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Human Capital: Transnational Korean Adoptees and the Neoliberal Logic of Return

Eleana Kim

Since the late 1990s, adult adoptees who were sent for adoption from South Korea to Western nations as infants and young children have been returning by the thousands to visit South Korea, search for relatives, and explore Korean culture. A smaller number choose to live and work for extended periods of time in their country of birth. This article contextualizes this phenomenon in relation to the South Korean government's proactive globalization policies and the rise of "English fever," and analyzes the shifting receptions of adoptees by the state and everyday South Koreans as a window onto post-IMF neoliberal transformations in South Korea. I show how a shift in the signification of adoptees between the 1990s and the 2000s is suggestive of the increasing association of adoption with human capital, whether in the state's attempts to enroll adoptees as successful global citizens and cultural ambassadors or vernacular views of adoptees as lucky cosmopolitans. Drawing on ethnographic research with resident adoptee returnees who lived and worked in South Korea for extended periods of time at the turn of the millennium, I show how their social marginalization and discrepant cosmopolitanism reveal the ascendance of neoliberal values in contemporary South Korea. In conclusion, I assert that resident adoptee returnees offer important critiques of dominant discourses that celebrate transnational adoption as the fast track to cosmopolitan privilege or as a postnational model for transcending racial and national hierarchies.

UNEXPECTED RETURNS

What parable, what catechism, could have prepared us for that which no one predicted would ever come to pass?

—Jane Trenka, *Fugitive Visions: An Adoptee's Return to Korea*¹

Eleana Kim is an assistant professor of cultural anthropology at the University of Rochester and the author of *Adopted Territory: Transnational Korean Adoptees and the Politics of Belonging* (Duke University Press, 2010).

When the children who had been sent from South Korea for adoption into Western families first began returning as adults in significant numbers in the mid-1990s, they quickly became a media spectacle, as journalists, with both sympathetic and sensationalistic motives, began to actively help adoptees search for their Korean families.² Images of tearful reunions between parents and children were frequently broadcast, especially as government and adoption agency summer programs attracted an increasing number of adult adoptees to the “motherland.” These narratives of reunion often concluded where they began, at the airport, where adoptees would depart to return to their “real lives” in their adoptive nations. In these stories, adoptees, having achieved resolution about their origins, could then be freed from the questions or traumas of the past and psychologically “move on.” That some adoptees would choose to return to South Korea and remain there indefinitely is often surprising to Koreans who, through media reports, typically associate adoptees with short term roots tours or birth family search attempts. As a Korean volunteer for an adoptee-service NGO told me, “Most Koreans can’t understand why adoptees would give up a good job and a comfortable life to come to [South Korea] to teach at a cram school [*hagwŏn*].”³

Adoptee author and activist Jane Trenka, whose 2009 memoir *Fugitive Visions* chronicles the first few years of her repatriation to South Korea, suggests that adoptees, in hindsight, also view their repatriations as unexpected and uncharted territory—“that which no one predicted would ever come to pass.”⁴ Their returns, which, throughout the early decades of adoption, between the 1950s and the 1980s, seemed to be unthinkable or unrealistic, by the 1990s had become increasingly imaginable, and by the 2000s, had become an accepted and expected part of the adoptee lifecycle, encouraged by all parties involved in Korean adoption—the South Korean state, NGOs, adoption agencies, social workers, and adoptive parents. Coming to South Korea to tour, learn the language, or experience the culture, especially for a school year abroad or the “gap year” after college graduation has become normalized as part of the transnational adoptee lifecycle, and what one could call “adoptee tourism” has become a niche market with packages offered by Western and Korean adoption agencies, Korean NGOs, and adoptee-run tour companies.

Yet adoptees who repatriate still constitute a small minority, and the duration and tempo of their returns are difficult to predict. Crucial to their ability to return and remain in South Korea is a confluence of factors—the inclusion of adoptees in the Overseas Koreans Act, the expansion of the English-language teaching market, and South Korea’s proactive globalization policies. These factors created the material conditions of possibility for their repatriations and are directly related to policy changes in the post-IMF era.⁵ Adoptees’ recognition by the state was largely premised on their recognition and resignification as “overseas Koreans” (*chaeye tongp’o*), who were framed as “assets” to the nation during a moment of crisis in which the South Korean state sought to

capture coethnic sentiments and mobilize transnational economic capital in the construction of a deterritorialized, global Korea.⁶

Even as adoptees are categorized as “overseas Koreans,” the circumstances of their migrations elicit ambivalent responses from everyday South Koreans and representatives of the state. One reason is that, as Tobias Hübinette has suggested, adoptees are painful reminders of the nation’s not-so-distant Third World past.⁷ But another is that adoptees can be viewed not only as victims of South Korea’s hypermodernization and uneven development but also as the beneficiaries of power inequalities in the global political economic order. Moreover, despite attempts to attribute adoptions to Korea’s past of poverty and deprivation, adoptee returnees implicitly or explicitly remind Koreans of the fact that overseas adoption has continued unabated since the end of the Korean War. As one American male adoptee told me in 2003, “Koreans will only admit that Korea is a developing nation when you mention adoption.”⁸

As adult adoptees became an undeniable presence in South Korea and in the diaspora, they provoked responses from both representatives of the state and the burgeoning NGO scene. Official government rhetoric in the 1990s began embracing them as “civil diplomats” (*min’gan oegyo*). Around the same time, progressive intellectuals in South Korea became drawn to them as unacknowledged victims of the authoritarian developmentalist state. These NGO activists and intellectuals grasped onto the adoption issue, framing adoptees as part of the Korean people who shared histories of oppression with other Koreans—the comfort women, civilian victims of the state-sponsored Cheju Island massacre in 1948, and the victims of the 1980 Kwangju Uprising—whose victimization by the regimes of the past granted them a redemptive form of cultural citizenship under the liberal democratic administrations of the present. The 1990s thereby witnessed not only the state’s proactive construction of a diasporic Korean family, including adoptees, but also a conjuncture among adoptees’ returns, processes of historical reclamation and coming to terms with the past (*kwagō ch’ōngsan*), and the rise of the middle-class “civil society movement” (*simin sahoe undong*), which led to the identification of adoptees as one of many social justice causes. In this identification, adoptees were sometimes framed as latter-day *minjung*, whose past victimization called for moral restitution in the present. Programs for returning adoptees and birth family searches became widely available in the 1990s as adoptees became the objects of charity for a range of NGO and GO programs and initiatives.

Elsewhere I discuss the implications of adoptees’ treatment as objects of charity for South Korean NGOs.⁹ In this article I call attention to the shifting cultural meanings and valuations of adoptees as a lens onto what many refer to as South Korea’s post-IMF neoliberal transformations. I first discuss two iconic figures, Susanne Brink of the 1990s and Toby Dawson of the 2000s, to analyze how adoptees have been resignified in South Korea from pathetic victims of the developmentalist state to lucky cosmopolitans in the context of

globalization and econometric measures of “human capital.”¹⁰ I then focus on a small population of adoptees who were living and working in Seoul during my period of fieldwork in 2003 and 2004, whom I refer to as “resident adoptee returnees.” My research suggests that these adoptees’ “discrepant cosmopolitanism” and social marginalization offer a productive vantage point from which to grasp emergent processes of (neo)liberal subjectivization in contemporary South Korea.¹¹

PROBLEMATIC TEMPORALITIES: VICTIMS AND BRIDGES

He is the most iconic figure. Isn't it moving that Toby came back and is putting effort into representing his motherland?

—Chông Pyôngguk, South Korean Minister of Culture, Sports and Tourism on *Toby Dawson—Lost and Found*¹²

In February 2007, Toby Dawson, a Korean American adoptee who won the bronze medal for the US Olympic team at the Torino Winter Games in the men's freestyle mogul competition, was reunited with his Korean father and younger brother, bringing an end to the most media-saturated birth family search in South Korean adoption history.¹³ Dawson was given a hero's welcome in South Korea, and during the same week that he met his father, he was named honorary PR ambassador to represent South Korea to the International Olympic Commission (IOC) in its bid for the 2018 P'yŏngch'ang Winter Olympic Games.¹⁴ Dawson's reunion with his birth father, staged as a press conference at the Lotte Hotel in downtown Seoul, melded seamlessly with Dawson's performance of filial loyalty to the nation, through his newly minted role as ambassador and representative of South Korea on the global stage. In fact, Dawson's role as an “ambassador” on behalf of the South Korean state actualized what had been, up until that point, a largely rhetorical gesture on the part of diplomats and government officials who frequently addressed adoptees as “cultural ambassadors” or “civil diplomats.” Adoptees, they optimistically asserted, were ideally positioned to function as bridges connecting South Korea to their Western adoptive nations in an age of globalization.

Prior to Dawson, Korean-born Swede Susanne Brink was arguably the most widely recognized transnational adoptee (*haeoe ibyangin*)¹⁵ in South Korea. In stark contrast to the five-star, paparazzi-style reunion of Dawson and his father, Brink and her Korean mother had reunited seventeen years earlier upon her nighttime arrival at Kimpo Airport in a tearful, wordless embrace. Raised in Sweden from the age of three, she was featured in an MBC documentary about adopted Koreans that aired on national television in 1989. Her story of abuse, abandonment, racial alienation, psychological distress, and single motherhood in Sweden was highlighted in the program and led to the dramatic reunion with her

Korean mother. The 1991 feature film *Susanne Brink's Arirang* (*Sujan Pŭrinkŭ ui Arirang*), directed by Jang Gil-Su (Chang Kilsu) and starring the famous actress Choi Jin-sil (Ch'oe Chinsil), effectively sealed Brink's reputation as the icon of transnational adoption in the 1990s. Coming on the heels of the 1988 Seoul Olympic Games, when international media scrutiny of South Korea's adoption program first brought widespread national attention to the phenomenon, the film added to a growing critical discourse about transnational adoption and called for collective soul searching regarding the exporting of "orphans" to advanced nations in the name of their best interests.¹⁶ Tobias Hübinette offers a compelling postcolonial and feminist reading of the film, underscoring the significance of gender in this redemptive story of the male journalists who "save" Susanne by reuniting her with South Korea and her Korean mother. As he writes, "when the Korean nation projects its fears of being dominated by a Western world, which is adopting its children, those feelings have to be compensated for by watching over and protecting particularly its female adoptees. It is only through recovering Susanne, accomplished by the resolute intervention of Korean male power[,] that the nation can be saved."¹⁷

The comparison between Dawson's and Brink's stories is striking in part because of the radical masculinization of Dawson's return narrative in which the birth mother (the typical object of desire) is entirely absent, and also because of the smooth interpellation of the adoptee as a servant of the state. Dawson's success and South Korea's aspirations met in perfect harmony around the P'yŏngch'ang Olympics, as he mobilized his social and cultural capital, garnered through his adoption to the United States, to help South Korea gain entry into the inner ring of advanced nations (as the Winter Olympics are typically beyond the realm of developing nations, which lack the infrastructure, resources, and talent pool for European-dominated winter sports). The respective stories of Dawson and Brink highlight what scholar So Young Park identifies as a shift in the figure of the transnational adoptee in the age of South Korean globalization, buttressed by the Korean Wave (*hallyu*). Following her analysis of television and filmic representations, one could argue that in the context of global South Korea, the female adoptee-victim has been superseded by the male adoptee-cultural bridge. As Park argues, rather than being rescued through recuperative reintegration into the "motherland" like Susanne Brink, the male adoptee (epitomized in the 2007 film, *My Father* [*Mai p'adŏ*]) becomes "truly transnational, no longer tied to the mother's body or the mother country through bloodline or family history, but allied instead with the father through cultural affinity."¹⁸ In other words, with South Korea's ascendance as a G20 nation and its solidified reputation as an advanced nation, adoption and adoptees no longer represent abuses to the nation due to its subordination in the global order of things. They now represent the best of both worlds, a perfect synergy of East and West.

Taken together, Susanne Brink and Toby Dawson offer a useful heuristic for understanding the residual and emergent modes by which returning adoptees

have been valued and signified in contemporary South Korea—the adoptee as melancholic victim of the authoritarian developmentalist state and the adoptee as transnational cosmopolitan ambassador for the democratic, advanced nation-state. While the figures of Susanne Brink and Toby Dawson map cleanly onto a historical periodization in which the authoritarian past has been overcome by the democratic present, adoptees embody and call forth overlapping, discordant temporalities in ways that trouble master narratives of democratization and neoliberalization in the post-IMF era. Indeed, transnational adoption provides a window onto the developmental inheritance of the neoliberal period, whereby the children whose bodies were leveraged for foreign capital in the past become flexibly rendered human capital for the deterritorialized nation-state in the present.

One recurrent strategy for resolving this problematic temporality is the official, tearful apology offered by agents of the state. In the state-sponsored documentary about Dawson's return to South Korea and family reunion, narrated by Dawson, he delivers a strongly worded critique equating adoption with commodification and connecting his adoption to that of a "larger cultural phenomenon": "Among the many revelations I've had since I first began reconnecting with my Korean roots is that I was not alone in being taken from my country and sold into a foreign adoption." Enveloping this critique within the film permits the state to acknowledge the past, yet leave it unaddressed, suggesting a clean break between the past and present. The Minister of Culture, Sports and Tourism, whose quote appears at the beginning of this section, is shown weeping on camera during his interview, telling Dawson how sorry he is for his adoption. This apology, replete with official tears, has become a generic response on the part of state representatives since the late 1990s. In the context of the film, it allows the narrative to move forward, and for Dawson to slide effortlessly into his role as ambassador.¹⁹

Like other bureaucratic apologies and official narratives of adoption, this one discursively neutralizes adoption as a problem of the developmentalist past, which can be overcome when adult adoptees accept the state's apology in the democratic present of recuperation and reconciliation.²⁰ Transnational adoptees, like Dawson, embody the contradictions of South Korea's modernization, yet I found that many adoptee resident returnees refuse to be recuperated or co-opted under the democratic guise of the neoliberal state and actively resist the symbolic "ambassadorship" bestowed upon them. The state's selective history transforms adoption from a national shame into a transnational gain, but it asks adoptees to reorder their condition of displacement and loss by replacing it with a subjectivity commensurate with neoliberal values of flexibility, entrepreneurship, and human capital. In their everyday lives, however, adoptees demonstrate how adoption has made cosmopolitanism or flexible citizenship difficult, if not impossible, to achieve, precisely because of their lost connections to Korean culture, language, and family.

HUMAN CAPITAL AND NEOLIBERAL SOUTH KOREA

My approach to neoliberalization in South Korea follows recent work by social scientists who have begun to identify the effects of neoliberal governmentality in everyday South Korean life since the restructuring of the South Korean economy and the ascendance of neoliberal forms of governance following the 1997 Asian financial crisis.²¹ The question of how to define South Korean neoliberalization against the classical models associated with the advanced liberal welfare states of Europe or the US brand of neoliberalism have been deliberated and analyzed by others and need not be detailed here.²² To be brief, I employ neoliberalization to describe the ways in which the South Korean state expanded the liberalization and deregulation of the economy (trends already in place since the early 1990s), in order to comply with World Bank and IMF-led restructuring demands that reflected hegemonic free market principles and the dominance of finance capital. In doing so, I follow anthropologist Jesook Song's analysis of neoliberalism in the South Korean context, which puts neo in parentheses to mark the fact that liberalism in South Korea coincided with neoliberalism on the global stage, extending the reach of a universal monetarist policy that privileges economistic measures of human value.²³

Recent studies of neoliberal governmentality in South Korea seek to correlate the macrolevel transformations of political economy with the on-the-ground practices and subjectivities of actors who negotiate economic and social insecurity with a heightened sense of their place in the global order of things. Rather than taking South Korean neoliberalization to be an accomplished fact, I consider moments of encounter between adoptees and Koreans to be performative sites of identity and difference in which the coconstitution of neoliberal normative subjectivity and adoptees' discrepant cosmopolitanism become analytically perceptible. The ways in which adoptees are or are not integrated into visions of South Korea as an advanced, globalized nation, and the ways that adoptees are positioned and position themselves within contemporary South Korea speak to calculative, market-based measures of human value, but can also reflect a critique of neoliberal *homo economicus*. Central to my analysis is the notion of "human capital," commonly associated with Chicago-school neoliberal economists and discussed at length by Foucault in his late-1970s lectures on biopolitics.²⁴

For Foucault, human capital provides a framework for describing the subsumption of social life under neoliberal capital and "the generalization of the economic form of the market . . . throughout the social body and including the whole of the social system not usually conducted through or sanctioned by monetary exchanges."²⁵ Characteristic of American-style neoliberalism, human capital relates to the neoliberal redux of *homo economicus* from a figure of exchange to one of entrepreneurship of the self. Whereas labor power is the property of the "free laborer" and can be exchanged for wages under capitalism, human capital is

indistinguishable from the worker. As Feher writes, “To envision human capital as a subjective form or formation implies that it must be compared to the figure of the free laborer, rather than to the notion of labor power.”²⁶ Rather than something that is owned by the worker, “my human capital is me, as a set of skills and capabilities that is modified by all that affects me and all that I effect.”²⁷ Labor power as a commodity owned by the worker has now become human capital that is coterminous with the individual as producer and entrepreneur of the self, an “ability machine” that produces income. Michel Feher builds upon Foucault’s analysis to suggest that what has changed from the neoliberal regime’s liberal precursor is not just a collapse of the spheres of production and reproduction, but also a shift from profit to appreciation.²⁸ Human capital thus extends beyond its typical application in studies of education and occupational management, which employ the term to describe the investments made in an individual through schooling and training. Instead, it can encompass any range of social processes and practices from the care of a mother for her child to confidence-building programs for the unemployed.

The notion of human capital encompasses “inborn physical-genetic predisposition and the entirety of skills that have been acquired as the result of ‘investments’ in the corresponding stimuli: nutrition, education, training, and also love, affection, etc.”²⁹ and provides the basis for entrepreneurship of the self. In the context of transnational adoption, human capital mirrors the way that state narratives construct adoptees as the ideal combination of nature and nurture—i.e., the transnational, transcultural wedding of “inborn” Korean qualities and the benefits of a Western education and upbringing. As Read writes, “the real subsumption of society by capital . . . involves not only the formation of what Marx referred to as a specifically capitalist mode of production, but also the incorporation of all subjective potential, the capacity to communicate, to feel, to create, to think, into productive powers for capital.”³⁰ Although human capital, as the neoliberal guise of the figure of *homo economicus*, may represent a “generalization of the economic form of the market,” it is, as Foucault writes, a “grid of intelligibility,” not a determinant of subjectivity or individual behavior.³¹

Human capital as a dominant grid of intelligibility in South Korea becomes evident in state and vernacular framings of adoption as an investment in Western education and knowledge. I argue that adoption in South Korea is increasingly viewed, retrospectively, as investment in human capital, rather than as a failure of the state to fulfill basic social welfare needs for its citizens. Adoptees, who were once perceived as collective victims of the authoritarian developmentalist period, today are featured as individual success stories, with adoptee musicians, artists, politicians, diplomats, and, of course, sports celebrities, frequently appearing in media reports. As in the case of Toby Dawson, they may be claimed as Koreans who can provide the nation-state with unexpected returns. They also resonate with aspirational goals of Korean parents and

their children, caught up in the post-IMF “English frenzy” and investments in human capital through the accumulation of “spec” (*sŭp’ek*).³² Whereas generic messages from the state prefer to address adoptees as long-distance coethnics accruing value for the nation, as I discuss in the following sections, in everyday interactions, adoptees are more likely to be framed as “lucky” cosmopolitans. Moreover, when it comes to longtime resident adoptee returnees, the grid of human capital renders adoptees who “give up a good job and a comfortable life to come to South Korea to teach at a cram school” markedly unintelligible, economically irrational subjects.

ADOPTION AS STUDY ABROAD

Many adoptees cannot deny that they have returned with many of the privileges of a Western upbringing, and talk about the “opportunities” they have had by being adopted, which they imagine they would not have had if they had stayed in Korea. But the often ethnocentric and classed assumptions that allow for the unproblematic conflation of rescue, family, love, and opportunity in adoption discourses render some adoptees particularly sensitive to the idea that their “best interests” were served through their separation from their original families and their adoptions to more advanced countries.

From the perspective of Western receiving nations, transnational adoption is typically framed as a humanitarian act that rescues a vulnerable orphan from death or abandonment. In the context of South Korea, however, which has sent more children overseas than any other nation, and which has been among the wealthiest sending nations since the 1980s, the commodification of human life is increasingly justified post facto via ideologies of upward mobility and opportunity. Adult adoptees who return to South Korea have experienced these variations, especially those who arrived in the mid-1990s and resided in Seoul through the turn of the millennium. Although adoptees I met in 2004 would joke about playing the “adoptee card” to get discounts from merchants or other special treatment, they also recounted shifts in their reception among native Koreans, especially taxi drivers in Seoul. A discourse of good fortune and luck began to replace prior discourses of shame and remorse, and cab drivers, who might have been apologetic and distressed in the past, would be more likely to say, as one adoptee told me, “Oh, you make lots of money, so you’re lucky.”³³

Especially in the context of the hypercompetitive school system in South Korea, and the naturalization of transnational families in the form of wild geese fathers (*kirŏgi abŏji*) and ever younger study abroad students (*chogi yuhak*), adoptees could be seen as having received effortless access to the privileges other Koreans yearn for, especially the most highly sought “spec,” English-language fluency. Indeed, it was not uncommon to hear younger generation Koreans, upon hearing about adoptees or meeting them, flippantly exclaim, “I wish I could be

adopted to America!” As one adoptee who tutored wealthy students applying to American boarding schools told me,

One mother said, in so many words, “adoptees are lucky.” I know a lot of mothers who want to send their children to boarding school in America—if you have the money, what a great opportunity. [The children] will live a better lifestyle regardless of the contact that they don’t have with [the parents], the values that they’re not instilling in them.³⁴

Affluent South Korean mothers’ conflation of *yuhak* with adoption may be the ultimate sign that adoptees are now viewed as paragons of neoliberal cosmopolitanism, a far cry from the iconic image of Susanne Brink’s adoptee-as-victim. Indeed, the radical lengths to which Koreans go to stretch the bounds of family and nation in the name of education and mobility have provided an ironic cover for birth families as well. At least two adoptees who have reunited with birth parents have been introduced to family, friends, and neighbors as a daughter who has been a *yuhaksaeng* (study abroad student) for many years, thereby providing an explanation for her sudden appearance, her cultural awkwardness, and lack of Korean fluency. Indeed, the association between *yuhak* and adoption has been frequent enough that Mihee Nathalie Lemoine, a Korean-Belgian adoptee, artist, and activist, cautioned an audience of supporters at an adoptee advocacy NGO fundraiser in July 2004: “If you continue to send children overseas, don’t think that it’s *yuhak*. It’s not at all like *yuhak*—it’s adoption, which is to say that it’s irreversible.”

The state’s celebration of adoptees as “successful global citizens,” a phrase often used by government officials, and the equation made between adoptees and *yuhaksaeng* measure adoptees’ human capital based on assumptions about their Western upbringings and educations. These framings are particularly marked for adoptees who grew up in humble or working-class families, whose families did not value educational attainment or confer educational capital on their children, or whose ties to their adoptive families or nations are severed or strained. Moreover, these state and vernacular narratives fundamentally misconstrue the history of transnational adoption. On the part of the state, the history of adoption is rewritten by attributing its causes to postwar poverty and overpopulation, implying that the problems of the developmentalist state have been overcome in the course of South Korea’s rapid modernization. In everyday discourses, and even on the part of some birth families, adoption is increasingly disconnected from memories of the past and dehistoricized and decontextualized in order to be viewed as another strategy and symptom of contemporary Koreans’ “cosmopolitan striving.”³⁵ In the following sections I describe the lifeworlds of adoptee resident returnees in Seoul whose discrepant cosmopolitanisms are formed in relation to neoliberalized contours of human life in South Korea and elsewhere.

ADOPTEE RESIDENT RETURNEES

As adults, transnational adoptees began returning to South Korea in the late 1980s, primarily as tourists, and their numbers grew exponentially in subsequent decades. Today, although reliable statistics on adoptee returns do not exist, based upon numbers of adoptee visitors to Korean adoption agencies, low estimates suggest that 3,000 to 5,000 have been returning every year for the past several years. Adoption agencies as well as universities, NGOs, and government ministries offer programs targeted to overseas adoptees, and they tend to take the form of roots tours or language and cultural programs. These programs may offer the first introduction to the “birth country” for some overseas adoptees, and many adoptees make subsequent trips back to South Korea, to search for Korean relatives and birth families, to tour the country, or to extend their studies of South Korean language and culture. Some of the adoptees who initially make their return trips to South Korea through these programs decide to move to South Korea and integrate into a community of resident adoptees who live and work in South Korea, primarily in Seoul.

As a discernible and self-identified international community of adult Korean adoptees formed in the late 1990s and early 2000s, adoptees exchanged stories of return and repatriation online and in person at conferences and gatherings. In these spaces, adoptees who lived in South Korea accrued distinction and social capital, and the idea that adoptees should go back to visit, to search for their Korean relatives, or to live gained currency. Some adoptees even felt pressure to return in order to be seen as more “authentic” or “real” among their adoptee peers. A Korean American male adoptee, age thirty-one, whom I interviewed, talked about how other adoptees viewed adoptees like himself, who had been living in South Korea for four years:

We're the cool adoptees because we live in Korea. [Other adoptees] are like, “You're hardcore; you're doing it.” Maybe we do deserve some credit. The first year is tough. You got to get through it. Adoptees come and go, though, maybe just because they haven't experienced all the ups and downs. They don't know how hard it can get. Or how really good it can be too.³⁶

Part of the reason for viewing adoptees living in South Korea as “hardcore” and as “doing it,” is because they are seen as having made the decision to leave familiar lives in their adoptive countries to pursue a fantasy of living in their birth country, which might also entail opening themselves up to emotional and psychological vulnerability as they seek out the story of their origins. Moreover, they choose to trade their existence as racially minoritized subjects in one country to be culturally and linguistically minoritized subjects in another.³⁷

A survey conducted in 2008 by the adoptee-run NGO, Global Overseas Adoptees' Link, suggests some of the characteristics of the adoptee population living in South Korea. Out of 238 respondents, more than half were from the

United States, with slightly more men than women from every country represented (Australia, Belgium, Canada, Denmark, France, Germany, Italy, Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, Switzerland, United States). The majority at the time were between the ages of twenty-three and thirty-six, and 47 percent ($N = 111$) were employed as foreign language instructors, mostly English teachers. Over half of respondents had been living in South Korea for at least two years, and 14 percent ($N = 33$) had lived in South Korea for five years or longer.³⁸

The ability of adoptees to return to South Korea and extend their stays indefinitely has been made possible by changes in legal and economic structures, the most significant of which were the passage of the 1998 Overseas Koreans Act (OKA), the loosening of restrictions on private after-school education, and the explosion of the English-language education market feeding Koreans' post-IMF "English fever."³⁹ One sign of adoptees' ambiguous status as relatively privileged overseas Koreans is the particular ways in which adoptees use the OKA's F4 visa for the purposes of labor migration, rather than for investment. Hyun Ok Park describes how the OKA was originally conceived to deterritorialize the South Korean nation in the economic interests of the state, primarily to attract investment capital from affluent Korean Americans.⁴⁰ Through the OKA, the implicit hierarchy of value that stratified ethnic Koreans according to their social capital and labor power became readily visible. Adoptees' returns coincided with an influx of ethnic Korean labor migrants from China and North Korean refugees—other Korean coethnics who were embraced as long-lost members of the Korean family, yet were excluded from the OKA. As Park argues, the paternalistic embrace of Korean Chinese and North Koreans as long-lost "returnees" borrows affective potency from ethnic identification, but takes place within a global capitalist regime, in which capitalist dreams motivate migration to the purported "homeland."⁴¹ In the case of affluent Korean Americans, in contrast, support of the economy of the "homeland" was assumed to take the form of overseas investment in real estate or the stock market, rather than in participation in the labor market. Compared with both the labor migrant "returnees" and overseas coethnic investors, Korean adoptees present an anomaly. Despite their relative economic privilege, they typically apply for F4 visas as labor migrants to work as English-language instructors in order to fulfill their dreams of homecoming, made possible by the structures of transnational capital and the rise of global English.⁴²

That adoptee returnees from North America teach English as a foreign language (EFL) is often assumed, but adoptees from Scandinavian countries are also known to have passed as Americans, despite their non-American accents. Adoptees have also been recipients of government scholarships for Korean language programs or advanced degrees at South Korean universities, and some adoptees have found employment where their language skills are valued (trading companies, transnational enterprises, and translation or editing services). This is especially true for European adoptees, who are often fluent in English and one or

two European languages, but who cannot easily find work in language instruction. Some adoptees working at English-language institutes have entered into supervisory or management positions, but others continue teaching classes and take up private tutoring for extra income. Some have become professional language instructors, gaining internationally recognized credentials such as CELTA (Certificate in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages) in order to expand their employment possibilities. A smaller number with masters or doctorates also hold professorships at universities, where they have benefited from the growing mandate for higher education institutions to “globalize” and conduct courses in English.⁴³

Aside from these exceptions, most adoptees, it is fair to say, become flexible laborers in the market for global English, in a job category that is considered to be temporary, low-status, unskilled, and lacking opportunities for advancement. Expatriate English teachers in South Korea, like the “postmodern paladins” that EFL scholar Bill Johnston describes in Poland,⁴⁴ are often transients who seek out adventure and to gain economic and symbolic capital through their service to people in other countries. They occupy ambiguous positions as subjects marginalized from mainstream society who are also agents of “cultural and political hegemony.”⁴⁵ Thus, “the laudable goal of teaching a language while learning about another culture . . . first hand sits uneasily, yet inevitably, alongside the language teachers’ implication in hegemonic and predatory power relations between English-speaking and non-English speaking countries.”⁴⁶ Adoptees (similar to other ethnic Korean or Asian native English-speaking teachers), however, are implicated in hegemonic power relations in more complex ways, and they frequently express frustration with the discriminatory treatment they receive from employers, who have historically associated native English speaking with whiteness. The ambiguous position of adoptees who become enrolled as agents of cultural and political hegemony yet who lack the social and cultural capital of white teachers informs adoptees’ critiques of contemporary globalization in South Korea. These critiques are also inflected by their histories as adoptees whose involuntary loss of language, culture, and nation is ironically recuperated through the commodification of their “Westernization” and their role as agents of cosmopolitan globalization.⁴⁷

Thus, as EFL teachers, adoptees have a heightened awareness that their value as returnees is predicated on the political and economic power relations between their adoptive nations and South Korea, and their ability to contribute to South Korea’s economic future. These geopolitical and economic relations have opened up new opportunities for adoptees to travel and work, and, in an ironic way, serve as “cultural ambassadors” through English-language instruction. However, when adoptees extend their stays, they begin to appear to Koreans and other adoptees as failed cosmopolitans, more akin to the melancholic victim of Susanne Brink than the future-oriented bridge of Toby Dawson.

DISCREPANT COSMOPOLITANS

My adoption failed to mold me into a global citizen, a true cosmopolitan, a person who has accumulated the riches of culture and experience, marketable job skills. I will never be able to think like a Korean person, no matter how hard I study, no matter which language holds my thought. “When they adopted you they stole your mind,” Dominique had told me, matter-of-factly, as if he had understood this for years. In my heart’s irrational math one Korea plus one America equals nothing—equals motherless, languageless, countryless.

—Jane Trenka, *Fugitive Visions*⁴⁸

The majority of adoptees I met during the course of my research (2000–8) conformed to the middle-class model of the adoptee who seeks roots and/or natal family, but returns “home” to continue on the path of upward mobility promised by adoption. Adoptees who stayed in South Korea, however, sustained lives others considered markedly liminal—many of them worked in jobs without any opportunity for advancement, were unmarried, and devoted much of their time to maintaining the adoptee community in Seoul. This lack of futurity was worrisome and troubling for Koreans, adoptive families, and other adoptees. Although some might view adoptee returnees as “hardcore,” others considered them to be “losers” who were unable to succeed in their adoptive countries, as one adoptee in the United States told me.⁴⁹ And like the South Korean volunteer quoted in the introduction, Koreans also wondered why adoptees would give up their comfortable and privileged lives in the West to become English-language teachers. In fact, the deferral of “going back”—this time back to the United States or to Europe—was a prominent feature in the talk of long timers in South Korea.

Sally Morgan was like many among the small group of adoptees I met in 2003 and 2004 who had been in South Korea for five years or longer who often talked about plans to leave South Korea, but like trying to kick a habit, would end up postponing those plans for the following year or would set them into a more distant, vague future. In part this was because life in the megacity of Seoul was very convenient and comfortable, especially with a steady income and a built-in community. In this sense, many adoptees embraced liberal views of personhood, as highly autonomous, self-authoring subjects who had relatively flexible employment histories, moving between different schools and institutes and taking on private tutoring on the side, in pursuit of more lucrative or more agreeable work circumstances. Although many American adoptees were paying off debts from student loans or saving up for more schooling, most had enough disposable income to enjoy life in Seoul at the level of a student or young professional, and it was common to hear of adoptees vacationing in Southeast Asia during their winter holidays.

Sally had moved to South Korea from the United States in 1997 at the age of twenty-four. She had been adopted as an infant by an American military family and talked about her decision to come to South Korea in pragmatic terms: her friend in the United States had been recruited to a South Korean government-run English-language teaching program and suggested she apply. She was placed in a middle school and taught there for a year, then decided to stay and began working at an international school. The in-between identities of adoptees in South Korea was most clearly articulated by Sally, who in the seven years she had lived there, had been actively involved in the adoptee community, dated adoptees and native Koreans, worked for many years as an English teacher, and was enrolled as a graduate student at South Korea's top university. I asked her if she felt that she was assimilating to South Korean society.

Not totally. Definitely not totally assimilated. . . . Some people might call it marginalized. I don't feel totally assimilated in Korea, and I don't feel totally assimilated in America. Someone said, "Hey it'd be much easier—just pick one culture!" The thing is I don't want to! I don't want to totally assimilate to one culture. I guess I'm just trying to find my own, I don't know if you can say, my own identity, kind of in a way, but I just want to—yeah, I accept that I am American and Korean, but you can't say you're American in this way and you're Korean in this way. It's more complicated. . . . The thing is, I get this pressure of a choice, but I don't want to choose. I don't see it as much of a choice. To me, it's hard to define, I'm not native Korean, but I am Korean. It's hard to define. And I am American. . . . And I think at one point, it was a process in order to assimilate and to identify more. I thought, oh yeah, I want to be Korean, but then I realized it's hard. It's like, I just can't because even if I could speak Korean well—fluently—there's still going to be a barrier.⁵⁰

The fact that most adoptees' repatriations permitted them only partial integration in their everyday lives demonstrates that, even if they held strongly ethno-nationalistic or essentializing views about identity and nation, reterritorialization was an inherently problematic project. Instead, adoptees that I interviewed, like Sally, frequently articulated views about identity and personhood that underscored their unwillingness to assimilate to Korean cultural norms and simultaneously asserted a strong desire to continue living in South Korea.

Adoptees who return to South Korea are sometimes viewed by liberal observers in Western countries, including adoptive parents, academics, or other adoptees, as retrogressive, nationalistic, and anti-cosmopolitan because it is presumed that they are seeking to restore an authentic cultural or ethno-nationalistic identity.⁵¹ Certainly, fantasies of plenitude informed some adoptees' desire to return, but most quickly realized that they were diasporic subjects whose connections to South Korea could not be recuperated from the past, but had to be built up in the present. Rather than ethnic primordialists, they are more akin to exiles or discrepant cosmopolitans, who, as James Clifford writes, are related to diasporic cultures of "displacement and transplantation" that are generated from "specific,

often violent, histories of economic, political, and cultural interaction.”⁵² Adoptees who return are drawn to Korea because of a biographical history of birth and displacement, but most, even if they would like to, cannot sustain an essentialized view of cultural identity for very long. In fact, nearly all the people I spoke with articulated a diasporic or postnational view of identity, and many, like Sally, refused to “choose” between two essentialized identities, but spoke of being “100 percent Korean *and* 100 percent Belgian,” or of just being human.

Unlike Dawson, whose fame and privilege allowed him to fulfill a role as a bridge and ambassador and contribute to the future of the nation, adoptees like Sally were also unlike Susanne Brink, who reconciled her past and moved on by returning to Sweden. In refusing to “choose,” adoptee resident returnees seem to hover between past and present in ways that can be curious and troubling to parents, Koreans, and other adoptees. These concerns reveal the fact that, even as returns and “roots seeking” have become normalized stages in the transnational adoptee lifecycle, adoptees are still viewed as properly belonging in their nations of citizenship, their adoptive countries. Many Koreans especially share this view, given the fact that so many South Koreans of the same generation as the returning adoptees, those in their twenties and thirties, desperately seek to escape the country’s economic and social constraints. Thus, the longer adoptees stay in South Korea, the more they seem to be squandering their economic and social capital. These adoptees, unless they are able to leverage their employment into more legibly “global” or “flexible” categories such as a job in a multinational corporation, upper level management in an English-language institute, or small business entrepreneurship, begin to take on a pathologized hue. Skeptical onlookers wonder what future these adoptees can have in South Korea. Some adoptees like Sally described the concerns of their adoptive parents who felt “a bit threatened. I’ve been here for so long [that] they think that I’ll stay here forever. So that worries them. And the fact that I like Korea, that I want to be Korean.”⁵³

The adoptee expatriate community in Seoul has become a *de facto* family for many, and spaces of “adoptee kinship” structure their lives and relationships.⁵⁴ They come to identify themselves as adoptees, or *ibyangin*, a category of social personhood organized around displacement and cultural alienation. Rather than reterritorializing identity as “Koreans,” therefore, their returns ground their deterritorialized identities in expatriate adoptee spaces. Moreover, by challenging the economic logic that governs liberal views of transnational adoption (which frames it as a form of rapid upward mobility for a child who moves from circumstances of scarcity and deprivation to opportunity and self-realization), adoptee activists in particular resist the dehistoricizing tendencies that either neutralize adoption as a problem of the authoritarian developmentalist past, or justify it *post facto* as a variation of study abroad education (*yuhak*). In the following section, I focus on a group of adoptees whose discrepant cosmopolitanism, indecorous personhood, and out-of-joint temporality confront the amnesia of both state and vernacular versions of adoptee histories.

DMZ AS HOMETOWN

In July 2004, on the eve of a major international conference for Korean adoptees in Seoul, four male adoptees who had been living in South Korea for three to four years called a meeting to organize a public demonstration against transnational adoption. One of the adoptees, whose online ID, Korean Airline, recalls adoptees' state-sponsored departures and arrivals, sent out an e-mail announcement to university listservs to rally support for their cause:

KOREAN STUDENTS WE NEED YOU TO STOP ADOPTION
 HELP US
 NO MORE KOREANS ADOPTED SENT OVERSEAS
 NO MORE AGENCIES MAKING MONEY
 NO MORE WHITE [*sic*] TREATING US LIKE PRODUCTS⁵⁵

Only a handful of people came to the meeting—representatives of adoptee advocacy NGOs, a university student, and myself—and no other Korean students or adoptees showed up. At the meeting, the four adoptees articulated their feelings about adoption as an exploitative colonial enterprise and their views of other adoptees, who, they argued, would be “80 percent for adoption but 100 percent [messed] up.”⁵⁶ They considered themselves to be the return of the repressed, as reflected in one adoptee's assertion that “Korean adoptees don't like us—when they see us, they see the part of themselves that they've been trying to hide, what they had to push down.” Another dramatically stated, “I'm ready to die to stop adoption. If they said they would stop adoption, I'd kill myself here. I'm really determined.” Whether or not it was intentional, this statement seemed to be a romantic echo of Chŏn T'aeil's desperate plea for help from university students in 1970. That plea was disregarded, but his self-martyrdom inspired the *undongkwŏn* (activists) of the democratization period. It appeared, however, that in the postdemocratization, post-IMF moment, these adoptees, who reflected and modeled themselves upon the previous generation's *minjung*, could not be recognized as such. And unlike Susanne Brink, whose gender was central to the narrative of “rescue,” these men were unlikely victims, more liable to be viewed as irrational and irresponsible, rather than vulnerable. Out of joint with the times, they called out for help from university students, yet young Koreans' subjectivities in the postdemocratization, NGO-era were shaped more by an ethos of middle-class volunteerism (and desire to improve their English-language skills) than by social justice.

These men, three from Europe, one from the United States, were marginalized members of the adoptee community, often described as “wild” or “crazy,” if not “dangerous” by other adoptees—especially among those who had organized the international conference, invested as they were in building a positive public image of adult adoptees as “successful” people who may have been

“disadvantaged” as children, but who now just wanted to be viewed as “normal . . . just like everyone else.”⁵⁷ These adoptees, in contrast, highlighted their *inability* to overcome their past traumas and resentments in ways that made them appear to be liabilities to others in the community. Two of them had traveled to South Korea in 2001 when they were seventeen and eighteen, with no intention of returning to their adoptive countries. Another arrived at the age of twenty, identified with marginalized Korean Chinese workers and sought 3-D employment in the (dirty, dangerous, and difficult) construction industry. In the context of Seoul in the early 2000s, they were exceptionally conspicuous—sporting long, unruly hair—intentionally disruptive, and often getting into barroom brawls. Unlike other adoptees living in South Korea, whose outward appearance and comportment allowed them to “pass,” these young men projected indecorousness and foreignness wherever they went. They were especially sensitive to gendered hierarchies of race and nation, and their discrepant cosmopolitanism was crucially born out of their experiences as racialized minorities in their adoptive families, communities, and nations.⁵⁸

The French-speaking adoptees, even as they spoke nearly fluent English, were unable to tap into the EFL teaching market due to their lack of college education and lack of native English-language skills. But, like the American adoptee, they viewed the teaching of English to be further evidence of South Korea’s neocolonial subordination to the United States, and of South Korean exploitation of adoptee labor. Deterritorialized subjects, they often expressed their sense of alienation and displacement through biting humor about dystopic/utopic spaces of (un)belonging, whether mock-romanticizing North Korea as being more culturally pure than the South, which had been corrupted by Western cultural and economic imperialism, or fantasizing about living on an “adoptee island,” imagined as a paradise that, they bantered, would quickly turn into vicious, internecine war. They were sometimes literally homeless and always psychically homeless, to the extent that one of them joked about wanting to live in the Korean demilitarized zone (DMZ), which he described as his *kohyang*, or hometown.

At the margins of the state, market, and family—the dominant domains for measuring human value—these adoptees were viewed with consternation by Koreans and with contempt by some middlebrow adoptees who feared that their extreme behavior and attitudes would reflect badly on the mainstream members of the adoptee community, who explicitly sought to gain legitimacy in the eyes of the South Korean public and government as “mature, independent adults.” In the context of English fever and cosmopolitan striving, they lacked the human capital that could make their adoptions intelligible, and they therefore led a precarious existence, with irregular employment and peripatetic lifestyles. They often articulated the belief that Korean adoption was, at root, capitalist, colonialist, and orientalist, and as adoptees who were not the beneficiaries of the power inequalities that structure transnational adoption, they held a less ambivalent view of adoption than others who could lead a relatively comfortable life as an

EFL teacher. Moreover, in part because they were raised in nations with strong traditions of state welfare, the Europeans expected much more than most Americans from the South Korean state in terms of benefits and protection.

They shared, with other long-term adoptee activists in Seoul, a desire to end the adoption system, a project that structured their sense of hope and future temporality.⁵⁹ Rather than viewing them as merely self-destructive and stuck in a quest for lost origins, then, one might instead see their efforts at recognition and restitution as subaltern modes of self-appreciation and self-liberation, not in a space outside of neoliberal capture, but as alternative expressions of human value, articulated in the face of their own commodification and racialized abjection. By connecting their struggles to South Korea's radical past and mobilizing against the tendency to divest adoption from its long history, whether under the banner of cosmopolitanism, or from the perspective of democratization fulfilled, they suggested that the violence of the developmentalist state is still alive and well, as long as children continue to leave the country for overseas adoption. As one adoptee stated at the meeting, "We're not doing this for ourselves; our lives are over. We're doing it for other children. I would hate to see other kids suffer the way we did."

CONCLUSION

The resignification of the cultural meanings of overseas adoption and the shifting receptions and representations of transnational adoptees are suggestive of the degree to which neoliberal rationalities have made kinship relations and social belonging acceptable sacrifices in the pursuit of human capital investment, liberal self-actualization, and cosmopolitan freedom among South Koreans. Yet resident adoptee returnees' cultural and economic marginalization and their discrepant and minoritarian cosmopolitanism raise uneasy tensions among neoliberal values, cosmopolitan aspirations, and global hierarchies in the reckoning of human value in contemporary global South Korea and beyond. On the one hand, returnees assimilate to the flexibilized labor economy, largely through short-term contract English-language teaching, yet on the other hand, their repatriations to Korea confound normative models of personhood that value entrepreneurship and cosmopolitan mobility.

Although it might be easy to interpret the affects of futility, despair, and fatalism expressed by the male adoptees in the previous section to be a divestment or depreciation in their human capital, I argue that these affects should be seen as subaltern modes of investment in their human capital, articulated through their attempt (however failed) to construct solidarity around a collective adoptee body of racialized and gendered suffering. Furthermore, if these radical adoptees represent the hidden, abject side of transnational adoption in the context of neoliberalism, then they may also shed light upon the ways that the human capital of even

the most successful and enterprising adoptees is built upon racialized modes of negative affect—of abjection and domination—rather than positive affects of freedom, self-actualization, and happiness.

Toby Dawson's story, in fact, reveals some of the ways in which even the iconic adoptee, whose human capital rests on his ability to at once transcend national boundaries and link two nation-states, embodies the persistent power of racial inequality to shape cosmopolitan subjectivities. The optimistic figure of the ideal adoptee as a "bridge" or "ambassador" papers over the ways in which many experienced their cultural citizenship in their adoptive countries and communities as compromised by their racialized difference. In the state-sponsored documentary about his reunion with his father and his ambassadorship, Dawson attributes his love of skiing not just to his natural athletic talents, but to his painful experiences with racial alienation—he was able to escape his difference on the slopes. As he states, "like Clark Kent" he could don his ski goggles and transform himself into a "different person." Striking a different note, in his address to the International Olympic Committee, Dawson drew upon his adoption history to win over his audience by referring to the opportunities he would not have been able to pursue had he grown up in South Korea, because the resources to foster skiing talent did not exist at the time. He asked the IOC to award P'yŏngch'ang the Olympic bid so that young Korean children today could reap the benefits of those resources.

Yet, even if the resources had existed for Dawson in South Korea, a major factor in his obsession with skiing was related to his displacement and racial alienation, which he would not have experienced in South Korea, or certainly not in the same way. Therefore, in calculating his human capital, in addition to his "inborn" aptitude for skiing and his good fortune for having been adopted by ski instructor parents in Vail, Colorado, one must also figure in his experiences as an Asian man raised in a white family, in a homogeneously white community. A significant part of Dawson's "luck," then, is that he was able to locate a utopian space, the snow-covered mountains, where his abjection and lack of belonging could be temporarily expiated. Yet even if the slopes could be a space of transcendence, the film hints that Dawson was passed over for the US Olympic team in 2002 because of racial discrimination among the judges.

Taken together, the radical male adoptees and Dawson present a bleak picture of transracial adoption from South Korea in its colorblind, multicultural, and neoliberal guises, which places the burden of self-esteem and the challenge of psychic survival on the shoulders of children who grow up seeking escape from their postcolonial condition on the clean, white slopes of the Rockies or in the artificial no-man's land of the demilitarized zone. These common experiences with racialized exclusion and isolation suggest some of the genuine limits to vernacular assumptions about adoptees' human capital and both neoliberal and progressive modes of cosmopolitanism (as the individual pursuit of unfettered consumption and capital accumulation or as democratic solidarity in a world

community).⁶⁰ The experiences also raise troubling contradictions for the state, which, as it continues to send children overseas for adoption, must absorb the critique of adoption as commodification and dehumanization (“being sold into adoption”) at the very same moment that it attempts to enroll adoptees as successful and willing servants for the nation.

NOTES

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1. Jane Jeong Trenka, *Fugitive Visions*, 170.

2. More than 70 percent of adoptees were sent to the United States and the remainder to nations in Western Europe, as well as Australia and Canada. Although official statistics from the South Korean Ministry of Health and Welfare report roughly 170,000 children have been internationally adopted since 1953, most adoption experts and scholars estimate the actual figures to be closer to 200,000. Republic of Korea, Pogŏn Pokchi Pu, *Kungnaeoe ibyang hyŏnhwang*. Adoptions from South Korea began in the aftermath of the Korean War, with the first wave composed of mixed-race children, born to Korean women and fathered by US or UN soldiers, and subsequent waves were composed of full-Korean children born into poverty or abandoned due to divorce or single parenthood. At its peak in 1985, close to 9,000 children were sent abroad for adoption, and negative media attention during the 1988 Seoul Olympic Games led to a concerted government effort to reduce the numbers of overseas adoptees. Tobias Hübinette, *Comforting an Orphaned Nation*, 77. Since the early 2000s, on average, 1,500 children have been sent annually, and government policies project an end to overseas adoption by 2015. Republic of Korea, Pogŏn Pokchi Pu, *Kungnaeoe ibyang hyŏnhwang*. The vast majority of those adopted between the 1950s and 1980s, who are now adults, typically had very little exposure to other Korean immigrants, cultural practices, or products during their childhoods. Republic of Korea, Pogŏn Pokchi Pu, *Kungnaeoe ibyang hyŏnhwang*.

3. Interview with NGO volunteer, August 26, 2003, Seoul, South Korea.

4. Jane Jeong Trenka, *Fugitive Visions*, 170.

5. Eleana Kim, “Our Adoptee, Our Alien.”

6. Eleana Kim, “Wedding, Citizenship, and Culture.”

7. Tobias Hübinette, *Comforting an Orphaned Nation*.

8. Interview with Korean adoptee, August 15, 2003, Seoul, South Korea.

9. Eleana Kim, *Adopted Territory*.

10. Thomas Lemke, “The Birth of Bio-Politics”; Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics*.

11. James Clifford, *Routes*.

12. *Toby Dawson—Lost and Found* (Jalbert Productions International, 2011), a documentary about Dawson's trip to South Korea to become a public relations ambassador and to meet his Korean birth father, is narrated by Dawson and features interviews with his family and friends in the United States, as well as South Korean government officials. The film is presented as a first-person documentary that explores with some sensitivity Dawson's feelings about South Korea, his adoption, and his birth-family reunion. It was sponsored by the South Korean Cultural and Information Service, the Presidential Council on Nation Branding, and the Korea Tourism Organization, with, according to a government press release, its "main purpose [being] to promote Pyeongchang [P'yŏngch'ang] as host for the 2018 Winter Olympic Games." Korea.net, Gateway to Korea, Press Release, www.korea.net/detail.do?guid=54555 (accessed December 7, 2011). The website is no longer available.

13. As documented in *Lost and Found*, despite Dawson's own initial reluctance to search for his Korean family, once the South Korean media took over, people from all over the nation came forward claiming to be his parents. The Korean Tourism Office led the search and, based upon DNA evidence, confirmed the identity of his father. Throughout the search process, news reports featured updates about the search and the DNA tests and kept the South Korean public riveted on their results. Dawson's father, a truck driver in Pusan, told reporters at the press conference that his wife had lost Dawson in the market one day when he was three years old. He found out when he got home from work and went to the orphanage to locate his son, but was refused entry and unable to check to see if his son was there.

14. After South Korea won the bid for the Winter Olympic Games, Dawson accepted the position as head coach for the South Korean freestyle skiing team.

15. The terms for overseas adoption and adoptees in Korean have altered somewhat over the years, but most Koreans refer to adoptees as *haeoe ibyanga*, using the diminutive "a," which denotes child. The more appropriate term, as advocated by adult adoptees, is *ibyangin*, which replaces "a" with "in" for "person," to disrupt the naturalized association of adoptees with dependent children. I use *ibyangin* to refer to adult adoptees in acknowledgment of their political struggles for recognition in South Korea.

16. When I interviewed South Koreans during my fieldwork in Seoul in the early 2000s, many Koreans referenced the film as the first time that they had heard of overseas adoption. Even if they had never seen the film, they knew the name Susanne Brink and the sad story that her name evoked. Indeed, the stereotype that overseas adoptees suffered hardships and were unfortunate (*pulssanghae*) was often attributed to the filmic depiction of her life. Since that time, numerous representations of adult adoptees have proliferated across the South Korean media landscape, as the melodramatic reunions of adoptees and their Korean parents have continued to draw South Korean audiences, which have been fed a steady stream of televised reunions since the 1985 telethons of war-separated families (*isan kajok*). Adoptees regularly appear on programs like KBS's *Kkok hanbŏn mannago sipta* (I want to see you once more) and MBC's *Kŭ saram i pogo sipta* (I want to see that person). With these multiplying images of adoptees searching for relatives, the diverse backgrounds of adoptees have become more widely broadcast, helping to dispel the notion that all adoptees have had abusive childhoods or emotional difficulties, but it is still often assumed that adoptees' returns to South Korea are motivated by a singular desire to reunite with their Korean mothers to heal the pain of separation. Like Susanne Brink, most documentaries that feature adoptee reunions conclude at the airport, where a

final round of tearful separations typically ensues before the adoptee returns to his or her family, life, and career in his or her adoptive country.

17. Tobias Hübinette, *Comforting an Orphaned Nation*, 142. The blockbuster feature film, *Kukka taep'yo* (directed by Kim Yong Hwa (Kim Yonghwa); English-language title, *Take Off*), about South Korea's first national ski jump team, was released in 2009 during South Korea's bid for the Winter Olympic Games. A fuller discussion of the film is beyond the scope of this article, but a brief comparison with *Susanne Brink's Arirang* reveals some similar shifts in representations of the "adoption problem" (*ibyang munje*) in contemporary South Korea. *Take Off*, although featuring a Korean adoptee character, was not a faithful biopic, according to interviews with the director, Kim Yong Hwa (Kim Hyon Jong, "Kim Hyon Jong's News Show"). Instead, the director based the main character loosely on an amalgamation of two recently famous adoptee athletes, Dawson and Recardo Bruins Choi, a Dutch Korean adoptee race car champion. The film departs from the clear social justice message of *Susanne Brink's Arirang*, which ended with a strong denunciation of South Korea's adoption program by Susanne Brink. In contrast, *Take Off* depicts the Korean birth mother as a solitary victim, not of a patriarchal state, but of class discrimination (rather than class subordination in a Marxist sense), as the oppressed maid in a wealthy family's household. The daughter of the household is the villain of the story, the stereotype of a morally abject, materialistic, and shallow member of the nouveau riche who continually abuses the birth mother. The reason for the overseas adoption, however, is never revealed. Rather than a problem of a corrupt state, therefore, adoption in this film is presented as an individual problem, disconnected from state policies or wider social issues of patriarchy or structural violence. An additional point of interest is the ambivalent attitude the adoptee character has toward the nation. The film highlights his displacement from and resentment toward South Korea, despite his service on the national team. Ultimately, what binds him to the nation is neither patriotism nor the nuclear family, both of which are presented as deeply alienating for the adoptee character. Rather, it is the sibling-like bonds of sport and masculine camaraderie with his teammates that grant him a sense of belonging, suggestive of the affective connections among "ethnic brethren" that transnational sports evoke among ethnic Koreans globally. See Rachel Mijung Joo, *Transnational Sport*.

18. So Young Park, "Transnational Adoption," 163. It is significant that the film *My Father* tells the story of a Korean adoptee (played by mixed-race actor Daniel Henney, whose mother is a Korean adoptee) who "finds" his birth father, Hwang Namch'öl, in prison, on death row. Even though DNA tests reveal them not to be genetically related, they develop a strong bond that transcends blood. Henney's character metaphorically "adopts" Hwang by taking his surname and officially registering himself as part of Hwang's family. So Young Park's association of the birth mother with bloodline and family history and the birth father with cultural ties, however, requires further qualification, as it contradicts Korean patrilineal kinship ideologies, which still have powerful social effects in South Korean society. In fact, anthropologist Elise Prebin, in her study of Korean adoptee reunions with birth families, finds that relationships within the patriline are more easily sustained and can be stronger than those with birth mothers and their families. These outcomes, while certainly influenced by kinship ideologies are also complicated by a range of emotional, psychological, and social factors, including the cultural stigmas that tend to place the burden of blame and humiliation on mothers, regardless of the circumstances that led to the adoptee's abandonment and adoption.

19. The film moves rapidly through a critique of South Korea's adoption program, with Dawson narrating the "staggering numbers" of children sent for adoption as South Korea sought to solve problems of population and development by "generating a revenue stream through the sale of young children." Minister Byoung-Gug Choung's tearful apology is followed by a resignification of Dawson from a "traded commodity" to an "iconic figure" who "well represents the past and present of Korea." A few seconds later, Dawson is shown on a snow-covered mountain, with his voiceover stating crisply, "With the formalities in Seoul behind me, it was time to hit the slopes."

20. President Kim Dae Jung in 1998 invited twenty-nine overseas adoptees to the presidential residence, offering the first public apology and recognition of adult adoptees. His juxtaposition of "roots" and the role that adoptees can play in South Korea's globalization has become generic to all subsequent state messages to adoptees. Since then, it has become commonplace for politicians and government officials to address adoptees through emotional apologies and often tearful performances, asking forgiveness as a prelude to framing them as ideal ambassadors or cultural bridges. See Eleana Kim, "Wedding, Citizenship, and Culture" and Eleana Kim, "Our Adoptee, Our Alien" for other instances of public apologies by state officials.

21. For examples of recent studies, see So Jin Park and Nancy Abelmann, "Class and Cosmopolitan Striving"; Nancy Abelmann, So Jin Park, and Hyunhee Kim, "College Rank and Neo-Liberal Subjectivity"; Jesook Song, "Between Flexible Life and Flexible Labor"; Dongjin Seo, "The Will to Self-Managing"; and Jesook Song, *New Millennium South Korea*.

22. Unlike the paradigmatic examples of neoliberalism in Latin America, neoliberalization in South Korea entailed the simultaneous establishment of the welfare state, albeit a minimally adequate one, alongside the installment of neoliberal programs, administered by progressive NGOs. As Jesook Song's ethnographic work demonstrates, the Kim Dae Jung administration responded to the financial crisis by establishing welfare policies intended to produce distinctions between "deserving" and "undeserving" subjects who were then enrolled in neoliberal modes of value creation, through workfare or knowledge entrepreneurship. The close collaboration of governmental and nongovernmental organizations produced the very programs and social relations that could actualize these reforms to create a flexible labor force of self-governing, entrepreneurial subjects, thereby undermining labor union solidarity and setting the stage for increasing economic inequality, polarization, and insecurity. These transformations are part of a much longer history of South Korean modernization and globalization, but they exist within a broader assemblage of economic, political, and social forces that are broadly neoliberal in character. See Jesook Song, *South Koreans in the Debt Crisis* and Sook Jong Lee and Kevin Hewison, "Introduction: South Korea and the Antinomies of Neo-Liberal Globalisation."

23. Despite the fact that the South Korean state never had a liberal period, as Song points out, theories of neoliberalism need not be restricted to evolutionary periodization, but should attend to the multiple kinds of neoliberalism that emerge out of particular historical and social contexts. As she writes, "South Korean neoliberalism emerged in the historical context of struggles between dominant 'illiberal' and marginal but forceful 'liberal' sociopolitical components: between the military developmental state and an anti-state social body as well as between conservative gender/sexuality/family norms (a mixture of neo-Confucian and orthodox Protestant heritages) and liberalistic women's movements."

See Jesook Song, "Introduction," in *New Millennium South Korea*, 3. The socialist futures that motivated and mobilized students and workers in the 1980s not only faded with the fall of the Berlin Wall, they were transformed into consumerist values and notions of responsible citizenship, which have been conflated with liberal democratic values by the very social actors who decried state power and global capitalism in their more radical pasts.

24. Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics*; see also Hairong Yan, "Neoliberal Governmentality" and Lisa Hoffman, "Autonomous Choices" for discussions of human capital in the context of China's market reforms.

25. Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics*, 243.

26. Michel Feher, "Self-Appreciation," 24–25. See also Jason Read, "Genealogy of *Homo-economicus*"; and Ben Anderson, "Affect and Biopower."

27. Michel Feher, "Self-Appreciation," 26.

28. Michel Feher, "Self-Appreciation."

29. Thomas Lemke, "The Birth of Bio-Politics," 199.

30. Jason Read, "Genealogy of *Homo-economicus*," 33.

31. Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics*, 243.

32. "Spec" accumulation (*sŭp'ek ssak'i*) has become a common way for students and parents to talk about investment in the child's human capital and his or her portfolio of assets and credentials, which can include school grades, languages, extracurricular activities, overseas education (*yuhak*), and standardized test scores, especially English-language proficiency (TOEIC). "Spec," short for "specifications," also refers to the ways that people on the job or marriage market quantify their human capital and competitiveness, converting their knowledge as if they had indeed become the "fixed capital" of a machine. See Jason Read, "Genealogy of *Homo-economicus*," 33. "Spec fever" (*sŭp'ek yŏlp'ung*) is one measure of normalization of neoliberal values of competition and self-improvement such that all human capacities (not just labor power, as under classic liberalism) become subsumed under capital. Furthermore, drawing upon Feher's discussion of the relationship between the subject and his or her human capital, one might also extend the meaning of "spec" as a particular characteristic of neoliberal subsumption in South Korea so that it not only stands for "specifications," but also for "speculation," in a highly competitive, high-risk society. Michel Feher, "Self-Appreciation," 34. For a discussion of English frenzy and spec, see Joseph Sung-Yul Park, "Naturalization of Competence."

33. Interview with Korean adoptee, September 5, 2004, Seoul, South Korea.

34. Interview with Korean adoptee, August 27, 2004, Seoul, South Korea.

35. So Jin Park and Nancy Abelmann, "Class and Cosmopolitan Striving."

36. Interview with Korean adoptee, August 27, 2004, Seoul, South Korea.

37. American studies and adoption scholar Kim Park Nelson conducted interviews with Korean American adult adoptees living in Seoul in 2006 and found that, contrary to her expectations, adoptees did not return primarily for symbolic or sentimental reasons, but for more pragmatic ones: "Many mentioned that they had left behind uninspiring or nonexistent careers in the United States, or that they had experienced recent personal breaks with family or long-term partners." She found that it was not the "pull of Korea as much as the lack of a pull to stay in the United States." Kim Park Nelson, "Korean Looks, American Eyes," 418. I also heard similar stories in my conversations and interviews with adoptees, who, faced with an unhappy present and an uncertain future, saved up money to buy a plane ticket to South Korea and found a ready and welcoming com-

munity, with organizations that support adoptee returnees with finding housing, employment, language learning, and birth family searches. Nevertheless, adoptees also reported many different reasons for returning to South Korea, with some foregrounding pragmatic reasons, others seeking to satisfy curiosity about Korea or their natal origins, and others attributing their desire to go to South Korea to long periods of isolation and alienation in their adoptive countries due to their racial difference and foreign origins.

38. G.O.A.'L., "Korean Adoptee Community." The community of adoptees in Seoul is very fluid, with adoptees arriving and leaving frequently, but of the longtime residents, some patterns have become discernible. Male adoptees outnumber females, and those who marry Koreans tend to settle in South Korea. Adoptees who marry each other tend to leave South Korea, especially if they intend to have children. Female adoptees predominantly date other adoptee men. A small group of self-identified LGBT (Lesbian Gay Bi Transsexual) adoptees also date each other, expats, or native Koreans.

39. So Jin Park and Nancy Abelmann, "Class and Cosmopolitan Striving."

40. Hyun Ok Park, "For the Rights of Colonial Returnees."

41. Ibid.

42. The South Korean F4 visa also grants adoptees more rights and flexible sojourns than the E-2 visa, which is designated for English teachers.

43. It is rare for foreign professors to be hired for tenure-track positions and even rarer for them to be tenured at South Korean universities.

44. Bill Johnston, "The Expatriate Teacher."

45. Ibid., 266.

46. Ibid., 260.

47. Similarities with 1.5 or 2nd generation Korean Americans exist at the level of racialization, but adoptees depart from Korean Americans in that they are culturally "white," yet their cultural authenticity, which is most valued by employers in the EFL market, is often eclipsed by their Korean physiognomy.

48. Jane Jeong Trenka, *Fugitive Visions*, 186.

49. Korean adoptee, personal communication with author, August 7, 2005.

50. Interview with Sally Morgan, August 26, 2004, Seoul, South Korea. Sally Morgan is a pseudonym.

51. Signe Howell, *Kinning of Foreigners*.

52. James Clifford, *Routes*, 36.

53. Interview with Sally Morgan, August 26, 2004, Seoul, South Korea. More recently, these assumptions may have shifted slightly, as the economies of the United States and Western European countries have contracted and those of East Asian nations have maintained relatively steady rates of growth. Adoptees who have returned to South Korea since the economic crisis of 2008 may now appear to family and friends to be rational economic actors, rather than poor investors in their own human capital.

54. On adoptee kinship, see Eleana Kim, *Adopted Territory*.

55. Lee Hyeran (pseudonym), e-mail distributed to Yonsei University BBS, July 6, 2004.

56. Stated by organizer of public demonstration meeting against transnational adoption, July 11, 2004, Seoul, South Korea.

57. For the original quotation, see Eleana Kim, *Adopted Territory*, 167.

58. A novella written by a Korean adoptee under the pen name, S. K. Chae, depicts the lives of disaffected young adoptee men who frequent the bars and clubs of Seoul's

university neighborhoods. The main character, Francois, delivers passionate critiques of adoption as a neocolonial practice premised on hierarchies of race and gender that have become internalized by the adoptees themselves. But aside from his male adoptee comrades, the other characters in the novel—native Koreans and other adoptees—are unwilling or unable to accept them. Largely based on true events, the novella depicts a violent encounter between expatriate English teachers and adoptee men who seek to protect their female companions from the unwelcome advances of predatory, orientalizing, white men. These contests over masculine power and sexual dominance are revealing of the marginalized position of some male adoptees in South Korea who view South Korean men with contempt because of their subordination to American occupation and white supremacy, and who struggle against their own disempowerment when it comes to asserting their full personhood and sexual agency in their adoptive countries and South Korea. S. K. Chae, *Remembering Koryo*.

59. Adoptee activists in Seoul, such as author Jane Trenka, who cofounded Truth and Reconciliation for the Adoptee Community in Korea (TRACK) in 2007, also engage in projects that highlight adoptees as victims of the state, to the consternation of some adoptees who do not view themselves as victims, or those invested in other narratives of personal agency and self-realization. TRACK explicitly connects the history of adoption to the history of the authoritarian state, as well as to other historical atrocities such as the Children of the Disappeared in Argentina, the Stolen Generation in Australia, and the forced removal of Native American children from their homes and communities. TRACK self-consciously borrowed the language of “truth and reconciliation,” which had been actively discussed in the 2000s around the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Korea (TRCK), the independent body that investigated atrocities and human rights crimes of the Japanese colonial period, the Korean War, and the authoritarian period. For TRACK, this strategic borrowing linked their work of uncovering illegalities and irregularities in past adoption practices to mobilize to end adoptions from South Korea in the present. These irregularities include forgery of documents, misrepresentation of children to the adopting parents, kidnapping, and unclear relinquishments. In addition, TRACK has collaborated with unwed mothers’ groups in South Korea that are attempting to gain public support for women who decide to keep and raise their children rather than relinquish them to overseas adoption. TRACK’s rhetoric actively mobilizes discourses of “international standards” and international human rights to pressure the South Korean government to reform or end its adoption program. Their collaboration with other adoptee activists and the organizations Adoptee Solidarity Korea and KoRoot culminated in a successful campaign to reform the South Korean adoption law in June 2011.

60. In his lectures on neoliberalism, Foucault downplayed the “inborn” aspects of human capital, including the threat of racism, preferring to speculate about the ways that artificial enhancement of physical traits might lead to new forms of geneticized risk management. The “race” of adoptees, however, should not be framed as “inborn,” but rather as a biosocial hybrid of nature and nurture. It is not that adoptees’ racial appearance is a guaranteed liability in a racially stratified world; it is that dominant colorblind models of transnational, transracial adoption in the United States and Europe since the 1950s have minimized the significance of the child’s racialization or, as Claudia Casteñeda argues, treated it as an optional “racial makeup” that is dehistoricized and rendered culturally insignificant. Claudia Casteñeda, *Figurations*, 94.

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