The Temporality of the Late Arrival: Fanon, Trenka, and the Question of Returning

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Introduction

Inter-country adoption from Korea began in the aftermath of the Korean War (1950–53), and constitutes today the largest, oldest, and longest-running transnational adoption program in post-war history. It is estimated that around 200,000 Korean babies have been sent to western countries, primarily the US. These days, far more than half of this group have reached adulthood, and many have returned to their birth country, usually for short-term visits.1)

For Korean adoptees, returning to Korea is a journey of discovery—and perhaps more specifically a journey of self-discovery. It is an experience of radical disjunction between the past and the present, the mind and the body, the West and the East—one that threatens to destabilize the world of the adopted subject. The encounter with Korea awakens the adopted subject from the illusion of a seamless world and points toward its discursive constructedness. The gesture of returning is thus an experience of radical deterritorialization in which everything—including the very core of the self and its place in the world—is open to questioning. And it is, at least potentially, an experience of emancipation and empowerment.

In the following, we want to explore the implications involved in this

gesture of returning through readings of Jane Trenka’s two books—*The Language of Blood* (2003) and *Fugitive Visions* (2009)—and the theoretical reflections developed by Frantz Fanon in his work *The Wretched of the Earth* from 1961. Trenka’s *Fugitive Visions* is both a continuation of her prize-winning memoir *The Language of Blood* and an independent investigation of a unique situation. In her new book, Trenka describes the experience of a Korean adoptee returning to—and resettling in—her native country. As such, the book offers a perspective which is uniquely different than the one we find in the majority of Korean adoptee autobiographies—in which the protagonist typically lives in the West and travels to Korea on a shorter or longer visit. But what does such a radical re-location involve more specifically, and how does this experience influence the stylistic dimension of Trenka’s writing? Frantz Fanon here offers an insightful reflection on the gesture of returning as a process of emancipation; and yet, as we shall see, Trenka’s new book also reformulates the Fanonian vision in unexpected ways. Read alongside, Trenka’s work and Fanon’s theoretical framework reveal some intriguing challenges and perspectives for the adopted subject embarking on the hard and difficult journey back to her native country.

**Strategies of Assimilation**

Transracial adoptees growing up in the West are often exposed to a number of ambiguous identity issues. One is the issue of assimilation—how to assimilate into white culture, and how to relate to a body that is perceived as “foreign.” In many cases, transracial adoptees end up rejecting this “foreign” body—and in a larger sense rejecting Korea as such and everything related to Korea—in order to fit in with their families and friends; the more transracial adoptees deny and distance themselves from their own bodies—as well as their country of birth—the more “secure” they feel in white culture. It goes without saying that the consequences of this assimilation strategy can be devastating in that it

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2) Throughout this article, we will refer to Constance Farrington’s translation of Fanon’s *The Wretched of the Earth*.

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