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Managing Cultural Specificity and Universality in Trey Anthony's *Da Kink in My Hair* and  
Ins Choi's *Kim's Convenience*

In *Da Kink in My Hair* and *Kim's Convenience*, Trey Anthony and Ins Choi respectively represent different ethnic spaces situated within a larger dominant white society. The setting of both the Caribbean hair salon and Korean-owned convenience store provides representations of and insights into underrepresented peoples. While both the hair salon and convenience stores are run and operated by ethnic Canadian hyphenates, they differ in who is granted entrance. For the salon, being a black woman is a prerequisite to access but anyone from off the street (literally) may enter the convenience store. *Da Kink in My Hair* is the story of black women; *Kim's Convenience* is universal. The women of the hair salon retreat from society even if temporarily. The Kim family is demonstrative of the Canadian value of multiculturalism, shedding Asians' status as the perpetual outsider. While both are set in Toronto, the two plays' settings, the black hair salon and the Korean-owned convenience store offer two different responses to being made foreign by the dominant white society: create a safe space with and for your fellow black women, or acculturate and be a cornerstone (or corner store!) in your Canadian neighbourhood.

The hair salon in *Da Kink in My Hair* serves as an exclusively black domain. The play's subtitle, "Voices of Black Womyn," emphasizes that it is comprised of the stories of black women. The decision to spell women with a "y" signals the intentional decision to decentre men. Anthony defiantly asserts that this is a narrative about black women, only black women. Consider the services it provides: black hair treatments. Hair, for black people,

women in particular, is so intimate. As Novelette, the hair salon owner says, “I’m telling you the hair sends me a message . . . And you know as women, we cry, cry a lot . . . The things I hear is right here in my hair!” (6). In their visits to the salon, the black women share their pains with another black woman, the only type of person who could empathize. In return, Novelette shares their burden. The salon is not just a literal hair studio; it is a place of respite for these hurting marginalized women. Black women can not patronize general hair salons lest they risk white hair treatments for black hair. There is no point in going to a presumably white salon if the stylists can not manage their hair or their suffering.

The convenience store, though Korean-owned, is not exactly a Korean space. The store does not function as a space for Korean people to commiserate and celebrate with other Koreans. A convenience store is for everyone’s convenience. Consider the ginseng-insam exchange with Rich, a black man. When Appa, the storeowner, criticizes Japanese hegemony in East Asia, he is not looking for someone to relate to his marginalization. This scene is not an emotional outburst. This interaction, through humour, reads almost like a fun fact about Korean-Japanese relations. Whereas Novelette and her clients have a shared lived experience, Appa is sharing his perspective with another Canadian who is not Korean. When Appa waxes patriotic, it is not so much that he has found a Korean platform. Rather, he imparts culturally specific knowledge in the culturally universal store.

*Kim’s Convenience* is more interested in how the Kims behave with and fit in with the world at large than issues exclusive to Koreans. In his book chapter “Domesticating the Stranger,” Barry Freeman claims, “*Kim’s* makes a more direct bid to universalize the drama into a greater narrative about the discontinuity of modernity and a lack of social connection of the sort that the in-person interactions of a local convenience store make possible” (76). The play is not the “Voices of Korean People.” Any ethnic group can own a convenience store. Instead, readers are implored to think of their local convenience stores. To consider the

tragedies and triumphs of a small business owner and maybe have a laugh over whatever ethnic quirks they may have. In his forward for the play, Albert Schultz writes that through its specificity, “This play, on hearing, becomes our story about our family in our community” (vii). *Kim’s Convenience* seeks to make the foreign East Asian into the familiar Canadian corner store owner. The play’s treatment of race is a product of one of Canada’s prides: its multiculturalism.

Racially (and figuratively) the world is often thought of as black and white. This assumed binary fails to consider Asians. Claire Jean Kim’s writings on “The Racial Triangulation of Asian Americans” touch on how “Since the mid-1960s, Asian Americans have been widely valorized relative to Blacks via the model minority myth” (118). However, the relatively better view of Asians does not mean they have been accepted by the dominant society. Because Asian Americans are neither black nor white, they can not attain insider status. If Asians are perpetual foreigners, then black people are racially positioned as inferior insiders in Claire Jean Kim’s figure of the field of racial positions (108). Such ideas are reflected in the two plays’ management of the ethnic space.

Choi goes beyond having his characters be accepted by white Canada. He illustrates characters attaining ‘insider’ status not by aligning them with white people, but with black people. *Kim’s Convenience* seeks to heal the strained relationships between Asian Americans and black people. The play is hyperaware of the tensions between Koreans and black people in particular. Appa tells his daughter Janet the story of Mr. Chae’s experience as a convenience store owner during the L.A. riots. He recounts:

All Korean convenience store is on fire and black people stealing . . . So, he get gun, ready to shoot, then he stop. What he see is that black woman who he give to loan and all his black customer hold hand, make big wall, stop other people stealing his store (Choi 70).

This touching show of solidarity serves as a rebuttal to the mainstream media's portrayal of a "bad minority's persecution of the good minority" (Kim 124). In sharing this story, Appa gives his daughter his blessing to date a black police officer named Alex. He later forces Alex to propose to Janet. Though they do not get engaged the two make their own plans to meet. In jest or not, the almost-marriage between the pair symbolizes the two racial groups coming together. It is the ultimate form of coming together. The psychic scars between black people and Koreans are beginning to be remedied.

As a whole, the narrative is an optimistic imagining of a truly post-racial Canada. This depiction is one of racial awkwardness but tensions cease to exist. While *Da Kink in My Hair* is concerned with the camaraderie of black women with other black women, *Kim's Convenience* has a focus on Korean and black relations. All of the characters are either black or Korean. Moreover, all the black characters are played by one actor. Some of the black characters are good, like Alex the neighbourhood cop. Some, like the shoplifting Mike, are bad. Appa suspects a customer will steal from his store because "He is black guy, jean jacket. That combo is steal combo" (29). Out of context, Appa is racist and wrong for thinking such a thing. Yet the play goes out of its way to prove that he is in the right. He lists what kind of black, white, and gay people steal. He can not be racist if he thinks that a fat black girl is "no steal"! The humour of this situation celebrates a society that has "successfully rid itself of racial friction" (Freeman 7). In saying "not all black people," the play rids Appa from suspicions of racism. More to the point, Mike did steal from the convenience store, proving Appa right.

On the other hand, *Da Kink in My Hair* does not pretend or aspire to utopia. While not to say the women are joyless, their hair reveals their immense pains due to racism. Depictions of racism are never treated lightly. Take for instance the story of Patsy's son's murder. She cries out, "Your son can kill my son just because! Because, maybe he didn't like the colour of

his jacket . . . And I know as a mother, you're supposed to love them . . . tell them to wear brown coats instead of blue" (21). Of course, it is not the colour of a boy's coat but his skin that may kill him. Compare *Da Kink in My Hair*'s heartbreaking treatment of racism to what is shown in *Kim's Convenience*. If we remove humour and apply a less-than-generous interpretation, perhaps one can imagine Appa saying, "He is black guy, brown jacket." Trey Anthony's play does not pander to or seek approval from general audiences.

The hair salon is exclusive in that it only services black women, but the lived experiences of this group vary greatly. But within this exclusivity exist different models of black womanhood. The women have suffered from a variety of problems. Ranging from colourism, being overworked and underappreciated by the white corporate world, to being sexually assaulted, these women have lived very different lives. Within this group, there is a range of socioeconomic statuses. The common denominator is their blackness and womanhood. Regardless of their differences, in "'Symposia' in the Drama of Trey Anthony and Louise Delisle," George Elliot Clarke argues, "black, as a modifier, gestures toward a Pan-Africanist and even black cultural nationalist position" (5). With Claire Jean Kim's theories in mind, the exclusively black space can exist because black Canadians do not have the same anxieties as Asians about acclimating to society. *Da Kink in My Hair* does not illustrate a desire to fit in but rather a need for respite from the dominant white society. Black people are no strangers to Canada. As opposed to *Kim's Convenience* domestication of the stranger, *Da Kink in My Hair* seeks to remove black women from universal and racist spaces. Clarke goes on to write, "anthony's conclusion may also point to the need, here, in Canada, for black women to group together in distinctive cities and regions" (7).

The only Korean characters in *Kim's Convenience* are the Kims. Their only (represented) links to Korea are each other. Early in the play, Appa refuses to sell his store because the neighbourhood needs him (19) and implores Janet to take over because it is his

story (53). His refusal demonstrates his loyalty to the community. But Appa's anxieties over an inheritorless store and its consequent closure may be caused by a future loss of Korean identity. If the store shuts down then what Korean spaces are left? Certainly not the churches. It is difficult to imagine another setting where the insam-ginseng, "Look same, not same thing (11)" exchange could take place. Instead of assuming he is maybe Japanese, Appa's customers can get to know more about him and his culture. Appa can do the same. The store is the stage for Korean pride and the exchange of cultures. The universal space serves as a conduit for cultural specificity.

When the prodigal son Jung returns, he is not just welcomed back into the family, he is given the store. By the end of the play, Appa says, "My story is not Kim's Convenience. My story is you" (88). Like his legacy, Koreanness is familial and interpersonal, not a physical place. While the convenience store may not be a Korean-exclusive place, Appa's family has reconnected to form their own Korean "distinctive region." Interestingly, Appa gives Jung a can of insam energy drink as it may be interpreted as a symbol of their shared identity. Moreover, Jung's suggestion to match the price of the insam drink to western energy drinks is another example of the foreign being made familiar. Lucky for everyone, Regent Park's neighbourhood convenience store will stay open and the Korean owner's son reprices the insam drinks.

Considering that they are ethnic-specific stories, it is no surprise that Trey Anthony's *Da Kink in My Hair* and Ins Choi's *Kim's Convenience* are concerned with race. The exclusive versus general nature of the hair salon and convenience store is reflective of how black people and Asian people respond to the unique ways they are oppressed. Black people are burdened by black-versus-white racism that deems them inferior. Because of this, the women of the hair salon create their own Pan-African space. Asian racial anxieties are more related to being accepted by the dominant society. Choi's play rises above portraying East

Asians as 'good' minorities and models reconciliation/healing between Asian and black people. *Da Kink in My Hair* and *Kim's Convenience* offer different models of racialized groups using physical spaces as healing from oppressive racial positioning.

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