents is extreme because these adoptees have no cultural connections with their birth countries. With Antonio not having any cultural ties to Korea, the consequence of deportation is extreme, especially considering the fact that he has a wife and daughters in America. On top of the deportation matter, Korean adoptees struggle with their understanding of identity. After being in a foreign country for so long, what is foreign begins to shift into familiarity while what was home begins to shift to a distant past no longer touched nor revisited.

According to Laybourn (2018), one of the reasons why the number of Korean adoptees was so high is because of the assumption that Korean children could quickly assimilate into American white families. She further notes that transnational and transracial adoptees (such as Korean adoptees) were seen as family members and

not immigrants (Laybourn, 2018). Thus, we believe it is important to consider Laybourn's notes as the very reason why Korean adoptees tend to have this similar rootlessness and confusion about their identity. Because of the promised easy assimilation and the promise of not having to deal with racial differences or heritage culture, Korean adoptees in America struggle with their sense of identity, as they are supposed to simply be seen as "white" family members, but realistically they are not. In addition, most American families who adopted Korean children had never been to Korea and knew little to no Korean Americans to expose their adopted children to Korean culture (Nelson, 2009).

While Hirsch (1996) believes that Czernowitz, the place where her parents are from, "embodied the idea of home, of place, but to me, it was and would remain, out of reach" (p. 661), Antonio's view on Korea is quite the opposite. America is not his roots, but to Antonio, it embodies the idea of home, of a place to stay, a place to turn to, while Korea, where technically his roots lie, is a place that is emotionally out of reach. The similarity of Hirsch's and Antonio's situation is that the place that embodies home for both of them has become out of reach. Antonio's case of being deported is the start of America being out of his reach. The difference is that the place where Hirsch's roots lie and the place that embodies the idea of home for her is the place outside of reach, while the place where Antonio's roots lie is not the place that embodies the idea of home.

For Antonio, his place of origin is practically non-existent. Subsequently, his identity regarding his place of origin is absent as well. Returning to his place of origin was never an option. Fresco (1993), as quoted by Hirsch, states that the diasporic life of the postwar generation's place of origin has been reduced to ashes, where a return is not possible. In addition to that, Laybourn (2018) notes that similar to second-generation Korean-Americans, Korean adoptees also feel in between the Koreanness of their roots and the whiteness of their adoptive families. Therefore, a lot of immigrants, postwar generation, second-generation Korean-Americans, and especially Korean adoptees have this shared rootlessness and confusion regarding their identity. The way they were brought up led them to believe that there is no return and no place of origin that allows a return. We believe this holds some weight in the reason why identity is such a misunderstood concept by them.

By acting as a postmemory for Americans who have lost their memory about Korean adoptees and ultimately showing what America has forgotten, *Blue Bayou* has successfully shown an irony about Antonio, who is about to be deported due to the lack of documentation that he is American when in reality his very nature of having no memory about his roots is in itself very American. Antonio LeBlanc is the epitome of being an American.

Blue Bayou problematizes identity, as seen in how the film shows the importance of memory in the complexity of national identity. Due to America's history, which is filled with collective amnesia and missing fragments, America is confused about its identity. The reason for this could be supported by Chu's arguments in discussing the opposite of postmemory: the phenomenon whereby children of immigrants remain resistant to their parents' memories, supported by Nahirny and Fishman, where they suggest that:

The children are raised in America's "dominant de-ethnicized society," and they regard their ethnicity as something archaic with relevance that pre-dates their own lives. Insofar as those of the second generation remember anything about their parents' pasts, what they remember is neither personal nor concrete, after all, they did not undergo these experiences first-hand, but rather generalized and abstract. No matter how assiduously the parents try to transmit memories of the homeland to their children, the living texture of these memories remains inaccessible to the second generation (Chu, 2008, p. 101).

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, *Blue Bayou* navigates the delicate terrain of imagination, postmemory, and identity. The film's self-awareness, combined with its imaginative reconstruction of Antonio's memory, invites viewers to question

their own perceptions of reality and underlines the powerful role of imagination in shaping one's understanding of heritage and identity. Subsequently, *Blue Bayou* has successfully created postmemory to fill in the void of America's absence or memory about their identity through the portrayal of Antonio and his imagination. By the conception of postmemory and the fostering of imagination, *Blue Bayou* has presented itself as a documentation that records the plight of Korean adoptees. Moreover, through the postmemory created by *Blue Bayou*, America has a reference in shaping their identity that was previously problematic due to the absence of a narrative. Literature and the arts, in general, may play the role of filling in the gaps in collective memory due to the lack of documentation. Thus, *Blue Bayou* is significant for understanding individual and collective culture and imagination in a globalized world as well as showing how the globalized world creates distance between a person and their assigned identity, as demonstrated through Antonio's assigned identity as a Korean while possessing very little knowledge about his cultural heritage. *Blue Bayou* presents how such distance due to a globalized world is becoming the norm.

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