5 ANNIVERSARY

TRANQUILITY IN GAPYEONG

The Jarasum International Jazz Festival puts the world's best jazz musicians in a serene setting, with fresh autumn air and the colorful mosaic of Jara Island as a backdrop

GROOVE

KOREA • Issue 72 / October 2012

www.groovekorea.com

On the trail of Shamans

In the dark it is hard to see who comes and who goes. Scattered fires and candles reveal the small ceremonies taking place near the water. This beach is one of the most important pilgrimage sites for Korean shamans

Gangnam Style? NAH.

It is a place constructed of illusion, aspiration, financial speculation.
The values embedded in the concept that underlie Gangnam are not Korean values, but Western

Real CHINESE food

Forget the jjajangmyeon. Oh Myeong-hak serves real Chinese food – melt-in-your-mouth pork belly in thick gravy, stir-fried eggplant, bok choy and mushrooms

Eat, Rest, Pay, Out

That's the translation of this restaurant's name. It's so popular (and cheap) that this is precisely what happens here

The McCurry interview

Steve McCurry sat down with Groove Korea to talk about near-death experiences and his views of Korea and Asia. His exhibition "Between Darkness and Light" is on display

Taking on the Hongdae establishment

New venue declares war against K-pop. They are open for the community. All genres and artists are welcome

Daehan tea plantation

South Jeolla Province is filled with amazing sights and some of Korea's most authentic attractions. This new monthly feature highlights weekend trips around Korea

The Busan Fireworks Festival

It's not only the most spectacular display of fireworks in Korea, it is surely one of the best in all of Asia

MY KOREAN IDENTITY

Overseas Koreans explore their heritage

Featured events:
48 Hour Film Project, 'Picasso at the Lapin Agile', HBC Fest, Zombie Walk

가 나

가 나

가 나

가 나

가 나

A life not lived

The search for a Korean identity

Story by Jenny Na / **Artwork by** Mihee-Nathalie Lemoine

> It always starts in the eyes. A question formulated in the back of the mind that works its way up to the surface until it practically begs for escape. They want to know what you are.

I've spent a lifetime trying to answer that questioning gaze and have failed on so many levels. That's what happens when the package doesn't match the contents and everyone, mostly me, feels as if they've been sold a false bill of goods.

When I look in the mirror, the person staring back is a strange Korean I don't always recognize as myself. She has brown skin, small almond eyes and dark hair, which doesn't match the image I have in my head of a girl with pale white skin, round eyes and dark reddish-brown hair. Though she has receded a bit over the years, I can't seem to shake her off. She's always there, lurking in the shadows. I manage to forget the Korean woman as long as nobody mentions it, but they always do. Whether the question remains unformed and locked in the eyes or comes spilling out as sound, it echoes in my head long after the encounter simply because that other girl just won't go away.

I don't think I've ever felt comfortable in my own skin, but that doesn't mean I've stopped trying to make it work. Growing up as a Korean adoptee in rural Minnesota, I was almost always the only Asian around and the boys on the playground made sure I knew it. Here in Korea, I can slip through a crowd virtually unnoticed until I open my mouth. And when I do, I can feel the awkwardness of who I am return.

I return to these questions now because summer is the season of adoptees, interns and fellows in Korea. Every year around this time, hundreds of hyphenated Koreans make the trip here from the Western countries where they've grown up, live or go to school. We are returning in ever larger numbers and many more of us are staying. We're choosing to make a life here despite circumstances that can be at once joyous and devastating. There is joy in the sheer number of discoveries large and small, and devastation in the amount of damage it can do to identities-in-progress.

I've seen enough friends – adoptee, mixed Korean and kyopo – take this journey to wonder what it is that makes us return, and to ask why we stay. Or maybe, with a tenth year here on my horizon, I wonder why I'm still here. Home, though, is an ambiguous concept for me and I'm not sure that I know where it is. Before coming here, I made my homes in Minnesota and New York, with a short stay in France. But I've never really felt like I belonged anywhere and I've always felt like there was something missing.

O Canada Puzzled Web (2009)

Cercles I, 2000 (collection privée Washington DC)

I came to Korea because I also felt that there were pieces of myself that I could only reclaim by coming here, to see where in the landscape of Koreanness I might belong. I didn't have many illusions about it, but in the back of my mind I desperately wanted it to fit.

Still, I avoided it for a long time. It was like a box I didn't want to open and my upbringing had shown me that sadness, frustration and loss were all part of the package.

Body of identity

People often ask how or when I knew I was different and if I knew I was adopted. To me, the answer is obvious, because the majority of people around me had always been white, including my family. I had two Caucasian parents and a Caucasian brother who was my parents' biological child and I spent my childhood and adolescence in majority Caucasian communities of less than 3,000 where Asians were scarce or nonexistent.

The defining feature of the town were I lived the longest was the decaying main street that stretched for a sleepy block down a cement road past buildings that were either crumbling remnants of the town's 19th century past or cinder block constructions that look like they were built in the '70s. The town was populated by proud immigrant families of Polish, German and Scandinavian origin, and by others of ambiguous descent.

I tried for a long time to play "white," but it seemed that no matter where I went — and until I could drive, the boundaries were defined by where my bike would take me — there was no escaping my difference, whether I chose to acknowledge it or not. But I knew. I knew something was off because of how everyone always looked at me. The color of my skin, the slant of my eyes, the impossible straightness of my hair betrayed me every time.

I grew up with this definition of my physical identity encasing my being like a straightjacket, even if it didn't match my own growing recognition of my racial identity.

I also grew up in an era where parents, including mine, were taught to assimilate their adopted children, which meant that you ignored race, identity and adoption and pretended that your child was just like you. As long as no one talked about it, you were somehow shielding your new arrival from the knowledge that she was different.

In junior high and high school, difference of any kind equals social death. So I as I got older, I did the only thing I could think of: I tried like hell to erase it.

I had my mom, who had once been a beautician, perm my hair. It took two bottles of permanent solution and two hours in plastic curlers for it to stick. I also had her thin my hair with thinning shears so I could be like a girl in my class who had the thinnest, blondest hair I'd ever seen. On the rare occasions when I went to the beauty parlor for a "real" haircut, the ladies would comment on how long and thick and lustrous my hair was. How exotic.

I tried to make my eyes look bigger with makeup, though I never could seem to get the beauty tips in the magazines (which were for white girls) to work for me. Neither could I make whiteness come out any of the tubes of mascara that my aunts gave me for an endless number of Christmases and birthdays.

No matter what I did I wasn't comfortable with who I was trying to be. But I kept trying.

Just when I thought I'd fooled everyone, especially myself, into seeing me as white, there was always something else reminding me of the deception.

At church, my dad would introduce me to new arrivals as his daughter and I instantly felt like a fraud. I could see the look of surprise before they could conceal it with a belated bit of "Minnesota nice."

For a couple of years, my mom sent me and my non-adopted brother to a culture day camp, where for one day of the year we took classes in Korean language and fan dancing, dressed in hanbok and ate Korean food. I tried pretending I was Korean, to see what it felt like, but it was a costume that never fit and one that I shed as soon as we got home. My mom eventually took me to Korea and later taught me how to make bulgogi so I could compete, in full hanbok, at the state fair. But things like these only increased my desire to be recognized as white and I wanted to avoid the questions that I was learning were safer to suppress.

It wasn't like there weren't Korean adoptees in our school. Minnesota has the highest concentration of adoptees in the United States and our school had at least five that I can remember. I avoided them all, because I wanted to be white, and being with them reminded me that I wasn't. Although I did

Cercles II, 2000 (collection privée Washington DC)

have a short-lived friendship with one of the adoptees in my grade, we never talked about being Korean and especially not about adoption. Eventually we drifted apart, as all kids do at that age. But I also believe it was easier for me to let the friendship go because as long as we were together I was part of an Asian "we." On my own, I could keep up the pretense that I was not.

Instead, I hid in the safety of the theater, where no one questions the act of trying on different identities, even if it was that of a Jewish woman named Blanche or a German girl named Liesl, and that's where I stayed until college.

All of that was okay for a while, because I was a model minority – easily forgotten as brown because I was quiet, obedient — and I played the role really well. I got away with it too, or thought I did, until the taunts of "chink," "Jap" and "gook" brought me crashing back to earth.

Race relations

In college I met my first real Koreans. They wore their black hair straight, had Korean names and Korean parents, and they seemed to know something about Korea. In my mind, they knew what it meant to be Korean.

I met other people of color there, too, and through them, I saw that pride in race and culture was cool, not something to be hidden, and that I, too, could embrace it as they had: without shame. With them, I could stop pretending to be a different person. For the first time, I could feel that other girl in the mirror start to fade.

Yet it wasn't like I discovered myself and it stuck. The awakening I was experiencing couldn't fully protect me from the rollercoaster ride of living between my new self and the one I had lived with for so long.

Back home, family and friends were eager to reassure me that I was one of them. "You're not different, you're Jenny." It was a sentiment that at first made me feel good, happy to be accepted, but later made me feel alienated, like an outsider in my own home. In the end, it was a slow and insidious kind of invasion that chipped away at my newly discovered sense of self, erasing me until I was no longer a person but an amalgam of everyone else's view of me.

How could people not see the difference that separated us, and therefore, not see me? How could my family love me, and not some superficial version of myself, if they couldn't see that we were different? If they couldn't see the people staring at us, at me, wherever we went? In many ways, then, I think I decided to make myself as absent as possible so that the questions might stop and I could once again hear the voice in my head telling them they were wrong.

After school I moved to New York and was happy to discover I could blend in whenever I walked out the door. For the first time, I finally felt free. Even the questions about where I "really" came from didn't bother me as much, but I do remember getting really angry when a black man asked it on the subway. It sounded like a line, and a really unimaginative one at that, so I threw up my hands and threw the question back, adding just enough sarcasm so he'd walk away with the message that our mutual brownness made us subject to the same question. Maybe it wasn't enough. In any case, his surprised look of confusion showed me that to him, Asians were always foreign.

To my surprise, that line was a common catcall from men with preconceived notions of the exotic Oriental and what she'd be like. Their sheepish stares and sly attitudes told me the story of their ignorance, but somehow forced another identity upon me. Each incursion erased whatever positive association I was creating for myself as a newly aware person of color, and taught me to see myself as an object capable of little else than the fulfillment of someone else's idea of who they thought I should be.

My response was to try defining "Asianness" for myself and for a time I tried being hyper-Asian. I used chopsticks for everything and trekked across the river to the Korean grocery up on 32nd Street and bought kimchi and strange things in packages with writing that I couldn't read. When I got home, I tried to cook the things with varying degrees of success and when it didn't work I chucked it all and ate the kimchi.

Yet I still avoided the girl from the Korean family who ran the deli down the street. Every time I went into the store for a newspaper or a cake of tofu, she would try to teach me Korean phrases because she thought she'd found a kindred spirit. Her efforts left me feeling uncomfortable and embarrassed because now I was a different kind of fraud, a Korean who couldn't speak a lick of Korean, and I would speed out of the store as fast as I could.

Tirez la Languette-Paulette (2002)

At this point, I was still ignoring my adoptee identity, choosing instead to identify as a person of color and then as Asian-American and Korean-American. But none of those labels really fit. I also tried other Asian identities – Japanese-American, Chinese-American, Filipino-American – encountering each through the lens of literature. I came of race on a steady diet of Tanizaki, Oe, Hagedorn and Yamanaka, and later, Iris Chang, Haruki Murakami, Arundhati Roy and Jhumpa Lahiri. But when I read my first book of adoptee essays, I was floored. Here were stories of people like me who knew what it was to feel like a white person in Asian clothing and knew what it was to be found out. They had dreams of Korea and I realized that I did, too.

The long road back

Korea wasn't a choice so much as a necessity for me. Deep down, I knew there was something I had to get here that I couldn't get anywhere else. I had long wanted to fill in for myself the blanks that I had let other people fill in for me. I also felt a kind of despair at not knowing my history; it hung like a weight around my shoulders and pressed against my chest until I couldn't breathe. What I wanted was to recapture something of what was left behind when I was sent away and construct a history for myself, if such a thing can be done, to replace the one I lost, or rather, never had.

By the time I got on the plane to come here, I had heard enough adoptees talk about their experiences to know that Korea wasn't a fairytale with a happy ending. I knew some adoptees had experienced the sting of not being recognized as Korean by "Korean" Koreans, but I thought I was prepared for the experience because I had developed another identity as a person of color. I thought it would give me a cushion. It didn't.

In the early days, I bristled at the cabbies who thought I was Japanese or Chinese because of my stunted Korean and I was shocked at how angry and offended some ajumma seemed when I couldn't understand their rapid-fire speech. One Korean ajumma I met while traveling on one of my first trips into the countryside gave me a look like I'd done something really horrible to her when I couldn't follow her terse instructions.

In the States I had felt my physical appearance was deceiving because people thought I was Korean when I felt white inside. Once I started to see myself as a person of color, maybe even a Korean, I thought people would be able to see it, too. Arriving here, I realized that they couldn't. The same set of contradictions that the promise of my physical appearance seemed to present in the States had followed me here. So I slipped back into old habits – only this time, instead of playing white, I was playing Korean.

When I entered language class I could no longer pretend.

The Korean language was difficult, but not only because it shares nothing with English. The Korean teachers I encountered seemed to expect, whether subconsciously or not, that I either be Korean or that I be kyopo, people who grew up with one or two Korean parents. Each new word I learned revealed that I wasn't and it was like peeling skin from an onion, each layer sharper, stronger, more bitter than the next. Sometimes the bitterness became like a weapon turned inward to places I didn't know had been wounded.

I've been told that I arrived to the United States with words – my mom once told me that one of them was "omma." In class, it was hard not to think about the loss of that word and the person it represented. When we did exercises where we talked about our families and our birthdays, saying my American birthday, talking about my Caucasian family – in Korean – felt wrong.

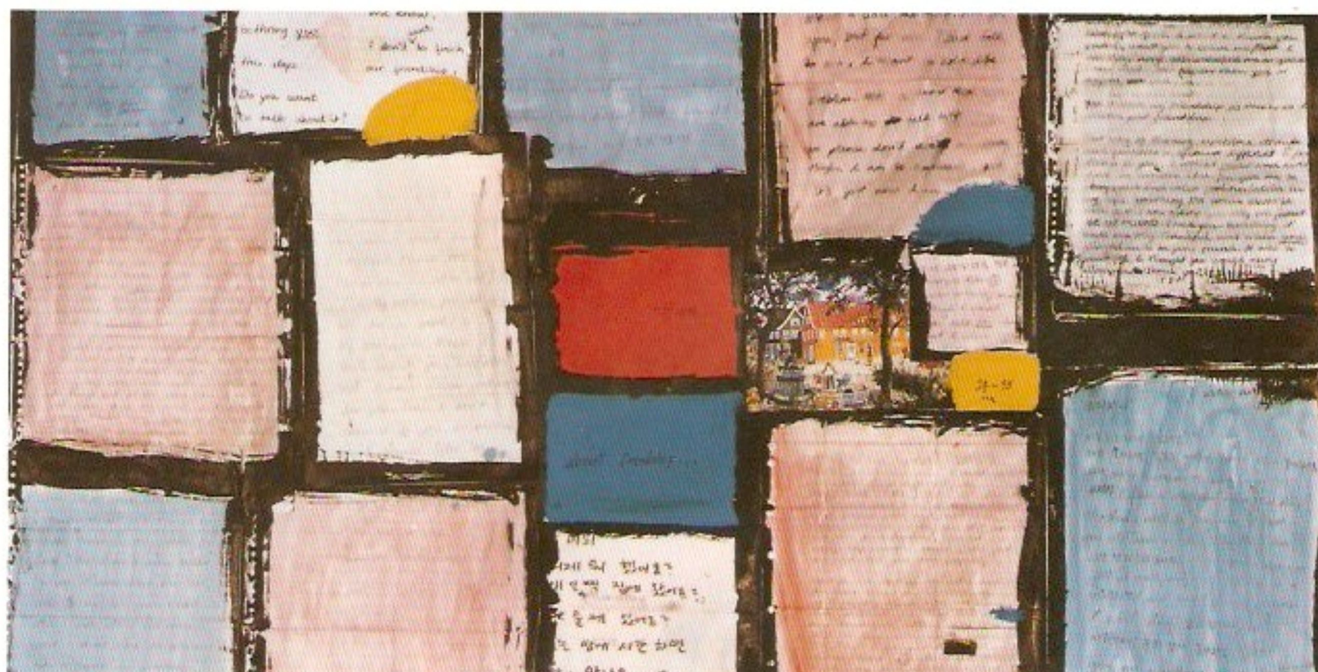
The third space

After my arrival, I met two groups of people who changed my experience of Korea completely.

The first was a group of dancers who became my surrogate Korean family. They allowed me to immerse myself in Korean culture and I learned much of what I know about Koreanness from them.

I spent hours in rehearsal, basking in the sounds of a language that was once again, for a short time, my own. With them, I only wanted to speak Korean because it allowed me to reconnect with a part of myself that I previously hadn't been able to access and I felt I was reclaiming something from my past.

They taught me what to eat and they taught me what breathing in Korean



About Friendship (1994-5)

is like (내시고, 마시고). They also taught me how Korean I wasn't by correcting and sometimes mocking my evolving baby talk. Then they taught me that none of it mattered: we were all family.

The second group of people I met was the community of adoptees who showed me another space: one where I'm neither Korean nor American, nor Korean-American. It was, to borrow a phrase from one adoptee, a "third space."

Before I arrived, I had reconnected with an adoptee from the town where I grew up who was the sister of my adoptee friend from high school. She let me stay in her tiny ground level apartment until I had a place to live, and during that time, she took me to palaces, showed me which foods to order and sympathized with my Korea confusions. She was generous with her friends and they soon became mine, too. Like us, they were adoptees, and with them, I could talk about adoption, race and identity – how it had affected us growing up and how it compared to what we were experiencing here. We also talked about how our identities had always been defined for us by other people: by adoptive parents, by agency workers, politicians and "experts." We sought to be recognized as experts of our own experiences, but we also wanted to move beyond the personal aspects of adoption to the larger system in which it continued to affect so many women and children. We researched the social context in which it arose and the social and political forces that kept it in place. Eventually, we formalized our group and gave ourselves a name, Adoptee Solidarity Korea, and a mission – to advocate for the rights of adoptees and to frame adoption as a social, political and human rights issue. Since then, ASK has worked to raise awareness about the complexities of the adoption system and adoptees' place in it. Today, we hold public forums on those subjects and we have helped shaped public policy through our involvement in the recent overhaul of Korea's adoption law that passed last year. We've also started a series of mental health forums that we hope will help empower adoptees as they work through their adoption experiences.

Through the relationships I've formed within this community of adoptees, what has become clear to me is that my identity as a Korean is inextricably linked to my identity as an adoptee.

No easy ending

I could pretend that this story has an easy ending, but I won't. I've done enough pretending to know that it doesn't get me very far.

I've always wanted to be recognized as Korean on some level, because my physical appearance seems to indicate that's what I should be, and in the back of my mind, I thought I could wash the white away. Being here has sometimes made me feel that I could. But this part of my identity is like an open wound.

I can no longer pretend to be just Asian, just Korean-American or just kyopo. My experience has taught me that as an adoptee, I lack the familial history and biological ties that seem to ground the people from these other groups.

In some ways, exploring the Korean part of my identity in Korea has given me a frame through which to finally see myself. However, I now know that I will never lay claim to all of the pieces of myself that I lost when I was adopted, so I will have to go about creating something new.

I still struggle with language, and language learning, and think about what it would be to be completely fluent. I still see women on the train and wonder if we're related because searching for my birth family is a task of which I've only scratched the surface and come up wanting. I believe that I have a birth family out there, somewhere, that I am not a true orphan without parents, but I also know I could be wrong. Part of me still wants to know. There's a whole set of questions about identity that people with a biological family don't seem to have to ask. They already know they got their smile from their mother, the way they hold their pen from their father. Adoptees I know who have reunited with their birth families talk about the character traits, the physical gestures or the verbal tics, they have in common with members of their birth families. What have I inherited?

Amidst this search for an identity, a place to call home, a place where I feel comfortable in my own skin, are the remnants of a life not lived, of another family I may never know. I also carry with me multiple identities as a cultural Minnesotan, an ethnic Korean and an adoptee, and I know I will move among them throughout my life.