

**Diversity in “the Korean Way”:
Transcultural Identities in Contemporary Diasporic Korean Literature and Media in
North America**

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Abstract

Literary and visual media representations of diasporic Koreans in Canada and the U.S. have noticeably grown in the twenty-first century, (re)shaping popular culture imaginations of South Korean and Asian subjectivities. From globalized sitcoms such as *Kim's Convenience* to novels, memoirs, and animated cartoons, recent portrayals of “Koreans” by diasporic Koreans increasingly depict the multifariousness of “Korean,” “Korean Canadian,” and “Korean American” identities through various lens and vehicles such as local and trans-national/trans-historical perspectives, transnational Korean adoption, and comedy/humour. To capture the significance of what I discuss as the transculturality of diasporic Korean identities, I suggest in this dissertation that new frames of comparison and examination beyond geographical, temporal, and disciplinary borders are required. By demonstrating shared and different geopolitical histories and their effects among diasporic Korean populations in North America in tandem with the diversity and politics of representation within literatures and media produced by diasporic Koreans, I unsettle the knowledge of “the Korean Way”—*being* or *becoming* “Korean”—and simplistic nationalist imaginations of hyphenated Asian identities, within histories of Western colonialism and exclusion and marginalization against racial minorities in North America.

The first chapter broadly traces: 1) the history of Korean Canadian and Korean American literature and media, 2) the respective political contexts shaping such representations in Canada and the U.S., 3) the development of anti-Asian Racism, racialization, and stereotypes in North America, 4) the modernization and economic rise of (South) Korea since the early-twentieth century. These historical and theoretical frameworks of the first chapter inform the second and third chapters, respectively exploring women’s narratives and televisual comedies of diasporic Koreans in North America since the 2010s. Chapter Two comparatively analyzes two novels and

a memoir by female diasporic Korean authors, Anne Y.K. Choi, Frances Cha, and Jenny Heijun Wills. In this chapter, I pay careful attention to how Korean-born women negotiate their sense of identity and sexuality within contexts of race relations and racism, racial and gender capitalism, and postcolonial histories of marginalization and oppression in settings of Canada, the U.S., and South Korea. Chapter Three examines different forms of televisual comedies, *Kim's Convenience*, *Dr. Ken*, and *Angry Asian Little Girl*, to underscore the influence of humour as an emerging strategy for diasporic representation, and at the same time, how such new vehicles of inclusion are surrounded by conditions of White-centred and commercial logics as well as internalized racism.

To

Joo Hyuk (Charlie) Park

Hee Kyeong (Juliana) Kang

Min Hwan (Dennis) Park

Jae Hwan (Tony) Park

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Introduction

I. An Urgent Task: Exploring (Diasporic) “Korean” Identity Through a Transnational Lens

This dissertation is born from Mark Twain’s age-old maxim to “write what you know” and the desire to respond to what Rey Chow refers to as the “affective dissonance”—the incommensurable rift between theoretical writing on one hand and fictional and autobiographical writing on the other in concerns of hybridity and multiculturalism theory.¹ Many scholars, writers, and cultural producers have attempted to explore “Korean Canadian” identity as I have laboured to do as part of my existential inquiries over the years as a transnational migrant. This attempt resembles similar efforts to establish “Korean American” identity within unique contexts of Korean migration and settlement in the U.S. and relates to the larger and emerging interest in describing and defining “Korean” and/or “diasporic Korean” identity today. In the twenty-first century, “What is Korean Canadian identity?” is a befuddling question, due primarily to the relative lack of information available regarding Korean Canadians in comparison to other East Asian minority groups in Canada, such as Chinese Canadians and Japanese Canadians, and even compared to Korean American populations. Additionally, I suggest that the uncertain definition of Korean Canadian identity comes from the rapidly spreading cultural commodities of South

¹ Chow explains regarding “affective dissonance” in “The Secrets of Ethnic Abjection” (2002), one of the issues that have surfaced prominently in the relevant debates is not cultural difference or ethnic diversity per se but rather a distinctive affective dissonance between theoretical writing, on the one hand, and fictional and autobiographical writing, on the other. It is, I believe, to this affective dissonance, which marks many plaintive responses to the euphoria about hybridity and multiculturalism theory, that we should be devoting more attention. For this reason, it is not sufficient simply to criticize theorists for ignoring the realities of cultural difference; it is more important, perhaps, to recognize that theoretical discourse itself, however attuned it may be to such realities, is always subject to its own discursive limit of rationalism and abstraction— a limit that translates into a necessary distance from the experiences being alluded to— in such a manner as to neutralize precisely the very emotional effects of injustice that persist as the remnants of lived experience (135).

Korea, including K-pop, K-dramas, and films in Canada and the U.S., as well as the postmodern wariness of nationalism's fervour to contain diasporic identities within neat confines of nation-based paradigms.

The question of Korean Canadian identity should then perhaps be reformulated to: *how is "Korean" identity constructed, portrayed, and consumed across Canada, the U.S., and South Korea? How can one define and describe Korean identity transnationally? How do representations of this transnational identity currently shape the subjectivity and imagination of diasporic Koreans in Canada and the U.S. in relation to Koreans residing predominantly in South Korea? What can this transnational and transcultural examination of Korean identity afford for studies of literature and media, Critical Race, and diaspora?* To arrive at answers, this dissertation examines a broader purview of the representation of diasporic Koreans in Canada and the U.S. over the last decade since 2011. I analyze several types of texts including novels, a memoir, television sitcoms, and an animated-cartoon series, featuring the experiences and imaginations of diasporic Koreans, largely shaped by diasporic Korean writers and artists. The purpose of my work is to respond to the inquiries that have haunted me and seemingly other diasporic-Korean artists and scholars by exploring the ways in which this identity has been envisioned transculturally in a multitude of contemporary texts.

I point to the local and global developments of Korean and Asian representation in several cultural industries in recent decades to further assert why this (re)examination of "Korean" identity is much needed today. Due to globalization's effects, the innovation of digital technology, and the rapid developments of South Korea's cultural industries, South Korean cultural trends and multi-media commodities have spread virally beyond Asia and around the world, significantly including North America. Dal Yong Jin terms the recent expansion of

Korea's cultural industries and exports of cultural products from Asia to global markets (including Europe and North America) as the "new Korean Wave" and notices their transformation as transcultural popular culture and digital technology. Differentiating this nascent growth from the original Korean or *Hallyu* Wave between the late-1990s and 2007, Jin points out that since 2008, the new wave has dramatically shown a convergence of digital content and digital technologies (vii). At the time of writing this dissertation, the South Korean Netflix series and dystopian drama, *Squid Game* (2021), most recently became a worldwide phenomenon as the platform's most popular show in its history with 142 million households sampling the title and the show being ranked as the number-one program in ninety-four countries (Flint and Chin). *Squid Game* serves as a new peak rather than an anomaly as the Korean black-comedy thriller, *Parasite* (2019), garnered widespread attention as the winner of the Best Picture Award at the ninety-second Academy Awards in 2020. K-pop artists such as idol groups Black Pink and BTS have won several Billboard music awards, made Guinness World Records across music and social media, and appeared on popular U.S. television shows such as *The Ellen DeGeneres Show*, *Jimmy Kimmel Live!* and *The Late Show with Stephen Colbert*. As a result, Korean traditional folk games sparked global interest (with the popularity of *Squid Game*), non-Korean fans of K-dramas and K-pop noticeably grew in Canada and the U.S., and subjects regarding South Korea such as class anxiety, poverty and income inequality, beauty products, food, language, and cultural customs became recognizable points of interest worldwide (see H. Park; Sharzer and Kang; McCurry and Kim; J. Lee et al.; K. Yoon; J. Lee and S. Kim). This globalizing phenomenon of South Korean culture inevitably shapes the identification and experiences of diasporic Koreans in terms of their proximity to or distance from such Korean identities and culture portrayed in the propagating media.

Meantime, over the last decade in both Canada and the U.S., visual depictions of Korean Canadians and Korean Americans have simultaneously grown amidst the rising tides of Asian Canadian and Asian American voices in popular-culture industries. As notable examples, *Crazy Rich Asians* (2013), a satirical-romance novel by Kevin Kwan, a Singapore-born American novelist, brought sharp attention to the over-the-top wealth of Singaporean “old money” families. The film adaptation of *Crazy Rich Asians* (2018) became the first Hollywood film to feature a majority Asian cast since *The Joy Luck Club* in 1993, amassing a worldwide profit of over \$239 million (“‘Crazy Rich Asians’: Why Did It Take So Long”; “The Social Codes of the Crazy Rich”). In 2016, *Fresh Off the Boat*, a network television sitcom featuring the life of a Taiwanese American family became the first in over twenty years to cast Asian Americans as the show’s leading characters. Following the rise-to-fame of several Asian American comics and actors such as Ali Wong, Randall Park, Awkwafina (Nora Lum), and Ken Jeong, Netflix released popular romantic-comedy films centering on the lives of Asian American characters, such as *Always Be My Maybe* (2019) and the *To All the Boys I’ve Loved Before* series (2018, 2020). A year before *Kim’s Convenience*’s launch in Canada, *Dr. Ken* (2015-2017), starring the Korean American comedian Ken Jeong, became the first sitcom in the U.S. focusing on a Korean American family on prime-time television in two decades since *All-American Girl* in 1994, starring Margaret Cho.

In consequence, the time to (re)examine Korean identity on a transnational level at the juncture of the increasing visibility of South Korean exports and the rise of Asian representation in North America is here and now. I argue that the compound rate at which Korean identity is exploding with diversity across geographic and cultural borders illuminates the urgency and challenge to unfasten the “imagined community” of identities that have been traditionally bound

within nationalist and disciplinary paradigms of imagination (Anderson 5-6). In tandem, studies of diasporic-Korean populations and their representations have been slow and scattered. Fields such as Korean Canadian and Korean American studies or literature, media, and cultural studies have disparately explored the subject of diasporic-Korean identity alongside various social science fields' efforts to update the current image of Korean populations in Canada and the U.S. I invoke an urgent and growing need for a more wholistic and granular image of diasporic Koreans across the paradigms of nations, regions, disciplines, cultures, and textual forms.

This dissertation analyzes six texts overall to serve as a catalyst in responding to this need. The texts consist of two novels, *Kay's Lucky Coin Variety* (2016) by Ann Y.K. Choi and *If I Had Your Face* (2020) by Frances Cha; a memoir, *Older Sister. Not Necessarily Related* (2019) by Jenny Heijun Wills; an animated-cartoon series, *Angry Little Asian Girl* (2014) by Lela Lee; and two television sitcoms, *Kim's Convenience* (2016-2021) and *Dr. Ken* (2015-2017), mainly written and produced by Ins Choi and Ken Jeong, respectively. The analysis of such texts, mainly taking place in the second and third chapters of this dissertation, are intentionally divided between verbal and visual texts for convenience and equity in comparison—to acknowledge the dramatic differences in the contexts of production and circulation as well as the experiences of the text for their audiences (in relation to textuality/reading/visuality).

The scope of my examination of diasporic Korean representation is temporally fixed on the most current decade from 2011 to 2021 due to the influence of multidisciplinary foundations built by Elaine Kim, Myung-Hee Song, Dal Yong Jin, and Caroline Kyung Hong in scholarship. Predicting that Korean American cultural expressions will continue to grow and become increasingly heterogeneous among the rapidly “shifting sociopolitical circumstances in the U.S., Korea, and the world,” Kim offered a comprehensive overview of Korean American literature

from its grassroots in 1934 to 2001 at the turn of the new millennium (150). Filling a large and persisting gap in the study of Korean Canadians in comparison to Korean American studies, Song published a book focused on Korean Canadian literature in 2010, examining several expressions by Korean Canadian immigrants written in the Korean language and published since 1977, including poetry, short stories, novels, essays, and criticism. While Jin marks the changed and transcultural effects of South Korea's cultural exports since 2008, Hong traces the steadily enlarging role of comedy and humour in Asian American representation since the late-nineteenth century, particularly noting the "explosion of comedy and humour produced by and about Asian Americans" in the twenty-first century. The scope of my work thus aims to extend the scholarship of Kim, Song, Jin, and Hong on diasporic Korean representation vis-à-vis the transnational spread of South Korean cultural commodities, while exploring the junctures at which these disparate dialogues can and should converge.

II. Methodology and Affordances: Korean Canadian/Korean American Studies, World Literature, Diasporic/Transcultural Identity

The multitude of textual forms examined in this dissertation afford the investigation of numerous recurring patterns informing the common and diverse characteristics of diasporic Koreans, their (self-)imagination, and perceptions of the differences from and resemblances to Koreans living in South Korea. Such tropes include but are not limited to the fluctuating concepts of Korean femininity and masculinity; intergenerational struggles; and the liminality of identity and belonging shaped by various factors such as one's locations of birth and residence, emotional and psychological familiarity with "home" and "host" cultures, legal status, postcolonial traumas, gender and sex, and the visibility of one's "Korean-ness." While some of these tropes have been noticed by scholars of Korean Canadian and Korean American studies in

representations from previous decades, their recurring and shifting dynamics in the most recent decade update the knowledge of how diasporic Koreans in Canada and the U.S. are currently defined and depicted. For instance, in the observance of intergenerational struggles portrayed in several topical texts of study, growing efforts to portray the second generation of immigrant Koreans as deviating significantly from the characteristics of the perpetual foreigner and model minority stereotypes can be noticed. This recurring portrayal, while it challenges racialized stereotypes against Koreans and Asians, also births a new stereotype of the “Bad” and “Shifting” Korean, as observed by Timothy August and Chi-Hoon Kim in their exploration of Korean American televisual images in U.S. reality and travel food programs (335). This idea of shifting stereotypes will be further explored in the first chapter. Other noticeable tropes include the rise of diasporic-Korean representation in comedy and growing dimensions of intersectionality in negotiations of “Korean-ness” such as gender, class difference, physical appearance, and transnational adoption, to be examined in the second chapter.

This investigation also offers several new directions for the future of Korean Canadian and Korean American studies as well as World Literature through the transcultural exploration of diasporic-Korean identity in North America. Partly due to the relatively nascent development of Korean communities in Canada (nearly six decades after the first group arrival of Koreans in the U.S.) and what Donald Goellnicht aptly describes as “A Long Labour: The Protracted Birth of Asian Canadian Literature” (2000), there is especially little scholarship on Korean Canadians in literary and cultural media studies. While Song’s book serves as the first dedicated examination of Korean Canadian literature, little to no scholarship exists on contemporary fiction, non-fiction, and visual media, originally created in English by Korean Canadians. Although a comparably expansive field of Korean American studies exists, connections between representations of

Korean American identity across literature and media remain scarce while comparative studies of Korean American and Korean Canadian representations are even more difficult to find. The variety of texts explored in this dissertation reveals the changing and propagating portrayals of diasporic-Koreans and the expanding reach of diasporic-Korean representation in mainstream Canadian and U.S. cultures.

What is more, the exploration of diasporic Korean identity through a transcultural lens serves as an apt case study of world literature as its scope and analysis traverse across national and geographic boundaries while it traces the effects of globalization, capitalist markets and circulation, and the transculturation of identities and commodities in an era of hyperconnectivity through digital technologies and social media. By “transculturation,” I allude to the anthropological term derived by Fernando Ortiz, referring to the process of exchange and transition from one culture to another, without the implication of loss or the uprooting of a previous culture that the term “acculturation” often implies (102). Transculturation further denotes “the idea of the consequent creation of new cultural phenomena” through the process of cultural exchange (103). By extension, the term “transcultural” indicates the interaction or exchange between different cultures beyond and across national boundaries. In “Transcultural Literature and Contemporary World Literature(s)” (2013), Arianna Dagnino asserts that

transcultural literary works engage with and express the confluent nature of cultures overcoming the different dichotomies between North and South, the West and the Rest, the colonizer and the colonized, the dominator and the dominated, the native and the (im)migrant, the national and the ethnic. Transcultural literature records the re-shaping of national collective imaginaries in an effort to adjust to the cosmopolitan vision in a new

age of transnational and supra-national economic, political, social, and cultural processes (3).

The collection of visual and verbal expressions studied throughout this dissertation diversely discuss and reimagine what is often referred to as (hyphenated or whole) “Korean” identity as belonging to both or neither of “host” and “home” cultures, (im)migrants to and citizens of Canada and the U.S., both outsiders and insiders of the sociopolitical changes in South Korea, and when concerning gender and sex, influenced by politics beyond local, national, and ethnic frames of thinking. In other words, the exploration of modern “Korean” identity, at times considered interchangeably with “Korean Canadian” or “Korean American” identity and at others, used as an antonym of the latter two terms, unveil the countless paradoxes and limitations of the nationally bound descriptors. As Homi Bhabha argues,

The study of world literature might be the study of the way in which cultures recognize themselves through their projections of ‘otherness.’ Where, once, the transmission of national tradition was the major theme of a world literature, perhaps we can now suggest that transnational histories of migrants, the colonized, or political refugees—these border and frontier conditions—may be the terrains of world literature (Bhabha 17).

While Bhabha made this assertion in the 1990s, the essence of his claims still stands true today in the world of ever-increasing migration and the perpetuating effects of colonialism still impacting identity formations between and across race, ethnicity, gender, sex, class, and so on. I push further that the study of world literature should look both forward and backward in its examination of transnational subjects—*how do they currently transform their identities as evolving from the subjectivities of “migrants, the colonized, or political refugees” and*

(re)construct their local realities and histories? What is the future trajectory of their transformation?

Moreover, in the study of world literature, to which this dissertation will contribute, debates persist on how to imagine the vast field characterized by *worlding* cultures, texts, and methodological practices. While Spivak has criticized the “scopic vision” of world literature that relies on a hegemonic and imperialist analysis of the world map in the *Death of a Discipline* (2003), several scholars have also characterized world literature as a “problem of mapping” (108; Coopan 104). These characterizing efforts include David Damrosch and Franco Moretti’s methodological suggestions of “elliptical” and “distant” reading as well as Wai Chee Dimock and Nirvana Tanoukhi’s critiques of scale through their model of literary “deep time” and attempt to clarify “the materiality of literary *landscapes*,” respectively (Dimock 3; Tanoukhi 600). Expanding N. Katherine Hayles’ discussion of informatics and networks in an era of “post/human” identity, Vilashini Coopan contends that the “world” in “world literature” is a “network nodal notion: both a way to name a totality (the network) and a point of location, a placing or emplotment within the totality” (Hayles 25; Coopan 107). Coopan asserts further,

If, in addition to world, literature, language, and identity, other central categories of world literature such as history and genre are rethought in networked and nodal ways the terrain of world literature begins to assemble itself as a distinctly *posthumanist* project (107).

These debates and dialogues of world, literature, and analytic and methodological frameworks (regarding text, stories, storytelling, and more) motivate the scope and organization of my dissertation as a timely case study. If the transcultural lens on diasporic-Korean identity reimagines the world, writers, and their characters through new frames of agency and co-

operation—so as to unsettle the concepts and boundaries of hegemonic world maps and polarizing vision of cultures—then the mix of forms and genres featuring diasporic Koreans invite a trans-textual frame of thinking in the investigation of identities and narratives in a globalizing, posthuman world. Although the forms and genres are not the central focus of study in the chapters, some theoretical attention is given to the potentiality of novels and memoirs and the genre of comedy, respectively. For instance, I take stock of how the contemporary writers and creators employ the different forms and genres not only to renegotiate their identity but to intervene in altering the conventions of such global vehicles of representation and expression.

Such affordances of this dissertation to the field of world literature study simultaneously extend the theoretical inquiries regarding diasporic identity. To reimagine a transcultural Korean identity through this dissertation is to disrupt the traditional borders such as the ones between the East and West, diaspora and home, local and global, and “Korean,” “Korean Canadian,” and “Korean American.” This is the essence of the comparative project at hand, signalling an ongoing process of transformation and border crossing to be expected in both the imagination of Korean identity in Canada and the U.S. and the methodology of Korean-diaspora studies. The transcultural lens on identity stems fluidly from several discourses of philosophy, cultural and literary studies, and social sciences on topics of migration, diaspora, postcoloniality, transnational citizenship, and ethnic or cultural hybridity.

As a starting ground, cultural studies and sociology scholars such as Ien Ang, Avtar Brah, and Mimi Sheller have made convincing arguments regarding the interplay between “travel and dwelling, home and not-home”² by signalling the notions of “homing,”³ “regrounding,”⁴ and

² See Mimi Sheller and John Urry, “The New Mobilities Paradigm” (2006).

³ See Avtar Brah, *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities* (1996).

⁴ See “Introduction: Uprootings/Regroundings: Questions of Home and Migration” in *Uprootings/Regroundings: Questions of Home and Migration* (2003).

“togetherness-in-difference”⁵ and foregrounding concepts of displacement, dialogism, disjuncture, hybridization, and belonging as recognizable conditions of migrant subjectivity (Peterson 3). Whereas Ang describes the diasporic subject as confined by “the myth of the (lost or idealized) homeland, the object of both collective memory and of desire and attachment, which is constitutive to diasporas,” the notion of transcultural identities strips the diasporic subject of its conditions of exile and nomadism, turning its liminality and in-between-ness into agency (5). Transcultural identities are said to be produced through the interaction of different groups of people, “eventually incorporating new discourses and knowledge systems into new forms of cultures situated within specific temporal and spatial spectrums” (Li 3). Echoing the findings of Hong Kong Canadians by editor Jessica Tsui-yan Li’ in *The Transcultural Stream of Chinese Canadian Identities* (2019), the representations studied in this dissertation unsettle linear understandings of immigration and suggest multidimensional migration experiences as people and characters travel more frequently between South Korea and North America and are more influenced by social and cultural exchanges across national and continental borders (14).

This transcultural exploration of Korean identities in Canada and the U.S. builds on important theoretical frameworks and discursive concepts linking identity to diaspora such as hybridity, hyphenated identities, and the “ethnic” (and/or) “minority.” Diasporic and postcolonial subjectivities have been discussed in relation to hybridity particularly since the tide of debates concerning diaspora emerging in the 1990s and gaining prominence over the next decade.⁶ As

⁵ See Ien Ang, *On Not Speaking Chinese: Living between Asia and the West* (2001).

⁶ These discussions include Rey Chow’s *Writing Diaspora* (1993), Paul Gilroy’s *The Black Atlantic* (1993), Homi Bhabha’s *The Location of Culture* (1994), Stuart Hall’s “Cultural Identity and Diaspora” (1994), and James Clifford’s essay “Diasporas” among many others. Hall defines the “diasporic experience” as not the essence or purity “but by the recognition of a necessary heterogeneity and diversity; by a conception of ‘identity’ which lives with and though, not despite, difference; by *hybridity*” – one that constantly undergoes a process of reproduction through transformation and difference (402; italics in original). Highlighting postcolonial critique’s power to bear witness to the countries and communities constituted as “otherwise than modernity,” such as the North and South and urban and rural, Bhabha notes how the postcolonial *contra-modernity* also deploys “the cultural hybridity of

Katherine Hallemeier points out, “hybridity” is a hybrid term indicating sameness and difference: despite the popular use of the term with contemporary connotations of inclusivity and empowerment and transformation for postcolonial and diasporic subjects, hybridity has also been used to “imply contrafusion and disjunction (or even separate development) as well as fusion and assimilation” (Hallemeier 125; Young 18). The term has been invoked to support “colonialist and white supremacist ideologies,” perpetuating difference while describing the fusion of otherwise distinct “races” and serving “primarily as a metaphor for the negative consequences of racial encounter” (Papastergiadis 169; Hallemeier 125). Since the late-1990s, critics have further debated about the meaning of hybridity and its significance especially in relation to universality and particularity (Li 10). Tracing the discussions of hybridity from Stuart Hall to Pheng Cheah and the rhetoric of “diversity” and ethnic “difference” in Canadian multiculturalism, Rey Chow notes in “The Secrets of Ethnic Abjection” how

the poststructuralist specialization in difference, a revolution on its own terms, appears quite inadequate in accounting for how the purportedly liberating movements of difference and hybridity can and do become hierarchically organized as signs of minoritization and inferiority in various contemporary world situations (134).

Chow explains that such implications arise in sociocultural and/or geopolitical terrains due to the assumptions regarding culture in poststructuralist theories of identity: while culture is assumed to occupy “something of the status of difference” associated with fluidity and movement (and thus emancipation), in reality,

culture in the plural— as multiple forms of differences, as cultural diversity, as multiculturalism— is fraught with unresolved tensions such as those of racism (inequality

their borderline conditions to ‘translate’, and therefore reinscribe, the social imaginary of both metropolis and modernity” (9).

between different racial and/or ethnic groups) and class discrimination (inequality between groups of the same racial/ethnic background as well as between groups of different racial/ethnic backgrounds) (134).

I intervene in this discussion regarding the hybridity of diasporic identities and the politics of multiculturalism by paying careful attention to the diversity of sociohistorical contexts and intersectionality that shape individual experiences and makeup of the so-called “Korean Canadian” and “Korean American” identities. In other words, while filling the gap in investigating the “hybridity” of diasporic Koreans and invoking the urgent need to study such identities further, I aim to destabilize recurring generalizations and stereotypes regarding diasporic Koreans/Asians in Canada and the U.S. and mark the ways that such identities are variously (re)negotiated vis-à-vis their dimensions of intersectionality in recent representations.

This updated exploration of the hybridity of diasporic Korean identities is also undertaken by acknowledging the presence of transcultural Koreans not only as characters depicted in fictional or semi-autobiographical portrayals but as writers of several texts studied throughout this dissertation. For instance, the authors and creators studied throughout this dissertation each attempt to show the flux of experiences, histories, relationships, and cultures influencing the lives of diasporic Koreans, based at least partially on their own lived experiences. They also reveal a globalizing sentiment of interaction with mainstream culture(s) rather than polarity or insularity through their creative styles and forms of expression including novels, autobiographical memoir, animated cartoons, and comedic sitcoms, written primarily in English and sometimes bilingually. Dagnino in *Transcultural Writers and Novels in the Age of Global Mobility* (2015) defines “transcultural writers” as

imaginative writers who, by choice or because of life circumstances, experience cultural dislocation, follow transnational life patterns, cultivate bilingual or plurilingual proficiency, physically immerse themselves in multiple cultures, geographies, or territories, expose themselves to diversity, and nurture plural, flexible identities (1).

The experiences and efforts of all writers and creators shaping this dissertation indicate their transcultural tendencies according to this definition. Referring to transcultural writers also as “transpatriate writers,” Dagnino posits that they challenge Samuel Huntington’s vision of the “clash of civilizations” by reclaiming an inclusive vision of culture(s) that “stresses the power of confluences, overlappings, and interactions rather than of polarities” and thereby promotes a global literary perspective and a “new way of imagining and living identity” (1-2). In this regard, the connections and their mechanisms, if any, between the transcultural identities and experiences of diasporic Korean cultural producers and the transculturality of their texts can be a matter of further exploration in the future of literary, media, and diaspora studies.

Lastly, it is essential to recognize that politics of production and circulation underlie different forms of representation (i.e., markets, publishers, funders, producers, audience et cetera)—although the transparency of such influences can differ dramatically. How various diasporic Koreans, as increasingly agential and transcultural writers and creators, negotiate and (re)formulate portrayals of their communal and individual subjectivities through their chosen forms furthermore inform the discourse regarding the politics of hybridity and transculturality in representation. Thus, in Chapter Three, regarding the case of *Kim’s Convenience*, I discuss the impact of such politics of textual production and circulation on the experiences of diasporic Koreans as transcultural producers and the depiction of diasporic Korean identities.

III. Summary of Texts and Chapter Divisions

This section provides a short introduction to the six texts employed as case studies in this dissertation, *Kay's Lucky Coin Variety* (2016), *If I Had Your Face* (2020), *Older Sister. Not Necessarily Related* (2019), *Angry Little Asian Girl* (2014), *Kim's Convenience* (2016-2021), and *Dr. Ken* (2015-2017), and foregrounds the organizing logics of the chapters to follow. Set in 1980s downtown Toronto, *Kay's Lucky Coin Variety* (hereon referred to as *KLCV*) is a *bildungsroman* of Mary Yu-Rhee Hwang, the novel's protagonist and a Korean-born immigrant youth in her senior year in high school. Mary is one of two children belonging to her first-generation Korean Canadian immigrant parents who arrived in Canada in the 1960s and operate a family-owned variety store in the East-side ghetto of downtown Toronto. Throughout the novel, Mary and her family encounter several traumatic experiences of racism, violent store robberies, verbal harassment and sexual assault, depicted as predictable outcomes of the socioeconomic struggles that racialized peoples and immigrants in Canada face in the realities of Canadian multiculturalism. Mary is seen negotiating her identity among systems and norms of discrimination she faces since her childhood, various pressures of "the Korean way," her family and community's fraught understandings of gender and racial hierarchies, and her romantic relationships with Will, her White high-school English teacher, and Joon-Ho, an international student from Korea who reveals to Mary the problematic implications of patriarchal pressures. *KLCV* not only traces the early developments of Korean communities in Toronto but unveils a range of silenced conflicts and traumas haunting Korean Canadian immigrant families from domestic violence, patriarchal norms, and socioeconomic pressures to succeed (academically or financially) to manifestations of internalized racism against Asian and Black communities.

The Brooklyn-based author Frances Cha's novel, *If I Had Your Face* (hereon referred to as *IIHYF*), is set transnationally between South Korea and the U.S., as it intertwines the

narratives of four Korean women and neighbours in the same building, Kyuri, Miho, Ara, and Wonna, each endeavouring to establish their lives in the dazzling, brutally competitive, and hyper-consumerist city of contemporary Seoul. As Miho recounts her memories in New York as an exchange student on a needs-based financial scholarship navigating her social position among the grotesquely rich offspring of South Korean *chaebol* families studying abroad, the novel features a glimpse of the wealthy Korean diaspora in the U.S. *IIHYF* takes issue with a number of ironies regarding Korean femininity with its representation of diverse working-class women, ultimately showing that no woman is enough. “In a world defined by impossible standards of beauty, after-hours room salons catering to wealthy men, ruthless social hierarchies, and K-pop mania,” the four protagonists, Ara, Kyuri, Miho, and Wonna, appear as respective caricatures of modern Korean women, constantly dancing across the fine lines of cultural acceptance between normalcy and success (Cha). While each woman navigates through her own struggles of career, money, pregnancy, and disability, respectively, alongside their past traumas, the women’s narratives and relationships intertwine to form a semblance of friendship by the end of the novel. Despite the *IIHYF*’s composition of first-person narratives of local Korean women, the novel is written and published originally in English by Cha who is a Korean-born, bilingual author, raised transnationally in the U.S., South Korea, and Hong Kong. These aspects of production such as the language and author’s positionality extend the discussion of transculturality regarding diasporic-Korean identities and narratives to the contexts of writing and circulation in tandem with the novel’s representation.

The memoir, *Older Sister. Not Necessarily Related* (hereon referred to as *OSNNR*) unveils the experiences of the author, Jenny Heijun Wills, as a Korean-born adoptee in Canada. Wills’ memoir details the history and systems of transnational adoption in South Korea,

intertwining them with her own experiences of dislocation, disjuncture, racism, and loss. Raised as an infant by a White family in small-town Southern Ontario, Jenny travels to Seoul in 2009, in her late twenties, to reconnect with her South Korean, first family. The memoir is inlaid with intertextuality as it unfolds through a series of letters addressed to “*Unni*,” meaning older sister in Korean, and the narrator’s accounts of her memories and historical data regarding Korean-born adoptees. Through her prose and recollection, Wills navigates through several relationships between mother and daughter, sisters, nascent families, and places of belonging. The memoir reveals the unique struggles of transnational trauma, cultures, and family dynamics as Jenny strives to maintain her connection with her first family upon her return to Canada. By the memoir’s end, through her processes of decision making and the consequent choice of motherhood, Jenny reconciles her past trauma and begins a slow journey toward healing. As the representation of Korean-born transnational adoptees in Canada are rare, Wills’ memoir provides a much-needed window to examine the heterogeneous experiences of Korean Canadians beyond their generational, acculturative, and linguistic differences and legal status to consider the unique sets of intersectional challenges facing transnational adoptees.

Angry Little Asian Girl (hereon referred to as *ALAG*) is a twelve-episode, animated-cartoon series featured on the Korean American channel Mnet that originally began as webcomics. *ALAG* brings attention to the emotions arising from the crisscross of race and gender issues, punctuating Asian American women’s silenced opinions, opposition, and resistance, through the symbolic main character of Kim as “a human explosive” (Ono and Pham 142; Noguchi). Based on Lee’s stereotypical childhood experiences as an ethnic Korean and Asian growing up in the United States, her comics reflect “what a child wishes she could have said in response to her overbearing mom, her own self-doubts, and ignorant teachers and schoolmates”

(Ono and Pham 143). Set in an imaginary American town of Placentia, *ALAG* shows Kim's interactions with her family, her school and neighbourhood community, and friends as a Korean-born, second-generation immigrant high-school student. Kim's circle of friends, described as the "United Colours of Benetton club scouts," include Deborah, the Jewish "Disenchanted Princess," Maria, the "Crazy Little Latina," who is "crazy, out of control, and emotional," Wanda, "the Fresh Little Soul Sistah," and Xyla, another Asian American character, who is referred to as a "gloomy girl" (145; "Angry Little Asian Girl"). While the animation's sarcastic humour is positioned "Somewhere between the quirky, crude characters in *South Park* and gloomy, fatalistic *Charlie Brown*," Kim's hyperbolic expression of what could/should have been said in many typical situations that an Asian American girl would face confront the racialized and gendered representation of Asian females as the "hyperfeminine: passive, weak, quiet, excessively submissive, slavishly dutiful, sexually exotic, and available for white men" (Do; see Espiritu, Tajima, Collins; Pyke and Johnson 36).

Turning to sitcoms, *Kim's Convenience* (hereon referred to as *Kim's*) originated as an award-winning play with the same title, written by Choi and debuted at the Toronto Fringe Festival in 2011. While the world of the sitcom is largely based on the world of the play, there are subtle differences such as the temporal setting—whereas the play is set in the 1980s, the sitcom is set in 2016. The Kim family is composed of Appa and Umma, who are first-generation Korean Canadians, and their children, Janet and Jung, who are second-generation immigrants born in Canada. The Kim family is ten years younger in the sitcom than they are on stage and thus, while Appa and Umma continue to run the store at the intersection of Sherbourne Street and Queen Street (between Toronto's Moss Park and Regent Park neighbourhoods) that they had bought in 1984, Janet is a twenty-year-old student studying photography at the Ontario College

of Arts and Design University (OCADU), and Jung is twenty-five years old, having recently begun his work at the Handy Car Rental. As the sitcom features a range of additional, recurring characters such as Jung's coworker, roommate, and best friend, Kimchee, and Umma and Appa's friends from neighbouring businesses and the Korean church, the series unfolds through various encounters and conflicts that the Kim family members experience within their relationships at school, work, the store, and in the larger community. In this dissertation, I will mainly focus the analysis on the first season of the series that aired between October and December of 2016.

Dr. Ken, on the other hand, was the American Broadcasting Company (ABC)'s second sitcom in 2015 centering on the lives of Asian American families (after *Fresh Off the Boat*), which also drew attention as the first sitcom in the U.S. focusing on a Korean American family on prime-time television in two decades since *All-American Girl* in 1994, starring Margaret Cho. Based on the life experiences of Ken Jeong, the show's Korean American actor, producer, and co-creator, as a medical doctor before he began his acting career, the two-season series features the life of a brilliant Korean American doctor and his dynamic multi-ethnic Asian family. Notably, the series was ultimately cancelled at the end of its second season in 2017, plausibly due to its lack of popularity, and was "*eviscerated* by TV critics" by the fall of 2015, within seven months since its launch, due to its failure to be funny, or original, as well as its problematic portrayals of Asian Americans (see Yahr, Bianco; Wiegand; McNamara; Werts; Eguchi and Ding). *Dr. Ken* revolves around Ken Park (played by Ken Jeong) and his wife, Allison Park (played by Suzy Nakamura)—second-generation, middle-/upper-class Asian American parents—and their two young children Molly (played by Krista Marie Yu) and Dave (played by Albert Tsai) (Eguchi and Ding 209; 299-300). The plot moreover features Ken and Allison's migrant parents and their professional lives, regularly starring Ken's coworkers at the

hospital.⁷ Ken is an intelligent Korean American physician who strives to be a good doctor, husband, and father, although his efforts are at times misguided. His wife, Alison, is a Japanese American psychiatrist who often reshapes Ken's spontaneous and overly passionate opinions and parenting ideas through her calm and analytical demeanor and professional expertise. Their teenage daughter, Molly, is popular, self-centred, and social, while their 10-year-old son Dave is more quiet, smart, and quirky (300). *Dr. Ken* is set in contemporary California, and Ken and Allison are depicted as a successful and high-income married couple, living in an upper-/middle-class residential neighbourhood and enjoying a socio-economically privileged lifestyle. The scope of this dissertation's analysis will only include the first season of *Dr. Ken* also.

This dissertation is divided into three chapters: 1) "The Time and Place of Diasporic Korean Representation in North America," 2) "Through Women's Narratives," and 3) "Laughing at/with Koreans." The first chapter establishes the historical and theoretical frameworks for the analysis to come in the second and third chapters. These frameworks encompass the history of Korean migration and settlement in Canada and the U.S., the development of visual and verbal representations of/by Korean North Americans, the similar and dissimilar contexts of colonialism, racism, exclusion, oppression, and multiculturalism in Canada, U.S., and South Korea, and theories by Asian North American and Critical Race studies scholars regarding race, racial hierarchies, and anti-Asian stereotypes. The knowledge of this chapter informs the historical and analytical lens through which I examine the variety of diasporic-Korean representation in the later chapters. By showing the systems and patterns of racism and exclusion that have haunted Asians North Americans for centuries, I elucidate the experiences of

⁷ Ken's colleagues at the Welltopia medical group include the new resident Julie (played by Kate Simses), receptionist Damona (played by Tisha Campbell), registered nurse Clark (played by Jonathan Slavin), and office manager Pat (played by Dave Foley) (299).

intergenerational trauma and hardship that underlie the narratives of diasporic Koreans even in the contemporary decade. The investigation of age-old anti-Asian stereotypes such as the yellow peril and model minority myths and their relationship to the state-sanctioned alienation of Asian North Americans, for example, empowers the narratives that call out the long-standing barriers to Asian North Americans' sense of belonging in the multicultural mosaic and the melting pot. The intersectional nodes of gender and race in the practices of exclusion and patriarchy as well as racialized stereotypes establish the socio-political milieu of female characters and writers studied in the second chapter. As the third chapter specifically explores the relationship between comedy, humour, and diasporic-Korean representation, the history and theory of racial relations inform the costs of laughter associated with the portrayal of Korean and/or Asian characters vis-à-vis other non-Asian characters and their resemblances to/resistance against anti-Asian stereotypes. Overall, this chapter of frameworks clarifies how diasporic-Korean representation today arises as a result of or as a response to the experiences and knowledge of Asian North Americans in the postcolonial diaspora.

The second and third chapters explore the patterns of identity formation and storytelling in twenty-first century narratives of diasporic Koreans through two respective strategies of investigation. Divided in terms of gender and genre, both chapters pay attention to how the narratives (re)situate and (re)construct diasporic-Korean identities through their negotiation of postcolonial histories, stereotypes, and race relations of both the past and the present. Moreover, I inspect how empathy, affect, and intimacy operate in the narratives in relation to their forms and genres in the process of their identity construction. The second chapter, "Through Women's Narratives," studies the narratives by Korean-born women predominantly residing in Canada or the U.S. regarding the experiences of ethnic-Korean women in Canada, the U.S. and South

Korea. I examine the ways in which race relations and internalized racism, racial and gender capitalism, socio-economic hierarchies, and postcolonial histories of marginalization, oppression, and military imperialism affect the female characters' psychological and emotional negotiations of their identity and sexuality. As Kimberlé Crenshaw asserts that "the intersectional experience is greater than the sum of racism and sexism, [and thus] any analysis that does not take intersectionality into account cannot sufficiently address the particular manner in which Black women are subordinated," gendered experiences of race/ethnicity, racialization, oppression, migration, and transculturation present distinct subjects of examination to mark the heterogeneity of diasporic identity, particularly among people of colour in North America (140). Moreover, as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak condemns the muted and tacit representation of the "subaltern" as monolithic "third-world women," she asserts that "Part of our 'unlearning' project is to articulate our participation in that formation—by *measuring* silences, if necessary—into the object of investigation" (48). The measurement of silence in this project then is to disrupt and untangle the generalized image of diasporic-Korean women based on anti-Asian and ethnic stereotypes as well as the noticeable cultural pressure exerted on Korean women to ascribe to a "Korean way" of looking, behaving, and being. Through the comparison of *Kay's Lucky Coin Variety*, *If I Had Your Face*, and *Older Sister. Not Necessarily Related* in this chapter I locate the intersections of such stereotypes and pressures of the "Korean way" in the representation of diverse women's experiences while highlighting the ways that their experiences are similar and different, pulled by factors including class, appearance, ability/disability, education, legal status, places of migration and residence, and family relationships.

The third chapter establishes humour as an emerging strategy for diasporic representation, serving as a vehicle of agency and resistance and at the same time fraught with

oppressive and racializing comedic tropes regarding people of colour. As there has been little to no scholarship on the relationship between Korean Canadian/Korean American representation and humour/comedy (see Diffrient, G. Jung, J. Lee, Meerzon), I survey the development of comedy and humour forms in Canadian and U.S. popular culture and trace the increasing presence of Asian and Korean-born individuals especially in visible spaces of films, television shows, digital media, and stand-up comedy. Building on Caroline Kyung Hong's first substantial findings on the relationship between contemporary Asian American representation and comedy and humour, I expand the frame of exploration to Korean Canadian representations and discuss the prevalent tropes shaping popular-culture images of diasporic Koreans while in many cases, perpetuating anti-Asian stereotypes. The stereotypes include the perpetual-foreigner and model-minority myths and gendered understandings of Asian males as feminine and sexually impotent in heterosexual relationships and females as "tiger mothers" or cute, exotic, and docile women in need of rescue, predominantly by White males. By comparing the comedic depictions of diasporic Koreans in *Angry Little Asian Girl*, *Kim's Convenience*, and *Dr. Ken* in the second chapter, I thus investigate the increasing ways in which diasporic Koreans attempt to participate in the identity making of their own subjectivities in mainstream cultures by presenting themselves as "laughing" or "laughable" humans, capable of being funny, showing their flaws, and sharing relatable experiences. Nevertheless, I point to the noticeable barriers in the texts' contexts of production, reception, and circulation that challenge the accuracy of their representations vis-à-vis the prevailing effects of hegemonic racial hierarchies and harmful stereotypes that impact the portrayals of Asians and other racialized individuals.

Chapter 1: The Time and Place of Diasporic Korean Representation in North America

To critically explore the transculturality of diasporic Korean representation today, one must first recognize how the contemporary understandings and (self-)imagination of diasporic Koreans emerge as a result of particular and shared histories of migration and settlement, colonialism and wars, racism and race relations, and globalization across Canada, the U.S. and South Korea. From a local perspective, the development of Korean communities in Canada is relatively recent compared not only to other East Asian populations but to the establishment of Korean communities in the U.S. The perceptions, images, and politics shaping the (self-)understanding of diasporic Koreans in Canada are nevertheless intertwined with the deep history of racial exclusion and marginalization against Asians in North America as well as the politics of migration and race in the U.S. through persisting stereotypes and racism as well as comparative and generalizing discourses of diasporic Korean and/or Asian North American identities. As the migration and settlement of Koreans in the U.S. reveal a longer history, the experiences of the early generation of Korean Americans are much more integrated within problematic histories of racism and racial exclusion in mainstream U.S. societies. Moreover, the imagination of diasporic Korean identities is heavily influenced by the past and present of the experiences and politics at “home,” through factors such as intergenerational trauma, the increasing frequency of migration between “host” and “home” countries, cultural imports/exports, and the internet. The extensive historical and theoretical frameworks presented in this chapter therefore prepare my dissertation’s readers with the knowledge and perspectives necessary to critically engage with the issues of diasporic Korean representation discussed in the

second and third chapters and to mark the significance of this discussion, in terms of its time and place.

I. Korean Canadian Representation in Literature and Media

Visual and verbal representations of Koreans in Canada are recent and scattered. While early literary circles among Korean Canadian populations can be traced back to the late-1970s, more scholarly and archival research is necessary to capture the range of literary and non-literary expressions by Koreans in Canada, especially in the early decades of the 1970s and 80s. The scholarship on Korean Canadian written expressions has been disproportionately focussed on works in the Korean language (*Hangul*). Myung-Hee Song has published the first book-length study on “Korean-Canadian Literature” in 2016, detailing the development of literary works written and published in *Hangul* from 1977 to the 2010s. Song notes that the history of Korean Canadian literature can be considered in two phases. The first phase marks the establishment of the first and only national Korean Canadian literary organization in 1977 until 2000, when the organization’s membership drastically increased to approximately 100 members at the turn of the millennium. This increase was due to the rise in middle-class Korean immigration to Canada following the so-called “International Monetary Fund (IMF)” financial crisis in South Korea in 1997. The second phase marks the period after 2001, particularly since the name of the national organization changed from “Korean Writers’ Association of Canada” to “Korean Canadian Writers’ Association” in that same year, marking a shift in the writers’ collective self-identification as “Korean Canadian” from “Koreans in Canada.” Moreover, the 2000s saw a diversification and rapid expansion of Korean Canadian literary circles as new literary organizations based in Vancouver, Calgary, and Edmonton emerged, localizing themselves differently from the national Korean Canadian Writers’ Association based centrally in Toronto

(19). The range of Song's examination encompasses several genres and forms including poetry, fiction, essays, and criticism.⁸

On the other hand, a scholarly review of Korean Canadian literature in English has not yet been conducted. Part of the lack in scholarship can be explained by the relatively recent rise in Korean Canadian publications in English (since approximately 1989) and the scholarly attention to Korean Canadian cultural expressions. Considering that in *Hangul* can be traced back to the 1970s, this gap in English publications may relate to the differences in official language proficiency between first- and second- generation Korean immigrants and the very few numbers of adult second-generation population in recent decades. More sociological and cultural studies on these contexts are warranted in future explorations of Korean populations in Canada. As a starting effort to trace the development of Korean Canadian expressions in English, I have built a tentative list of single-authored texts published in English, although further studies on publications in archives and collections, poetry, criticisms and other genres are much required.⁹

On my tentative list, there are fifteen texts including novels, plays, and several children's books. One of the earliest texts in English is *The Wanderer: The Autobiography of a United Church Moderator* (1989) written by Reverend Sang Chul Lee. In the 1990s, three works of

⁸ As the most published South Korean scholar on Korean diasporic literature in Canada, Song Myung Hee's monograph titles include: *The Yesterday and Today of Korean Literature in the Americas: From Canada, the United States, and Argentina* (2010) and *Korean Canadian Literature Research: Korean Canadian Experiences of Diaspora and Honest Records of Life* (2016). She has also authored the "Korean Diasporic Literature in Canada" section of the Literature and Translation Institute of Korea's comprehensive archive report on "Korean Diasporic Literature" (2018).

⁹ I note here that a similar persisting gap exists in the study of Korean Canadian literature in French. As Jenny Heijun Wills points out that "[a]ssumptions about what constitutes the nation in Asian Canadian studies. . . rarely interact with the official bilingual and bicultural (English and French) nature of the country," I posit that the causes of this gap further include the precarious status of francophone Korean and Asian Canadian writers in an anglo-centric field of Asian Canadian literary studies (75). In her article, "Competing Nationalisms in Ru and La Trilogie coréenne: Francophone Asian Québécois Literatures," Wills analyzes *La Trilogie coréenne* (2012), an understudied contemporary, semi-autobiographical novel exploring the cultural significance of language—the French language in particular in relation to English and Korean languages—by Ook Chung, a francophone Korean Canadian writer born in Japan.

Korean Canadian women were published in English through Canadian publishers: *Under the Hostile Moon* (Two Bints Press; 1993), a poetry collection by Jean Yoon; *Inside the Hermit Kingdom: A Memoir* (Key Porter Books; 1997) by Sun Kyung Yi, and *Noran Bang: The Yellow Room* (Playwrights Canada Press; 1999), a play by Myung Jin Kang. In the 2000's, Sang Kim published *A Dream Called Laundry* (2006), a play, and *Ballad of a Kareoke Cowboy* (2007), a novel, both through the Korean Canadian Literary Forum-21 Press (KCLF-21; now renamed as Variety Crossing Press). KCLF-21 appears as a rare small press in Canada specializing in the literary publications of and by Korean Canadians.¹⁰ Since 2010, there has been a notable rise in publications by Korean-born writers in English. Ins Choi's play *Kim's Convenience* was published by the House of Anansi Press in 2011 and other texts that emerged between 2010 and 2020 include: *The Home We Built on Ashes* (2015), a memoir by Christina Kim; Ann Choi's *KLCV*; *Running Through Sprinklers* (2018), a children's novella by Michelle Kim; *Krista Kim-Bap* (2018), a children's book by Angela Ahn; Wills' memoir; *The Silence of the Bones* (2020), a novel by June Hur; and *Once Upon An Hour* (2020), a children's book by Ann Choi. Many of these narratives, excluding *Kim's*, *KLCV*, and *OSNNR*, did not garner much attention from Korean Canadian and Canadian literary circles. On the other hand, Ins Choi, Anne Choi and Jenny Heijun Wills' works have recently collected popular and literary acclaim as winners of Canadian literary awards and/or earning nominations as finalists in short and long lists.

A few independent films centering on Korean Canadian experiences have also appeared over the last decade, receiving recognition through Asian Canadian film festivals and word of mouth in the Korean Canadian community. These films include Alice Kim's *Don't Cry* (2017), Aram Collier's *Stand Up Man* (2017), and Samuel Kiehoon Lee's *Gyopo* (2019), respectively

¹⁰ See <https://varietycrossingpress.wordpress.com/about/>.

shown at the Toronto Korean Film Festival (TKFF), the Reel Asian Film Festival, and the Vancouver Asian Film Festival (VAFF). Prior to the twenty-first century, Sun-Kyung Yi's documentary *Scenes from a Corner Store* (1996) was produced in association with the Canadian Broadcast Corporation (CBC) as one of the earliest film portrayals of a Korean immigrant family in Canada by a diasporic Korean writer and producer. While *Kim's Convenience* attracted much critical attention in mainstream Canadian society, depictions of Korean Canadian individuals and their experiences are still largely missing in broader industries of prime-time television and non-independent film. This gap in representation partly relates to the persisting lack of Asian representation and roles for Asian actors on screens and stages as well as the nascent development of diasporic Korean communities and artistic voices in English.

II. Political and Historical Contexts Influencing Korean Representation in Canada

Like other racialized immigrants in Canada, the experiences of Koreans Canadians are intertwined with local histories and politics of White-settler colonialism, multiculturalism, and racial oppression. To understand the experiences of Korean immigrants, one must be cognizant of the trauma stemming from systemic policies of ethnic marginalization and exclusion such as the imposition of the "Chinese Head Tax" in the 1880s and the internment of Japanese Canadians in the 1940s. As countless scholars of Asian Canadian studies note, the contemporary experiences of the Canadian "multicultural mosaic" for Asians in Canada are fraught with the histories and aftereffects of systemic racial exclusion as well as cultural propagations of racial discrimination, still pervasive today (see Lien Chao, Lily Cho, Smaro Kamboureli, Roy Miki, Mona Oikawa, and Eleanor Ty). An overview of the multifarious racist strategies enacted by

governments against Asian minorities, however brief, is therefore necessary to understand and contextualize Korean immigrant experiences in Canada.

Canada became a new country through the European colonization of Indigenous lands in North America, the formation of French and British colonies throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and officially, through the passing of the British North America Act in 1867. Nevertheless, in the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, Canada was considered widely as a “white man’s country,” as declared in several mainstream press articles and by the first prime minister of Canada, John A. MacDonald, in a parliamentary speech (see Adachi, Thobani). Canada’s political and economic development involves the continual subordination of Indigenous peoples and the growth of the capitalist economy as a “foundation for the policies of slavery, marginalization and socio-economic exclusion of racialized immigrants” (Galabuzi 75). While immigrants were needed as labourers for the burgeoning economy and backbreaking jobs such as railway construction, the desire to preserve a White Canada is shown in Canada’s immigration laws, such as sections regarding explicit exclusion based on race contained in the Immigration Acts of 1910, 1919, and 1952 (Pon et al. 4; see Jakubowski). In these sections that indicated some races as “preferred” and others as “non-preferred,” Asians and Blacks were “part of the non-preferred groups and viewed as inherently inferior and unassimilable” (4; see Fleras).

The fate of Chinese and Japanese Canadians in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries reveal the inhumane consequences of racial capitalism, racism, and state-sanctioned practices to preserve White Canada. Between 1881 and 1884, an estimate of 6,500 Chinese migrants arrived in Canada as labourers employed by contractors to build the western section of the Canadian Pacific Railway (Li 21). Many of the workers were discharged after the completion of the railway, and they occupied casual employment positions in logging, mining, farming, and

canning industries in British Columbia (Li 22). The first settlement of Japanese people in Canada began in the 1870s, and many primarily worked in the sawmill and salmon fishing industries (Pon et al. 6). Between 1885 and 1989, Japanese migrants continued to arrive in Canada as predominantly unattached male peasants who took up fishing or farming in British Columbia and supplied cheap labour, sometimes underbidding Chinese labourers (Ty 14; Adachi 18, 31). During this time, Asians were considered second-class citizens and confined to menial work by “the combination of exclusionary laws, discriminatory taxes, boycotts, hostility, and labour exploitation” (Ty 14; see Takaki, Chan, Li).

In 1885, the Canadian government imposed a head tax of fifty dollars on any Chinese person entering Canada through the Chinese Immigration Act. This tax was raised to a hundred dollars in 1900 and to five-hundred dollars in 1903 (Ty 15). The head tax’s purpose was to discourage Chinese immigration, responding to racist criticisms that “Chinese labourers were driving down wages and taking jobs away from Anglo-Saxon workers in British Columbia” (James 889). This policy was replaced by a near-total ban on Chinese immigration through the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1923 that remained in place until 1947 (889). While the comprehensiveness of the 1923 ban is somewhat surprising in that “Aside from the indigenous people, no other ethnic group in Canada has experienced such harsh treatment,” the racism marking the policy of restriction and eventual exclusion was not new; other similarly racist policies existed even prior to 1885 (Li 5). For example, Peter Li notes that British Columbia had passed legislation to bar Chinese Canadians from voting in provincial and municipal elections as early as 1875. Other racially predicated policies include a Saskatchewan law barring Chinese employers from hiring “white” women and several provincial laws of British Columbia that “prevented persons of Asian descent from working in the liberal professions or on Crown lands”

(Bolaria and Li 107-109; James 889). Under the act of 1923, Chinese persons in Canada were required to register with the government and only members of the diplomatic corps and children born to Chinese parents in Canada were permitted to enter the country.

Racial hostility and frequent outbursts of marginalization and violence further tainted the experiences of Chinese and Japanese Canadians during these times. Whereas Japanese Canadians were initially racialized as being “highly civilized” and “clean and frugal” and deemed to be more favourable than the “undesirable” and “unclean” Chinese, by 1900, petitions were arriving to the Governor General of Canada to prohibit all “Orientals” from entering Canada (Ty 15; Adachi 43). In 1887 and 1907, serious riots with thousands of protesters vandalizing the Chinese quarters and intimidating Chinese people to stop competing for jobs with White workers took place in Vancouver (Li 35). As Ty notes, the 1907 riot was “one of the largest anti-Asiatic demonstrations in the history of British Columbia,” during which the crowd swept into “Little Tokyo” and waved banners with slogans such as “Stand up for a white Canada” (16; Adachi 72-3). The riot furthermore triggered the first voluntary restriction of Japanese migration to Canada, as a “Gentleman’s Agreement” was struck between the Canadian and Japanese governments in 1908 to allow only a small number of Japanese migrants to enter Canada (Pon et al. 6). Compared to the Chinese Canadian bachelors that could not bring their wives to Canada, Japanese immigrant women were still permitted to enter Canada as picture brides until 1928, offering a more stabilized family life and the establishment of settlement communities with schools, shops, churches, and restaurants. However, by the 1920s, resentment against Japanese Canadians had also grown (Ty 18; Adachi 107). A request was made by British Columbia to the federal government in 1922 to pass a law prohibiting “Asiatics” from “acquiring proprietary interests in agricultural, timber and mining lands or fishing and other industries” (18; 140).

Moreover, for Chinese Canadians, the effects of the unassailable exclusion policies were profound and prolonged. The prohibitively high tax—at five-hundred dollars, the cost was equivalent to two years' wages—created a population of “married bachelors.” As a result, the emergence of a second generation of Chinese Canadians was made virtually impossible until the late 1970s (Borhaila and Li 114-116). The deliberate prevention of the formation of Chinese Canadian families, while federal policy was bringing European female domestic workers to boost White birth rates, “deprived Chinese migrants of family support, created psychological scars, delayed the formation of a viable Chinese-Canadian community and exposed those Chinese women who did manage to immigrate to an unusually harsh environment of sexual and reproductive pressure” (James 889; Abu-Laban 265-266). Chinese migrants were left unprotected at the mercy of ruthless labour contractors and in an informal system of indentured servitude (889). The state-sanctioned, comprehensive policy also branded Chinese Canadians as “the unwanted race in Canada,” legally shaping the basis of racial and ethnic stereotypes against Chinese and Asian peoples as undesirable (Chao ix). As Lily Cho argues, the situation of Chinese immigrants within the Canadian imaginary “as both purely subservient and dangerously suspect” through the head tax at a time of national formation not only “named and regulated Chinese as a racial category of identity” but was further constitutive of Chinese Canadian subjectivity within a legal apparatus (66, 71).

Similar nation-wide state-sanctioned discrimination against Japanese Canadians occurred in 1942, when over twenty-two thousand Japanese people were removed from their homes on the Canadian West Coast and sent to relocation and detention camps in disparate locations, following Japan's bombing of Pearl Harbour in 1941 (Pon et al., see Oikawa). Mona Oikawa details and analyzes the impact of this wide-scale dispossession and ethnic exclusion in

Cartographies of Violence: Japanese Canadian Women, Memory, and the Subjects of the Internment (2012). Empirically, more than forty Orders-in-Council were applied to “persons of the Japanese race” for “detention, incarceration, movement, dispossession, housing, employment, dispersal, loyalty, citizenship, and other matters” (Oikawa 102; Kobayashi 456). Exemplified by the creation of a 100-mile “protected area” from the Pacific Ocean to the Cascade Mountains within which the minister of justice was allowed to control the movements of all people of Japanese ancestry, the policies of restriction and dispossession included the imposition of curfews, curtailment of their access to public places, impoundment of fishing boats, and the confiscation of property, sealing the fate of Japanese Canadians in 1942 as “landless, propertyless, and homeless” (102-106). In their forced relocation, Japanese Canadian families “were only allowed to take 150 pounds of baggage per adult and 75 pounds per child over twelve with a maximum allowance of 1,000 pounds per family, which meant that they had to leave behind possessions that were often looted or destroyed” (107). Internment camps of Japanese Canadians systemically destroyed communal and familial relations, as they were dispersed across Canada in various topographies, from Hastings Park in Vancouver to road camps and prisoner-of-war (POW) camps across Canada’s western, central, and prairies provinces.¹¹

¹¹Dispelling the myth of Japanese Internment camps in Canada as a collapsed and reduced spatial image of “camps,” Oikawa reports the variety of carceral sites that operated across Canada.

There were other carceral sites: Hastings Park in Vancouver (which for many was the first place of incarceration); the five so-called self-support camps; the various road camps to which men were sent (seventeen at the Yellow-Blue River Highway Project that traversed the border of BC and Alberta, seven at the Hope-Princeton Highway Project in BC, seven at the Revelstoke-Sicamous Highway Project in BC, and six at the Schreiber-Jackfish Highway Project in Ontario) and that were operated by the Department of Mines and Resources; the prisoner-of-war (POW) camps in Angler and Petawawa, Ontario, and KananaskisSeebe, Alberta, operated by the Department of National Defence to which some of the men were sent; Neys Hostel in northern Ontario; and other hostels in Saskatchewan, Manitoba, Quebec, and southern Ontario. There were the sites of forced labour on sugar beet and other farms on the Prairies and in Ontario. There were domestic service and other jobs that women and men were forced to accept ‘east of the Rockies’ in Quebec, Ontario, and Manitoba in the face of unemployment in the camps, destitution, or the threat of deportation to Japan when the repatriation survey was conducted. There were industrial projects in

Oikawa perceptively relates the Internment of Japanese Canadians to the technologies of expulsion and forced displacement that the Canadian government had used against Indigenous peoples¹² including the establishment of reserves and residential schools; she argues that such colonial technologies are foundational to the construction of Canada and its “spatial organization of domination” (96-97). She points out that Japanese Canadians’ expulsion occurred shortly following the finalization of the construction of the reserve system in British Columbia, and that the first sites considered by the federal government for the incarceration of Japanese Canadians were residential schools and reserves inhabited by Indigenous peoples across the nation (98). Hence, Oikawa suggests,

in imagining the Canadian settler nation and its citizens, state officials also relationally imagined those who were considered extraneous to both. Their colonial and racial imagination conceptualized that Indigenous peoples could share carceral and Indigenous spaces with a group constructed as racially foreign, or that Japanese Canadians could be used to again displace Indigenous peoples through their own forced displacement (98).

Such systems and technologies facilitating the marginalization and exclusion of Indigenous and East Asian people in Canada not only disclose the overwhelming history of racialization and White hegemony characterizing the nation’s formation and its imperialist expansion but

Ontario and in Westwold and Taylor Lake, BC. The most geographically distant site was Japan, the country from which Canada did not accept some visiting Japanese Canadians in the 1940s and the country to which 3,964 people were forced to move through the coercive signing of the repatriation survey.

¹² Regarding such technologies, Oikawa notes,

The technologies or practices used against Indigenous peoples and authorized by the use of settler-state law, including the Indian Act, such as expulsion, forced displacement, incarceration, segregation, dispossession, separation, and destruction of families and communities, denigration of languages other than English and French, the role of the Christian churches in destroying traditional spiritual practices and numerous other methods have been implemented and practised for centuries. Settler control of Indigenous nations established techniques that could be adapted for the policing of immigrants and the eventual formulation and administration of the Internment (96).

furthermore reveal the underpinnings of racism and colonialism that shape the multicultural “mosaic” of Canadian society today.

Korean migration to Canada thus begins with the aftermath of such racist policies and at a time when Canadian immigration policy started to veer away from a focus on race, ethnicity, and country of origin toward an ostensibly deracialized alternative emphasizing skills, education, and experience (Pon et al. 8; see Fleras). Having shifted away from the preferred versus non preferred system in 1962, the federal government introduced a point system in which “independent and assisted-relative applicants were numerically assessed against the demands of occupation, education, and language expertise” in 1967 (Fleras 253). Despite the claim that the new colour-blind points system is devoid of racial bias, Canada’s immigration policies were still far from perfect in that they continued to favour “class-advantaged male applicants with access to educational credentials in those countries with Canadian embassies for processing applications,” and that “immigration recruiting resources were disproportionately allocated to developed countries in comparison to developing ones” (253; Pon et al. 8; see Thobani, “Nationals, Citizens, and Others”). Nevertheless, as Kim et al. points out, mass Korean migration to Canada in the 1970s was made possible by Canada’s changes in its immigration policies in 1962 and 1967 and the new presence of a Canadian embassy in South Korea in 1973, among other concurrent changes in domestic conditions in South Korea (6-7).

As new immigrants then, many Koreans Canadians witnessed Canada’s fraught transition as the first country in the world to adopt multiculturalism as an official policy in 1971, the adoption of the Canadian Multiculturalism Act in 1985, and the redress settlement between the Canadian government and the National Association of Japanese Canadians (NAJC) in 1988 (Hogarth and Fletcher 70; Kobayashi 1). Hogarth and Fletcher argue that the policy of

multiculturalism implemented by Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau and the era of multiculturalism in Canada thereafter has two critical emphases: “(a) the maintenance of heritage, cultures, and identities and (b) the full and equitable participation of all ethnocultural groups in the life of the larger society” (85). The authors point out, perceptively, that the pursuit of either of these two ideals in the exclusion of the other leads to opposing and equally devastating consequences (one leads to the separation of individuals and societal segregation and the other to assimilation and a societal melting pot, respectively). It is moreover important to note that multiculturalism in Canada emerged in the context of its two “founding nations,” asserting the significance of its biculturalism/bilingualism to its national identity. The challenge of multiculturalism in practice lies in theories of ethnocentrism, that throughout history, “more groups, communities, and societies positively evaluate their own ways of being, the more they negatively evaluate the ways of being of others” (85-86). The realities of Canadian multiculturalism then can be seen in the sentiments of nationalism that view differences in values and religious practices as threats to the stability of the nation and the normativity of Whiteness that challenges the sense of belonging of racialized Others (85-88).

Within such paradoxical conditions of multiculturalism, Korean communities have burgeoned across Canada over the last several decades, heavily influenced by the shifts in Canada’s economic interests underpinning the changes in its immigration policies. Thousands of early migrants arrived on Canadian shores in the 1970s and 80s as sponsored family members and as independent immigrants with their educational and occupational qualifications (Kim et al. 7). Between 1986 and 2003, more than approximately 78,000 Koreans arrived in Canada as the expansion of the business-class immigration program in Canada triggered a surge in this class of immigrants (9-10). Ann Kim et al. notes that since 2004, there has been a noticeable increase in

the regionalization of immigrants through the Provincial Nominee Programs to regions such as Vancouver, Winnipeg, and the Maritime provinces and a rise of transnational Korean families through “parachute” children¹³ and *kirogi* (“wild goose” in English) families¹⁴ (12-13). Many first-generation Korean Canadians built their livelihoods as self-employed businessmen and women through corner stores, laundromats, and restaurants in the hopes of securing a more prosperous life for their children (Korean Canadian Women’s Anthology Collective 4). In many urban areas, Korean Christian churches formed as the locus of congregation, community, and support for new immigrants and their families (4; see Kwak). As the Canadian immigration policy increasingly reflected the nation’s global economic interests and South Korea arose as a new global economic power in the 1980s and 90s, the rise in Korean migration to Canada continued, eventually shifting the composition of Korean migrants “from working-class and middle-class workers to predominantly wealthy entrepreneurs with a marked increase in the number of temporary residents and international students” (4; Kwak). Nevertheless, as all the literary and visual representations by Korean Canadian writers in this dissertation show, many Koreans in Canada were still subject to racism, marginalization, socioeconomic oppression, and underrepresentation continually from the 1970s until today. While the forms and effects of anti-Asian racism in literary depictions of Chinese Canadians and Japanese Canadians have been widely studied through texts such as Sky Lee’s *Disappearing Moon Café* (1990) and Joy Kogawa’s *Obasan* (1981), the experiences of Korean Canadians captured in literature have been rarely examined to date.

¹³ Children who migrate to another country alone without their parents and placed under legal guardians in the host country (Ann et al. 13).

¹⁴ A transnational family dynamic where one parent, often the father, works in Korea while the other, typically the mother, accompanies the children, who acquire student visas. The reference to *kirogi* families is culturally common and widely accepted across media and scholarships. As Ann et al. explain, “wild geese symbolize family loyalty and marital harmony” as they “engage in seasonal migration [and yet] are monogamous and remain loyal even after the death of a mate” (13).

As an additional point of interest for future researchers of Korean Canadian history and culture, little is known about the Korean Canadian community's reaction, if any, to historical trajectories influencing Asian Canadian and Korean Canadian identities such as the Japanese Redress in Canada, the 1992 Los Angeles riot, and the slow emergence of Asian Canadian studies. On September 22, 1988, Prime Minister Brian Mulroney formally acknowledged the wartime human rights violations against Japanese Canadians and announced an agreement with NAJC which included individual redress payments of \$21,000 "for each living Japanese Canadian who had been expelled from the coast in 1942 or who was born before April 1, 1949" ("Japanese Canadians: Redress Campaign"). As Audrey Kobayashi elucidates, "Individual compensation was the most important principle upon which the settlement was based" as the NAJC was adamant that the principle of redress must be the compensation of individual Canadians (not because they were Japanese Canadians) and that the payment should be symbolically a significant sum (5). Despite having arrived through a slow, painful, and overdue process, the 1988 settlement confirmed the rights of Japanese Canadians as citizens and "established the principle of redress for those whose rights have been abrogated" (2). In *A Dream Called Laundry* (2006), a play by Sang Kim, a Korean-born former "comfort woman" (during colonial Korea and the Asia-Pacific War¹⁵), now living in 1970s Toronto, expresses her disapprobation of Japanese Canadian communities to her daughter:

¹⁵ In *Comfort Women: Sexual Violence and Postcolonial Memory in Korea and Japan* (2008), Sarah Noh defines "comfort women" as "an English translation of the Japanese euphemism *ianfu*, [referring] to the tens of thousands of young women and girls of various ethnic and national backgrounds who were pressed into sexual servitude during the Asia Pacific War that began with the invasion of Manchuria in 1931 and ended with Japan's defeat in 1945." Estimates of the total numbers of Japan's comfort women range from 50,000 to 200,000 and constitute of majority Korean women, large numbers of Chinese and South Asian women, as well as a small number of Japanese women (xii).

Look what they do. They come this country pretend be good people. Soon take over everything. . . Korean people work hard. Make money clean way. Work fifteen hour. Seven day. Even God rest on seven day. For what? For sell gum and cigarette and make ten cent. Japs take money from govern... govern... (29).

Through this uncanny comparison of Canada's war crimes against Japanese Canadians to Japan's colonial violence in Korea, the woman reveals her complicated perspective on the redress movement of Japanese Canadians as a victim of colonial violence in the local Canadian context of racial marginalization. Such literary representations indicate gaps in the study and knowledge of Korean communities in Canada, and yet, pose as fascinating points for further investigation of the relationships among Asian Canadian communities throughout the history of Canadian multiculturalism's formation.

Additionally, while Pyong-Gap Min points out a lack of comparison between Korean American and Korean Canadian experiences, he asks, referring to the conflict between Black and Korean communities in the U.S. in the 1980s and 90s, "Did Korean business owners in Canada serve many minority customers in the 1990s and have conflicts with them?" (Noh et al. xiii). As relevant responses, reflections of Korean Canadians on the conflicts experienced by Korean immigrant storeowners in racially Black neighbourhoods in the U.S. and the 1991 Los Angeles riot appear in literary accounts such as *KLCV*, examined in this dissertation, and Choi's play, *Kim's Convenience*. I suggest that these literary depictions fill in the gaps of sociological and cultural studies in obtaining a fuller and clearer image of Korean Canadians and their identity across time and location. Furthermore, Myung-Hee Song observes that in the fourteenth edition of *Korean Canadian Literature* (2009),¹⁶ the Korean Canadian writer Chung-Do Park published

¹⁶ *Korean Canadian Literature* is a biennial journal published by the Korean Canadian Writers' Association (KCWA).

an introductory review of *Divisadero* (2007), by Sri Lankan born Canadian writer Michael Ondaatje. Song points out that this indicates Korean Canadians' shifting interest toward Canadian mainstream literature beyond their ongoing literary activities in the Korean language (19). In fact, despite the relative concurrence of the rise in Asian Canadian literary studies and the beginnings of Korean literary publications in Canada, Korean Canadian critical interventions relating to mainstream Canadian literature, culture, and politics prior to the 2000s is extremely rare. *HanKut: Critical Art and Writing by Korean Canadian Women* (2007), composed by The Korean Canadian Women's Anthology Collective, is notable in this respect as the first collective and creative interpolation by Korean Canadians in English, exploring Korean-born women's identity intersectionally through the lens of "race, gender, sexuality, class, ability, religion, and nationality" and critically situating the authors' voices within paradigms of multiculturalism, racism, and feminist studies (1). Finally, Wills' memoir, studied in the second chapter, unveils the experiences of transnational Korean adoptees in Canada, whose identities have been further underrepresented and unexamined. These scattered yet emerging representations of diverse Korean Canadians contributing to the gaps in sociological and historical knowledge of diasporic Koreans moreover complicate the politics and perspectives regarding Canada's multiculturalism, Asian Canadian studies, and transnational Korean identity.

III. Korean American Representation in Literature and Media

In comparison to Canada, the Korean American literature unfolds through a longer history of Korean migration. The earliest group arrival of Koreans to the U.S. dates back to January 1903 when Korean labourers landed in Honolulu during a short-lived plantation-labour

recruitment campaign in Hawaii.¹⁷ In the following decades until 1945, Koreans arrived in the U.S. as foreign students, political exiles, picture brides, farmers and labourers, settling dominantly in Hawaii and California in isolation from mainstream U.S. societies. While Korean immigration to the U.S. with the aim of permanent settlement began in 1962, until then from 1945, war orphans from the Korean War, Korean spouses of American soldiers, biracial children, and students migrated to the U.S. for purposes of adoption, family reunion, and studies abroad (LTI Korea 35-36). Finally, family immigration from South Korea to the U.S. has rapidly accelerated since the U.S. government's broadening of its immigration laws in 1965 (to be explored further in Section IV).

The steady development of Korean American writing reflects these diverse experiences of Korean migration to and settlement in the United States. As Elaine Kim notes, Korean American experiences possess their uniqueness in that “[they] are all rooted in specific historical and sociopolitical circumstances,” and although “Korean American literature is not wholly determined by these circumstances, it emerges from the dialectical interplay between social forces and cultural production, which continually alters its boundaries and contours” (149). In contrast to the development of Korean Canadian expressions that began with robust communal literary circulations and publications in the Korean language, some earliest Korean American writings emerged in English in the context of the writers’ attempts to present the “true story” of Asian Americans’ successful experiences of “Westernization” or “Americanization,” as their resistance to a century and a half of persistent and deeply rooted racism against Asians as “others”(150). Moreover, as Kim posits, “The double impact of U.S. racial discrimination and

¹⁷ Until Japan’s colonial government halted Korean migration to Hawaii in 1905, approximately 7,226 Koreans relocated to and settled on the American island as labourers, the vast majority of whom were males in their twenties (LTI Korea 30). This history will be explored further in the fourth section of this chapter.

Japan's colonization of Korea effectively limited the growth of Korean American communities for six decades" (151). Such particular social histories differentiate Korean American experiences from the otherwise considerably shared conditions of Asian Americans in the history of racial discrimination in the U.S. (150-151).

These contexts only partially explain the limited production of Korean American publications until recent decades. The works of early male and female writers from New Il-han, Younghill Kang (1903-1972), and Richard Kim to Ronyoung Kim, Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, and Sook Nyul Choi depict the influences of Japanese colonization on Koreans and Korean Americans as well as their experiences of alienation and "Westernization" in the U.S. (E. Kim 151). Despite the sizeable number of first-generation Korean intellectuals, including political exiles, that arrived in the U.S. since the early decades of the twentieth century, relatively few literary productions by first-generation Korean Americans exist in both English and Korean until the 1970s (E. Kim 49, 160). Korean American writing in Korean through organized literary circles resembling the KCWC can only be seen from 1973 through the issues of *Jipyeongseon* (1973-1976; Horizon), and more robustly in the 1980s. The Koreans in America Literary Association began sponsoring its journal, *Miju Munhak* (Korean American Literature), after its establishment in 1981 and produced four issues until 1985 (160). Six more Korean American literary journals operating in Korean including *Munhak Segye* (The Literary Realm, 1988) were born thereafter during the 1980s.

The late-1980s and 1990s saw the rise of increasingly hybrid and heterogeneous Korean American writers, particularly among the children and grandchildren of pre-1965 immigrants, as well as localized literary circles in cities such as New York, Washington, San Francisco, and Chicago, that continuously published literary works in Korean (E. Kim 51, 160-161). These

second- and third- generation Korean American writers emerging in the 1990s “[challenged] old categories and notions of who can be called a Korean American writer” (E. Kim 169). Several award-winning writers critically acclaimed by mainstream American literary circles such as Nora Okja Keller, Heinz Insu Fenkl, Chang Rae Lee, and Susan Choi published their major works during the 1990s. These works include *Native Speaker* (1995), *Memories of My Ghost Brother* (1996), *Comfort Woman* (1997), *The Foreign Student* (1998), and *A Gesture Life* (1999). Such novels portray multifaceted Korean American characters, including the mixed-race children of Korean women and U.S. military men, a suave Korean American male politician running for mayor of New York City, the American-born daughter of a former comfort woman, Korean American adoptees, and a foreign student in the southern US from independent Korea in the 1950s.

Many Korean American writers have garnered critical acclaim and entered the mainstream American literary scene as novelists, poets, and playwrights in the twenty-first century. For example, Min Jin Lee’s debut novel, *Free Food For Millionaires* (2007) was well received, and her *Pachinko* was a finalist for the 2017 National Book Award for fiction. Jenny Han’s *To All the Boys I’ve Loved Before* trilogy (2014, 2015, 2017), a series of young-adult fiction depicting the high-school romance of a biracial-Korean teenage girl in Virginia, was popular with readers and viewers alike. The first two novels of the trilogy were adapted to film on Netflix in 2018 and 2020. In theatre, Young Jean Lee, an established Korean American playwright with her own theatre company, became the first Asian American woman to have her play produced on Broadway with *Straight White Men* in the Hayes Theatre in 2018. Suji Kwok Kim and Sun Yung Shin published award-winning poetry collections: *Notes from the Divided*

Country (2003), Griffin Prize finalist, and *Skirt Full of Black* (2007), winner of the 2007 Asian American Literary Award for Poetry, respectively.

Korean American visual representation roughly began near the turn of the new millennium, with changing cultural and economic conditions propelling the rise of Asian representation in the U.S. Benjamin Han points to the proliferation of various television channels catering to distinct Asian-diasporic community audiences since the 2005 establishment of KTSF, the first Asian television station in the U.S., and the growth of Asian American audiences in the last two decades (275). Caroline Kyung Hong notes how the late-twentieth century marked Asian Americans' slow conversion from comic objects to comic agents as their representation in popular U.S. comedy and humour grew. She warns, however, that this conversion process involves the problematic featuring of Asian Americans on screen as "perpetual foreigners, often in concert with the model-minority stereotype" ("Comedy, Humor, and Asian American Representation."). Emerging independent Asian American filmmakers of the 1980s and 90s also used comedy and comedy-drama to reflect on various issues including immigration, inter- and intra- ethnic cultural and class differences, intergenerational family conflicts, and gender and sexuality.¹⁸ Between 1994 and 1995, *All American Girl*, an ABC television series starring Margaret Cho, a Korean American stand-up comedian and actress then rising to fame, garnered

¹⁸ Hong offers a comprehensive list of examples here:

Notable comedic Asian American films of the late 20th century include Wayne Wang's comedy-dramas *Chan Is Missing* (1982), *Dim Sum: A Little Bit of Heart* (1985), and *Eat a Bowl of Tea* (1989), which all center on stories of Chinese American families in Chinese American communities; Peter Wang's comedy-drama *A Great Wall* (1986), the first US feature film shot in the People's Republic of China; Ang Lee's *The Wedding Banquet* (1993), a transnational, bilingual romantic comedy about a gay Taiwanese immigrant man who marries a mainland Chinese woman and the nonnormative family they form together; Timothy A. Chey's cross-cultural comedy *Fakin' da Funk* (1997), about a Chinese son adopted by black parents in South Central Los Angeles, perhaps the first Afro-Asian comedy; Chris Chan Lee's *Yellow* (1998), a coming-of-age comedy-drama about Korean American teenagers, also set in Los Angeles; and Nisha Ganatra's comedy-drama *Chutney Popcorn* (1999), about a young Indian American lesbian in New York City navigating her romantic and familial relationships (7).

popularity as the first prime-time TV sitcom in the U.S. to feature an Asian American family as lead characters. *All American Girl* comically portrays the intergenerational conflicts between Margaret Kim (played by Cho), a rebellious teenage daughter, and her Korean American family, living and operating a bookstore in San Francisco. Despite early anticipation for this groundbreaking sitcom, the series received significant criticisms for its stereotypical depictions of Asians such as the “tiger mother” and its inclusion of “butchered Korean language.” Television sitcoms featuring Asian American families as their lead casts did not return until 2015, when ABC released *Fresh Off the Boat* (2015-2020) and *Dr. Ken* (Han 275). Finally, there has been an array of independent films depicting or produced by Korean Americans such as *Yellow* (1998), *Close Call* (2002), *Undoing* (2006), *Never Forever* (2007), *Tie a Yellow Ribbon* (2007), *West 32nd* (2007), *Seoul Searching* (2015), *Spa Night* (2016), *Gook* (2017), and *Minari* (2020). These independent films progressively cover a wide range of genres such as crime drama, neo-noir, and comedy, while their characters markedly break away from Asian stereotypes, highlighting their “Americanness” in multidimensional ways.

The continual diversification of Korean American narratives in the landscape of mainstream American literature and media promises new directions for future scholarship. Although comparably more scholars have engaged with Korean American literature, including Elaine Kim, Sun Mo Yoo, and Kun Jong Lee, insufficient attention has been paid to the new generation of Korean American narratives emerging in the twenty-first century as well as the increasing appearance of Korean Americans on mainstream U.S. television. The bridging of existing and future scholarship on Korean American literature and media through a broader lens, decentred from nationalist and disciplinary paradigms, affords updated methodologies to examine the growing cultural and textual diversity of narratives showing the multifariousness of

Korean American identities. Moreover, the broadening of Korean American representation in digital spaces, exemplified by the online success of Phil Yu's blog, *Angry Asian Man* (est. 2001), and the rising influence of the new Korean wave on American popular culture reveal greater potentiality to re-examine the current development of Korean American narratives through more transnational and transdisciplinary frameworks.

IV. Political and Historical Contexts Influencing Korean Experiences in the U.S.

As Ty notes in *The Politics of Invisibility in Asian North American Narratives* (2004), the history of Asian Americans vis-à-vis state-sanctioned practices of exclusion, marginalization, and racial discrimination in the U.S. bear striking resemblances to its counterpart of Asian Canadians in the northern multicultural mosaic. The experiences of Asian Americans are intertwined with the U.S.' shifting political and economic interests, and Lisa Lowe posits that this relationship can be largely captured in two phases: the first phase since the first arrival of large Asian migrant flows to the melting pot in the 1850s until World War II, and the second phase from WWII to the present. In the first phase, the recruitment of Asian immigrants as a labour force was motivated by the imperative to bring cheap labour into the developing capitalist economy, and Chinese, Japanese, and Filipino workers were indispensable to the construction of railroads, the agricultural economy, and the textile and service industries in the U.S. (12). Nevertheless, the racialized divisions among labourers leveraged by capital to maximize profits while upholding the "whiteness" of U.S. citizenship and property ownership shaped the exclusion of further Chinese immigrants and disenfranchisement of the existing Chinese labour force in the 1880s, as well as successive exclusions of Asian Indians in 1917, Japanese in 1924, Filipinos in 1934, and the enactment of Alien Land Laws in 1913, 1920, and 1923, prohibiting all Asian immigrants from owning land and other properties (13). Lowe notes that in the period

after World War II, “the capital imperative came into greater contradiction with the political imperative of the U.S. nation state,” as the former required “economic internationalism to expand labor and capital, to secure raw materials and consumer markets, to locate areas in which to invest surplus capital, and to provide a safety valve for domestic tensions,” while the latter necessitated the “consolidation of a strong, hegemonic nation-state in order to regulate the terms of that post-war economic internationalism” (15). These contradicting imperatives arose as a result of the emergence of export-oriented economies in Asia and Latin America, and the geographic shift in production to such regions for low-wage labour markets. Furthermore, while the U.S. Immigration Act of 1965 “opened” immigration and renewed domestic labour supplies, the demographic composition of Asian American immigrants post-1965, largely as low-wage service sector workers and “proletarianized” white-collar professionals, still show the contradicting imperatives between capitalism and the state through the continued racialization and exploitation of Asian Americans across strata of class and gender (15-16). Another distinguishing feature marking post-1965 Asian immigration is the contradiction between the displacement of Asian societies affected by U.S. war and colonialism (in regions including South Korea, the Philippines, South Vietnam, and Cambodia) and their arrival in the U.S. whose national identity seeks to forget the precise memories of imperialism that the Asian migrants carry with them (16-17).

The early emergence of Asian American settlements in relation to U.S.’ economic imperatives of labour and capital accumulation can be easily observed in the migration history of Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Indian, and Filipino immigrants. As the onset of mass Asian migration to the U.S., large numbers of Chinese migrants first arrived in the 1850s through frontiers of Hawaii and California due to the labour shortages of Euro-American workers in

Hawaiian sugar plantations and in mining, triggered by the California gold rush (Chan 25-27). In 1852, 195 Chinese contract labourers arrived in Hawaii, and more than 20,000 Chinese migrants passed through the San Francisco Customs House heading to the gold fields in the Sierra Nevada foothills (26; 28). Mass Japanese arrival as additions to the U.S. labour force began in the 1880s, as Sucheng Chan points out that “the Hawaiian sugar boom could not have occurred without the importance of a new group of Asian laborers, the Japanese” (25; 35). While the importation of Japanese labour was “much more organized” than it had been for Chinese migrants, when the 1900 Organic Law made Hawaii a formal U.S. territory, the entry of contract labourers became illegal and all previously made contracts became null and void (35-37). Labour recruiters from the mainland then arrived in Hawaii to lure Japanese workers away with the prospect of higher wages, as “[r]ailroad companies, lumber mills, and farmers in the Pacific Northwest and in California all desired Japanese labour” (37). As a result, 34,000 Japanese migrants left the islands for Pacific Coast ports between 1902 and 1906. Due to this mass exodus of workers, plantation workers convinced the territorial government to pass a law requiring the recruiters to pay a \$500 fine in 1905, and President Theodore Roosevelt signed an executive order two years later banning Japanese peoples with passports for Hawaii, Mexico, and Canada from remigrating to the continental U.S.¹⁹

The experiences of early Korean, Indian, and Filipino migrants were similar to those of the Japanese, although there were far fewer migrants in comparison, further limiting their social

¹⁹ The flow of Japanese migrants in the U.S. was thus redirected; whereas before 1908, only 55,000 Japanese had come to the mainland, in comparison to more than 150,000 in Hawaii, between 1908 and 1924, more than 120,000 arrived on the Pacific Coast and only 48,000 entered the islands (37-38). This shift also relates to the socio-economic opportunities offered in the farms along the Pacific Coast to climb up the “so-called agricultural ladder” for Japanese, Korean, Indian, and Filipino immigrants by saving enough money to “lease land as tenant farmers and eventually buy land as farmer-owner-operators,” despite harsher living conditions than plantation life. Chan points out that the Japanese “in particular, had a penchant to use this channel of advancement” (37). As a result, 8,000 Japanese Americans had become tenant farmers by 1917 (38).

mobility. Chan notes that by the 1920s, Filipinos had become the largest ethnic group in the plantation labour force and the largest group of Asian farm labourers in the Pacific Coast, although they did not manage to climb the agricultural ladder partly due to the passing of various alien land laws by the time of their mass arrival (37-39). Mass Korean migration to the U.S. began with the arrival of 101 Korean labourers in Honolulu in 1902 (LTI Korea 30). This flow continued until 1905 when Japan's colonial government banned Korean migration to the U.S. to curtail the internationalization of the Korean independence movement and to maintain the competitiveness of the Japanese American labour force. Approximately 7,226 Koreans are recorded to have resided in Hawaii during this time (30). As many Koreans left the islands after the disappointment and hardship experienced at the plantation, by 1907, approximately one-thousand Koreans had remigrated to work in the copper mines of Utah, the coal mines of Colorado and Wyoming, the railroads of Arizona, and the salmon fisheries in Alaska (Takaki 270). The majority settled in California, although the mainland community remained relatively small and scattered, numbering only 1,677 in 1920 (270). Moreover, from 1905 to 1924, when U.S. immigration laws banned Korean immigration, roughly 11,000 picture brides and fewer than 1,000 political exiles who entered through China or Europe also landed in the U.S. (E. Kim 151). Takaki notes that like other Asian migrants, Korean Americans were seen as "strangers from a different shore" and faced ethnic antagonism, racism, and exploitation, especially as the Alien Land Act of 1913 denied their naturalized citizenship and thus prohibited Koreans from owning land and limited leases in California (271-272).

Until the Immigration Act of 1965, citizenship and immigration laws were used to contain the population growth of Asian Americans and to maintain their gendered conditions of exploitation. The bar to U.S. citizenship for Asian men remained until the repeal acts of 1943-

1952 (Lowe 11). For Asian women, the legal barriers to citizenship were significantly higher as Lowe observes,

The 1943 enfranchisement of the Chinese American to citizenship, for example, constituted the Chinese immigrant subject as male; in the 1946 modification of the Magnuson Act, the Chinese wives of U.S. citizens were exempted from the permitted annual quota; as the law changed to reclassify “Chinese immigrants” as eligible for naturalization and citizenship, female immigrants were not included in this reclassification but were in effect specified only in relation to the changed status of “the Chinese immigrant,” who was legally presumed to be male (11).

As early as 1875, The Page Act, passed by U.S. Congress prohibited the entry of “Chinese, Japanese, and Mongolian contract laborers, women for the purpose of prostitution, and felons” (Chan 54). This law in practice reduced the number of Chinese women entering the U.S., preventing the formation of families and subsequent generations for Chinese immigrants (54; Lowe 11). Then, in 1882, with the enactment of the Chinese Exclusion Law, the U.S. federal government suspended the entry of Chinese labourers for ten years, except for “merchants, students and teachers, diplomats, and travelers from its provisions” (Chan 54). Chinese exclusion policies were furthermore extended in 1892, again in 1902, then became indefinite in 1904. Japanese migration to the U.S. was similarly restricted by immigration policies of 1907 and 1920, when the U.S. denied passports to Japanese labourers and picture brides, respectively. In 1924, the overarching ban on the entry of “aliens ineligible to citizenship” to the U.S. was enacted by the Immigration Act (55).

The decades since the 1960s then saw the abolition of Asian quotas for immigration in 1965, Asian Americans’ growing participation in concerted efforts by African Americans, Native

Americans, and Chicano-Latinos to demand racial equality and social justice, and radical rise in Asian American population (Lowe 21-22). Goellnicht describes that

The significant post-World War II immigration of Asian women to the United States and Canada resulted by the mid-1960s in a sizeable population of college-age, North American-born, native-English-speaking children, many of whom entered universities and colleges just when radical protests were rampant on campuses (4).

Overall, the coalition of racialized communities during this time sought to combat institutionalized racial segregation and disenfranchisement through multiple action-oriented strategies including grassroots mobilization and the development of “resistance cultures” (Goellnicht 23). For instance, the galvanizing events of the 1968 student strikes at San Francisco State College and the University of California at Berkeley, represented by groups such as the Asian American Political Alliance, shaped the foundations of a strong pan-Asian ethnic movement (Goellnicht 4). The Civil Rights movement also emerged as the center of organization for the cross-race mobilization of Asians, Blacks, Native Americans, and Chicanos, while simultaneously allying with the global political shifts in third world liberation (Lowe 23). Goellnicht famously contends that without the examples of and alliances with the Civil Rights movement and Black Power, the Asian American Movement would not have come into being. Additionally, the population of Asian Americans swelled remarkably following the 1965 act, as new waves of Asian immigrants arrived in masses to the U.S (4). The so-called “second wave” of Asian American migrants post-1965 increased the Asian American population from one million (less than one percent of the U.S. population) in 1965 to five million (two percent) in 1985 (Takaki 420). This second wave also reconstituted the make-up of the Asian American population, increasing its diversity: whereas in 1960, fifty-two percent of Asian Americans were

Japanese, twenty-seven percent Chinese, twenty-percent Filipino, one percent Korean, and one percent Indian, by 1985, twenty-one percent of Asian Americans were Chinese, twenty-one percent Filipino, fifteen-percent Japanese, twelve-percent Vietnamese, eleven-percent Korean, ten-percent Indian, four-percent Laotian, three-percent Cambodian, and three-percent “Other” (420).

Since 1965, the Korean American population also saw a significant rise. Totalling less than 100,000 in 1970, it reached more than 800,000 by the turn of the millennium (Min 187).²⁰ These numbers remarkably contrast the Korean migration flows to the U.S. in the decades prior to 1965: between 1951 and 1964, approximately 6,300 orphans and 6,500 wives of U.S. servicemen entered the U.S., and more Koreans left the North American country than entered it between 1924 and 1950 (E. Kim 151). The earlier part of the second wave of Korean American immigrants bears some resemblances to their Korean Canadian counterparts in that while Korean American immigrants are characterized by high-educational and pre-immigration occupational levels, their post-immigration experiences in the U.S. are marked by underemployment, transition to blue-collar jobs, and self-employment due to their lack of fluency in English other factors (Min, 2014, 190,194). Two studies by Illsoo Kim and Pyong-gap Min of Korean immigrants in New York and Atlanta, respectively, in the early 1980s suggest that the vast majority of survey participants (over 80 or 90 percent) were engaged in white-collar and professional occupations at the time of their departure from Korea (I. Kim 41; Min, 1984, 346). At the same time, the 1980 U.S. census shows that only 47 percent of Korean adult immigrants are in white-collar occupational categories, suggesting that a significant number of white-collar

²⁰ In further comparison, the U.S. Census Bureau data estimated that there were nearly two-million people of Korean descent residing in the U.S. in 2019 (Budiman). The largest number of Koreans live in the state of California and cities of New York and Los Angeles, although thousands of Korean Americans are reported to exist in other regions such as Houston, Dallas, and Atlanta (LTI Korea 26).

immigrants may have turned to blue-collar occupations (Min, 2014, 194). The census report also shows that 12.2 percent of recent Korean immigrants (arrived between 1970 and 1980) are self-employed—compared to 6.8 percent of native-born American workers—which places the Korean group on top in terms of the highest self-employment rate among seventeen recent immigrant groups appearing in the 1980 census. Common business ventures pursued by Korean immigrants in the U.S. have included labour-intensive trade and services such as grocery/liquor stores, groceries, dry cleaners, fast-food restaurants, as well as wholesale and retail trade businesses (194).²¹

Factors including the rise of Korean immigrant businesses and the degradation of Korean Americans' socio-economic class post migration, as well as the racialization of Asian Americans in between White/Black racial dichotomies in the U.S., set the grounds for the 1992 Los Angeles riot between Black and Korean communities. Conflicts between Korean immigrant merchants and the Black communities within which they own and operate their businesses had become common in many major U.S. cities such as Los Angeles, New York, Philadelphia, and Chicago since the late 1970s (C. Kim 124; see Pyong Gap Min, *Caught in the Middle: Korean Communities in New York and Los Angeles*). Although Korean immigrants in L.A. had maintained better relations with the Black community compared to those in 1980s New York, tensions spread when a fourteen-year-old Black girl was shot to death in a Korean-owned grocery store in the spring of 1991 while struggling over an unpaid bottle of orange juice with the female owner (Min 218). On April 29, 1992, following the acquittal of four White police

²¹ While some suggestive similarities exist between the demographics and experiences of post-1965 Korean immigrants in Canada and the U.S., due to a revision of the U.S. immigration act in 1976, following an economic recession leading to a drastic reduction of occupational immigrants, the vast majority of Korean immigrants admitted to the U.S. since the late-1970s have arrived “not by virtue of their skills required in the American job market but by virtue of their relationships to those already [in the U.S.]” as naturalized citizens, through family sponsorships (Min, 2014, 190).

officers charged in the brutal beating of Rodney King, a Black motorist, Korean American storeowners in L.A. became the target of mob violence for three days, during widespread civil unrest in the predominantly minority neighbourhoods of the city centre²² (R. Kim 2001).

The violence not only included physical attacks on the merchants in contained district neighbourhoods but the “mass media’s discourse of Koreans as violent, greedy foreigners,” encouraging further violence to the larger Korean American community (R. Kim 2001; see Clough; E. Kim, 1993; M.H. Song, 2003). As Rose Kim claims, Korean Americans “first entered the consciousness of much of the nation” on April 29, 1992, through mass media portrayals of gun-wielding Korean merchants, fending off mostly Black and Latino inner-city residents attacking their stores; the *Los Angeles Times* showed a “photograph of four young Korean American men lying shot on the sidewalk, including eighteen-year-old Edward Lee who eventually died” (2006). Claire Kim, in her theory of racial triangulation (explored further in the next section), points out how the mass media consistently interpret Black-Korean conflict as a morality play— “the bad minority’s persecution of the good minority”—thereby deflecting the attention away from the overarching influence of White power in order to “depoliticize the conflict and delegitimize Black grievances about discrimination and racial inequality.” On the other hand, as revealed by the history of racism, exclusion, and marginalization of people of colour in the U.S. prior to the 1990s, White power shapes the backdrop of conflicts by placing Korean immigrants and Black Americans in their respective places amidst the strata of the urban political economy through practices including “language and accent discrimination, redlining, residential segregation, and racial violence” (C.J. Kim 124).

²² Casualties and injuries from the violence amounted to fifty-three deaths and 2,300 people injured, while around 10,000 people were arrested. While the total damages were estimated to near a billion dollars in value, more than a thousand buildings were burned, thousands of jobs were lost, and approximately 2,300 Korean-owned stores in Koreatown and South Central neighbourhoods were looted and/or burned (Min 90).

Korean American experiences and representation are therefore more enmeshed with the U.S.' formative years of struggle, including the labour-dependent construction of its economy and upheavals demanding racial equality and social justice, than those of Korean Canadians who largely arrived later, following the construction of the multicultural mosaic. Moreover, because of the longer US history of migration, coupled with the fact that the Korean American population is nearly eight times bigger than the Korean Canadian population to date, the scale of Korean American studies (that began in the early 1970s) is much more comprehensive compared to Korean Canadian studies (with over 110 books and nearly five-hundred journal articles and book chapters focussing on Korean American experiences published before 2010).²³ Yet recent fictional representations of Koreans in the U.S., across multiple textual forms have garnered little critical attention. How do new televisual representations by Korean American creators such as *ALAG* and *Dr. Ken* understand diasporic-Korean identity in relation to past and present racial hierarchies, relationships between racial/ethnic communities, and anti-Asian stereotypes in the U.S.? Do they define their identities similarly or differently compared to the comical depictions of diasporic Koreans in Canada in terms of their sense of belonging or degrees of "Korean-ness"? These productive questions will be addressed in the third chapter of this dissertation.

Contemporary identity formations of diasporic Koreans in the U.S. are in constant relations with Korean popular culture, whose globalized products inevitably enter the U.S. Jun-Sung Park observes that in the U.S., Asian, African, or Latin American ethnic spaces are no longer enclosed and isolated from the larger society as they once were due to the effects of contemporary media capitalism, and thus urban ethnic spaces and transnational migrant

²³ Min notes in his foreword to *Korean Immigrants in Canada* that no social science book focussing on Korean Canadian studies existed in 2012 and that only five or six dozen journal articles had been published (xi).

populations are becoming important points for cultural globalization in the U.S. (122). As various Korean television channels are established in major U.S. cities such as L.A, New York, and Chicago, mostly playing imported content from South Korea for hours every day, and as the Internet provides the fastest way to obtain the latest media content from both sides of the Pacific, there is a minimal time lag in the transmission of information between South Korea and Korean American communities (J.S. Park 122). Park discusses how “the growing availability of cultural information from Korea has increased young Korean Americans’ exposure to and consumption of Korean popular culture over the years,” although their consumption depends on factors such as their generation, living arrangement, self-identity, Korean proficiency, and socio-cultural groups (123). Additionally, scholars have noticed how the consumption of “homeland” popular culture reconnects Asian American youth to their “homelands” through images mediated by “electronic capitalism,” thereby potentially providing a foundation on which they can construct “a new kind of transnational community based on shared imagination and consumption” (121; see Appadurai; Anderson; J.S. Park, 2004). I suggest that this construction of a new transnational community stems at least partially from the birth of new transnational identities shaped by the growing effects of electronic capitalism. For example, the novel by Frances Cha included in the second chapter shows how the concerns and imagination of Korean American authors today extend beyond their “Korean-American-ness” to contemporary issues of women living in South Korea. Believing that such new trends in the representations of diasporic Koreans in the U.S. will continue to evolve, I argue that their examination through a transnational historical lens is crucial to grasp the significance of continually transforming diasporic-Korean identities.

V. Exploring Anti-Asian Racism, Racialization, and Stereotypes in Canada and the U.S.

From their identification as “Orientals” and “Asiatics” to “aliens ineligible to citizenship,” the racialized subjectivity of Asians in Canada and the U.S. is inseparably tied to the exclusion of people of colour in the history of the two nations’ formation, traditionally bipolar constructions of race relations as Black and White, and the hegemony of colonialist societies upholding White supremacy. Prominent and prevailing stereotypes of the “yellow peril,” “perpetual foreigner” and “model minority,” spanning centuries and decades, stem from exclusionist immigration and citizenship policies that have characterized Asian North Americans as an “inferior race,” perpetual and machine-like labourers, unassimilable and undesirable, and yet more desirable than other racial groups due to their proletarian productivity. Whereas the concept of the yellow peril was most explicitly dominant in the first half of the twentieth century, the stereotype of the model minority is said to have originated in the 1960s (Kawai 111) Claire Jean Kim explicates the dialectic of the yellow peril and the model minority through a theory of racial triangulation. She argues that “Asian Americans have been racially triangulated vis-à-vis Blacks and Whites” through two linked processes of “relative valorization”²⁴ and “civic ostracism”:

Racial triangulation reconciled the urgent need for labor with the imperative of continuing White dominance. By positioning Asian immigrants as superior to Blacks yet permanently foreign and unassimilable with Whites, racial triangulation processes fashioned a labor force that would fulfill a temporary economic purpose without making any enduring claims upon the polity (109).

²⁴ “Relative valorization” refers to a process whereby a dominant group (Whites) valorizes the subordinate group (Asian Americans) relative to another subordinate group (Blacks) on cultural and/or racial grounds for the purpose of dominating both groups but especially the latter. “Civic ostracism,” on the other hand, refers to when a dominant group (Whites) constructs the subordinate group (Asian Americans) as “immutably foreign and unassailable with Whites on cultural and/or racial grounds” to ostracize them “from the body politic and civic membership” (Kim 107).

As such, stereotypes of Asians have been constructed on a spectrum of “otherness,” as a threat on one hand, and an acceptable risk on the other, because of their productivity and assimilability as “almost-but-off-Whites.” Lowe furthermore links the yellow peril and model minority stereotypes to the anxieties of the nation, particularly in the U.S., and locates them in the state’s classification of racialized Asian immigrant identities through legal exclusions and inclusions, perpetually locking their identity in a limbo between “legal” and “illegal” and “citizen” and “noncitizen” (19). Claiming that the Asian immigrant figure has served as a kind of phantasmic site “on which the nation projects a series of condensed, complicated anxieties regarding external and internal threats to the mutable coherence of a national body,” Lowe lists the defining characterizations of Asian immigrants: “the invading multitude, the lascivious seductress, the servile yet treacherous domestic, the automation whose inhuman efficiency will supersede American ingenuity” (18).

The term “yellow peril” arose in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries from the West’s fear of “the yellow race” as a menace that had the potential to threaten the domination of the White race due to East Asia’s large population, the rise of Japan’s imperial power, and the possible growth of China’s military and economic power (Kawai 112; see Okihiro; Thompson; Wu). Many trace the first use of the term to its popularization by the German Kaiser, Wilhelm II in the late-nineteenth century (Kawai 112). The yellow peril referred to the cultural, economic, political, and military threats of the yellow race, as a part of a larger group of non-White people that challenge the supremacy of the White race (112). Pon et al. note how popular culture, political, and social discourses considered Chinese people in Canada as threats of displacement for White European immigrants and thereby constructed Chinese men as “threatening, conniving, inscrutable, effeminate, filthy, opium smoking, sexual predators who coveted white

women” (6; see Pon). Asian women, in turn, were considered dangerous to White societies due to their “fecundity and lasciviousness” as White Euro-Canadians feared that Asian women would produce too many non-White or mixed-race children (Pon et al. 6). During the same period in the U.S., Asians were cast “as frauds who pretend to American identity by performing, with an intent to deceive, the rights and responsibilities of citizenship”; imposters and enemy spies “who simulate the appearance of loyal citizens while covertly harboring foreign loyalties” (Tang 4-5; see T. Chen). As previously noted, notions of a threatening and undesirably foreign yellow race underpinned decades of exclusionist migration, property-ownership, and citizenship policies by the state as well as the incarceration and dislocation of Asian migrants in North America.

The model minority stereotype mainly emerges from two mainstream media articles published in 1966: “Success Story, Japanese-American Style” appearing in the *New York Times Magazine* on January 9, 1966, and the “Success Story of One Minority in U.S.,” focussing on Chinese Americans, featured in the *U.S. News and World Report* (Kawai 113). The two articles respectively celebrate Japanese and Chinese Americans as model minority groups, who value and maintain family solidarity, respect education, and are self-sufficient and law-abiding (113). Nevertheless, Kim stresses that the model minority myth does not claim that Asian Americans have culturally assimilated into White society: “instead, it posits their material success and attributes this to their ongoing cultural distinctiveness,” indicating that “Asian Americans are too busy getting ahead and making money to worry about politics” (118). In this way, Kim demonstrates how the relative valorization of Asians as better than Blacks “is inextricably linked to civic ostracism” (118). Both Kawai and Kim also point out the model minority stereotype’s perpetuation of a “colorblind talk” by emphasizing that Asian Americans are succeeding through their efforts at self-sufficiency despite their racial background (Kawai 113; Kim 119). Kim

explains in *Bitter Fruit: The Politics of Black-Korean Conflict in New York City* (2000) that the colourblind ideology increases racial power “not through the direct articulation of racial differences but rather by obscuring the operation of racial power, protecting it from challenge, and permitting ongoing racialization via racially coded methods” (17). Critical race theorists such as Guinier and Torres have further suggested that colourblindness blames the consequences of inequality on individual under-performance without the acknowledgement of institutional racism by abstracting individuals from their social and historical contexts (38).

The yellow peril and model minority stereotypes resurfaced in the 1970s and 80s in both the Canada and the U.S. through contexts of education, trade, and mainstream media. In Canada, CTV, a prime-time broadcaster, aired a program titled “Campus Giveaway” on September 30, 1979, in which the narrator alleged that 100,000 foreign students were taking the spots of White Canadian students in professional programs, while the camera panned the faces of Chinese students, “portraying them as foreigners, aliens, and transient sojourners” (Pon et al. 10; see Chan; Fernando; Lai; Nipp). This program motivated thousands of student protesters to march in cities such as Toronto and gave rise to unprecedented anti-racism activism in the Chinese Canadian community (Pon et al. 11). The blunt portrayal of Chinese students as foreigners and threats to the academic success of White Canadian students while affirming the stereotype of Asian Canadians as studious and hard-working reveals the persisting rhetoric of the yellow peril and model minority still propagating in Canada in 1979. In 1971, *Newsweek* published an article arguing that Japanese Americans had outshone not only minority groups but “‘outwhited’ the whites” on “nearly all levels of conventional success” (“Success Story: Outwhiting”). In 1985 and 1986, *Time* and *Fortune* respectively published articles suggesting that Asian American household incomes exceeded “not only that of American families in general. . . but also the level

reported by whites” and that “America’s Super Minority” children “outscore white” in academic, cognitive, and intelligence tests, scoring more As and failing less than White children (Kawai 116; see Doerner; Ramirez). Moreover, Kawai notes that the yellow peril stereotype returned to portray Asian Americans as “unfair” economic competitors (116) during the 1980s and early 1990s, when the “economic ‘success’ of Japan and so called Asian ‘tigers’—Hong Kong, Singapore, South Korea, and Taiwan—” led to deteriorating trade relationships between the U.S. and Asia. Thus, the return of the yellow peril and model minority myths in these contexts showcases how such stereotypes are persisting and pervasive, resurrecting in different times of national anxieties.

Since the 1980s, these prevailing stereotypes have also frequently appeared on television in North America, especially in comedies. The confluence of the yellow peril and model minority stereotypes is visible in the “plethora of comic Asian nerds and foreign-exchange students in 1980s US comedy,” as most famously exemplified by the character Long Duk Dong in John Hughes’ teen comedy *Sixteen Candles* (1984), a strange and geeky foreign-exchange student whose “foreignness and sexual ineptitude provide much of the film’s broad comedy” (Hong, “Comedy, Humour, and Asian American Representation,” np). In the twenty-first century, despite the seeming rise of comic Asian North American representation in an era of neoliberal multiculturalism and the commodification of diversity, much remains the same. As Hong notices, William Hung’s 2004 audition on *American Idol*, performing an awkward rendition of Ricky Martin’s pop song “She Bangs” was “subsequently portrayed as a foreign, talentless buffoon and mocked by the show’s judges and in the media, becoming a viral sensation and national laughingstock.” Hong highlights the striking resemblances of William Hung to *Sixteen Candles*’ Long Duk Dong in terms of both figures’ embodiments of “nerdy, foreign,

ineffectual Asian men.” Numerous other examples, such as the character Leslie Chow in *The Hangover* trilogy (2009, 2011, 2013), Han Lee in *2 Broke Girls* (2011-2017), Ben Chang in *Community* (2015-2017), and Dong Nguyen in *Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt* (2015-2019) reveal how “humour at the expense of Asians is still seen as fair game” in contemporary mainstream comedy and humour (Hong).

In Canada, according to parts of the 2004 Task Force for Cultural Diversity on Television report, common stereotypes regarding people of East and Southeast Asian background seen on television include:

Gang members, martial artists, convenience store owners or restaurant workers; extremely intelligent and industrious, excelling in technology or mathematics; yelling or speaking with a thick accent; and Gender-specific stereotypes, such as dainty, elegant, sexualized women and men who are martial arts teachers or wise, old sages (24).

Such stereotypes identified by the study’s focus group participants in 2003 do not stray far from the characteristics of the yellow peril and model minority stereotypes. Furthermore, the identification of Asian characters as “martial artists, convenience store owners or restaurant workers” raise intersectional issues of class. In “‘Asian Fail’ Chinese Canadian Men Talk About Race, Masculinity, and the Nerd Stereotype” (2014), Huynh and Woo further observe how the framing of Asian men as “socially and sexually impotent,” aligned closely with stereotypes of the so-called nerds and geeks, impact Asian Canadian men’s experiences and their internalized sense of self and their “Asian-ness” (364; 368-371).

Several questions that August and Kim pose in their investigation of “Bad Koreans” are pertinent to examining the characters of *Kim’s*, *Dr. Ken*, and *ALAG* in the third chapter. For instance, the authors ask, “who precisely, can embrace the figure of the ‘Bad Korean,’ and who

does this ‘new’ televisual ethnicity serve?” (336). Confronting Eve Oishi’s claim in her own study of “Bad Asians” that the avant-garde Asian American movement must continually remake itself amidst changing cultural status, August and Kim ask, “[But] must they undergo perpetual transformation?” (Oishi 222; August and Kim 348). The transformation of the “Asian” figure in North America, responding to the shifts in racial stereotypes and the efforts by Asian North American artists and producers to break free from traditional depictions, makes the task of analyzing Asian North American representations additionally challenging. This is especially true in comedy: how can one poke fun at a subjectivity that is willingly and unwillingly shifting itself to fit the mold of popular expectations while struggling for representational space in a White-centred arena? How does this challenge of analysis and authenticity pair with the rising demand for authentic or caricatured “Asian” or “Korean” representation in popular culture? Responding to such complexities, how have Korean Canadian and Korean American creators of recent visual comedies shaped the representation of their own ethnic communities/identities? These questions, remaining as mutual tasks for both the agents and objects of laughter, will be explored further.

VI. (South) Korea: Colonialism, Modernization, and the Korean War, 1900-1945

Since the late-twentieth century, many social scientists have described South Korea as an “Asian tiger,” an example of “success” in third-world development an “economic miracle” (Seth 1; J.Lee 37). South Korean historians often date the beginning of Korean modernity to the birth of the Yi Dynasty, establishing Chosŏn, in 1392 (Seth 2). Michael J. Seth considers the modern era of Korea more narrowly from the 1860s, when Korea was catapulted into the world of late-nineteenth century imperialism with the crumbling Sino-centric political order in East Asia. This period includes the fall of Chosŏn and the Yi dynasty with Japan’s annexation of Korea in 1910, the colonial period from 1910 to 1945, Korea’s division in 1945, and the respective

developments of North Korea and South Korea since 1945 (2). I focus my survey of Korea's modern history more narrowly from the twentieth century onwards for the purpose of contextualizing Korean migration to North America and the continuing influences of the "homeland" on its diasporic identities. As the modern history of Korea still encompasses a range of political conflicts shaped by a complicated mix of domestic and external influences—including but not limited to the stages of colonization and industrialization—to critical post-liberation periods such as the Korean War and the Park Chung Hee era, my aim here is to provide a high-level overview of the key events that characterize the Korean diaspora, while elucidating their potential effects on diasporic-Korean identity.

As previously noted, the first Korean group migration to the U.S. was in 1902, when approximately a hundred labourers landed in Honolulu. This migration continued until 1905, when Japan annexed the Korean peninsula through a series of treaties between 1904 and 1905, eventually stripping Chosŏn of all its sovereignty (Buzo 40). As early as the Treaty of Kanhwa in 1876, commonly regarded as a symbolic event in the modernization of Korea, Japan began a process of sustained involvement in Chosŏn to pre-emptively enlarge its influence on the peninsula while excluding other foreign interests (18; 24). Adrian Buzo in *The Making of Modern Korea* (2016) claims that the "benevolent disinterest" of Western imperialist powers such as Britain, France, Germany, and the U.S. contributed to the misfortune of Chosŏn by leaving its fate dependent on the outcome of the Sino-Japanese and Russo-Japanese rivalries (23-24). Western imperialist powers had little interest in Chosŏn as it presented minor advantages strategically or commercially due to its small market size and lack of vibrant commercial life: "they saw Choson not in terms of opportunity, but in terms of its capacity to disrupt their broader interests, most obviously by becoming a source of conflict between China and Japan" (18). Thus,

in February 1904, Japan was able to occupy the Korean peninsula while simultaneously launching a successful surprise attack on the Russian fleet at Port Arthur on the Liadong Peninsula. Following Russia's naval defeat in the Battle of Tsushima in May 1905, the Treaty of Portsmouth, negotiated by Japan and Russia and mediated by the U.S., was signed in September, leaving Japan in charge of the Korean peninsula (39).

The modernization of Chosŏn's economy and culture had already begun by the turn of the twentieth century, at times despite its own interests. The Treaty of Kanghwa forced Chosŏn to engage in foreign trade and to allow foreigners to live on its land, while Japanese merchants received full consular protection (25). The Korean Customs Service, established in 1883, facilitated the growth of a substantial agricultural and livestock trade that became an efficient revenue generator. The inception of commercial economic infrastructure included the opening of the Hanseong Bank (est. 1897), the first bank backed by private local capital, which soon led to the emergence of other banks (36). Currency reforms were taking place as part of this shift in infrastructure, and in 1898, Chosŏn's first railway linking Seoul and Incheon was built (36-37). By 1905, the construction of a countrywide rail network connected Seoul to Pusan (the southern tip of the peninsula). In Seoul, an extended electric trolley car line opened in May 1899 linking the city centre to Hongnung (near the Anam Campus of Korea University today) and Yongsan (37). Scholars like Andre Schmid argue that national consciousness was born in the late-Chosŏn era, with the active promotion of the Korean phonetic alphabet as a national script (kungmun) after 1895, as a resistant response to the "new knowledge" intrusion of militaristic and imperialist powers (65-66). Nevertheless, Seth acknowledges that "Koreans, because of their ethnic-linguistic homogeneity, their geographic isolation and their country's long political unity, appeared to have a sense of identity as a folk or culture that went beyond dynastic loyalty" (4).

Despite these steady internal developments, the 1910 Treaty of Annexation extinguished the last vestiges of Chosŏn's sovereignty and began the formal colonial period of Korea.

Between 1895 and 1910, Japanese immigration to Korea rose from 10,000 to over 170,000 (Buzo 40). Scholars have argued that Koreans' experience of colonialism was unusual and deeply traumatic. As Seth explains,

It differed in that Koreans were colonized by a neighboring people with whom they shared many cultural traditions. Japan's attempt at coerced assimilation gave it a unique character, as did the intense nature of its occupation with several hundred thousand soldiers, police and officials from the metropolitan state penetrating deep into Korean society. And Korea underwent a greater degree of industrialization than was the usual case for colonies (4-5).

Bruce Cummings and Mark Caprio also argue that the Japanese used their similarities with Koreans as primary rationale for their "integration" (Caprio 7; see Cummings). As Caprio elucidates, this "integration" not only involved the cultural assimilation of Koreans but also the dismantling of "the walls that separated colonized from the colonizers" (17-18). Japan's vision of its assimilation policies for Korea was a gradual process. Although some thought that it would take decades, possibly as long as a century, for Koreans to "shed their traditional culture and to absorb Japanese culture," Japan's assimilation policies developed over its thirty-six-year occupation of the peninsula (Caprio 17). The Japanese government utilized the media to instruct Koreans on their new status as subjects of Japan but with the breakout of war, the Government-General was forced to accelerate this process of assimilation (17). There were roughly three positions adopted by the Korean population in relation to Japanese attempts to eradicate their culture.

pro-Japanese (*shin-Nichiha*) Koreans, who trusted the Japanese pledge to make them “real Japanese” (*honto no Nihonjin*); anti-Japanese (*hai-Nichiha*) Koreans, who believed that Korea’s salvation could be realized only by seeking independence through ethnic self-determination (*minzoku jiketsu*); and Koreans who waffled in a grey zone (*haiiro sonzai*) between these extreme views” (Caprio 4).

While the Japanese government heavily funded the industrialization efforts in Korea, these investments were geared toward the expansion of the colonial empire. Japanese investments in heavy industry in Korea (steel, chemical, and hydro-electric power) required the concurrent construction of an extensive railway network in the colony (Cummings 487). As a result, by 1945, Korea’s rail system was the most developed in Asia outside of Japan, carrying nearly fifty percent as much traffic as in all of China in the early 1940s (487). Japan’s expenditure levels for infrastructure in Korea was extraordinarily high—“sixty to eighty percent of state capital formation in Korea compared to about fifty percent on the average in Taiwan” (488). The colonial state also provided Japanese entrepreneurs with facilities beyond railroads such as “stable currency, credit and banking facilities, uniform weights and measures, and perhaps above all the rule of law. . . [that] provided a basis for commercial and industrial activity that enabled a stable and predictable investment environment” (488). Nevertheless, despite the industrial expansion and economic development of Japan’s colonial empire, as Cummings acknowledges, “the infrastructure in 1945 bore little relationship to Korean society” as Korean groups and classes were largely excluded from the modernizing activities of the 1930s and early 1940s, “except as laborers or low-level technicians and bureaucrats” (507).

Twentieth-century colonialism in Korea led not only to rapid industrialization, but also the international migration of refugees, political exiles, and war victims, and the gendered

violence of the systemic, military prostitution of Korean women during the Asia-Pacific Wars. The colonial era led to the displacement of Korean people since political refugees and activists escaped to China, Russia, and the United States to lead the independence movement against colonial rule between 1910 and 1945; large flows of students, orphans, and women also immigrated to the U.S. or Canada during the post-war era from 1945 to 1962 (I.J. Yoon 39-40). The Japanese empire's conscription of "Comfort Women" during the Asia-Pacific wars involved withdrawing women and girls from the Korean peninsula and other colonies in Asia for military prostitution (J.K. Lee 68). In her work on female sexual proletarianization, Kathleen Barry posits that the "militarization of sex" arrived in the aftermath of the Korean War during the 1950s, when "female orphans, widows, and other impoverished women catered to occupying American soldiers" (J.K. Lee 68-80; see Barry). In the 1960s and 70s, a sector of rural female migrants "came to fill the demand for military prostitution for U.S. troops who continued to be stationed in South Korea," illustrating Barry's argument that the "industrialization of sex" often accompanies the economic development of the Third World (80).

These contexts of colonialism, rapid industrialization, gendered violence, and the sexualization of women inform the memories of intergenerational trauma, forms of nationalism, and the gendered understanding of identity permeating the communities and narratives of the Korean diaspora in North America. The study of diasporic-Korean narratives must therefore situate the representations of diasporic-Korean identities within socio-political contexts on both continents, in the past as well as the present. For example, scholars like Carter Eckert, Dennis McNamara, Chong-soon Kim, and Soon-won Park have shown how a small Korean entrepreneurial class of land and business-owning elites prospered under Japanese rule, and largely maintained its colonial business and labour practices in the post-liberation period (Seth

5). Furthermore, as the systems and culture of military prostitution during the colonial period blend into the sex work industry during the U.S. military occupation in South Korea, these postcolonial contexts of camp town prostitution and transnational sex tourism underlie the Western, sexualized stereotypes against Asian women as well as the presence of Korean women entering North America as the wives of American soldiers and biracial children as migrants (see J.K. Lee, *Service Economies*). These shared influences of sex work, gendered stereotypes against women of colour, and postcolonial patriarchal societies in Canada, the U.S., and South Korea will be explored further in the second chapter.

Another set of historical events characterizing diasporic-Korean identities includes the division of Korea in 1945 and the Korean War that led to the creation of two separate Korean states divided at the thirty-eighth parallel in 1953.²⁵ While the story of South Korea became one of miraculous economic “success” following the war, this division was yet another traumatic blow to the peninsula and a modern tragedy to many. Moreover, since its formation, North Korea’s presence has haunted the image and understanding of South Korean identity like the spectre of a long-lost, mysterious, and unpredictable twin, particularly on the Western stage. E. J. R. Cho suggests that North Korea’s nation-branding strategy is of particular interest “because, unlike any other nation branding attempts made in the communist or liberalist world, North Korea has never set out to create a ‘favourable’ self-image that would be acceptable to the outside world” (595). Cho describes North Korea’s branding strategy as one that is “threatening” to an international audience through symbolic gestures such as a series of military spectacles and

²⁵ Despite the lack of access to resources, many scholars have recently studied the history of North Korea including the pioneering work of Chong-sik Lee, *History of the Korean Worker’s Party* (1978), Dae-sook Suh’s biography of Kim Il Sung (1988), and Suzy Kim’s *Everyday Life in the North Korean Revolution, 1945-1950* (Seth 7). The division of Korea and the War has further garnered much scholarly attention since the 1960s, and scholars have discussed the division within the geopolitics of the Cold War, the external influences of the Soviet Union and the U.S., and the context of a domestic revolution (6-7).

nuclear tests (595-596). On the other hand, Liv Yoon and Brian Wilson note the Orientalist and xenophobic portrayals of North Korea in western media coverages of the 2012 London Summer Olympic Games. Yoon and Brian examine stories such as the one by *ABC News* titled “North Korea’s key to Olympic medals: Refrigerators for winners, labor camps for losers,” showing traces of the yellow peril and model minority stereotypes, while highlighting North Korea as a poor, grotesque, and violent country (511-512). Observing the recent spectacles of the “theatre state” in North Korea and the West’s limited yet often racist and xenophobic images of North Korea in the contemporary era, an important and less examined question to consider is: *how do these spectacles and images of North Korea shape “Korean” identity for South Koreans?* Although I do not tackle this question fully in this dissertation, a brief discussion takes place in the third chapter regarding subjects of humour related to diasporic-Korean identity in the hopes of sowing the seeds for future research.

The participation of Canadian and U.S. soldiers in the Korean War between 1950 and 1953 moreover affect the intimacies, Orientalist images, and stereotypes regarding Korea/Koreans among Canadians, Americans, and diasporic Koreans. During the war, the U.S. contributed 1,319,000 personnel to the UN Command and suffered 33,629 killed in action, 103,284 wounded, and 5,178 missing or captured, while the casualties further include 20,617 deaths from nonbattle causes (Johnston and Canadian War Museum 372). In comparison, a total of 21,940 Canadian soldiers served in East and Southeast Asia, and the casualties and injuries include 309 killed in action, 1,202 wounded, and 32 captured (372). The Korean War has been regarded as a largely “forgotten war” in the U.S. despite this sizable military involvement. Judith Keene states that many Korean War veterans suffered shame and humiliation upon their return home, due to “interrogations, surveillance and the spectacle of public trials in which returned

POWs were prosecuted as communist collaborators.” reference missing The performance of U.S. soldiers in Korea was further rated as poor by military leaders, as victory was replaced by a stalemate and the behaviour of soldiers in captivity was “interpreted as indicative of the weakness of their military training and the shallowness of their civic commitment as Americans” (1098). Charles Kraus notes the Orientalist discourse regarding Koreans by U.S. military officials during the war. Lieutenant General John R. Hodge, for example, claimed in May 1946 that Koreans were “very backward and unruly”; General Douglas MacArthur’s complained in 1946 that unlike “wealthy U.S. educated Koreans,” Koreans encountered during the war were “poorly trained, and poorly educated Orientals strongly affected by 40 years of Jap control, who stubbornly and fanatically hold to what they like and dislike, who are definitely influenced by propaganda and with whom it is almost impossible to reason” (157). William Cameron and the Canadian War Museum seem to confirm Kraus’ arguments by noting that Canadian soldiers regarded the peninsula as “a land of filth and poverty” (372). Such views of Koreans as poor, unreasonable, and uncivilized, impact the post-war experiences and identities of diasporic Koreans in North America, as depicted in some works of Korean American literature. Jodi Kim states that the “U.S. imperialist Cold War military intervention in Korea racializes Korean immigrants and Korean Americans prior to their arrival (or birth) in the United States and continues to racialize them in the protracted aftermath of the Korean War itself” (1).²⁶

According to such studies, the Korean War appears as a convoluted transnational memory influencing the gaze on Korea/Koreans as well as diasporic Koreans’ self-understanding of their identities. The trauma of the “forgotten” war seemingly impacts the post-war experiences of both

²⁶ In Korean American writer Chang-rae Lee’s novel, *Native Speaker* (1995), Henry describes his internalized thoughts and feelings of the Cold War imperialist and racist inscription, as he says that when he sees his father-in-law, Stew, who is a Korean War veteran, he feels as though the colour of Stew’s body says, “I saved your skinny gook ass, and your momma’s too” (Lee 225).

Canadian and U.S. veterans, whose memories of the once war-torn nation may be distinctly frozen in time, and those of Koreans, who live the daily realities of a divided nation. Moreover, the Orientalist and gendered dialectical dynamic of the “saviour” and “saved” between Western and Korean soldiers plausibly contribute to the racialized stereotypes of Asian men as weak, although relatively little scholarship explores this relationship in comparison to the impact of exclusionist policies against Asian men in Canada and the U.S.

VII. Post-War Contemporary South Korea

The postcolonial “success story” of South Korea emerges from its rapid economic and social modernization and its democratization over the last half-century. By 1986, South Korea’s dramatic transformation “from an underdeveloped economy to a dynamic industrial power in the fast lane” included its attainment of a relatively self-sufficient economy with a trade surplus balance and the end of its military dictatorship (Y. Chung 5). Securing its position as a major economic power on the global stage, South Korea became a member of the G-20 in 2008 (Y. Chung 5). As of 2005, South Korea was the most wired country in the world (with broadband Internet in seventy-two percent of all households), and by 2000, its volume of exports had hit \$172.3 billion (from a nearly nonexistent export market in 1954), placing South Korea as the thirteenth largest exporter in the world (Y. Chung 5;30). The nation’s cultural industries also saw a phenomenal expansion, becoming a new local force in the production and export of transnational popular culture through products such as film and television shows since the late 1990s (Yong 4). As Yong refers to the expansion of South Korea’s cultural exports beyond Asia to North America and Europe since 2008 as the New Korean Wave (or *Hallyu 2.0*), since the proliferation of social media technologies, South Korean cultural products including K-pop music and K-dramas have shown an extraordinary rise as a transnational phenomenon around the

globe (Yong vii). An emblematic moment of this rise was when Psy's "Gangnam Style" entered the popular vocabulary of millions around the world as the first YouTube video to hit one-billion views in 2012 ("PSY's 'Gangnam Style' hits 1 billion views"). In response to the enlarging and shifting characteristics of the Korean Wave(s), scholars have discussed diverse areas of the phenomenon including cultural forms such as television programs, film, popular music, and video games and major fields comprising plastic surgery, Korean food, and fashion (Yong viii). If South Korea's economic development provided the nation with a seat at the table as a major world power in recent decades, *Hallyu*, on the other hand, "has become a symbol for Korea's competent advancement to a more civil and sophisticated country" (G. Kim 520).

Nevertheless, inequities surrounding women and uneven wealth distribution between the classes with the domination of *chaebol* families notably since the 1970s lie in the shadows of the southern peninsula's rapid development. Contemporary women's issues in South Korea were unveiled to the world in the twenty-first century as a spectacle when the spread of the #MeToo movement in Korea inspired a series of street demonstrations and online activism, galvanized by social media platforms.²⁷ Especially since the establishment of the "Citizen's Action to Support the MeToo Movement" by South Korean women activists in March 2018, several street protests were organized involving tens of thousands of women (six protests were held in 2018 alone), raising awareness against sexual discrimination and sexual violence, such as "*Molka*," spy-cam pornography, rape culture among K-pop stars, and direct and indirect cases of femicides (see

²⁷ The #MeToo movement, started by Tarana Burke in Philadelphia, PA, inspired Korean women to speak out about their experiences of sexual harassment and to call for social justice. #MeToo in South Korea began with Suh Ji-Hyeon, a woman prosecutor, who publicly came forward with her experiences of sexual harassment and discrimination on a live news program in January 2018 (Hasunuma and Shin 97-99). Suh's example encouraged many professional women, including university professors and legislators, to share their own experiences of harassment and to "[call] for fundamental changes in the patriarchal culture of South Korea's male-centred organizations and workplaces" (100). As a result of these voices, several powerful men, including politicians, movie directors, actors, teachers, and professors, have been socially and legally accused of sexual harassment or assault.

Hasunuma and Shin). Gooyong Kim furthermore highlights the fraught role of young women in the political economy of K-pop's success by arguing that the continuity of Korea's developmentalism "largely relies on under-paid female workers as a docile, disposable labor force in K-pop's dominant modality of neoliberal, service-oriented market rationality" (520). Kim relates the exploitation of women in the K-pop industry to the mistreatment of women as a means of national economic development during the years of Park Chung-Hee's military dictatorship in post-war Korea:

K-pop idols "voluntarily" become prey of the K-pop industry's rampant profiteering, which capitalizes on their competitive spirits, perseverance, and physical strength in their dream of being financially successful and socially famous in the neoliberal show business, while under Park's developmental-dictatorship, female workers had to endure exploitative, inhumane working conditions to support themselves and their families as a matter of survival on sweatshop factory floors in the '60s and the '70s (G.Y. Kim 520).

The domestic and international popularity of K-pop, marked by its "glossy features" and innovative production value including "seamless choreography, catchy songs, fashionable outfits, and spectacular music videos," mainly owes its success to idol groups, including the contemporary proliferation of female idols.²⁸ While the K-pop idols' roles not only include their performance as singers but as celebrities "who act, endorse, model and advertise," the increasing competition and commodification of female idols have led to the images of women becoming comparably more suggestive (G.Y. Kim 526). Kim describes this state as a double bind for female idols as they are "presented as active subjects while being re-objectified and in turn [they]

²⁸ Kim notes that there were 244 different K-pop idol groups between 2005 and 2013: 130 all-boy, 103 all-girl, and 11 co-ed groups. Within this scope, the number of all-girl idol groups such as SNSD and Wonder Girls, have been noticeably growing with at least ten new groups debuting per year (525).

lead female audiences to believe they too can commend active (sexual) subjectivity,” without affecting any changes to the existing patriarchal gender hierarchy within Korean society (532). What is more, the female idol’s influences on their fans’ life choices and self-promotion strategies even extend as far as the pursuit of plastic surgery. According to *K-Pop Surgery*, an online blog, the K-pop Combo, for example, is a common (or sometimes mandatory) plastic surgery “for double eye-lids and a higher, pointy nose amongst the idols” and “an easy rampant measure for the fans to look cute and amicable, associated with an ideal *aegyo* quality” (G.Y. Kim 532; see “Plastic Surgery Meter: Jessica, Girls Generation”). As explored further in the second chapter of this dissertation regarding women’s narratives, plastic surgery is considered a strikingly common and an instrumental process in improving the socio-economic status of women in South Korea, such as getting a better job or a pay raise. To explain this phenomenon, scholars have considered the origin of plastic surgery in Korea to a Korean prostitute “who wanted to appeal to American soldiers in 1961” as well as to bleak domestic job-market prospects and the propagation of K-pop and beauty industries, particularly in the post-financial crisis economy since the late 1990s (532-533). As the growing trans-nationalization of Korean identity involves the reimagination of self, based on various and fast changing locations and conditions of diaspora, the proliferation of capitalistic and unrealistic beauty standards in South Korea in tandem with its foundations and practices of patriarchal culture cannot be ignored in the examination of the gendered identity of diasporic-Korean women.

Finally, the contemporary economic development of South Korea relies heavily on the emergence and continuing domination of *chaebol* families, shaping a steep class divide between the low- to middle-working class and the wealthy elite of family-owned corporations. Seth explains how the favouritism toward large manufacturing firms during the state organization of

the economy in the 1970s gave rise to “large and increasingly diversified business groups, usually under family-based ownership and management,” known as *chaebol* (168). These *chaebol* groups became a prevailing and distinctive feature of the South Korean economy as they grew in wealth and power over the last several decades. Seth notes that some *chaebols*’ roots stretch as far back as the Japanese colonial period, when small- and medium-sized Korean businesses operated family-controlled businesses in collaboration with the colonial government, while others developed “through the acquisition of confiscated Japanese assets, the gaining of lucrative import trading licenses, and through preferential access to bank loans” in Korea’s post-war years of developmental capitalism (168). In the 1980s and 1990s, the *chaebol* groups met opportunities for further rise to power as President Roh Tae Woo’s distinguishable political efforts included “the close, corrupt nexus between the ruling party, the bureaucracy and other major *chaebol*,” alongside a strict control of the banking and finance system and a repressive attitude toward labour organizations (195). In consequence, by the end of 1980s, South Korea’s accelerating economy was characterized by an over-reliance on *chaebol* performance, particularly in manufacturing industries (199).

As the political and economic power of globally recognized *chaebol* firms such as Hyundai, Samsung, and SK persist, several scholars in recent years have criticized the unequal capital and power distribution and social polarization upheld by South Korea’s economic structures. Hyeng-joon Park and Jamie Doucette problematize contemporary debates regarding the financialization of South Korea in that “they obstruct or neglect important capitalist power relations that shape economic inequality and political power by underestimating the power of Korea’s large family-led conglomerates” (535). Kyung-Pil Kim takes issue with the ways that *chaebols* utilize crisis and crisis management strategies to maintain their hegemony over civil

society while continuing to accumulate capital and compete with other capitalist firms (22-23). Other scholars such as Hyun-Chin Lim and Jin-Ho Jang discuss the significant social outcomes of the post-financial crisis transformation that privilege *chaebols* including the increased presence of transnational capital, an uptick in labour flexibility (such as easier redundancy-layoffs and the legalization of “dispatch labour”), and inequality and poverty (444; 453). Despite the *chaebols*’ potential harmful effects on the economy and society, the luxuriousness of this wealthy class has also been popularly depicted in Korean dramas and films. The category “Chaebol K-Dramas” on the website *My Drama List* holds seventy-six twenty-first century titles (“Chaebol K-Dramas”). Displaying the lavish lifestyle and sovereign-like power of the *chaebol* class creates a similar pattern as the one produced with female idols, whereby working-class desires are shaped in order to encourage over-spending and consumption, which in turn work to maintain existing hierarchies within political and economic power structures. As these conditions of wealth consciousness and social inequalities pair with women’s expectations of beauty, marriage, social mobility, and reputation in novels such as *KLCV* and *IIHYF*, Chapter two will show their manifestation in the lives and experiences of diasporic-Korean women as well as within the imagination of diasporic-Korean authors.

The following chapters will pursue two distinct case studies regarding women’s narratives and the relationship between comedy, humour, and diasporic-Korean representation. The historical and empirical contexts shaping the experiences of Koreans and Asians in North America and the theories of race, racism, and racialization relating to diasporic-Korean experiences have been outlined in this chapter to position my analysis of twenty-first century Korean North American texts appropriately within existing scholarly discourses and to clarify its socio-cultural and historical importance. Comparing Canada and the U.S., reveals the myriad

ways in which the experiences of Koreans in these two countries have been similar and different, while also noting the relative delay of Korean representation in Canada in terms of literature, media, and scholarship. The commonalities of long-standing and perpetuating stereotypes against Asians, for instance, show how the shared anxieties of colonialist and multicultural nations affect diasporic-Koreans' liminal and ambiguous understandings of identity as "belonging" and "unbelonging." The intersections of gender and race in stereotypes against men and women, respectively, reveal how the diasporic-Korean woman's experience may be radically different from a man's, even within similar systems and cultures of discrimination and marginalization. The rise in comedic representations of Asian Americans in relation to the recent visibility of Koreans in Canadian and U.S. popular-culture televisual images underscores the importance of analyzing how diasporic-Korean subjectivities are shifting to uphold or to challenge the persistent, racist stereotypes affecting Asian North American lives for generations. Lastly, the history of the Korean peninsula through its various stages of colonialism, modernization, industrialization, and globalization fills in significant gaps in the understanding of diasporic Korean identities regarding their past and/or intergenerational traumas as well as their contemporary transnationalism. Such a comparative and trans-continental overview of relevant socio-political contexts is crucial to fully comprehend the transformation and hybridity of the Korean diaspora today.

Chapter 2: Through Women's Narratives

There was an article in the Toronto Star that I read recently about Korea being one of the top plastic surgery capitals in the world. It didn't surprise me at all that this tiny peninsula would be awarded such dubious distinction. At night when my mother would reiterate her tale, she would gently pinch at the corners of my eyes proclaiming that it was necessary to do this in order for my eyes to grow to their optimum potential, preceding the surgery I would supposedly have when I got older. When I questioned such absurdity, my mother would say in a cool and nonchalant manner that it wouldn't be right if I kept my eyes the way they were and that, in fact, adding the eyelid crease would bring me a better husband and a more satisfying life.

—Jane G. Kim, “The Funny Looking Dress”

I. Arriving at Korean Women's Narratives: A Trip Down Memory Lane

I giggled quietly when I first read Jane's short story published in *Han Kŭt: Critical Art and Writing by Korean Canadian Women* (2007). My giggle emerged from feelings of empathy, familiarity, and bitterness. My mother had done something like Jane's mother: she had pinched at the corner of my eyes or looked into them with an excited twinkle in her own, claiming I would be “pretty too” if “only” my eyes were bigger. I laughed, and I still do when comments like this would spring up, ever so casually. To me, they are an ordinary part of “small talk” with my mother, aunts, and sometimes, even friends. During my childhood and teenage years, I too wanted double eyelids—more paved and visible creases like the ones non-Asian women and beautiful Korean actresses on screen have—and bigger eyes. How much bigger, I didn't exactly know. I used to purchase cosmetic tape in the shapes of thin half-moons and stick them on my eyelids before going to sleep. They weighed down on my eyes and sometimes, my eyes got droopy and itchy but, in the morning, I would be rewarded with the creases. *And I too would be pretty.*

Fast forward many years, and I was sitting at a pub table in downtown Victoria, BC, with a Korean international student that I used to tutor. While doing my master's study, I needed a source of income to get by, and I had built a lucrative short-term business teaching English to

Korean students on temporary visas, often with the hopes and dreams of becoming a permanent resident in the future. Having been raised mostly near Toronto since the age of ten and with my family still living in Ontario, I felt isolated on the small west coast island in my first few months. This loneliness had motivated me to tutor – I knew that Korean international students tend to prefer Korean, female tutors around their age for a sense of safety and shared cultural knowledge, while I needed a friend and found comfort in surrounding myself with Korean people wherever I went. I knew that in the cash-paying market for tutors, there were many non-Korean, and often White, “teachers” that would scam and overcharge helpless newcomers or in the case of male tutors, sexually prey on their female students. As my own intervention, I genuinely wanted to use my past experiences of learning English as a second language to create more positive settlement experiences for adult Korean newcomers, who like my parents, arrived in Canada with little knowledge of the local language, culture, and people. And so, I often took my students to a casual pub after the lesson and spent some extra, non-billed time chatting with them in English.

While my student and I were sharing a beer, a tall, White man, roughly in his thirties, suddenly approached our table. The first question he asked us was, “Where are you girls from?” When I answered first that I was from Toronto, he paused for a moment, seemingly wondering what to say next, until my student responded that she was from Korea, which brought a beaming smile to his face. “Korea! See, I knew it. *Ahn-nyeong-ha-sae-yo*,” he said triumphantly. The student clapped her hands together and laughed loudly, bringing another shade of satisfaction to the young man’s face. In this moment, his body turned almost fully toward her. He went on to say that he “loved Korean girls” and *Kimchi*. Noticing my student’s broken English, he began to slow down his speech and said somewhere during the conversation, “Your English, very good,”

sticking his right thumb up. I sat there quietly smiling politely and observing the surprise, excitement, and a faint hint of flattery on my student's face and a look of desire on his. I said a few words here and there, and eventually, after nearly twenty-or-so minutes, said that I needed to be home. A few minutes before that, the man had remarked, "I find that Korean girls are so nice and beautiful. . . like you girls." His words triggered a flattered giggle from my student and a twisting knot in my stomach. The student did not want to leave with me, despite my hopes, and so, I left the pub alone that night, feeling guilty and discretely asking her to send me a text when she got home safely. The emotions that I had encountered in that pub were akin to reading Jane's story: *empathy, familiarity, and resounding somewhere deep inside my heart, bitterness.*

There are many experiences such as these that I can more easily describe than explain. They are moments of incommensurable feelings that are vivid yet ordinary, and academic terms like "cultural code-switching" just begin to scratch the surface of explication. As Jennifer M. Morton observes, for low-income minorities, cultural code-switching is a way "to remain authentically engaged with the values of their communities, while taking advantage of opportunities for further education and higher incomes available to those that participate in the middle class" (259). The keywords "taking advantage of opportunities" resonate with me from Morton's description; whether it is with my mother, my Korean tutee, or a non-Asian stranger, I often consciously or unconsciously engage in cultural code-switching to take advantage of the opportunities to fit in, feel familiar, and therefore, belong. The costs of this familiarity and belonging are sometimes steep—my sense of self and confidence, the shape of my eyes, or the subjugation to microaggressions. But I smile and nod at my mother's evaluation and imagined surgery, the delight of another Asian woman not yet traumatized by routine pangs of gendered racialization in a moment that resurrects my own trauma, and finally, yet another encounter with

Orientalism and exoticization. In my experiences as an Asian immigrant in Canada and arguably, as a Korean, I am bound to (want to) belong.

When I think about these peculiar encounters, especially with other Korean-born women, I often wonder about the experiences, feelings, and knowledge enveloping their identities, behaviours, and worldviews. I feel alien even among other Korean women while in Canadian contexts of racism and racialization, many people often assume that I “must” feel a sense of “home” when I am surrounded by my own “kind.” Yet, somewhat ironically, when surrounded by other Koreans, my mother’s repeated teachings from a young age are still deeply instilled within me: she emphasized time and time again that in front of Koreans, I must not share “too much” about our family’s struggles, my failures, and any information concerning my romantic relationships, lest I ruin my family’s reputation or my own. From my observations, my mother’s mantra was the rule rather than an exception among first-generation Korean Canadian immigrants. As an adult nowadays, when I take a trip down memory lane with some Korean girlfriends that I had met as family friends in Canada or in Korean churches, we often discover things about ourselves or families that we were forbidden to share during our youth by our parents. Oddly then, I sometimes had felt more comfortable to air out my dirty laundry with temporary Korean visa students or non-Koreans, although often in these interactions, my listeners saw my experiences as exotic, “cultural,” or difficult to comprehend. Another promise of secrecy was also demanded by my parents, and especially by my mother, whenever I had a chance to speak to my relatives in South Korea. My siblings and I were told to say that “We are living well,” even in times of the harshest economic hardship, and routinely performed the role of enviable cousins living and studying abroad in the West.

My repressed feelings of alienation were somewhat soothed by reading the narratives of other transnational Korean women, including Jane's short story and others examined in this chapter. In their fictional and non-fictional accounts, they describe and explain circumstances and emotions that I had similarly felt, giving words and a sense of reconciliation to my own feelings and experiences. At the same time, the women's narratives are also different and foreign: from class, sexuality, religion, and geographic location to unique contexts of adoption and migration, they open my eyes to the multifaceted-ness of my own race, ethnicity, and gender. They respond to the questions that haunted me internally: as postcolonial Korean-born women on Canadian shores, why do we aspire to have bigger eyes? How does this aspiration differ between my mother and me vis-à-vis her deeper sense of familiarity with Korean culture, her language barriers, and my memories of wanting to fit in with other kids on the schoolyard who poked fun at my "slanted eyes"? How do our internalized understandings of race relations, racism, class, and sexuality differ between Korean women in South Korea and diasporic Korean women? Finally, how do these understandings relate to our shared and disparate, acknowledged and unacknowledged histories of colonialism, imperialism, exclusion, and patriarchy? These feelings of difference and alienation along with a sense of comfort and coalition with transnational Korean women's narratives are what drew me to this chapter like a gravitational pull.

II. Why Should We Study Women's Narratives?

The rationale for examining women's narratives as a strategy for observing transnational identity can be divided into two parts: first, an explanation of why we must study "women," then, a justification of the utility of narratives. Judith Butler challenges the common identity of *women* in *Gender Troubles: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (2006), pointing out that

If one ‘is’ a woman, that is surely not all one is; the term fails to be exhaustive, not because a pregendered ‘person’ transcends the specific paraphernalia of its gender, but because gender is not always constituted coherently or consistently in different historical contexts, and because gender intersects with racial, class, ethnic, sexual, and regional modalities of discursively constituted identities (4).

Due to this intersectionality, Butler asserts the impossibility of separating “gender” from the political and cultural crisscrossing within which it is “invariably produced and maintained” (5). This chapter, in its exploration of the narratives of transnational Korean women, is aligned with Butler’s arguments, thereby not seeking to consolidate the experiences and representation of Korean-born women within rigid frames of commonness. Instead, I seek to grasp the variability of Korean-born women, their experiences, realities, and representations, placed across diverse geographic and temporal settings of the contemporary era. I aim toward an epistemological understanding of “Korean woman”—how this category of identity is formed and manifests to influence the lives and subjectivity of different Korean-born women in different ways, particularly in modern conditions of transnationalism and diaspora.

This investigation is also a path forward to self-understanding. As a Korean-born woman who has lived a third of her life in South Korea and two-thirds in Canada, I too have felt the insufficiency of language to compare, contextualize, and contemplate on my own identity, prolongingly in flux. Like Smaro Kamboureli, I work as a “diasporic critic” who, by claiming the “authenticity” of my ethnicity, can “speak with a degree of authority on what constitutes otherness as a double sign” through my minoritization and positivistic difference. On the other hand, as a “Canadian subject,” I can claim a “different kind of authenticity, one encompassing the presumed cohesiveness of the dominant position,” that I can strategically utilize to “critique

the dominant system from within, or possibly, to embrace it with irony, even complicity” (21). Kamboureli however underscores the ideological contradictions facing the diasporic critic. Borrowing Rey Chow’s warning that “spotlighting the speaker’s own sense of alterity and political righteousness” does not necessarily “turn powerlessness into ‘truth,’” the diasporic critic can self-dramatize their subalternity as a means of authority and power or “relinquish her claim to ethnicity by adopting a seemingly neutral position,” whereby her choices are limited to resort to forms of pluralism or relativism (Chow 12-13; Kamboureli 21-22).

My solution to this ambiguity of the diasporic critic is to engage in a kind of empathetic comparison. By comparing and contextualizing the experiences of diverse Korean-born women, including my own, I am asserting a new intersectional, epistemological process in the learning and unlearning of Korean-ness, womanhood, and transnational identity. At the same time, I take part in this investigation with empathy—as Suzanne Keen describes, “a vicarious, spontaneous sharing of an affect, [that] can be provoked by witnessing another’s emotional state, by hearing about another’s condition, or even by reading” (208).²⁹ The English novelist Vernon Lee, who brought the concept of empathy into literary discourse, argues that empathy allows us to enter into:

imagination, sympathy, and also into that inference from our own inner experience which has shaped all our conceptions of an outer world and given to the intermittent and

²⁹ Being that the term “empathy” entered the English vocabulary relatively recently when the experimental psychologist E.B. Titchener translated Theodor Lipp’s term *Einfühlung*, which meant “the process of ‘feeling one’s way into’ an art object or another person,” as “empathy” in 1909, the term has been commonly associated with its close relative, “sympathy,” and others like “emotional contagion” (209). Empathy is however distinguishable from sympathy in that whereas the latter is “other-directed,” the former is “a turning-away from the provocative condition of the other” (208). Emotional contagion, which more closely resembles Lipp’s sense of “our automatic mimicry of one another,” is described by Hatfield et al. as “the tendency to automatically mimic and synchronize facial expressions, vocalizations, postures, and movements with those of another person and consequently, to converge emotionally” (Keen 209; Hatfield et al. 81).

heterogeneous sensations received from without the framework of our constant and highly unified inner experience, that is to say, of our own activities and aims (68).

Empathy, in this regard, denotes an intimate access to and encounters with the feelings and thoughts of others and therefore, when utilized as a tool, can serve as a way of transforming the emotional convergence into a productive means of self-understanding and self-location for the critic. To put it another way, through empathetic comparison, I can overcome the dissonance between self-dramatization and self-neutralization by asserting, measuring, and reconciling my own “truths” as a diasporic subject and simultaneously (re)learning the facets of my identity and history within a broader and more intimate range of other identities and experiences.

The application and accessibility of empathy also relate to the form(s) of the narratives examined in this chapter: fictional and non-fictional representations of women’s experiences through palimpsestic, first-person modes of storytelling. Whereas *Kay’s Lucky Coin Variety* (2016; hereon referred to as *KLCV*) by Ann Y.K. Choi is a young-adult novel in the singular voice of Mary Yu-Rhee Hwang and *If I Had Your Face* (2020; hereon referred to as *IIHYF*) by Frances Cha is a multi-perspectival novel intertwining the voices of four narrators, Kyuri, Miho, Ara, and Wonna. *Older Sister Not Necessarily Related* (2019; hereon referred to as *OSNNR*) by Jenny Heijun Wills is a non-fiction memoir of the author’s lived experiences. Nonetheless, all three are composed in the first person with scattered, non-linear plotlines that resemble a palimpsest of memories. As Wayne Booth suggests, “*If an author wants intense sympathy for characters who do not have strong virtues to recommend them, then the psychic vividness of prolonged inside views will help them,*” the first-person point of view serves as one of the best narrative techniques to promote the reader’s identification with the character and their empathy by providing a seemingly raw, internal perspective (Booth 377-8, italics in original; Keen 219).

The singular or multiple narrators in Choi, Cha, and Wills' texts are largely undramatized and reliable, offering past-tense accounts of their experiences with seemingly transparent insights into the psychological and emotional processes of the narrators' younger selves during their coming-of-age experiences. Furthermore, for audiences unfamiliar with South Korea, the narrators serve as cultural ambassadors/translators of Korean language, culture, and customs, as well as local contexts of Korean Canadian/Korean American communities. These narrative techniques intended to increase the reader's identification with the narratives' realism and characters offer more reasons to engage with empathy in my analysis of the texts about (and by) transnational Korean women. In this manner, empathy serves both as an outlook and lens to approaching the narratives examined in this chapter as well as the tool employed by the authors to assert and clarify the understanding of various Korean(s).

III. Critical Race, Feminism, Intersectionality

This chapter is heavily indebted to three theoretical paradigms, critical race, feminism, and intersectionality studies. The combination of these paradigms allows a necessarily nuanced observation of transnational Korean women across the fronts of race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and class. Investigating and transforming the relationship among race, racism, and power through broad perspectives (including economics, history, location, group and self-interest, and emotions and the unconscious), critical race theory (CRT) first emerged as a movement in the 1970s by several lawyers, activists, and legal scholars that noticed a roll back of the advances of the civil rights era and sought-after new theories and strategies to combat subtler forms of racism. Since the 1980s, CRT has become an umbrella study for splinters of Asian American, Latino-critical, LGBTQ, Indigenous, and Muslim and Arab studies, linking the discourses of civil rights and ethnic studies (Delgado and Stefnacic, "Introduction"). As many critical race

scholars have noted, forms of racism have shifted elusively since the 1960s including the emphasis on a declining significance of race through covert racism (see Friedman; Wilson), colour-blind racism, (see Alexander), and unconscious racism (see Blanton and Jaccard).

Benjamin Bowser posits an updated theory of racism that accommodates its changing concepts by highlighting the interactions between cultural, institutional, and individual forms of racism through the metaphor of a three-legged stool (582). Bowser argues that while cultural racism provides the “blueprints for the operation of institutional racism,” as the objective of institutions is to “fulfill cultural scripts,” institutional racism operationalizes cultural racism within and across generations, thereby providing “reinforcement for individual beliefs in racial hierarchy. . . [and] justification for individual efforts to maintain racial hierarchy—individual racism” (583). If Bowser’s theory asserts a new perspective on the structure and dynamics of racism, Asian American studies scholar Claire Jean Kim’s theory of racial triangulation, introduced in the last chapter, provides a new framework to examine race relations “beyond Black and White” and beyond the approach of racial hierarchies, “with whites on the top, Blacks on the bottom, and all other groups somewhere in between” (106). Kim suggests that the racial triangulation of Asian Americans has persisted since the mid-1800s until today, appearing in both overt and covert fashions and functioning as a “normative blueprint for which groups should get what, reproducing patterns of White power and privilege” (107-108). As I argue that Bowser and Kim’s observations of racism and racial relations are transferrable and that they are highly applicable in the Canadian context, I utilize their frameworks for racial structures and dynamics in the examination of Choi, Cha, and Wills’ narratives.

Feminist discourses, on the other hand, help to identify the systems and cultures impacting women. The movements of critical race and feminism are interconnected as CRT

partially builds on radical feminism's insights into the relationship between power and the construction of social roles as well as the invisible patterns of patriarchy and domination (Delgado and Stefnacic, "Introduction"). While feminism remains a contested and multifaceted site of ideology and politics continually changing to reflect the diverse and current experiences of women around the globe (see Rupp and Taylor), the core tenets of feminism commonly acknowledge the oppression and disadvantage experienced by women due to social arrangements (Jung 2). As many feminists argue that social, political, and economic change is required to eradicate the oppression against women, Verta Taylor suggests that core feminist values include "egalitarianism rather than hierarchy, cooperation rather than competition, nurturance rather than rugged individualism, peace rather than conflict" (Jung 2; Taylor 445). The practice of feminism has also been situated within the broader women's movement, including its recent rise in South Korea, especially since the late 1990s (Jung 2;5). Sperling et al. defines the women's movement as a "broader category of activism, which includes all mobilization of women as social and political actors that invokes and reflexively created the politicized identity of 'women'" (1158). Kyungja Jung highlights that despite the crises faced by feminists in industrialized countries in recent decades (see Faludi; Ferree and Martin; Spalter-Roth and Schreiber; Maddison and Jung; Summers), "the women's movement has flourished in Korea, and women's organizations have become more visible and influential in politics" (5). More will be explored about the development of the women's movement in Korea since the 1980s in the next section. This brief historical overview, alongside a survey of some key tenets shaping feminism in contemporary South Korea, begins in the 1980s as this is the earliest temporal setting of the women's narratives examined in this chapter.

Intersectionality, first coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989, and expounded further in “Mapping the Margins” (1991), connects the discussion of race and gender as well as other dimensions of diversity in women’s narratives. In “Mapping the Margins,” Crenshaw introduces three categories of structural intersectionality, political intersectionality, and representational intersectionality to illustrate the race and gender dimensions of violence against women of colour that contemporary feminist and antiracist discourses have failed to address (1242-1243; 1245). These categorical terms serve as important analytical tools to assess and define the dimensions of intersectionality influencing transnational Korean women’s experiences in the remainder of the chapter. By structural intersectionality, Crenshaw refers to many systems and relevant dynamics such as shelters, employment and housing practices, and immigration laws that fail to adequately address the “multilayered and routinized forms of domination that converge in . . . women’s lives” including, but not limited to, “poverty, child care responsibilities, and the lack of job skills” (1245). She suggests in this regard that despite the converging systems of race, gender, and class domination in the experiences of battered women of colour, “intervention strategies based solely on the experiences of women who do not share the same class or race backgrounds will be of limited help to women who because of race and class face difficult obstacles” (1246). Political intersectionality, on the other hand, is a concept that underscores the situation of women of colour in “at least two subordinated groups that frequently pursue conflicting political agendas.” Crenshaw highlights how unlike men of colour and White women, women of colour undergo a need to split their political energies between two sometimes opposing groups, which leads to intersectional disempowerment (1252). Lastly, representational intersectionality consists of the ways in which images of women of colour are produced by popular culture through

dominant narratives of race and gender and “a recognition of how contemporary critiques of racist and sexist representation marginalize women of colour” (1282-1283).

These theories regarding race, racism, gender, class, and their intricate connections provide the dialectical tools to describe and define the structures and relationships constructing Korean-born women’s experiences as represented in fiction and in real life. I argue that the reading of transnational Korean women’s narratives without a comprehensive understanding of their historical encounters and the ability to identify the factors of oppression surrounding them leads to a critical misreading, as demonstrated in the upcoming section on *KLCV*. Moreover, despite the narratives’ efforts to ignite the readers’ empathy, a lack of awareness and/or acknowledgement of the surrounding conditions of oppression contributes to the inability to compare accurately as well as empathetically. To further inform this chapter’s reader on the socio-political significance of the women’s issues raised in the narratives to be studied, I provide a more detailed account of the history of women’s experiences and movement in South Korea alongside recent scholarly views regarding South Korean feminism in the following section. I suggest that the contemporary history of South Korean women along with the historical contexts of Korea, Canada, and the U.S. in the previous chapter helps to demonstrate the transcultural intersectionality of Korean women’s experiences and the need to examine an appropriately wide range of contexts to engage critically with transnational women’s narratives.

IV. Women’s Experiences, the Women’s Movement and Feminism in South Korea

During South Korea’s rapid post-war industrialization and economic development, women increasingly became more educated and present in the labour market,³⁰ although gender

³⁰ Since the 1960s, women’s participation in the labour market has gradually grown from 34 percent in 1965 to 51.1 percent in 2018 (KOSIS). According to OECD data, women’s educational attainment has also improved considerably with similar numbers of women and men completing university degrees as 63 percent of both women and men between the ages of 25 and 34 completed tertiary education (OECD).

ideologies regarding their social roles were slow to change and sexual violence against women has remained a persistent issue. Work-family balance issues, for example, only became prominent from the late 1980s onward with the growth of the women's movement and the abolishment of military authoritarian regimes (Sung 98). Due partly to traditional understandings of gender roles based on Confucian patriarchal ideologies, the notion of women's roles as "good wives and wise mothers" still largely prevails while women struggle to balance work and unpaid work at home. Several scholars have pointed out Confucian ideology's patriarchal values such as that "for a married woman, filial piety toward her husband's parents is more important than obligations to her own parents" and that men are exempt from responsibility for domestic/care work (Sung 100-111; see S.W. Lee). These traditional values upheld by many parents-in-law and male partners assign household tasks and eldercare to women, even while they work, and normalize the parents-in-law's interference in the division of labour at home between the husband and wife in Korean families (101). Thus, as Sirin Sung describes, Korean women are "living in a transitional period where tradition and change coexist" and as a result experience contradiction between traditional gender roles and the ideal of gender equality (99). Despite gradual changes in gender equality policies and the autonomy of the South Korean women's movement in the 1990s and 2000s, according to the OECD research in 2016, the gender pay gap in median earnings of full-time employees is the highest in Korea among OECD countries at 37 percent (compared to the OECD average of 15 percent), and women in Korea spend four to six times more time on unpaid care work than men (OECD 2012; 2016).

Moreover, within Korea's colonial and neo-colonial contexts as well as post-colonial military regimes, ideologies of women's sexuality were marred by impositions of chastity, androcentric and patriarchal nationalism, militarized sex work, and widespread sexual violence

against women. As Korean men suffered blows to their masculine authority through Japanese colonialism and the subsequent U.S. military occupation of South Korea, emerging anti-colonial discourse and capitalistic nationalism paradoxically claimed the spiritual superiority of South Korean workers and masculine integrity while imposing chastity on Korean women (C. Choi 12). Reflecting on her nervous bodily reaction upon her encounter with an American soldier in the U.S., Chungmoo Choi writes,

In the eyes of Korean men, who have obsessively disciplined and regulated women's bodies as metaphors for their uncontaminated, uninterrupted homonational (or homosocial) identity and imposed on women the ideology of chastity and self-censorship, my preening would have been a sign of their own cultural and national defilement (13).

Choi notes how this very ideology of chastity has also silenced “hundreds of thousands of former and present ‘comfort women’ who fear that they might be stigmatized as the emblem of promiscuity.” The stigma against comfort women as “promiscuous” women returned home established a nomenclature constructing Korean men as the victims of Korea's emasculation as a nation, while upper-class Korean women also carried a small dagger as a part of their daily attire “as a reminder for them to take their own lives, if and when their bodies were violated by men other than their husbands, especially by invading foreign soldiers” (13).

Despite this patriarchal imposition on chastity, Jin Kyung Lee ironically describes how “prostitution in South Korea became an integral and vital part of both the local and the national economy, and everyday cultural and social life” with the U.S. military presence on the southern peninsula and the development of military camp towns. Since the establishment of the Republic of Korea in 1948, over thirty-five thousand American troops stationed in Korea have stayed in over one hundred military facilities and fifty camps within the course of half a century (“Military

Prostitution” in J.K. Lee, *Service Economies*). As Lee argues that “Camp town sex workers have been the Comfort Women of postcolonial South Korea,” she explains that the lowest South Korean working class provided various day-to-day services to the occupying military (as the American military bases tended to be in impoverished rural parts of Korea) while the camp-town economy was highly dependent on bars and brothels—sex and sexualized service industries. According to Lee, “over a million women have worked as sex workers for American servicemen in camp towns around the country” in the last several decades (“Military Prostitution”). Moreover, this development of the sex work industry was state sanctioned as Katherine Moon points to a Christian activist women’s report to reveal that the Korea International Tourism Association, a government agency, had “licensed and trained” prostitutes for foreign men and publicly praised their economic contribution to South Korea’s industrialization (43). The Korean state “played the role of brokering (sex) labor in camp towns” akin to other forms of South Korea’s transnational labour (e.g., military labour in Vietnam or the export of Korean nurses, miners, and construction workers) and saw the camp town prostitutes as “playing the role of ‘personal ambassadors’ in their interactions with American servicemen,” thereby smoothing out relations between South Korea and the U.S. (Moon 84-85; 102-103; “Military Prostitution”).

The experiences of Korean women and the construction of their sexuality are further tainted by irony and patriarchy when one observes how sexual violence against women was regarded as a minor issue in the 1970s and 1980s, despite women’s growing participation in the Korean social movements toward class liberation that aimed to transform capitalist structures and overthrow the military regime. Gender-specific issues pertaining to the female body and sexuality were overshadowed by class and nationalism struggles, while even women’s movement activists believed that “women’s problems should be solved within the framework of the Korean

social movement, the central tenets of which were *minjok* (nationalism), *minju* (democracy), and *minjung* (the people or the masses) (Jung 9). Nonetheless, progressive women's groups began to organize publicly in 1983 during the harsh military regime of authoritarian President Chun Doo-Hwan. Student and labour movement activists, university alumni, and graduates of the 1970s Christian Academy social education programs became key players in the organization of new progressive feminist groups (Jung 10). It is important to point out, however, that the South Korean women's movement in the 1980s differed from the second wave of women's movement in Western countries as the former rejected separation from the broader political struggle in comparison to the latter that "sought to create an autonomous, gender-specific movement" (11; see K.H. Kim).

Despite the rise of women activists, unacknowledged and suppressed sexual violence was prevalent in South Korea until the late 1980s when several tragic, publicized cases took place, triggering widespread activism to reconsider sexual violence as a gender-specific and autonomous issue. Sexual assault and torture against women by public enforcement agencies including the police were suppressed during the 1980s to curb the democratic Minjung Movement (Jung 12). Jung notes that in this period, sexual violence perpetrated by ordinary men against ordinary women were largely ignored by the women's movement, because women activists overlooked the gendered nature of sexual violence and framed the issue as human rights violations used as a means to suppress the democratization movement instead (12). This perspective changed in 1986, when the brutal sexual torture of Kwon Insook, a student protester for female factory workers, by Moon Gui-dong, a police detective notorious at the time for his involvement in torture, publicly highlighted the inhumanity of police violence, and gave rise to alliances among women's groups including the Korean Women's Association United

(KWAU),³¹ and ignited public fury against the brutality of Korea's dictatorial regimes (13-14). As more rape cases against ordinary women perpetrated by civilians or police became known to the public, in 1989, another tragic case of rape against Sin Myung-sim by a police officer while she was seven months pregnant came to the forefront.³² The collective activism against this case led women's groups to pay attention to myths about sexual violence, including victim blaming, and sexual assault incidents perpetrated by the police against ordinary women (16).

Signalling a progressive turn in the notion of women's roles and sexuality, since the 1990s, the women's movement in South Korea began to achieve autonomy from the democratic movement, and the agenda of women's groups turned to include more gender-specific issues such as: "maternity leave, family planning, childcare, equal pay for equal work, domestic violence, and sexual violence" (Jung 16). While this achievement and the proliferation of women's movement also came with increased alliances with the state, Korean feminists paradoxically saw the period of early 1990s as a crisis as they contemplated how to maintain the independence and radical nature of the women's movement in the changing and favourable political climate (Jung 5). Nonetheless, generally, women's movements and relevant organizations became more visible and influential in the Korean political scene throughout the 1990s to the mid-2000s (86). As state feminism as a global trend contributed to making gender equality a national priority since the 1995 Beijing Women's Congress, in Korea, "gender mainstreaming" started in the 2000s, and the Ministry of Gender Equality was established in 2001 to mark the launch of institutional state feminism on the southern peninsula (H.M. Kim

³¹ The KWAU was established as an umbrella organization for twenty-three progressive women's movement organizations in 1987 (Jung 14).

³² While the victim's husband reported the rape to the police after the victim had told her husband after the baby was born, the police station "transferred the offender to another station and framed the rape as adultery between the victim and the police officer," bringing shame to the victim and her family. As a result, the victim committed suicide after the court turned down the complaint (Jung 15-16).

247). Nonetheless, referring to the administrations of former Presidents Lee Myung-bak and Park Geun-hye as the “dark ages of feminism” or “age of misogyny” due to their state reforms based on sexual binaries and conservatism, Kim and Chang argue that the widespread #MeToo movement in Korea in 2018 began due to the absence of state feminism and the abstract “protection” provided by laws and institutions that did not suitably reflect women’s experiences (247-248). The #MeToo movement then ignited the “direct activism” of South Korean feminists led voluntarily by various women NGO groups and animated through social media platforms. Furthermore, the #MeToo provided historical momentum for the women’s movement to split from the “male-centred progressive camp” in Korea and to become an autonomous, new movement, no longer connected to the collectivist civil rights movement against the law and the state (251).

Despite the achievements of the #MeToo and other recent women’s movements in South Korea, much more still needs to be done on individual, cultural, and institutional levels to eliminate the oppression of women. Numerous scholars have discussed persisting women’s issues regarding their perceived roles vis-à-vis the social pressures to marry and to reproduce (see Cho and LoCascio; Sung), capitalism and consumer culture’s influences on women’s identity construction (see Y.J. Lee; Koh), unresolved trauma of former comfort women and militarized sex workers (see J.K. Lee; Getz), and the exploitation of women in contemporary sex work-related industries (see Barraclough and Faison). As seen with the post-civil-rights era changes in forms of racism in the U.S., the growing women’s movement and state intervention on gender inequality in South Korea may furthermore cause forms of domination and discrimination against women to become more subtle, private, and hidden. Additionally, with the increasing speed of economic and cultural changes in South Korea, including the rise of

capitalistic beauty markets, the globalization of the Korean Wave, the proliferation of social media, and growing domestic attention to gender inequality, generational gaps in ideology and values between parents and children, and mothers and daughters, may substantially broaden. For Korean immigrant families abroad, this gap can be further widened as the socio-economic hardship, long work hours, and social isolation of first-generation immigrant parents may place them in an ideological “time capsule” while their children become more socialized and acculturated within Canadian and U.S. societies. More sociological, psychological, and cultural studies must be pursued to observe the day-to-day experiences of ordinary Korean women in South Korea and in diasporic contexts to understand the diversity and differences among female Korean identities particularly in a transnational light. In the sections to follow, I present three distinct and interrelated case studies of such examinations in a literary context with the aim of contributing to developing studies on Korean women’s experiences through transcultural, intersectional, and multi-generational lens.

V. *Kay’s Lucky Coin Variety*

The coming-of-age experiences of Mary Yu Rhee Hwang between her last year of high school and undergraduate studies at the University of Toronto showcase the myriad ways that her identity formation as a young woman is embedded within local structures of ghettoization, racism, and violence as well as the paradoxes of diasporic Korean culture. As Mary encounters several traumatic events such as sexual assault and battery, violent store robberies, and racism at school, her understanding of her Asian-ness and sexuality transforms, at times as a measure to keep safe and to belong, and at others, as a way of resistance. Moreover, Mary’s ethnic self-understanding in relation to her womanhood also constantly changes as a result of her parents’

paradoxical insistence on the “Korean way,” her observations of race relations, and her own romantic affairs with White and Korean men.

To examine the transnational and transcultural intersectionality of Mary’s experiences as a young Korean woman growing up in 1980s Toronto, I divide my analysis of *KLCV* in this section in threefold ways. The first part observes Mary’s traumatic encounter with sexual assault perpetrated by a neighbourhood thug, a White male, and how structural, cultural, and historical factors such as the ghettoization of her neighbourhood, gendered racialization, U.S. military imperialism in South Korea, and the parental pressure on chastity inform Mary’s negotiations of her trauma and identity. In the second part, I study the impact of hegemonic and White-supremacist racial ideologies and racial triangulation on Mary and her Korean community’s internalization and perpetrations of racism. I especially explore how Mary’s assessments of her Korean identity shift with a hyperconsciousness of race between Whiteness and Blackness. Thirdly, I investigate the paradoxes of “Korean” womanhood aiming at marriage and economic success, and how such paradoxes reveal the collision of local socioeconomic contexts and South Korean gender ideologies, causing Mary’s identity to oscillate in between.

i. Beyond a “Melodramatic Blur”: Local and Transnational Structures of Sexual Violence

In *The Globe and Mail* review of *KLCV*, Kerry Clare, a Toronto-based author, editor, and blogger, critiques the recurrence of violence in Choi’s novel. Clare writes, “Violent assaults, robberies, shootings, suicide, domestic violence, attempted rape and an actual fiery explosion is a whole lot of action for a single novel, and the literary impact of these incidents is undermined by their frequency—it all becomes a melodramatic blur” (“Review: Ann Y.K. Choi”). Although Clare acknowledges that the *KLCV* is “the sort of book its protagonist spends the novel yearning

for,” pointing out where the Canadian literary canon has come up short regarding Korean representation in the past, she laments that the novel may lack depth to adult readers, primarily due to the plot’s fast pace and the frequency of “action” among other criticisms (“Review”). While the reviewer notes that “Mary’s story is one of contradiction, set in the spaces in between” to describe Mary’s struggles at home and at school, she also makes no mention of the youth’s experiences of racism highlighted prominently in the novel, aside from the bleak comment that while Mary does not relate to her parents’ history and culture, “*her background* makes her feel out of place at home in Toronto as well” (“Review”).

I argue that one must see the forest beyond the trees to grasp the meaning of the violence in *KLCV* beyond a “melodramatic blur.” The links between the violence in Choi’s novel are nested in the composition of Mary and her family’s structural intersectionality: their location in a high-crime urban ghetto as racial minority immigrants with heavy economic dependency on their family business and minimal capacity to rely on legal protection. In the opening scene, Mary’s daydreams at the store are abruptly interrupted by the sound of screeching tires, blasting horns, and “someone screaming obscenities” (Choi 3). The first customer to enter after the commotion is Tico, a regular at the store who “smelled awful” and came in “every Tuesday at 8 p.m. to receive a loaf of day-old Wonder Bread” out of Mary’s mother’s charity (3). The second customer is perceived by Mary as a “dark-haired prostitute” trying to buy a “box of condoms and a pack of Wrigley’s Big Red chewing gum” (4). Mary describes her family’s small apartment on the upper floor of a two-storey building located near Queen Street West and Bathurst Street, “a corner popular with prostitutes, the homeless, and the occasional patient from the nearby mental health hospital” (10-11). At the family-owned convenience store on the ground floor, which opens every day at seven in the morning except for Christmas, cigarettes and condoms were the

“best sellers,” and the store was robbed frequently (11-12). The narrator notes how her family cringed at the sight of store robberies and deadly shootings reported in the newspapers, all too aware of their fate as “easy targets, especially at night” (16). Mary’s parents routinely lament about their long working hours and frustration from their inability to speak English, as Mary’s mother says to her daughter: “If you only knew just how many packs of cigarettes, bags of milk, and thousands of newspapers we had to sell. . . We sacrificed everything to come here. Do you think I enjoy working sixteen hours a day, people thinking I’m stupid because I can’t speak English?” (16).

The family’s helplessness while surrounded by crimes and violence is further exacerbated by Mary’s parents’ reluctance to call the police as “[n]o one would buy a business with a reputation for problems, if and when the time came to put it on the market” (29). Elucidating the economic significance of the store to her family’s survival, Mary reveals that they at first had to live in government-subsidized housing infested with rats and that her parents had finally saved enough money to purchase their own store after “years of working in other people’s variety stores and at miscellaneous jobs since emigrating from Korea in 1975” (60; 4). Hitchens et al. argue that the vexed relationship between urban residents in disadvantaged communities and the police often turns into legal cynicism— “a distrust of law and those who enforce it”— and Mary’s parents exhibit this lack of faith in the police’s ability to provide aid when needed. When Mary insists to her mother that they should call the police regarding a recurring theft of their newspapers, her mother responds that “[t]hey wouldn’t care about the papers” and that the police would think “it was a waste of their time” (Hitchens et al 28; Choi 29). Although Mary presumes that her mother’s response is more motivated by the reluctance to create “bad publicity for the

store,” other incidents of the police’s inadequate intervention such as after a store robbery and Mary’s sexual assault show that her mother’s beliefs are correct (29).

The violence surrounding Mary is thus part and parcel of her low-income, high-crime neighbourhood, while her family’s inability to escape the violence is related to their economic class and social barriers, including her parents’ lack of English skills and the deficiency of systemic support. The poverty and ghettoization of the area surrounding the intersection of Queen Street West and Bathurst Street is a non-fictional reality in 1980s Toronto. The nearby mental health hospital mentioned by Mary is one of Canada’s largest psychiatric facilities, the Queen Street Mental Health Center, now called the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH), situated just one block west of the store’s location (Horgan 500). In the wake of psychiatric deinstitutionalization in the 1970s, Parkdale, a neighbourhood to the west of the hospital and two large blocks west of Queen Street and Bathurst Street, almost immediately became “synonymous with the intertwining stigmas of mental illness SROs [(single-room occupancy housing)] and poverty” (500). In an extensive study on the territorial stigmatization of the Parkdale neighbourhood, Mervyn Horgan highlights how many deinstitutionalized people found affordable accommodation in the area in poorly built, legally ambiguous rooming houses and bachelorettes, leading to the “ghettoization of ex-psychiatric patients” (Horgan 504; Dear and Wolch 1). According to a *Toronto Star* news article in 1979, homeowner representations to the city-initiated Task Force on Bachelorettes saw Parkdale as “an unbearable hell unfit for descent people,” and the highly stigmatized area was filled with accommodations aimed at low-income singles (Horgan 505; “Crowded Parkdale ‘a hell’ city told”).

This context of deinstitutionalization, ghettoization, and illegal single-room occupancy housing helps to explain the depiction of frequent store robberies and sexual violence in the

novel. Mary mentions that she was seldom left in the store by herself for long as the store was robbed frequently, and that one night “a patient from the mental health hospital [came] tearing in with a butter knife held dramatically in the air” (Choi 12). The narrator describes the incident as follows:

“I need a goat to sacrifice!” he screamed at my mother. “Sell me a goddamn goat!” When my startled mother stared wide-eyed at him, he turned to me. “You—you!” he stammered. . . “What’s your name?” When I mumbled Mary, he yelled, “Ming, tell her—tell her in Chinese or whatever you speak!” We captured the entire incident on security videotape, minus the sound, but the police took it away before we could show anyone (12).

The knowledge of the surrounding political contexts not only grounds this scene in the realism of its contemporary setting but provides reasonable grounds to wonder whether the representation of the police’s confiscation is linked to systemic efforts to silence the harmful effects of the psychiatric deinstitutionalization in the 1970s and 80s. Moreover, the area’s ghettoization and the rampant spread of illegal, single-room accommodations partially contextualize the prevalence of prostitution portrayed in the novel.

The sexual assault perpetrated against Mary by a neighbourhood pimp named Leon, who was also a regular customer at the store, is subtly foreshadowed before the event takes place, within the realism of the novel’s setting. Mary frequently observes Leon lurking around outside the store, talking to women that she perceives as prostitutes, and occasionally staring or calling out to Mary and her friends. She vividly recalls her first encounter with Leon at the store a few days prior to the assault, as he asked her for her name while buying a pack of cigarettes and a pornographic magazine, titled, “Shades of Singapore: Subservient and Sexy” (21). On the night

of the assault, Mary is sleeping on the floor of the store with her father as part of her family's vigilante efforts to catch the thief who has been stealing their store's newspapers. When Mary feels uncomfortable and scared in the middle of the night, she leaves the store alone to go back upstairs to her home when Leon suddenly attacks her in the dark staircase. Leon stops short of raping Mary and batters her instead as Mary's head hits the handrail and she falls unconscious. He screams, "Stupid Chinese bitch!" as he hits and kicks the fallen victim to wake her up, as he insinuates that the rape "won't be any fun" unless she is awake (33-34).

This violent incident of sexual assault, while horrific, is not an unexpected event in the novel. Not only is the perpetrator seen lurking around the scene of the crime, but the violence is portrayed as a foreshadowed consequence of the socioeconomic and geographic structures of Mary's neighbourhood. These structures of violence are also linked to the lack of systemic interventions by the police and the prevalence of gendered and racialized violence against women of colour. Mary recalls how "foolish" her family felt when the policeman and woman that had found Mary asked for Leon's information, and the family realized that they had neither his last name nor phone number although they had let the perpetrator run a tab at the store (37). The police officers then proceeded to take her parents and Mary respectively aside, asking Mary questions such as whether her parents had any bad tempers, how she was doing in school, and whether she had a boyfriend (37). These questions with innuendos of victim blaming, doubt, and racialization worsen the helplessness of the young victim and her family and explain the legal cynicism of Mary's parents that had maintained a state of isolation for Mary's family surrounded by crime. When Mary's oldest friend, Rubina, visits her at the hospital and asks what she knows about Leon, Mary realizes that he is "into Asians" from his previous purchases of pornographic magazines (39). Rubina, who is Pakistani, stops short of asking Mary if she thought that Leon

assumed he could get away with his crime because his victim was Asian. , but nevertheless states, “My mother thinks white men believe they can do pretty much whatever they want with us and get away with it cuz they’re white. At least that’s what happened to her sister at work” (40). These comments make Mary briefly remember how her elementary school principal had insisted that foreign names should be changed to English names if they “wanted to go to school in Canada” (40) . Through these moments, Mary begins to understand *why* the assault had taken place in her life and to piece together the puzzles influencing her identity: her race, the racism surrounding her family, and the recurrence of gendered violence against women of colour.

Moreover, as aftereffects of the assault, Mary reflects on her sexuality through the lens of traditional Korean gender ideologies, feeling additionally frustrated and angry. Following the assault, Mary’s mother forbids anyone else from visiting her daughter and acts as though nothing has happened. Mary’s frustration against her mother is shown in her conversation with Josh, when he is attempting to console his sister:

“You know what she’s like.” Josh said. “The way she deals with things is to bury them inside—make like nothing’s ever happened.”

But it did, I wanted to scream. To me. Something terrible. Why couldn’t she talk to me? Still. I knew better than to confront Josh, who was more accepting. We were Korean.

We’d been taught from birth not to ask why or why not (37; italics in original).

The reasons behind the mother’s repression of her daughter’s trauma are further unveiled when Mary mentions that she had seen the relief on her mother’s face when she found out at the hospital that her daughter had not been raped and that Mary was still a virgin (41). While drunk, Mary exclaims, “And here’s to my goddamn virginity still being intact!” thinking of how her mother must have thought that they could still “marry [her] off, without shame, to some Korean

guy” (41-42). Wanting to rebel against her mother, Mary avows internally, “*I’ll take over the family business, or worse, move back to Korea and marry a black American soldier stationed in the army base near Itaewon*” (42).

Mary begins to situate her identity not only within the violence and trauma in her life, but within historical contexts of sexual violence in South Korea and Korean gendered ideologies demanding women’s chastity before marriage. Through her mother’s reactions at the hospital, Mary learns the social value of her chastity, particularly in the Korean marriage market. When Mary avows to “marry a black American soldier” as an act of rebellion against her mother, the imagination of her identity blends Canadian realities of hardship and violence with the neo-colonial history of her “home,” while envisioning her chastity as a weapon. Given the exploitation of militarized sex workers in post-war South Korea and the U.S.’ imperialistic domination over the peninsula, the teen’s “way out” is still a path of patriarchal subjugation and social marginalization, while implicitly, her sexuality is imagined as a tool for her false ideals of freedom. Nevertheless, Mary’s identity formation as a Korean woman in Canada following a traumatic event of violence is shaped complexly by local and transnational histories as well as ideologies regarding women’s sexuality. This highly contextual development of Mary’s identity therefore requires an expansive understanding of the realism in Choi’s novel, based on Canada’s geographic structures of ghettoization in tandem with South Korea’s history of neo-colonialism and gender, revealing the responsibility of the reader to observe the significance of violence beyond “a melodramatic blur.”

**ii. Black, White, and the “True Invisibles”: Internalized Racial Triangulation
Among Koreans**

Mary and her family's experiences in Canada since her childhood further disclose the prevalence of racism and exclusion at institutional, cultural, and individual levels persisting in the 1980s. Mary cannot forget that her elementary school principal, Mr. Darcy, had pressed upon her parents the necessity that their children, Yu-Rhee and Chun-Ha, should discard their Korean names, , and adopt English ones that their teachers could more easily pronounce. Mr. Darcy argued, "It'll help them fit in. Their teachers would never be able to say a name like this," pointing at the children's names (19). When Mary's parents fall silent and disappointed, the principal urges further by saying, "You have no choice. It's the school board's policy" (19). As Mary's family has no knowledge of Canadian names, the principal offers the names "Mary" and "Josh," the names of his children, to the distraught family (20). Mary remembers the faces of Mr. Darcy's children with "blonde hair and thousands of little brown spots sprinkled all over their little pale faces" in the principal's family photo (20). Although this scene of White washing through the erasure of cultural names is most emblematic of the institutional racism experienced by Mary's family, it is only the tip of the iceberg. As Mary reveals several incidents of verbal harassment involving racial slurs against her and her mother throughout the novel, when Mary introduces the book *Invisible Man* (1952) by Ralph Ellison to her mother, the latter becomes irritated, saying, "It's always black and white in Canada. The Koreans, Chinese, Japanese, anyone from Asia are the true invisibles" (128). Mary realizes during this conversation as well as in her English classes throughout high school and university that literary representations of Koreans and Asians are rare.

While the invisibility of "Asian-ness" is established through these scenes, others unveil the internalizations of racial triangulation among Koreans and Korean Canadians alongside suggestions of racial conflicts between Korean and Black communities in the Greater Toronto

Area. In a conversation about a store robbery against a Korean storeowner, Mr. Park, an owner of a convenience store in the Vaughan and Oakwood, area describes to Mary's father that this was the third time that the victim had been robbed at gunpoint in the same month and that he cannot give the store away as there are "too many blacks in that neighbourhood" (161). Mr. Cha adds, while complaining about the rising cost of cigarettes, "Forget the blacks, it'll be the high taxes that kills my business first. I wish a giant bomb would fall and kill off all the blacks—then at least half my worries would be gone" (161). When Mary's father tries to switch the subject by asking how many times a store gets robbed in Toronto, Mr. Park responds that "It's better here than L.A. or New York," suggestively revealing the business owners' awareness of the racial violence emerging across U.S. cities between Korean and Black Americans in the late 1980s (161). Although Mary's father dismisses Mr. Park's racist comments when the father and daughter are alone and reminds Mary to "treat everyone the way that [she] wants to be treated," Mary's internalized understandings of race relations is further revealed when she sees her Korean Canadian friend, Kate, sitting in the mall cafeteria with a Black date. Mary wonders "how Kate's parents would react if they knew she was on a date—especially with a black boy" (161; 75). Later in the novel, when Mary runs into Kate again at a Korean karaoke bar, Kate explains that her parents had made her give up her baby when they discovered that the father of the child was Jordan, the date that Mary had seen Kate with at the mall (119).

These scenes, along with Mary's vow of resistance through marriage with "a black American soldier," show the pervasiveness of racism against Black people manifesting in Korean and Korean Canadian understandings of race relations. Claire Jean Kim elucidates racial triangulation as a process partially occurring from the "relative valorization" of Asian Americans in relation to Black Americans "on cultural and/or racial grounds in order to dominate both

groups,” many Korean Canadian immigrants’ beliefs regarding Black Canadians as degenerate, criminal, and lesser than their race exhibit their internalizations of this valorized status despite their keen awareness of their own marginalization from mainstream society (107). Suzette L. Speight builds on Robert T. Carter’s definition of internalized racism as “self-blame and feeling responsible in the context of racism” to acknowledge that “[i]nternalized racism is all about the cultural imperialism, the domination, the structure, the normalcy of the ‘way things are’ in our racialized society” (Carter 36; Speight 129). Applying this expanded definition and Kim’s concept of racial triangulation to the scenes observed in Choi’s novel, Korean Canadians’ discrimination and hate against Black individuals can be read as their inability to see the forest beyond the trees—the pervasiveness and universality of White supremacy and anti-Black racism that influence the respective structural ghettoization and marginalization of Black and Asian communities, establishing the contexts of violence and conflict among them. While Dee Watts-Jones describes that “when people of African descent internalize racism it is an experience of self-degradation, and self-alienation; one that promotes the assumptive base of our inferiority,” in *KLCV*, Korean Canadians’ internalization of racism reveals their self-perpetuation of the model-minority myth.

Mary’s internalized racism also manifests in her romantic relationship with her high-school English teacher, Mr. Will Allen. During high school, the teen developed a passionate crush on Will, her blue-eyed, handsome English teacher in grades nine and eleven. Mary notes how she and her friends had thought that his photos in the yearbook were attractive enough to be featured on the *Tiger Beat* magazine and comparable to popular White male actors that Mary had had a crush on like Shaun Cassidy and Mark Harmon (15). She kept a notebook of all the eloquent English words that Will used and felt encouraged by his compliments to pursue creative

writing. After entering university, Mary reconnects with Will at a local café and through their shared passion for creative writing, they eventually become casual lovers while Will is still in a relationship with another teacher at the high school, Ms. Yuki Nakamura. Mary is enamoured of Will's eyes, with "so many lovely shades of blue," and when he shows her a small tattoo on his upper left arm, she confesses, "I was delighted he'd allow his perfect white body to be mutilated. It made him more desirable. I stared into his eyes" (140). Mary's infatuation with her teacher stems in part from her idealization of English literary texts written by White authors and American films starring White actors and actresses that Will recommends. He hangs posters of film classics such as *Casablanca*, *Gone with the Wind*, and *Breakfast at Tiffany's* in his classroom, and Mary romanticizes her teacher as she idealizes White "Great" literature and film (86). Mary's infatuation with such representations further impacts the youth's self-imagination; when Will mentions to Mary that he can drop off a copy of a new movie recommendation at her parents' store, Mary thinks back to Audrey Hepburn and what the actress would wear "if she worked in a variety store" (87). On the other hand, Mary feels small and comparably unattractive standing next to a blonde and blue-eyed woman in front of Will during their first encounter at the local café (114). Mary's self-consciousness around Will, however, appears also as a product of Mary's frequent encounters with racism as Mary overhears a waitress talking about Mary and Will at a restaurant in rural Ontario, saying, "Why's a handsome guy like him wasting his time with a skinny little Oriental?" (186).

If Mary's hyperawareness of Black men is triggered by the relative valorization of Asians against Blacks and the internalization of the model minority myth, her desire for, and self-consciousness around, Will can be seen as a result of the "civic ostracism" in Claire Jean Kim's model of racial triangulation. By "civic ostracism," Kim refers to the process whereby the

dominant group of Whites constructs Asian Americans as “immutably foreign and unassimilable with Whites on cultural and/or racial grounds in order to ostracize them from the body politic and civic membership” (107). This ostracism felt by Mary and her family is not only visible in their encounters with racism at school and at the store, but also in the lack of representation of Asians in mainstream literatures and films, as Mary empathizes with her mother’s description of Asians as the “true invisibles.” As Mary matures through her relationship with Will and her deeper study of Canadian Literature in university, she becomes growingly aware of the covert racism and ostracism that surrounds Canadian literary studies and her relationship with Will. For example, she recommends to her lover several books by Asian-American and Asian-Canadian writers “to expand his reading repertoire” and becomes upset when he appears to make excuses instead of taking her suggestions (214-215). Mary remarks internally, “Maybe it was my fault; I was expecting him to embrace that part of me that was foreign to him—to leave the comforts of his white world and try to see things from the point of view of an Asian protagonist, or at least go to a restaurant that didn’t require a steak knife” (215). Although by the end of the novel, Mary concludes her relationship with Will realizing the dynamics of race relations that had shaped their interactions and her feelings toward Will, the pervasive effects of internalized racism are nevertheless reflected in the youth’s coming-of-age experiences including her romance and sexuality.

iii. The “Korean Way” of Womanhood

Lastly, Mary’s identity formation is jointly shaped by her exposures to the “Korean way” of womanhood, enforced by her parents and surrounding Korean communities. Mary’s mother is especially insistent on the “Korean ways” of life and decision making for her daughter. Mary remembers how she took piano lessons once a week “[like] all Korean girls” as a child, and her

mother rejected her request to take guitar lessons, saying disapprovingly, “But you’re a girl” (18). The teen explains how the piano was “the first-choice instrument, followed by the violin” for Korean girls, and that “[it] was considered essential for a girl as young as three or four to study music as a sign of her grace and her family’s ability to afford things in life” (16). Mary’s mother had also scolded her daughter for not having any Korean friends and remarked, in an accusatory, hostile tone, “You don’t like Korean people. You’re ashamed of your culture. But you’ll marry a Korean man if you know what’s good for you” (23). Despite the daughter’s frustrations with her parents’ ways, she reveals her internalization of their insistence when she feels embarrassed after telling Will that her parents cannot read English: “They’d kill me, I thought, if they knew I was exposing our secrets to the world. It wasn’t the Korean way” (27).

The demands of this “Korean way” also include achievement of academic and financial success and marriage to a Korean man. Mary’s mother routinely urges her daughter to “make something of [herself]” because her parents had “sacrificed everything” for their lives in Canada (16). Reflecting on the experiences she had in common with her close friends at school, she concludes that “As immigrant children, we led parallel lives and were bound by parallel expectations of great achievement, which ultimately led to a lot of conspiring against our respective parents” (22). However, this expectation of achievement is inflected by gender. Her parents, for example, expect to be taken care of in their old age by their son Josh, who complains to his sister, “At least you’ll be free of that expectation. . . You’ll go on and marry some white guy whose parents won’t care” (16). When Mary tells her mother that she wants to major in English at university, her mother responds after some hesitation, “Maybe it wouldn’t be too bad if you become an English teacher. Steady job. Have your summers off. Have children” (128). The “Korean way” of womanhood is furthermore clarified when Mary meets Eun-Jin, her

twenty-four-year-old cousin, during her trip to South Korea. Eun-Jin studied in London when she was fifteen, was now a master's student in international languages at Seoul National University, the most prestigious school in South Korea, and speaks six languages. Nevertheless, when Mary asks her cousin what she plans to do after graduation, Eun-Jin replies matter-of-factly, "Get married. Start a family" (65). When Mary asks what kind of job Eun-Jin can get in Korea with her abilities in so many languages, Eun-Jin elaborates, "I think many North American women work by choice. The competition for jobs in Korea is so fierce it isn't considered right for women to take jobs away from the men" (65-66). The cousin later adds that although she had wanted to study law, her mother thought that languages, literature, and the arts would "attract a better husband" (66).

The expectations of the "Korean way" shaping Mary's youth combine the socioeconomic conditions of immigrant life in Canada with South Korean gender ideologies, and carry harmful consequences for Korean Canadian women. Mary becomes exceptionally upset with her parents when they refuse to intervene when they see her friend Kate's father act abusively against his wife while drunk. Kate had confided that her father was violent and that he had even "pushed her mother down a flight of stairs years ago, leaving her with a broken leg and sprained wrist" (72). When Mary admonishes her mother, the latter simply responds that the situation is none of their business (74). This "polite," silent acceptance of gendered violence constitutes a customary acknowledgement of the inescapability and commonness of domestic violence against women within South Korean and Korean Canadian contexts of the 1980s. The "Korean way" of womanhood also exposes Mary to yet another encounter with sexual violence when Joon-Ho, a family friend whom her parents considered a prize candidate for marriage, becomes obsessed and eventually attempts to rape her when she rejects his proposal (203). These recurring scenes

of sexual, physical, and verbal abuse against Korean Canadian women disclose their frequent exposure to risks of violence even within domestic situations, despite the “Korean way” of womanhood that positions marriage as their ultimate vocation in life.

Therefore, in *KLCV*, Mary’s identity is formed through the intersections of Canadian and Korean ways, old and new expectations, and local and transnational histories of colonialism, exclusion, and domination. Her self-imagination and self-location across horizons of time and place illustrate Crenshaw’s analyses of structural, political, and representational intersectionality, displaying the multitude of factors impacting the youth’s adolescence, including race and class relations, gendered ideologies, and systemic and cultural discrimination. This combination of intersectionalities is inherently and unavoidably transcultural in diasporic Korean women’s lives and in their search for belonging. More than with the other two literary works to follow, I empathize the most with Choi’s novel, as it responds to many of my personal, existential inquiries regarding my “place” between Black and White race relations in Canada and between “Korean” and “Canadian” ways of life. At the same time, the novel’s setting is far-removed from my own—it takes place nearly two decades earlier than my arrival in Canada, and although my family has resided in another urban ghetto of Toronto, I was unfamiliar with Parkdale’s history until pursuing this chapter’s research. South Korean gender ideologies regarding women’s roles have furthermore changed, although some foundational tenets persist, with the rise of contemporary women’s movements and increased globalization of South Korea’s economic development. Despite these differences, my empathy and familiarity with *KLCV* trigger a contemplation on female experiences of “Korean-Canadian-ness” and the process of analyzing the novel provides me with the theoretical tools to examine my own experiences. The next sections showcase how the lives and identity formations of other Korean women in the U.S.,

South Korea, and Canada compare with Mary's experiences and my own. While their similarities expand the "Korean Canadian" frame of my (self-)imagination through an increased awareness of transnational Korean, female experiences, their dissimilarities demand an ongoing exploration of the diversity of women's narratives.

VI. *If I Had Your Face*

Frances Cha, the author of *IIHYP*, seamlessly fits the bill of a transnational author. She is Korean-born and grew up in the U.S., Hong Kong, and South Korea. In an interview with *The New York Times* (NYT), she mentions how as an eight-year-old child in South Korea, she began writing novels with blonde and blue-eyed protagonists, incongruent with the girl she saw in the mirror ("Frances Cha"; "Author Frances Cha"). Prior to publishing *IIHYP*, she graduated from Dartmouth College with a Bachelor of Arts degree in English Literature and Asian Studies and completed her Master of Fine Arts study in creative writing at Columbia University with a Dean's Fellowship ("Frances Cha"). Cha worked as an editor in journalism after graduation for the Samsung Economic Research Institute's business journal and the travel and culture sections of CNN International in Hong Kong and South Korea ("Frances Cha"). The author notes that such experiences of interviewing and working in the Korean language fine tuned her skills in "writing stories and contextualizing them for an international audience" ("About Frances Cha"). As an inspiration for writing *IIHYP*, Cha points to her experience of reading *The Joy Luck Club* (1989) by the Asian American writer Amy Tan, when she realized the possibility of having "an Asian protagonist *and* exploring themes like filial piety" ("About Frances Cha"; italics in original). She therefore aspired to "write a story about young women that is very specific to modern Korea" ("About Frances Cha").

As a result of Cha's lived experiences and skills in contextualization, *IIHYF* is arguably a novel about contemporary South Korean women for a non-Korean audience. Through the multiple points of view of four protagonists, Kyuri, Miho, Ara, and Wonna, Cha uncovers the prevalence of plastic surgery and impossibly high-standard beauty industries, rigid social hierarchies, and the old boys' club culture ("where business deals are done in 'room salons'"), challenging modern-day social norms in South Korea ("About Frances Cha"). At the same time, Cha's narrative is highly contextualized: despite the differing perspectives of four local Korean women, the women's stories are filled with elucidations of Korean social norms and culture, subtly interweaved throughout the narrations and dialogue to guide non-Korean readers by the hand. Cha's exploration of the proliferation of elective plastic surgery in South Korea is moreover connected to an ideology regarding filial piety that is both ancient and deeply rooted in modern-day Korean culture. As Cha explicates, "Filial piety—'*hyo*' in Korean—is the age-old historical and traditional virtue of deep respect and support and love towards one's parents and elders. To say 'he is a *hyo-ja*' or 'she is a *hyo-nyeo*' means someone is a good son or daughter, exhibiting and living by respect that is born of gratitude to [their] parents" ("About Frances Cha"). This value of filial piety is related to traditional Korean gender norms regarding women's roles and the emphasis on children to succeed academically and financially as a repayment for their parents' sacrifices, as discussed in previous sections. In her interview with the *NYT*, Cha clarifies how Kyuri's elective plastic surgery in the novel, for example, is motivated by her desire to be a *hyo-nyeo* by providing for her ailing and widowed mother and thus to climb the social and economic ladder by getting a better job in the room-salon industry through undergoing surgery and becoming more beautiful ("About Frances Cha"). These investigations of Korean social norms not only update the reader on the mindsets of modern Koreans but unveil their inner

motivations, driven by harsh socioeconomic realities, traditional values, and existing oppressive structures.

My goals for examining Cha's novel are twofold: one, I want to explore *why* female Korean characters aspire to change their physical appearances in relation to the self-imagination of their bodies and identities; and two, I seek to observe the effects of Korean social hierarchies and how they inform and influence the women's behaviours and self-reflections. Regarding the first exploration, I discuss the conjoined implications of hyper-capitalism, consumerism, and the economic expansion of plastic surgery and beauty-related industries in contemporary South Korea. For the second examination, I take note of how such social hierarchies, rigidly divided by economic class, move stably and transnationally to and from the U.S. through the growing migration of Koreans across continents. I posit that this analysis of *IIHYF* not only provides a comparative outlook on contemporary South Korean women's experiences but informs the understanding of diasporic Korean women, who like me, are exposed to pervasive ideals of beauty and upward social and economic mobility spread across "Korean" culture and transferred through international migration, generational conflicts, and increasingly, the internet and social media.

i. Purchased in the Name of Beauty: Capitalism, Plastic Surgery, Social Mobility

The introduction to South Korea's beauty-related industries and room-salon culture unfolds through the relationship between Sujin, Ara's best friend, and Kyuri. As all four protagonists live in the same apartment building as roommates and neighbours, Kyuri is invited across the hall to Sujin and Ara's shared apartment by Sujin, who is "hell-bent on becoming a room salon girl" like Kyuri (Cha 3). As an "electrically beautiful" girl, Kyuri works at a room salon named Ajax, a so-called "10 percent" salon that "supposedly employs the prettiest 10

percent of girls in the industry” (28).³³ Sujin asks Kyuri where she got her eyes done, and Kyuri explains that the hospitals that she goes to are the “best,” the oldest hospitals “on the Beauty Belt in *Apgujeong*” where popular singers and actresses are regulars (5). The Cinderella Clinic, where Kyuri got her plastic surgery, modelled after the face of the lead singer of a girl idol group, is a highly exclusive and expensive clinic where the doctors are all said to have graduated “top of their class at Seoul National [University]” and require referrals and appointments months ahead (9-10).

Plastic surgery is only a part of the widespread beauty industry in Korea, while beauty is repeatedly described in cosmetic and manufactured terms in *IIHYF*. Listening to Sujin and Kyuri’s conversation, Ara compares the two women’s faces, noting that “the fold on [Sujin’s] right eyelid has been stitched just a little too high” and that “even apart from her asymmetrical eyelids, Sujin’s face is too square for her to ever be considered pretty in the true Korean sense” (4). On the other hand, Ara portrays Kyuri as follows:

The stitches on her double eyelids look naturally faint, while her nose is raised, her cheekbones tapered, and her entire jaw realigned and shaved into a slim v-line. Long feathery eyelashes have been planted along her tattooed eye line, and she does routine light therapy on her skin, which glistens cloudy white, like skim milk. Earlier, she was waxing on about the benefits of lotus leaf masks and ceramide supplements for budding

³³ Cha explains the function of women in South Korea’s room salons during her interview:

To start, [the room salons are] nothing like a strip club. The women are fully clothed. Every group is in a private room, which is like a very luxurious karaoke bar. The women are there more to facilitate conversations. Their business objective is to get the men to drink. Like many things in South Korea, the room salons are tiered. The top 10 percent of establishments, including where Kyuri works, charge thousands of dollars a night (“About Frances Cha”).

In addition, showing the commonality of such institutions in the shadows, Ara describes how before she met Kyuri, she had not been aware of the scale of the room salon industry, but “now that [she knows] what to look for,” she sees one on every side street, with nearly invisible entrances from the outside and nondescript signs hanging above darkened stairways, “leading to underground worlds where men pay to act like bloated kings” (4).

neck lines. The only unaltered part of her is surprisingly her hair, which unfolds like a dark river down her back (4).

The awareness of beauty as a cosmetic and industrial construction is clear in Ara's description, as she can formulaically point to features of Sujin and Kyuri's face that have been altered through consumerism. These alterations not only involve surgical procedures but cosmetic therapies and products that relate to a notion of beauty in the "true Korean sense." Despite Ara's claim that Kyuri's hair is the only unaltered part of her body, Kyuri pays routine visits to the hair salon where Ara works as a stylist, making a point to get her long hair done in natural waves according to the preferences of her clients, in a style that resembles a popular actress in a K-drama (12-13).

The proliferation of beauty in the "true Korean sense" in relation to the rise of cosmetic-surgery and beauty-related industries in South Korea has been widely studied across social science disciplines (see K.N. Koh; S. Yoon and Y.A. Kim; Seo et al.; Holiday et al.; Leem). Holiday et al. observe the popularity of the "Korean Look" in the South Korean cosmetic-surgery industry that has recently garnered international tourists: this look pertains to "a set of facial surgical procedures to widen the eyes, narrow the cheekbones and jawbones, and augment the nose tip" (191). The authors moreover suggest a unique relationship between cosmetic surgery tourism and medical nationalism in South Korea with several surgeons evoking strong national pride in their accounts of Korean surgery— "world leading medical technology and skill"—with Seoul (especially Gangnam) as "a global surgical capital" (193). The so-called "Beauty Belt" in *Apgujeong*, mentioned in *IIHYF*, is a renowned area of Gangnam, "home to more than 200 cosmetic-surgery clinics."³⁴ Kyuri and Sujin's discussions of the top doctors in

³⁴ The Beauty Belt is estimated to attract approximately 150,000 extra visitors to Seoul in 2012, nearly double the 82,000 medical tourists who visited South Korea in 2010 ("Chasing eternal youth in Seoul's Beauty Belt").

the surgical industry as consumers furthermore confirm the rhetoric of steep competition and hierarchy echoed by surgeons in the South Korean cosmetic surgery market.³⁵ As S. Kim et al. trace the rapid development of the medical tourism industry in South Korea especially since 2007, state-sanctioned efforts to promote medical tourism overseas in the southern peninsula largely began in 2009 (426).

Within these recent contexts of capitalistic markets, increasing consumerism, and nationalism pertaining to medical tourism, Taeyon Kim points out how contemporary South Korean women have channeled their drives for self-cultivation into new forms of self-improvement, centering on the body and achieved through consumption practices including makeup and cosmetic surgery (107-108). Offering evidence of the normalization of such consumption practices, especially among young women, articles in the *Korea Times* and *Korean Herald* have indicated that 60 percent of poll respondents “approve of plastic surgery as a means to improve one’s prospects” and that “up to 70 percent of plastic surgery patients are high school students” in years as early as 2000 and 2001, respectively (T. Kim 105; “Plastic Surgery Boom”; “Korea Times: Cosmetic Surgery”). Several scholars have also recognized how the practice of high school students receiving double eyelid surgery as a graduation present has become a “rite of passage” by the turn of the new millennium (T. Kim 105; Kaw 255; Zane 171-172). Meanwhile, participants in Seo et al.’s study on the “acculturative labor” of young Korean women in the face of K-beauty’s hegemonic hybridity have underscored the requirements and simultaneous effacement of beauty-related labour in the paradox of the “manufactured natural

³⁵ For example, a South Korean surgeon claims, “First, if you want to get into medical school, you should be in the top 1%, and [only] the top 1% amongst the top 1% can be a plastic surgeon. Intelligent students are in fierce competition to be a plastic surgeon. To be able to survive in the competition, plastic surgeons in Korea keep trying to study and develop surgical methods. Consequently, plastic surgery skills in Korea became the best in the world” (Holliday et al. 193).

look” practiced by K-pop celebrities (608). Examples of this effaced labour include practices of skincare, fashion, and bodywork that conceal “the fabricated dimensions of beauty” by manufacturing a “natural look” (608). The emergence of such markets and consumerism normalizing the paradox of beauty in the “true Korean sense” informs the conversations between Ara, Sujin, and Kyuri. While there may be a particularly intricate relationship between South Korean entertainment and sexualized service industries and beauty, the women’s familiarity with cosmetic surgery and beauty-related industries and their hyperawareness of beauty as a manufactured construction can be seen as a feature of the realism of the contemporary South Korean setting.

The motivations that drive women to adhere to such strict beauty standards, on the other hand, appear as their aspirations for upward social and economic mobility in Cha’s novel. Although Ara is convinced that Sujin is envious of Kyuri’s face and lifestyle “for the money,” she also speculates that Sujin is obsessed with her looks due to their shared past of growing up in an orphanage named the Loring Center (4). Ara explains that the Loring Center was also a “home for the disabled and deformed” and that everyone in the city had thought of the facility “as a circus” (8). While Sujin had told Ara that her parents died when she was a baby, Ara realizes that Sujin must have been abandoned by a girl even younger than them and thinks that perhaps “Sujin’s mother was a room salon girl too” (8). In other words, Sujin’s motivations for plastic surgery are characterized by her traumatic past of abandonment and social marginalization as she strives to achieve beauty as a status of social acceptance and tool for financial wealth. Self-aware or not, Sujin borrows money from an underground loan shark that targets room-salon girls to pursue her surgery and becomes filled with hopes and excitement, saying to Ara, “Wouldn’t it be wonderful to go to sleep at night and wake up rich every day? But

I won't spend it. Oh no. I will stay poor at heart. And that is what will keep me rich" (14). Kyuri also suspects that Sujin feels desperate to join in on her lifestyle because Sujin feels obligated to take care of Ara, who is mute from a disability and Sujin's best friend since her childhood at the Loring Center. Kyuri learns that Sujin is soon to be laid off at her flailing nail salon following her plastic surgery, and when Kyuri tries to convince Sujin to take another job instead of working at a room salon, Sujin tears up, explaining that "Ara cannot adjust to the real world. . . and [therefore] Sujin has to make as much money as she can for both of them" (91).

Turning to Kyuri, while her primary motivation for pursuing plastic surgery appears as the need to provide for her mother and to maintain her role as a *hyo-nyeo*, she recalls how even as a girl, she knew that "the only chance" she had of altering her fortunes was to change her face (30). When she sees Candy, the singer whose face served as model for Kyuri's, in the waiting area of the Cinderella Clinic, Kyuri stares at Candy to measure their likeness and feels frustrated when she notices that Candy had been crying because of the rumours and gossip that had been recently spreading about the young idol singer (30-31). Kyuri wanted to reach over and shake Candy by the shoulders: "Stop running like a fool, I wanted to say. You have so much and you can do anything you want. I would live my life so much better than you, *if I had your face*" (31). Before working at the "prettiest 10 percent" salon, Kyuri worked in the red-light district and like Sujin, borrowed money from underground moneylenders to alter her face (90-91). From this experience, she desperately wishes that Sujin not follow the same path; she describes the perpetual hardship that she had endured before she was able to receive help from a wealthy and benevolent old client, who occasionally wanted to see and lay with her naked as a reward for paying off her debts:

One minute, you are accepting loans from madams and pimps and bloodsucking moneylenders for a quick surgery to fix your face, and the next minute the debt has ballooned to a staggering, unpayable sum. You work, work, work until your body is ruined and there is no way out but to keep working. Even though you will seemingly make a lot of money, you will never be able to save because of the interest you have to repay. You will never be able to get out of it entirely. You will move to a different shop in a different city with a different madam and a different set of rules and times and expectations, but it will still be the same, and there is no escape (91).

Revealing her perpetual misfortunes, Kyuri mentions that while she lies to her benefactor that she quit the salon and will become a teacher as he “loves the story that he saved [her],” she has begun to rack up debts again from her recent touch-up surgeries (92).

Thus, the women’s motivations for pursuing plastic surgery and regularly adhering to strict beauty regimens are intertwined within manifold contexts of financial hardship, traumas of social marginalization, caring for dependents, and requirements for upward mobility—to escape inhumane conditions of exploitation and/or to attain financial stability. While the detriment of some of these contexts appear specific to the room salon industry, Miho and Wonna’s narratives unveil additional social conditions surrounding South Korean women that lead them toward whatever means necessary to achieve a semblance of social status and financial stability. As a natural beauty who is “pretty without having surgery,” Miho works as an artist in residence at a university in Seoul (54). Miho notes that she feels a “pinch of pride” when someone asks if she has had any surgery and she can say no (55). She has been described as “the naturally beautiful artist-in-residence” in articles and reviews of her artwork, and with an overt tone of vanity, Miho reveals that her department head has gone so far as to make her promise not to cut her hair,

which reaches down to her waist and has become symbolic of her beauty (55). While making a request for her to attend an upcoming luncheon for potential patrons of the university and politicians, the director of Miho's art department makes a point to mention that she is "the department's mascot" and that her presence at the luncheon is important because the "politicians can channel funds, or they can influence chaebol to set funds aside" for artists to continue creating work for the university (198-199). When Miho asks if another recipient of the same fellowship that she had received is also coming to the luncheon, the director hesitates, then says that "her work represents her better than she herself can" (199). Miho translates the meaning of the director's words in her narration: Mari, the other artist, is "near forty, divorced and overweight, which renders her entirely invisible in the eyes of Korean men of every generation" (199).

While Miho's narrative discloses how misogynistic beauty standards shape unequal opportunities for women, Wonna's point of view offers a glimpse into the hypercompetitive and unaccommodating South Korean workplace environments that further oppress women into survival mode. Wonna is a newer tenant in the same building as Ara, Miho, and Kyuri, and lives with her recently married husband. She is pregnant with her first child after the trauma of three miscarriages in the same year and feels more anxious about her pregnancy than excited, due not only to the fear of losing her child but to concerns of financial stability and pressures against women at work. Surrounded by overt sexism and misogyny, Wonna is cautious to reveal her pregnancy at work in her New Product Development role. Upon requesting a personal day for a medical check-up, her male department head raps her on the head with a rolled-up sheaf of paper, commenting in a loud voice for the entire department to hear, "As everyone knows, this is why women can't advance" (114). Wonna identifies her immediate boss, Miss Chun, as "a

thirty-seven-year-old unmarried woman” and explains how she feels sorry for her despite the boss’ cruelty and ineptitude in the office, because department heads and chiefs would routinely take jabs at “why no one has married her” during team dinners in Miss Chun’s presence (119). Wonna describes that “the men [would] take turns dissecting her height (too tall), her education (too threatening), her personality (too strong), her clothes (too dark), and start offering advice about how to attract a man (in corporate cute mannerisms in speech)” (119). When Miss Chun discovers that Wonna is pregnant, she looks at Wonna disapprovingly and asks wearily, “I don’t think it’ll be quite fair for you to take a long maternity leave when your colleagues will all be working to save their livelihoods, do you? Especially when we don’t have the headcount to add anyone else?” (227). Wonna’s boss explains matter-of-factly that due to a company-wide hiring freeze, she cannot replace Wonna but at the same time, if the team does not deliver on their quarterly results, the entire team will be laid off, except for herself, due to her seniority. As a result, granting Wonna a maternity leave of three months if she “absolutely must take a maternity leave,” Miss Chun emphasizes that Wonna should not apply for any more time in order not to put the team in jeopardy (228).

These diverse narratives in Cha’s novel show the inseparable relationship between beauty and women’s desperation for social and economic mobility. While women are stuck in the transition from neo-Confucian ideals of femininity such as subservience and reproductive destiny to new consumerist identity in beauty-related markets, as Holliday et al. explains, “[cosmetic] surgery in Korea is still largely about embodied capital, conceived colloquially as *kyorhon songhyong* (‘marriage cosmetic surgery’) and *chig’op songhyong* (‘employment cosmetic surgery’)” (192; see T. Kim; Leem). Plastic surgery is therefore seen as a “life investment” in South Korea, according to a Korean Surgeon: “[Korean people] would like to match their looks

to their social status. They also have varied aims: some would like to get a good job; some would like to marry; some would like to become musicians or actors in the entertainment industry” (Holliday et al. 192). Although this “life investment” becomes more important for those working in jobs and industries that relate to their looks, the association between beauty and upward socioeconomic mobility is widely accepted by both South Korean women and men, as men growingly participate in cosmetic surgery “to connote a softer, more amenable masculinity” (192; see Holiday and Elfving-Hwang). Nevertheless, due to widespread gender discrimination in the workplace and the restriction of women’s gender roles through traditional Confucian values, social norms for women’s beauty are still much more prevalent than men in South Korea (see S. Kim and Y. Lee; J.H. Kim et al.; Holliday and Elfving-Hwang). For example, Holliday and Elfving-Hwang note that having “the ‘right face’ can be crucial in ‘marrying well’” and “can also be a determining factor in gaining employment in a Korean job market” (73). A photograph is a requirement for all job applications, and physiognomy—having a “friendly” (*insaing’i choun*) facial feature—is often used to evaluate candidates as a normal part of the recruitment process (73). Sunwoo Kim and Yuri Lee also point out how the restriction of women’s roles according to patriarchal values have caused men to “concentrate on women’s appearance rather than on their abilities or personalities when choosing a spouse” and to prefer “soft and feminine images” of women (15).

Within these competitive social norms of beauty, South Korean women are increasingly participating in the job market and becoming an economic provider for their households, despite the lack of accommodations for family planning and more precarious work conditions for women. The population of South Korean women in the labour market has steadily increased from 42.8 percent of women in employment in 1980 to 50 percent in 2005, although this rise has

been accompanied by greater disparity in employment quality (Korean National Statistical Office; see H.Y. Kim and Hong; H.J. Min). Employment instability and income inequality commonly characterize the labour market inequalities and job precariousness affecting South Korean women, and the Korean government's expenditure on maternity and paternal leave per child born is considered one of the lowest among OECD countries (Bonneuil and Kim 22; J.H. Kim et al. 2). According to a nationally representative study, 58.2 percent of working women reported suffering from income-related gender discrimination, compared to 5.2 percent of men, and 79.3 percent of women reported experiencing gender discrimination in terms of promotion opportunities, in comparison to 3.9 percent of men (S.S. Kim and Williams 7). Moreover, a striking 70 percent of South Korean women working in paid jobs are not covered by family leave benefits due to their temporary employment conditions or their status as contingent workers, and many women choose not to use eligible benefits due to factors including "the fear that they may be viewed as less loyal or committed, thereby jeopardizing future promotions, merit recognition, or wage increases" ("Unstable Jobs"; Jang et al. 102-103). These challenging workplace conditions for women decreasing their financial stability and feelings of social acceptance in tandem with the radical alternative for women to succumb to their fates in marriage and domestic roles perpetually and paradoxically affect their sense of self and reliance on manufactured beauty.

What is further problematic and revelatory about women's understanding of beauty in Cha's novel is their internalization of social comparison and belief in beauty as a means for empowerment. In other words, the social norms of beauty built at the intersection of capitalism, consumerism, patriarchy, and competitive and discriminatory labour markets have become a normal part of South Korean women's self-imagination and identity location, in comparison to

other women, often without the recognition of their roots. In “Why do women want to be beautiful?” (2018), an investigation of the underlying reasons women desire to be beautiful in South Korean, Chinese, and Japanese cultures, Sunwoo Kim and Yuri Lee determine that Korean women frequently refer to superiority, “the pursuit of relatively superior competitiveness to surpass others with appearance and physical beauty,” as a value underlying their desired perception of women’s physical beauty, much more so than other East Asian participants (9-10). The authors infer that superiority is a prevailing perception in South Korea due to its hypercompetitive society: “[since] social competition for limited resources and the social power of appearance has intensified in the past decade, Korean women have gradually believed that they could achieve more with limited social resources through social beauty” (10). Moreover, a significantly higher number (77.78%) of Korean interviewees mentioned social competition of appearance during the focus group interviews, indicating a prominent belief in the “social empowerment of beauty,” implying that “beautiful women have more social opportunities than less beautiful women” (14). In the novel, Kyuri describes the ugliness of an older madam at her room salon that makes other girls look prettier and claims that she does not understand “ugly people,” especially “if they have money”: she asks, while studying herself in the mirror, “Are they stupid. . . Are they perverted?” (13). As roommates, Kyuri and Miho have also fought because Kyuri had accused Miho of “feeling superior” because Miho was “pretty without having surgery” (54). Although Miho denies the accusations, she internally admits feeling proud when she can admit to being a “natural” beauty (55). In their respective narratives, Miho describes Kyuri as “painfully plastic,” while Kyuri refers to Miho as “pretty but not to the level of perfection you can achieve with surgery” (53; 96). Miho furthermore easily comprehends and accepts the meaning of her department director’s words when he excludes the other, less

attractive female fellowship recipient from the luncheon. These examples and more disclose how the deeply rooted internalization of superiority, comparison, and empowerment attached to beauty shape not only the female characters' perceptions of themselves but their hierarchical organization of other women in relation to the self-positioning of their own identities.

In her interview, Cha points out that “in South Korea, there are very real and practical reasons people have plastic surgery” in opposition to the American and Western ideas about “remaining true to yourself,” and thus, asks her readers to “reserve their judgement” on this matter (“About Frances Cha”). The author’s plea reveals her awareness of international readers and the need for contextualization to fully comprehend the characterization and plot of her novel, immersed in themes of beauty and plastic surgery. As I have introduced Cha as a transnational author at the beginning of the section, *IIHYF* serves as a difficult novel to place within neat nationalistic categories of a “Korean,” “Korean American,” or “diasporic Korean” novel, given the author’s identity as a Korean American with a range of transnational experiences, the novel’s South Korean setting and characterization, its original publication in English, and its self-reflexive understanding of its audience as non-Korean readers. In these ways, reading *IIHYF* inherently requires a lens outside of the nationalistic framework as the novel not only informs the identities of contemporary women in South Korea from an inside-out perspective but the interest and familiarity of a diasporic Korean woman examining women’s conditions in South Korea as an outside-in point of view. From this simultaneous embodiment of insider and outsider perspectives, the novel portrays the identities of South Korean women as being shaped by a unique set of local and historical conditions and furthermore through the internalization and normalization of such conditions over time. These embedded conditions influencing women’s identity can be transferred fluidly to diasporic settings, as will be discussed further in the next

section regarding the transnational movement of class between South Korea and the U.S. Then, as a diasporic Korean reader in Canada, Cha's depiction of "Korean" beauty standards and their impact on women's identities offers a nuanced outlook on the surfacing of such conditions within my own self-imagination and interactions with other Korean-born women in Canada. This effect of the novel on the diasporic critic exhibits another insider-outsider duality—the novel presents a guide, one of many, to understanding contemporary Korean women simultaneously and empathetically as "me" and "them."

ii. If I Had Your "Place": Transnational Class and Social Hierarchy

Forms of social hierarchy in *IIHYF* are rigid, impenetrable, and yet, transferrable across borders. Like in many modern capitalist nations, hierarchical organizations of people in South Korea are common, most visible in unequal distributions of wealth and social polarization. As depicted in the novel, from neighbourhoods and hospitals to room salons and schools, many structures are tiered in South Korean society. Since the early 1980s, inequality in the Korean economy has reached unprecedented levels, triggering gaps in income, consumption, and education between the rich and the poor, with the most striking and widening gaps in employment status and income level across labour markets (Yun 269). As many scholars and policy makers point to such inequalities as the result of a structural phenomenon, the legacy of *chaebol*-friendly economic development strategies during past authoritarian regimes has been often identified as a factor (269). Hagen Koo notices further that income distribution in Korea in the past two decades has shown polarising trends that have led to "internal division within the working class and the blurring boundary between the working class and the middle class" (2). One such polarising trends is the large income gap between regular or standard workers and non-regular, non-standard, workers, and another is the difference between "a minority of top income

earners and the rest of the labour force” with 80 to 90 percent in the bottom of the income hierarchy (2). In these socioeconomic hierarchies, the boundaries between tiers are socially constructed as unbending through several factors including differences in consumption, social status, the legacy and insularity of wealthy families, as well as the marginalization and exclusion of lower economic classes.

In the novel, the operations of capital-driven hierarchical relationships among women’s interactions are overtly noticeable. Even among the four narrators, the social acceptability and status of Miho and Wonna, considered as standard workers, are different from Ara and Kyuri, who hold more precarious positions as non-standard workers. Despite being roommates, Miho remarks that “anyone who is remotely respectable would die in horror” before they would be seen with Kyuri, although she respects her roommate’s ability to save and manage her money (54). On the other hand, when Kyuri’s friend who works in the room-salon industry, Nami, meets Miho, Kyuri notes that Nami feels intimidated by Miho “because Miho lived in America until recently and she has a real job at a university being an artist” (94). Miho’s repulsion toward Kyuri partially results from the perception of immorality attached to women working in sexualized-service industries in addition to the inferiority of Kyuri’s condition as a precarious worker. In turn, Nami’s intimidation around Miho is shaped by the higher and foreign education status associated with Miho’s respectable employment at a university.

The social disparities between the wealthy and low-to-middle class are furthermore distinctly portrayed in Kyuri and Miho’s narratives. Kyuri observes the entrance of a young “expensively dressed” woman in her room at the room salon, noticing that her dress, which has appeared in the latest issue of a women’s magazine, is “the same price as a year’s rent” (18). Kyuri additionally describes the woman’s appearance as follows: “Up close, I could see that her

face was devoid of surgery—her eyes were single-lidded and her nose was flat. I would not have been caught dead walking around with a face like that. But clearly, from the way she walked and held her head, she came from the kind of money that didn't need any" (19). In this description, wealth appears to trump beauty in the hierarchical organization of women, despite the earlier emphasis on beauty as a significant measuring stick for women's sense of superiority. As the woman turns out to be a friend of Kyuri's regular male client in the room, Kyuri turns into a silent ghost, readily excluded from the remainder of the conversation, as her client and the woman discuss their unique problems of financial privilege, with a seemingly impenetrable barrier left in between Kyuri and them. As another example, when Miho meets the mother of her boyfriend, Hanbin, who belongs to a *chaebol* family, the mother asks Miho among other condescending remarks, "It's just so wonderful; how there are so many opportunities these days for *people like you*, isn't it? Our country has become such an encouraging place" (59).

These rigid social hierarchies, formed within domestic structural conditions in South Korea, are moreover seen as traversing and transferring neatly across borders into the U.S. through Korean migration in Cha's novel. Some examples can be seen in Miho's encounters with an exclusive group of wealthy Koreans during her study abroad at the School of Visual Arts (hereon referred to as SVA) in New York. While Miho represents the low-to-middle class as an orphan raised in the Loring Center and studying abroad through the aid of a charity-based, visual-arts scholarship, the friends that she meets in New York embody the Korean upper class, routinely shopping on Fifth Avenue, owning and living in luxurious apartments, and hosting exclusive, bespoke parties in bars and hotels. Upon arriving in the U.S., Miho describes her bewilderment with discovering "so many Koreans so at home in the streets and cafes and stores of New York—and in the hallways and classrooms of SVA—for whom studying abroad and

traveling back and forth by themselves were commonplace occurrences,” including some that had been doing so since they were children (66). During her interactions with many Korean students in New York, Miho is frequently asked questions such as what part of Korea or which neighbourhood she is from as well as which schools she had attended before arriving at SVA. Nevertheless, when Miho identifies her public middle school and hometown in Korea to another Korean student at SVA, Miho notices that “[the student’s] eyebrows bounced sky high before she turned swiftly back to her phone” (68). Miho appears accustomed to this differential treatment and the recognition of her “inferior” status even in a diasporic setting. Upon reflecting that she did not care and that she could not have lied about her school anyway, Miho describes her acceptance of the interaction as follows:

For all its millions of people, Korea is the size of a fishbowl and someone is always looking down on someone else. That’s just the way it is in this country, and the reason why people ask a series of rapid-fire questions the minute they meet you. Which neighborhood do you live in? Where did you go to school? Where do you work? Do you know so-and-so? They pinpoint where you are on the national status, then spit you out in a heartbeat (68).

While Miho’s internal justification elucidates the hierarchical assessment of Koreans in the domestic arena, there is a lack of consciousness regarding her geographical and cultural position in the U.S. The understanding of her identity within rigid structures of Korean social hierarchy remains unaltered, exposing the neat transference of Korean political forms impacting women’s identity construction in a transnational setting.

The manifestation and effects of the South Korean social hierarchy in the U.S. moreover reveal interesting dynamics through the collision of local and emerging forms of race and capital.

As Miho befriends Ruby, the daughter of SeoLim Group, one of the wealthiest conglomerates in Korea and the sponsor of Miho's visual arts scholarship, she becomes mesmerized by the extravagance of Ruby's lifestyle and her seemingly untouchable status, even among non-Koreans. While working at Ruby's art gallery as a part-time assistant, Miho discovers that other female Korean coworkers from different renowned U.S. universities, including the Parsons School of Design and NYU Tisch School of the Arts, had applied for the same job although they came from wealthy families, only because they wanted to meet Ruby (67). Meanwhile, Ruby responds "coolly and monosyllabically" to her workers, which breeds resentment and rumours such as that "[the] dean loves her because of all the donations her father made" and that Ruby's father had only made such donations "because she didn't get into Stanford like everyone else in their family" (67–68). Miho further observes that when a "finance type" Caucasian man, in a "well-cut suit," attempts to strike a conversation with Ruby while complimenting her beauty in a restaurant, she remains aloof and quiet, which results in the sullen man walking away, muttering "bitch" under his breath (69). Requesting Miho to take a picture of the man the next time a similar occurrence happens, Ruby remarks, clenching her jaw, "How dare he think he can just walk up and talk to me?" (70). Additionally, the only other non-Korean Miho notes in her narrative of New York is a "blond, uniformed bartender" serving drinks to otherwise all-Korean guests at a SoHo apartment party, hosted by one of Ruby's wealthy Korean friends (131). Although this mention is brief, in these interactions between upper-class Koreans and White Americans in Miho's narrative, notions of racial hierarchy and White supremacy are subtly disrupted in both Korean women's self-understanding and in the representation of labourer and employer relationships. The "at home" presence and economic power of wealthy Korean students in prestigious private colleges and universities in the U.S. furthermore paint a radically

different picture from earlier depictions of racialized Korean immigrants concentrated in impoverished Canadian neighbourhoods as seen in *KLCV*.

The hyperawareness of social hierarchies among Koreans in both domestic and diasporic settings contextualize the influence of class differences on women's identities as well as the economic diversity of Korean populations in Canada and the U.S. In Miho's memory, Ruby is vividly "lounging on her white sofa in her Tribeca apartment, caressing a piece of jewellery she had bought that day, surrounded by impossibly beautiful things" (65). While the glorious image of Ruby is preserved in Miho's mind like royalty, Miho is continually awed by the "impossible" wealth that envelops her in New York, viscerally aware of its foreignness and her unbelonging. Upon entering a house party in a "soaring loft" filled with upholstered velvet sofas and an "enormous chandelier dripping with red crystals," Miho notes, "I was still not used to the interiors of this world—that of the wealthy Koreans in America. The strange, lavish use of colors in this apartment bewildered and overwhelmed me. Even the scent was heavy and unusual. . . I had never smelled anything like it before, but it was expensive, I could divine that immediately" (131). Even among her closest friends, she recounts her feelings of drowning in panic in an "alien world," while she assumes that they too had been fascinated by her foreignness, terror, and insecurity: "They'd never seen anyone so raw before and they must have marvelled at me. They cloaked themselves so well with assurance, smug and luminous" (135). The alienness described by Miho in these moments betrays her constant feelings of inferiority, in relation to her process of identity construction through social and economic comparison. Despite being surrounded by Koreans in the U.S., Miho renders herself as foreign as though she neither belongs in the ethnic group among her nor the American setting she is in. Miho's emotions of unbelonging and internalized identity as a visible outsider triggered by economic class differences among Koreans

in North America present a stimulating comparison to similar feelings of Korean women arising within encounters of racial differences, as depicted in *KLCV* and *OSNNR*.

Finally, these representations of Miho in contrast to other wealthy Korean international students in the U.S. point to a lack in scholarship on the social effects of economic disparities among diasporic Koreans in the U.S. and Canada as both permanent and temporary residents. While scholars have acknowledged the increasing population of Korean international students in North America, especially since the late-1990s,³⁶ little attention has been given to the economic diversity of this group as well as the impact of economic disparities on the relationships and identities of diasporic Koreans. Due to the staggering costs of post-secondary education in Canada and especially in the U.S.³⁷ as well as the living costs associated with studying abroad, predictions can be drawn about the economic status of tuition-paying international students financially supported by their families in South Korea. Moreover, in the case of pre-college study students in Canada, Hyunjung Shin points out how they have “constructed themselves as new transnational subjects, *yuhaksaeng* (visa students), who are wealthy, modern, and cosmopolitan, distinguishing themselves from both long-term immigrants in local Korean diasporic communities and Canadians” (101). In *KLCV*, the comparable differences in consumption and lifestyles between Koreans living in (or recently arrived from) South Korea and long-term Korean immigrants in Canada also appear through characters such as the family of a wealthy international student in Toronto, Joon-Ho, and Mary’s relatives in Korea. These common representations between the two novels furthermore highlight the need to pay attention to the

³⁶ Between 2014 and 2015, out of the majority of international students arriving in the U.S. from Asian nations (57.4 percent in total), South Korea placed third in terms of the number of arrived students, behind China and India, with 6.5 percent (J.T. Young 433). In Canada, South Korea was the “leading source of international student inflows to Canada” in the 1990s, and in 2008, Korean students accounted for approximately 18 percent of total foreign student inflows that year with 13,941 students in total (Kwak 90).

³⁷ The recruitment of international students is highly lucrative for U.S. universities as international students contributed nearly \$45 billion to the U.S. economy in 2018 (Andrade 132; “Economic Impact”).

economic and social relations among various groups of diasporic Koreans in North America, often divided and consolidated simply by categories of legal status.

VII. Older Sister Not Necessarily Related

i. From Transnational Adoption to Becoming “Korean”

Frankly put, approaching *OSNNR* demands the most empathy out of me as a reader and critic out of the three narratives studied in this chapter. As a way of answering why, in the memory of me and my tutee in the bar, I vividly recall the internal tension I felt when the White man asked where we were from. It would have made sense to say that we were both “from Korea”; after all, as a 1.5 generation immigrant, it was the truth, and it would have quickly satisfied the man’s implied point of curiosity. Nevertheless, I resisted the urge because in that moment, I desperately wanted to be seen as a “Canadian,” an identity that I had understood as having an “equal” status to the White man standing in front of me, and a “privilege” that I had deservedly earned from the years of putting up with the kind of reality that was facing me in that moment. I wanted to be seen apart from the Other, “Korean” woman sitting across the table; I had predicted that she would be more certain of her identity and “where” she was from even before she spoke. In that moment, despite the years of appeasing my mother’s demands for the “Korean way” of womanhood, I was firmly planted in being “Canadian,” while across the square border, *she* was “Korean.” Since as far back as I can remember, identity was imposed on me in such binary terms. However, especially in the first decade of my life in Canada, I was happy to oblige to such binary approaches, as I could easily code-switch between being “Korean” or “Canadian” by tapping into the vestiges of the “old” culture left in me or the new, growing part of me as the “almost-White” model minority that gave me a pseudo-sense of belonging. In *OSNNR* then, contrary to my earlier experiences of *feeling* as both “Korean” and “Canadian,”

Jenny discloses her memories of feeling like neither. If *KLCV* reminds me of my own experiences of growing up in the ghettos of Toronto as a racial minority immigrant and *IIHYF* feels familiar due to my internalizations of South Korean social norms regarding beauty and economic hierarchies, *OSNNR* is most foreign to me because it tells a story about “becoming Korean.” I realized after reading *OSNNR* that when the White man had asked me where I was from, it was because I *knew* the answer that I did not want to answer him. In Jenny’s narrative, I find the opposite experience—of not knowing the place that she is from, the place that had seemingly rejected and abandoned her as an infant, and the place that keeps changing faster than she can reconcile her traumatizing past.

I examine Wills’ narrative in this chapter particularly because it enlarges the purview of transnational Korean women in Canada and furthermore exposes a gap in the study of Korean Canadians. As the first memoir of a Korean adoptee in Canada, *OSNNR* provides a literary and auto-ethnographical account of Jenny’s childhood trauma, the struggles of meeting her Korean, first parents, and her attempts to reconcile her identity through necessarily transnational and transracial frames of negotiation. In addition, Jenny’s experiences of racism in Canada or confusion and marginalization in South Korea resemble the encounters of other female characters in *KLCV* or *IIHYF*, thereby exposing some similarities in the realities of transnational Korean women, regardless of their family relationships, legal or economic status, and/or language abilities in Korean or English. I pursue the investigation of *OSNNR* through three steps: firstly, by providing a brief history of transnational Korean adoption and an analysis of the memoir form; secondly, exploring Jenny’s experiences of racialization and socialization as an “unidentified Asian” in Canada; and thirdly, by tracing her processes of “becoming Korean”

through her attempts to learn the language, culture, and history of Korea while reconciling her past trauma with her first and second families.

ii. Issues of Transnational Korean Adoption and Contextualizing the Memoir Form

Transnational adoption from Korea began after the Korean War in 1953, as the war separated as many as ten million Koreans from their family members and served as the germinal event for the splitting of over tens of thousands of Korean children from their biological parents through adoption abroad (Park Nelson, ““Eligible Alien Orphan”” in *Invisible Asians*). In the U.S., although the broadly understood narrative of “the child orphaned by war and rescued through adoption by benevolent Americans” found its roots through this first generation of adoptees, the percentage of Korean American population adopted before 1962 represents only a tiny fraction of the total (less than 4 percent) (““Eligible Alien Orphan””). The practice of transnational adoption became cemented by the founding of what is now known as Holt International by an American evangelical Christian, Harry Holt, in 1956, and grew through the combination of earlier humanitarian efforts by U.S. soldiers and missionaries during the Korean War as well as the imagery of Korean children as devastated orphans in a war-torn country in popular American magazines (Walton 42; see Park Nelson; Oh). More than 167,000 children have been placed in adopted families in Western countries since the beginning of Korean transnational adoption, and the U.S. received the highest numbers between 1953 and 2008 with 109,242 adoptees, while approximately 2,181 adoptees arrived in Canada between 1967 and 2008 (Walton 42; E.J. Kim 21; see Hübinette; Ministry of Health and Welfare). While there is a growing study of Korean transnational adoptees in the U.S., the examination of the experiences of their counterpart in Canada has remained largely missing until Wills’ memoir.

Transnational adoption has been raised as an issue among polarized gazes in both the West and South Korea over the past few decades, running the gamut of views from its consideration as “a neo-imperialistic perpetuation of gender, race, and class-based inequalities on a global scale” to “a blindly sentimental perspective that sees it as an incontrovertible good or a necessary humanitarian rescue of the world’s neediest orphans” (E.J. Kim 3). Meanwhile, even decades after the end of the Korean War, transnational adoption in Korea has been ongoing, accelerating to an annual average of over five-thousand children being sent for overseas adoption in the late 1970s and 1980s, and with approximately two-thousand adoptees leaving the country each year between 1991 and 2006 (E.J. Kim 21; see Hübinette; “Domestic and foreign adoption”). Eleana J. Kim notes that by the 1970s, “transnational adoption became an institutionalized welfare practice in many nations and a naturalized ‘choice’ for individuals in Euro-American West,” largely due to the success of the Korean transnational adoption model (5). Despite being ranked as the world’s thirteenth largest economy in measurements of GDP in 2007 and having the lowest birthrate in the world in 2008, South Korea earned its reputation as “the Cadillac of adoption programs” through its long history of overseas adoption and advanced medical services and streamlined processes that “ensure healthy infants within a short period of time” (2-3).

Therefore, in the case of transnational adoption in Korea, Jessica Walton confronts several dominant narratives that reduce the complexity of adoption experiences and the emotional labour of adoptees. As a part of her three-pronged approach, Walton asserts that the dominant narrative of “rescue” “neglects the fact that the majority of adoptions did not occur in the aftermath of the Korean War and that transnational adoptions continue to happen despite Korea’s status as an Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD)

member since 1996” (25). Moreover, she posits that the “rags-to-riches” narrative neglects to comprehend the local circumstances that make children “available” for adoption by focusing on a perceived material disparity between the birth and adoptive countries (25). Finally, she challenges the “supply/demand logic” of adoption narratives that “obscures the potential questionable ethics involved that relate to, but are not limited to, issues of informed consent, monetary motivations, and institutional corruption that structure adoption practice” (26; see Smolin). The problematic effects of these dominant narratives and Walton’s arguments will be examined in and applied to my analysis of *OSNNR*.

It is also worthwhile to discuss the significance of *OSNNR*’s literary form as a memoir. Thomas Larson suggests that a memoir is “a book that emphasizes the *who* over the *what*—the shown over the summed, the found over the known, the recent over the historical, the emotional over the reasoned” (“From Autobiography to Memoir” in *The Memoir and the Memoirist*). The memoir form dually engages in a practice of auto-ethnography while fleshing out its emotional immediacy. The memoir takes the reader beyond the historical to the writing subject’s emotional journey, through selective and often fragmented memories. Considering that all three narratives of women studied in this chapter are inspired by the lived experiences of the writers, the memoir form in *OSNNR* strikes as the most raw and “authentic” account of a woman’s search for identity. Nevertheless, as Larson claims, “no matter how telescoped our thematic and emotional emphasis is, the story is still *a* story: it is subjective and distinct, a melody with the barest orchestration. It cannot be *the* record of *the* past as autobiography tries to be. . . . Despite its rightness, it’s a version of, perhaps a variation on, what happened” (“From Autobiography to Memoir”; italics in original). For many readers to whom transnational adoption is an unfamiliar

experience, *OSNNR* allows a more empathetic and intimate understanding of the traumas of displacement, loss, and cultural collisions.

The reader is further engaged through a series of unclaimed letters written by Jenny and addressed to *unni* (“older sister” in Korean), Jenny’s half-sister, whom Jenny never meets in South Korea. As Kate de Medeiros suggests, the letter form exudes a sense of the “everyday,” as “one may write a letter to a friend without giving conscious thought to what types of details should be included in that letter, simply because the letter form is so familiar and/or recognizable” (160). In Wills’ memoir, the letters betray the writer’s deepest emotions of sadness, anger, confusion, and longing. Through a familiar and intimate form, Jenny’s letters to *unni* appear as the rawest moments of her stream-of-consciousness, and at the same time, reveal key contexts required by the reader, who like *unni* does not comprehend the traumas of transnational adoption, to walk a mile in Jenny’s shoes. I argue that this combination of the memoir form interlaid with the letter form effectively portrays the emotional labour of transnational adoptees, triggering affective and emotional experiences from the reader.

iii. Lost and Found: the “Unidentified Asian” in Canada

But the construction of a relative self in the memoir is no less difficult: the person writing now is inseparable from the person the writer is remembering then. The goal is to disclose what the author is discovering about these persons. But such a goal can arise only in the writing of the memoir, a discovery which then becomes the story.

—Thomas Larson, “From Autobiography to Memoir” in *The Memoir and the Memoirist*

Jenny who writes her memoir and Jenny who appears in her memories seem like different people. Considered as an “unidentified Asian” until she was suddenly labelled as “a Korean girl” by her peers in school at the age of seven, young Jenny was visible yet not seen, legally belonging to a community, and yet, perceived as a perpetual black sheep. Jenny recounts a memory of a flight from Florida when she was eight: the flight attendant asked her where she

was from, and Jenny told her South Korea. Everyone laughed because the attendant meant to ask where Jenny was flying home to that day—the final destination after her connection. Jenny realizes two things from this moment: one, that she was so accustomed to strangers asking her where she was from; and two, that she needs to teach herself, when she is grown up, “to refuse to answer that question depending on who [is] asking,” because “being *visible* isn’t the same thing as being *seen*” (139). As the memoir begins at her “rebirth” during her visit to South Korea to meet her first family, Wills’ narrative can be seen as the process of Jenny’s gradual self-identification after discovering her roots, by reliving her past traumas and re-locating her childhood in Canada where she was visible, like an eyesore, and yet, unseen.

Jenny’s experiences during her youth and adolescence are characterized by routine racialization, and at the same time, socialization as White. As Park Nelson explains, “Transnational adoptees, unlike children in other immigrant families, often are exposed to native country culture, when it is addressed at all, through dominant culture interpretations, without any adoptee, immigrant, or person-of-color perspective” (153). As the only person of colour in the family, Jenny is isolated, although her adoptive parents apply a colour-blind approach to being “forgetful” of her differences in their upbringing. Jenny recalls receiving a pale, blue-eyed doll with short black hair as a childhood Christmas gift from her adoptive parents as they said, “*It looks like you*” (133-134; italics in original). While Jenny grew up in a small town with a large German Canadian community, her adoptive mother had once recommended Jenny to audition to be Miss Oktoberfest in her late teens. Jenny recalls “having no response” for her adoptive mother:

It wasn’t because I was opposed to pageants. And it wasn’t because I thought those girls were more beautiful than me. But to put things into perspective, look through any of the

archives that feature photographs of the young women who've been crowned with this honour. It seems obvious why that contest, and really that town, wasn't for me (148). Thus, despite being raised in a White family, Jenny is hyperaware of her physical and racial differences, especially as her frequent encounters with racism and racialization cause her to internalize her sense of alien-ness.

Walton highlights how for many Korean adoptees, the “embodied experience of a white identity due to being racially and culturally socialized in white adoptive families is contested by the fact that they are not socially perceived as white, and instead become ‘Asian’ through a racialization of their bodies” (68). Jenny remembers how she “disappeared into a life of cream-of-mushroom casseroles, Irish setters, and patent leather Sunday school shoes” as a child, illustrating further, “I was buried under Bach concertos, feathered bangs, and maple sugar candy until my own mother wouldn't have recognized me” (3). Despite this so-called burial, or whitewashing, of her identity, Jenny is considered first as an “unidentified Asian” then as a “Korean girl” in her elementary school when the 1988 Olympics were hosted in Seoul (135). She notes how suddenly, she was expected to answer for a country and culture that she had never known as she “transformed into a Korean girl overnight” to her teachers and other children at school, “who trusted post-racial mottoes that [they're] all the same” (135). While as an “unidentified Asian,” Jenny “laughed along when someone pulled their eyes back and said *chop suey* or *chicken chow mein* with a certain tone in their voice,” as a “Korean girl,” she encounters her classmates sing-songing “nonsense words they thought they'd heard on the news” and demonstrating “fake-out martial-art chops” and leaping crane kicks (135; italics in original). Once, one of her teachers asked Jenny to defend “Korean dog-eating” under the horrified gaze of her class, while her classmates called her a “dog-eater” from that day onward (135).

Such racism and racialization follow Jenny wherever she goes, worsening in her years of adolescence, as she describes that she had been ill-prepared for her unexpected launch into “Asian womanhood” by herself (144). Jenny explains, “The world saw me differently the more I had to stand alone as an adolescent Korean girl because without my parents on either side, my proximate whiteness dissolved away” (144). Gendered dimensions combine with her ongoing experiences of racialization as she notes that men began to look at her in a different way than other girls in the class and that she became aware of the “storylines they loved” and the “pornography they watched” (144). In her letters to *unni*, Jenny reveals emotionally that the first boy she had kissed had wordlessly left her after someone had said to him, “I bet she looks like this”: filling in the blanks, Jenny imagines a face with “buck teeth and pulled-back eyes” (145). Jenny’s boyfriends in high school are furthermore met with disapproval from their parents or friends, as cousins would explain to them that Jenny is not “good enough” to hang around their family and childhood friends would describe Jenny as seeming “sneaky” (148). Even while walking around with her father, Jenny is met with whispers and glances around town, as one day, she recalls a hardware store clerk asking if the rakes Jenny and her father were buying were “his and hers,” while “White women averted their gaze” and White men stared without shame and with ardent curiosity (147).

Apart from these encounters with racism and racialization, Jenny’s identity is further dislocated through her knowledge and trauma as a transnational adoptee. As Walton argues,

Korean adoptees’ experiences highlight a particular embodied experience in which their subjective sense of self is continuously disrupted not only through others’ perceptions of their racialized bodies but also how this deeply embodied sense of self raises further

ontological questions about who they are, including their family history before adoption—information that many adoptees live without or have very little of (69).

Jenny describes that according to schoolyard rumours in her youth, her Korean mother was a sex worker, and her Korean father was a fisherman. The rumour ascribed that her mother was poor, her father was unmarried, and that Jenny had two older brothers on her father's side, which was why the Korean parents had decided to send Jenny, a girl, away (7). Meanwhile, Jenny is aware that her Canadian parents had considered Vietnam before adopting from Korea but that transnational adoption from Vietnam was closed to Canadians, and thus, Jenny arrived at their household because "[they] didn't care" and "just wanted to help" (7). After her first visit to Korea, Jenny furthermore learns that there was a baby named So Young that had died before her adoption which gave way for Jenny to be adopted in So Young's place. Jenny feels drawn to So Young, as she considers that she had become So Young, "Because she died in a whisper, an inconvenience in the transaction" (118). These mixed narratives and discoveries of her adoption and family histories trigger Jenny's acts of remembering and attempts at rendering herself visible through filling in the gaps of her self-knowledge and (re)writing her narrative. In another letter to *unni*, Jenny moreover reveals her emerging sense of self through the location of her subjectivity within the broader history of Korean transnational adoption:

Unni. . . It resonates a lot these days, that we are who we were scraped up from the floor of orphanages and churches and hospitals and sent alone to new families and cultures and lands are members of a lost generation. We're a blip on the history of your country, a nation that seems millennia older than the countries to which we were sent. . . When this ends—and it will end, I promise you—a memorial will be built and maybe pages will

be added to grade-school textbooks. And we'll continue to vanish, to die one by one, many of us with the words why me? on our lips (23; italics in original).

iv. Finding Visibility: “Becoming Korean”

Jenny’s accounts of her identity formation amidst Canadian contexts of socialization and racialization as well as Korean history of transnational adoption therefore reveal similar and dissimilar experiences as other transnational Korean women studied in this chapter. One of the ways that Jenny’s encounters radically differ from theirs is her journey toward “becoming Korean,” as she variously attempts to learn the language and culture of her “home” and to (re)build a relationship with her first Korean family. Through this depiction of Jenny, another layer of the diversity and intersectionality of the Korean diaspora in Canada is uncovered. Jenny learns how to become “Korean” as well as to be a Korean transnational adoptee without constant question marks and feelings of abandonment in her later years. Although Jenny’s search for “Korean Way” began in Canada during her university years before her first visit to Korea, Jenny feels alien and unfamiliar upon her arrival. As she not only connects with her long-lost family but with other transnational Korean adoptees and the history of Korean adoption overseas, Jenny learns to embody “the Korean girl” that she had been in the eyes of others long before her self-discovery began. Her search for “Korean-ness” in Canada also exposes forms of discrimination that she had experienced among other Korean Canadians, such as from a Korean language instructor in Quebec. These encounters of discrimination among Koreans disclose further feelings of inadequacy and difference engendering a loss of community and belonging for transnational adoptees. In contrast to Choi and Cha’s narratives that share women’s simultaneous rebellion against and longing to follow “the Korean way” of life, Wills’ memoir shows how transnational adoptees begin at ground zero and seek to clarify the mirage of their longing.

Jenny is exposed to Korean people and culture as a gradual part of her transition from her rural, White-centred hometown in Ontario to the urban mecca of multiculturalism in Toronto. After high school and her move to Toronto for her studies, Jenny met other people of colour. She recalls that in “that multicultural space, amongst people so sure of themselves,” she was “learning to be a woman of colour,” developing a steady sense of community and yet still so aware of her isolation (152). Jenny became acquainted with a Korean Canadian woman in her third year of university, and the woman taught her how to say, “I love you” in “the language she spoke with her parents” (152). Jenny practiced the expression, *sarang he-yo*, for years until she met her Korean mother. The first time that she “tasted Korea” was when she was twenty and alone in a restaurant near Christie station (considered the old “Korea Town” of Toronto) (153). Jenny communicated with a language barrier with the Korean older woman that served her, miming a rocking baby and pointing to her closed mouth and shaking her head. The woman “seemed to understand, because she let out a sigh, a sympathetic *aigo*, and turned and walked into the kitchen” (153-154). While tasting her first *bibimbap*, the fiery spice of *gochujang* (red pepper paste) that made her tongue recoil, Jenny remembers how the older woman, who was neither her mother, grandmother, sister, nor aunt, had placed her hand on Jenny’s shoulder as she tasted the “creamy, charred, bitter, and sweet Korea” (154).

Then, in 2010, Jenny met a Quebecois man who had also been adopted from Korea in a Korean language class at a community centre near Atwater station in Montreal, as her search for “Korean-ness” became more intentional after her first trip to Korea. Jenny describes how they had been the worst students in the class, and at the same time, the only Koreans there, “clumsily sounding out an alphabet so foreign and definitely not inherited” (81). The instructor, Madame Kwon, zeroed in on the two adoptee students, wanting them to succeed and confused when they

did not, because their struggles upset “her belief that the Korean spirit is so powerful that it can overcome anything” (81). Jenny thinks in Madame Kwon’s shoes, sarcastically: “I mean, were we so different from all those Koreans who’d burst out of Japanese colonialism, tongues naturally ready for pepper paste *and* their loved, outlawed language?” (81; italics in original). The man and Jenny responded differently to their shortcomings as Jenny “fell back to the Protestant ethic that [she had] been raised on,” while her friend slacked off and eventually stopped showing up (81). Jenny extends her empathy to her friend’s struggles through the lens of their shared identity: “It felt bad to see our language blossom so effortlessly in the mouths of non-Koreans. Hobbyists and Orientalists, while we struggled. It stifled us, our desperation” (82). When he stopped coming to class, Jenny notes that “[I]t hurt because [she] knew that it was a place where he was trying, imperfectly, to find something recognizable in himself” (82).

Informing Jenny and her friend’s experiences, Walton explains that while Korean adoptees in her research attempted to find a space where they could “(re)embody a meaningful Korean identity,” they experienced another layer of marginalization for not being able to “fully embody a socially recognisable ‘Korean person’” due to their cultural and linguistic differences (90). This expectation of socially embodying a “Korean person” among Koreans arises from the understanding of Korean identity in biological terms with a focus on “shared blood” (Walton 89). As Madame Kwon assumes a “natural” inheritance of Korean language learning abilities among Korean-born individuals, this cultural and essentialist focus on “shared blood” wrongly assumes that being racially Korean means being able to speak Korean and understand Korean cultural values and practices. For transnational adoptees, this assumption not only fails to consider their contexts of growing up in non-Korean families and communities but does not account for the intangibility of their Korean identity due to “the institutional erasure of Korean

adoptees from Korean family trees and the difficulties they faced while searching for [their] birth family” (90). These moments of marginalization among Koreans further complicate and isolate transnational adoptees’ sense of self as they feel misunderstood and denied by people with the “likeness” of their bodies. Illustrating this effect, Jenny recounts her memory of the final session of the Korean language class: “Madame Kwon shook my hand and wished me luck, squinting and smirking. She never understood how a true Korean couldn’t learn the language, which made her look for evidence in my face that I wasn’t actually who I was. That’s all I took from that course” (83).

During her time in Korea, a country of people who supposedly “look like” her, Jenny continues to feel like an alien, although she slowly begins to fill in the gaps of her family tree and trace a map of transnational history that has surrounded her subjectivity. Jenny’s first visit to Korea takes place in the summer of 2009 as her Korean mother first discovered Jenny’s Korean name from an agency worker in 2008 and since then, began exchanging letters with Jenny—inconsistently, with a translator in between—for nine months (14). Jenny learns that she has a younger sister with a different father, Bora, and that her mother’s boyfriend, a conservative Christian man, did not approve of her mother’s reunion with Jenny, which is why the mother’s letters were written sporadically in secret (15). After the reunion with her mother and Bora, which was emotional on the mother’s part and surreal for the returned daughter, Jenny realizes how far the branches of her family stretch and that it has further roots than she had imagined as she reunites with her aunt and maternal grandparents (31). Her mother reveals that Jenny was the result of an affair with a married man who had a son and daughter, the *unni* to whom Jenny addressed her letters (54-55). Upon her birth, Jenny was taken away against her mother’s will from the hospital birthing room by someone who could have been a missionary, according to the

arrangement made by her angry paternal grandparents. Crying for the first time in front of her mother, Jenny remembers that only three words arose as a response to her mother's story: "*You wanted me*" (56).

Jenny also meets several other transnational adoptees while staying at a guesthouse for Korean adoptees in Seoul during her trip. She acknowledges that in theory, the Seoul guesthouse was "a place where adoptees came to find kinship and support, where [they] tried to assemble the shards of lives and a culture that were tossed [their] way when [they] became too inconvenient to unsee" (21). However, Jenny contrasts the reality: "the guesthouse was a place where we forged the kinds of connections unavailable in our regular lives, it was also a place of palpable confusion and rage and grief" (21). She recalls that someone had once referred to the guesthouse as "the space where Korean adoptee loss was concentrated" (21). As Jenny sat with adoptees from Germany, Denmark, the United States, and Australia for many nights, listening to their competitive reveals of their darkest scars, she points out that those people and their stories settled in her chest, "calcified into a heavy mass that rattles in [her] heart" when she remembers her months in Seoul (22). Therefore, while the space of her "likeness" extends through her connection with other adoptees, as she learns the scale of decades-long transnational adoption in Korea that had displaced and damaged thousands of people's lives, Jenny is further devastated, realizing her place in a postcolonial history of mass state-sanctioned abandonment of socially marginalized children.

Finally, despite these puzzle pieces coming together, Jenny's sense of her difference from other Korean people is more fine-tuned during her time in the southern peninsula. She recalls that in Seoul, it was not difficult to spot her as she stood out in a crowd. Although her ash-blond hair was showing its dark-brown roots, it was a few years before the light hair colour would

become more common in Korea. Jenny wonders if she had kept her hair light throughout her trip to mark her identity as an outsider, claiming difference for herself, before anyone could remind her that she did not belong (33). Meanwhile, some store clerks assumed that Jenny was not Korean and spoke Chinese or Japanese to her and her mother's surprise. Once on a train when two men with Midwest American English accents talked to her in Korean and tried to peddle her a Bible and some pamphlets, Jenny was "washed over by the thought that they saw [her] as any other Korean girl and not as a foreign outsider" (38). She uncovers her true feelings of difference when thinking through the time when her mother had asked Jenny to go to a public bathhouse with her: Jenny declined because she was afraid to see her mother's body that had become so foreign. Thinking of her mother, Jenny confesses, "If she hadn't noticed the vast cultural space between us up to that point, my refusal to ever accept her invitation to the baths must have confirmed it. She eventually registered that I could never be the kind of Korean daughter she'd be fully able to recognize" (46). These moments display Jenny's increasing awareness of her physical and cultural difference during her time in Korea, and her keen awareness that she could never fully embody a Korean identity. While resembling the experiences of other transnational Koreans in South Korea whereby they notice a sense of difference marked by their Westernized identity, Jenny's experiences portray how she is perpetually stuck in between her desires to "become Korean" and her much less resolvable awareness of her ephemeral and disconnected Korean-ness, uprooted since her infancy (11).

VIII. Conclusion: Self-Location Through Community and Variability

By comparing and analyzing the narratives of three female, transnational Korean authors in this chapter, I have aimed to complicate the "sameness" that at times consolidates and at others, excludes and marginalize transnational Korean women's experiences based on race,

ethnicity, gender, legal status in the “host” or “home” countries, language abilities, and so on. In exploring two novels and a memoir, I feel a sense of closeness and familiarity despite their differences in temporal and geographical settings and simultaneously am awed by the depth of contexts that empathy and understanding require. Some parts of Choi, Cha, and Wills’ narratives elucidate the worldviews of my mother, aunts, friends, cousins, and other Korean women that I have encountered and that continue to influence my own self-understanding as a “Korean woman” in the world. At the same time, I am more wary of the internalized assumptions that women that look or sound like me, speak my language, or are from the land that I was born in share similar experiences even of racism, racialization, marginalization, and/or exclusion. While the three women’s stories showcase how transnational Korean women face comparable barriers and share some dimensions of their intersectionality, they also assert that due to their respective transcultural intersectionality, each experience is different and therefore requires nuanced examinations. The comparison across borders of texts that may have been traditionally categorized as “Korean Canadian,” “Korean American” or “South Korean” unveil the disparate and productive ways that such stories are interconnected through modern histories of war, colonization, displacement, and globalization as well as how they inform the characters of one another, requiring their readers to apply a necessarily transnational lens to every page.

In addition, the geopolitical approach taken by this chapter, surveying diverse spaces that variously shape the diasporic Korean women’s lives and sense of self, from a specific neighbourhood in downtown, multicultural Toronto to a small rural community, passing through New York and Seoul, emphasizes the complex and interconnecting nodes of history and local and international politics on which the women’s identities depend. The discussion of Choi, Cha, and Wills’ narratives furthermore signals a return to the “Korean Way” from my point of view as

a diasporic critic, as the geographic location of my analysis circulates back to Ontario, and the significance of the “Korean Way” shifts from a being a firm anchor in Choi’s novel, becoming redefined largely in the South Korean context in Cha’s work, then culminating as an unattainable desire in the last narrative. Therefore, from a seemingly local frame, my approach encompasses the global, exposing the complexities of identity, desire, poverty, wealth, race, gender, and nationality through a worldly and transhistorical perspective.

Chapter 3: Laughing With/At Koreans in North America

I. *Black Panther*, *Kim's Convenience*, and the Challenges of Korean Representation in the North American Mediascape Today

I was excited to enter the crowded theatre to watch *Black Panther* (2018), a history-making Marvel franchise film centering on an African superhero and a reversal of the hegemonic history of Western colonization and modernization through the depiction of a fictional, precolonial African powerhouse nation named Wakanda. I had pre-booked tickets for the film's debut in Canada, and as the plot unravelled, I was pleasantly surprised to discover that some of its action scenes take place in Busan, South Korea. Nevertheless, in a few minutes, I was gravely disappointed by a conversation in Busan. In the film, when three Wakandan heroes arrive in a bustling night market, one of them, Nakia (played by Lupita Nyong'o), approaches a mid-aged Korean woman named Sophia (played by Alexis Rhee), who is occupied selling fish to customers. What follows is a brief conversation between Nakia and Sophia in Korean; Nakia, a Black, Wakandan woman, speaks Korean with a noticeable English accent although her lines are articulate and comprehensible. As a native and fluent Korean speaker, I was impressed. On the other hand, I was stunned by Sophia's lines as they were completely incomprehensible; her dialect and pronunciation bore little resemblance to the standard or southern dialects of Korean that I was familiar with, and I relied on the English subtitles to get through the Korean character's lines.

Later that year, I met Sophia again through the screen as I began analyzing *Dr. Ken* for this dissertation: the same actress, Alexis Rhee, stars in the show as Ken Jeong's Korean American, first-generation immigrant mother, characteristically speaking English with a thick Asian accent. Rhee, as Ken's mother, wears a similarly impenetrable look as she does in *Black*

Panther. Representing Korean-born, female characters in respective settings of South Korea and the U.S., the actress speaks in a broken, “alien” tongue, maintaining the stern authority of a “tiger mother,” whether the conversation is exchanged in Korean or in English, at the fish market or over the dinner table. After watching *Dr. Ken*, I searched up the scene of Sophia in *Black Panther* on YouTube to see if anyone else had problematized her incomprehensible Korean in the movie. The search only took a couple of minutes. Under a video entry featuring less than two minutes of Nakia and Sophia’s exchange, there were several comments. The top three comments as of November 2021 appear as follows: “As a Korean, I can tell the black woman spoke a better Korean than the Asian lady’s”; “As a Korean-American, I can understand what Nakia is saying 100%, but I can’t tell what that woman is saying. My guess is that *the woman is not Korean*”; “As a Korean, [I] can’t understand what that Korean woman is speaking at all.” My personal favourite comment: “Wtf marvel that Asian lady is speaking *alien* not Korean” (“Black Panther”; italics added). Ironically, Alexis Rhee is an American actress of Korean descent.

The multiple levels of irony surrounding Sophia’s “alien” speech in *Black Panther* introduce the complexities of televisual (diasporic) Korean representation in North America today. Although I could not find a credible biography of Alexis Rhee, from what I can gather, she is a Korean-born actress raised and residing in the U.S., whose first language is not Korean (“Actress Alexis Rhee”; “Is all representation good representation?”). While she fits the bill of a person of Korean heritage to bypass the problems of colour-blind casting, the incongruity between her role as a native speaker of the Korean language and Rhee’s lack of linguistic capacity still raises issues of non-traditional casting.³⁸ As a result, the rare representation of a

³⁸ The Non-Traditional Casting Project (NTCP) defines this term as “the casting of ethnic, female or disabled actors in roles where race, ethnicity, gender or physical capability are not necessary to the character’s or play’s development” (Pao 391). Forms of non-traditional casting such as colour-blind casting have assumed an equal opportunity among actors regardless of their physical appearance, thus allowing for “a so-called leveling of the

Korean woman in a Hollywood film by a Korean American actress leads to the misrepresentation of the Korean language. Lupita Nyong'o's more accurate Korean pronunciation in comparison to the actress playing a native Korean character is furthermore ironic. Another layer of irony persists in the fact that many non-Korean-speaking viewers would have assumed Sophia's Korean pronunciation to be accurate based simply on the contrast of skin colour between the Black and Asian actresses and based on Rhee's Korean birth, for any viewers familiar with Rhee's ethnic heritage. This example in *Black Panther* thus opens a discussion about how the misrepresentation of transnational Koreans persists, due to old and emerging issues of racist production systems, racial stereotypes, as well as the increasing diversity of diasporic Koreans, and the transformation of racist representations becoming more subtle and nuanced, despite the growing visibility of Korea and Koreans in North American film and television industries in recent decades.

Kim's Convenience (also hereon referred to as *Kim's*) further demonstrates such intersecting issues of contemporary Korean representation in North America through various angles brought to the forefront of public discussion by the sitcom's diasporic Korean actors. In June 2021, following the sitcom's end, the actress of the character Umma, Jean Yoon, claimed in a series of lengthy Twitter posts that she and the show's cast members had been offended by the draft scripts of *Kim's* final season, due to "storylines that were OVERTLY RACIST, and so extremely culturally inaccurate that the cast came together and expressed concerns collectively" (@jean_yoon).³⁹ This comment came only days after Simu Liu had called out the racist

playing field where everyone can then perform the same roles with cultural specificity" (Warner 12). Nevertheless, as Kristin Warner points out, this form of casting has allowed showrunners and television writers to avoid explicitly writing race into the script and instead replace them with "racially neutral" roles based on White assumptions, at times played by racial minority actors (13).

³⁹ As a response to a *Globe and Mail* opinion article written by a veteran media critic John Doyle, criticizing Simu Liu's comments against *Kim's* production team, Jean Yoon wrote on Twitter as follows:

overtones in *Kim*'s and the show's "overwhelmingly white" production team in a Facebook post. Liu had explained that "the writer's room [had] lacked both East Asian and female representation" and that "[a]side from Ins, there were no other Korean voices in the room." Yoon's Twitter posts confirmed Liu's allegations, while specifying further that as an Asian Canadian woman, "the lack of Asian female, especially Korean writers in the room" made the actress' experience of working on the show "painful" (@jean_yoon). After pointing to the scenes produced by the writer's team under Kevin White's leadership that offensively portrayed or misrepresented her Asian Canadian female character, Umma, Yoon bellows in her post, "THIS IS WHY IT MATTERS," vocalizing her frustrations at the producers that had allegedly brushed off her cultural feedback as simply that "Jean doesn't understand comedy."

Dear sir, as an Asian Canadian woman, a Korean-Canadian woman w more experience and knowledge of the world of my characters, the lack of Asian female, especially Korean writers in the writers room of Kims made my life VERY DIFFICULT & the experience of working on the show painful[.] Your attack on my cast mate @SimuLiu, in the defense of my fellow Korean artist Ins Choi is neither helpful nor merited. Mr. Choi wrote the play, I was in it. He created the TV show, but his co-creator Mr. Kevin White was the showrunner, and clearly set the parameters. This is a FACT that was concealed from us as a cast. It was evident from Mr. Choi's diminished presence on set, or in response to script questions. Between S4 and S5, this FACT became a crisis, and in S5 we were told Mr. Choi was resuming control of the show. Under Mr. Choi's leadership, S5 restored many of the core values of the original show, and most offensive "jokes" were removed. To give you an idea of what we are talking about, here is one scene from the original S5 drafted under Mr. White's leadership. Pastor Nina comes to the store to pick up Mrs. Kim for a Zumba class. Mrs. Kim is wearing NUDE shorts, and Pastor Nina is too embarrassed to tell her she looks naked from the waist down. Mr. Kim enters, and the joke is that if you're married you can say anything. No one, esp. Mrs. Kim, would be unaware that a garment makes her look naked. Unless she is suddenly cognitively impaired. or STUPID. Stripping someone naked is the first act before public humiliation or rape. So what was so funny about that? At my request, Mr. Choi cut he scene. THAT scene would have aired hours after 8 people, 6 Asian women, were shot in Atlanta, GA in a hate crime spree that shocked the nation. THIS IS WHY IT MATTERS. If an Asian actor says, 'Hey this isn't cool,' then maybe should just fix it, and say THANK YOU. And I'm sick of holding this back-Koreans hardly ever get MS: 0.1/100,000 or one in a million. You are 5x more likely to get a blood clot from the AZ vaccine than you are to get MS if you're Korean. The producers: "But why does it matter?" And "Jean doesn't understand comedy." And hey, if I hadn't spoken up all the Korean food in the show would have been WRONG. Ins doesn't know how to cook or how things are cooked, no one else in the writers room were Korean, and THEY HAD NO KOREAN CULTURAL RESOURCES IN THE WRITERS ROOM AT ALL. What I find tragic about this situation was the refusal to believe the urgency with which we advocated for inclusion in the writers room. The failure to send us treatments, outlines, the resistance to cultural corrections & feedback. There is so much I am proud of. But S3 & S4 in particular had many moments of dismissal & disrespect as an actor, where it mattered, with the writers. And the more successfully I advocated for my character, the more resistance and suspicion I earned from the Writers/Producers.

This publicized controversy illuminates the delicate balance between comedy and cultural accuracy in the representation of racial minorities, while the concerns pertaining to this fine balance with respect to *Kim*'s are not new: criticisms against Appa's "Korean" accent had ensued at the launch of the sitcom. In a *Maclean's* article in the fall of 2016, Paul Sun-Hyung Lee, the actor of Appa, discusses how he received feedback challenging his "Korean" accent on the show on the grounds that it did not "sound Korean," or that the accent was a perpetration of racism ("How to do an on-screen accent"). Lee reveals that he takes these comments seriously due to the importance of the accent to the role that he is playing and the actor's own experiences of racism during his childhood and in his career. He explains that although the accent is not "who Appa is," it is an integral part of his makeup as an immigrant who has had to learn English at a late stage in life and thus has the vestiges of his mother tongue. Appa's frustrations surrounding his language barrier are furthermore significant to the characterization as the storeowner struggles to make himself clear day in and day out despite his past as an educated and well-respected teacher in his home country.

The actor also notes that the accent is a touchy subject for him as he could not "do" a Korean accent for the longest time, having been raised in Canada as a child who "didn't want to be Korean" due to the reminders of his cultural difference from others. Later in life, when Lee was asked to "utilize" Asian accents on set due to his skin colour, his childhood attempts to escape from the perpetual foreigner stereotype posed ironically as a roadblock to his career. Lee describes the pain and irony of this incident as follows:

I can do Cantonese, and Mandarin [accents], I can do passable Japanese, I can do some Filipino, Vietnamese—but not Korean. Korean for me was a roadblock. I remember I was doing this one episode of *Mayday*, and I was playing the role of Captain Park, the Korean

Airlines pilot who crashes his plane into the side of this mountain. When I auditioned for the role, no accent was required. . . Then, on set, the director says, ‘We want the Korean accent, to give it some flavour.’ I said, ‘I don’t know if I can do it.’ ‘But you’re Korean.’ So I tried it and I was so bad that they ended up giving all my lines to the copilot. That was embarrassing—so embarrassing. It was terrible (How to do an on-screen accent”).

Lee’s experiences highlight the convoluted relationship between the internalized racism of his childhood and the systemic racism in the acting and entertainment industries, partaking in colour-blind casting, disregarding dimensions of Asian actors’ intersectionality, and demanding them to play into racial stereotypes. The embarrassment and shame felt by the actor moreover disclose the duality of rejection, difference, and inadequacy surrounding both identities as a “Korean” and “Canadian.”

The actor’s counterpoints to the criticism against the “authenticity” of his accent, however, does not adequately address the politics and damage involved in his performances of the “Korean” accent. In the *Maclean’s* interview, Lee mentions that he uses a “modified” version of his first-generation immigrant Korean father’s accent while acting as Appa, because if he “went full Korean accent,” people would not be able to understand much of what he is saying (“How to do an on-screen accent”). The actor insists that this pulling back, and the lack of consistency is “one of these horrible decisions you have to make as an actor,” asking rhetorically, “Is it really going to affect who this character is if you’re not letter-perfect on the accent, or is it more important to get the story points across?” (“How to do an on-screen accent”). Lee furthermore adds that the representation of Appa is a deeply personal and emotional experience, as the criticisms he has received regarding the accuracy of his accent make him angry:

I hear people go, ‘That doesn’t sound Korean, who is this guy! He’s not Korean, he should be ashamed, he sounds terrible, how come they can’t get accents right?’ That bothers me. I care about the character so much. I am Korean. And you know what, and pardon my French, but f–k you, that’s my dad’s voice. So if you don’t like it, go f–k yourself, because that’s how my dad sounds (“How to do an on-screen accent”).

The actor’s comments showcase the political decisions of production that are weighed against the accuracy and significance of a minority character’s cultural traits. I label this decision as *political* because Lee’s rhetorical question can be countered with another rhetorical one: *to whom* does it matter that Appa’s accent is “letter-perfect,” and *to whom* is it more important to get the story points across at the expense of the misrepresentation? Lee’s claim that although the accent is not the joke, some humour will be taken as “situational humour” from Appa’s accent due to being “in the entertainment field” also discloses the political dynamics of production in the mainstream media industries expecting certain tropes of racializing comedy and a lack of consideration that incongruities may arise between the intended humour and the dominant audience’s amusement simply from their sense of superiority over the character’s unassimilated qualities. Moreover, while Lee’s emotional rejection of the audience’s feedback reveals the deeply personal nature of his work, attempting to perform the accent of his father, his comments fail to consider that some Korean Canadian audiences may take offense at the inauthenticity due to Appa’s symbolic representation of their own fathers’ voices.

These discussions of *Kim*’s cast members, the sitcom’s audience, and the media elucidate more clearly how the mainstream televisual representation of diasporic Koreans is still enveloped in White supremacist production systems and ongoing debates about “authentic” and responsible portrayals. From a larger purview, scholars have noted the effects of post-racialism on the

depiction of racial minorities and the “cultural translation” of racial/ethnic communities mediated by televisual program makers within commercial logics for profit—what Kyle Conway terms “saleable diversity”—in recent decades (5). Such politics of representation uniquely combine with the politics of humour in comedic genres, as I foreground here and continue to demonstrate throughout the chapter that comedy is *political*—it involves the relations of people laughing *at* or *with* the joker. In the case of televisual comedy, the politics of humorous representation intertwine with layers of racial, ethnic, national, and commercial power relations embedded in the production systems and processes from casting and acting to networks and funding. These political dimensions of televisual representation and of comedy expose diasporic Koreans emerging as mainstream cultural producers to risks of “selling out” by exchanging visibility and commercial success for the cost of perpetuating persisting negative stereotypes against Asians.

Meanwhile, the Korean population in North America as well as the conversations about Asian representation and anti-Asian racism are rapidly growing in Canada and the U.S., increasingly challenging the diasporic Korean cultural producers with the task of depicting their cultural communities in diverse, yet accurate and ethical ways. It is worthwhile to point out in this respect that Yoon and Liu’s public outcry against *Kim*’s production and Lee’s interview with *Maclean*’s are separated by the rise of the anti-Asian racism movement that followed the widespread violence against Asian North Americans during the coronavirus pandemic and the shooting of six Asian American women in Atlanta in March 2021. These contexts in the background of television and media production continue to unravel and inform discourses about Asian North American identity and representation, such as the impact of internalized racism and the model minority myth that have triggered Asians in North America to remain quiet and to

overlook the historic and covert racism against them. The growing diversity of diasporic Koreans in Canada and the U.S. in terms of their immigrant generation, legal status, other dimensions of intersectionality, and self-identification, as shown in previous chapters, additionally complicate the task of inclusive representation especially when representational space is limited and politically competitive to gain access to the landscape of popular-culture visual media.

II. A Case Study of Visual Media Representation: Contemporary Televisual Comedy of and by Diasporic Koreans

This chapter explores diasporic Korean representation in North American televisual comedies *centering on* and *created by* diasporic Koreans over the last decade. By “televisual comedy” I refer to comedic texts produced for television, although the meaning of “televisual” has been evolving. As Todd Tarplay points out, an abundance of new media options easily accessible to middle-class people around the world, such as digital television, video on demand, personal video recorders, and the internet, have been changing the ways that people consume and interact with media (29-30). Thus, I consider the concept of televisuality to be expanding through such technological alterations in the media of reception and production. Jeremy Butler’s working definition of televisual comedy moreover highlights the relationship between humour and the televisual medium; he argues that “[televisual comedy] generates humor through the medium of television itself—using camera angles and framing, sound effects, odd lighting, and so on, to trigger laughter,” although, “televisual humor can be divorced from a show’s narrative drive” (“Comedy, Televisuality, and Convergence” in *The Sitcom*).

I focus on televisual comedies because the last decade has seen a drastic rise in funny Korean North Americans within the expansion of humorous Asian representation in Canada and the U.S. Popular comedy forms such as stand-up, television sitcoms, and online media are

becoming new sites of Asian and Korean visibility and agency in (re)shaping the imaginations of their subjectivity. Televisual comedies then offer up a rich territory of investigating contemporary representations of diasporic Koreans and the ways that the images of and challenges to embodied representation are shifting. This investigation further extends this dissertation's exploration of transcultural Korean identities by revealing how visual and auditory depictions of Koreans and Asians have been changing to release such subjects from nationalist and colonialist frames of imagination—according to racial stereotypes and bound within insider and outsider dichotomies. As more images and narratives of Asians are created by Asian North Americans in the twenty-first century compared to the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the contemporary study of diasporic Korean televisual comedies gives privy to how diasporic Koreans have been understanding and (re)negotiating their self-image.

The use and vehicle of comedy furthermore show how diasporic Koreans have been adopting humour as a strategy for reimagining Korean identities and reordering racial hierarchies in social imagination. As laughing and the ability to laugh is a human condition, diasporic Koreans' recent intervention in comedy can be observed as a new method of representation emphasizing Korean peoples' humanity and thus, a new paradigm for scholarly investigation. The penetration of diasporic Koreans in popular genres of televisual comedy as cultural producers and visible participants is furthermore significant as sitcoms and animated cartoons have been dominantly White centred historically. At the same time, this growing inclusion at its grassroots is not without its costs nor free from the invisible hands of commercial, White-supremacist, and post-racial logics. The agency and imagination of diasporic Korean cultural producers also operate within the realities of historic, covert, and internalized racism in the contemporary era. Therefore, the laughter and celebration of emerging Korean representation in

North America should be promptly and periodically suspended to examine *who* or *what* we are laughing at and *why* we are laughing.

While the previous chapter on women's narratives demonstrates the costs of racialized and gendered exclusion against Asians and diasporic Koreans, this chapter offers a contrasting perspective on the price of inclusion in the arena of televisual representation. Dimensions of racial/ethnic inclusion bring to light new questions regarding *who* gets to represent *whom* and *how*, considering the diversity of the Korean population in North America, even within local and temporally specific settings. The two chapters also combine to reveal the amplifying creative voices of 1.5- and second-generation diasporic Koreans through literary and multimedia interventions in the twenty-first century and their reflections on the transnationalism and transculturalism of diasporic Korean identities vis-à-vis other Koreans and race/cultures in North America. As the previous chapter has briefly examined manifestations of internalized racism and othering among Korean and diasporic Korean individuals, this chapter extends such explorations to observe how *difference* is underscored in contemporary visual depictions of and by Korean North Americans and how such emphasized difference upholds or reshapes images and dynamics of racialization and race relations.

This two-part section begins by discussing the social constructions of race through visibility, post-racialism, and "saleable diversity" in recent decades as well as exploring the history of televisual comedy and the relationship between Asians and humour in North America. These discussions inform the time and place of diasporic Korean televisual comedy today with relevance to the thematic focus on comedy and humour of and by Asian North Americans and racial/ethnic representation within televisual entertainment industries. This first part also foregrounds how existing scholarship noticing the increasing portrayal of diasporic Korean

diversity on television as the features of novelty or subjects of humour has paid little attention to the effects of internalized racism and othering among racialized individuals, despite such conditions' profound influence on the popular imagination of Korean/Asian identities.

The second part then turns to several case studies of diasporic Korean televisual comedies produced and aired in the 2010s: *Kim's Convenience*, *Dr. Ken*, and *Angry Little Asian Girl* (hereon referred to as *ALAG*). The case study of each text is limited to two or three episodes per series as the goal of this second part is to focus on a comparative and contemporaneous exploration of diasporic Korean televisual comedies as an unprecedented investigation. Nevertheless, these studies unveil recurring aspects of concern in the depiction of diasporic Koreans in recent televisual comedies. Such aspects include the perpetuation of racial stereotypes against Asians or other minorities, manifestations of internalized racism and "intra-ethnic othering" (to be explained later), and the ways that such recent depictions complicate and reinvent diasporic Korean identities by reassigning positive and negative racial images and meanings to different groups along the spectrum of acculturation among racial minorities in North America.

III. Social Constructions of Race Through Visuality, Post-Racialism, and "Saleable Diversity"

The first chapter of this dissertation traced the evolution of anti-Asian stereotypes in relation to their historical and cultural contexts in Canada and the U.S. that have created and maintained "controlling images" of Asians as foreign, Other, and as model minorities. The second chapter further revealed how transnational Korean women's imaginations of their racial and ethnic identities fluctuate based on the perpetuation of racist stereotypes and rhetoric regarding one's belonging/unbelonging, sometimes in comparison to other racial groups, in the

women's social surroundings. Race in this sense as a social construction resemble Judith Butler's concept of gender⁴⁰ in that they are more "performative" than "biological." Michael Omi and Howard Winant, like many scholars of racial identity, stress that essentialist racial categories (as exemplified by the U.S. census' system of racial classification) do not account for the ways that individuals can resist imposed racial categories by "performing" race in subversive manners and how people can also "switch" racial identities over the course of their lifetime (8). Jeremy Butler elucidates that one's skin colour can signify different identities based on their geographic location, the racial distinctions and positions within that location's culture, and their history of race relations. Furthermore, certain styles of dress or hair, once marked as distinct features of "biological" race, are no longer limited "to the persons of that race and *only* those persons" as the fashion of subcultures are frequently coopted by other subcultures or dominant cultures (Butler, "Comedy, Race, Ethnicity, and Religion").

This social construction of race has been heavily impacted by visual representations and performances of race including vivid imageries of stereotypes, especially since the proliferation of television and other visual and digital technologies. Lori Kido Lopez lists the common, stereotypical ways that people of colour have traditionally been depicted in visual media through resilient and easily identifiable tropes:

African Americans are dull-witted coons, violent brutes, hypersexual hoochie mamas, welfare queens, and servile mammies; Asian Americans are perpetual foreigners, asexual nerds, weaponized martial arts villains, alluring geisha dolls, and conniving dragon

⁴⁰ Butler argues in *Gender Troubles*, gender is culturally constructed: hence, gender is neither the casual result of sex nor as seemingly fixed as sex. . . . When the constructed status of gender is theorized as radically independent of sex, gender itself becomes a free-floating artifice, with the consequence that *man* and *masculine* might just as easily signify a female body as a male one, and *woman* and *feminine* a male body as easily as a female one (10).

ladies; Latinas are spicy spitfires and docile maids, while Latinos are gun-toting gangsters and macho Latin lovers; Native Americans are sexy princesses and warmongering savages, papoose-wearing squaws and wise elders (20; see Bogle; Collins; Berg; Bird; Ono and Pham).

While studies in Canada such as the CRTC-commissioned Task Force for Cultural Diversity on Television report show alarming under- and mis- representation of racial minorities (see Fleras; Jiwani; Mahtani), people of colour continue to be flat and secondary characters on television shows, aside from mostly pluralist programs that focus on minorities (Yu 4). As stereotypes are “the patterned ways we sort people into collections of traits,” these tropes and patterns of depiction concretize and reproduce negative images of racial minorities as believable or “real” in mainstream societies on a mass scale (Lopez 20).

Racist representations in media industries have also become more nuanced and subtle, despite or perhaps as a result of entering a phase that many scholars believed as “post-racial” following the election of the first African American president, Barack Obama, that signaled hopes for a new era of racial progress (Lopez 2). While many scholars refer to the current racial context as “post-racial,” as Kent A. Ono and Alison Yeh Cheung argue, one must understand how the condition of post-racality exists within White supremacy and not outside of it. Ono and Cheung suggest that “[visual] culture within post-racality entails an ironic relationship between viewers and visual media,” because although post-racism presupposes that viewers are conditioned with at least some amount of racial consciousness, and in this respect, “representations of Asians and Asian Americans are ‘always already’ being scrutinized broadly for their potentially racist, stereotyping content,” producers of post-racist representations may present racial or racializing images and narratives “in such a way so that knowing audiences can

wink and laugh along with the performer” (17). Such “passable” post-racist portrayals can be humorous or ironic and must be self-reflective about its performance to confront and transform problematic ideas of racism. As Ono and Cheng argue, the audience can then

see that the performer knows that we live in a racialized world, that they are performing within that racialized culture with that self-knowledge, the audience is aware of racism and the history of racial performance, and representation, and that audiences will allow the performance and representation, and that audiences will allow the performer to embellish on racialized performance, because (after all) that performance is done for consumption and pleasure, with full knowledge of what constitutes racist performance, which they must be trusted to sidestep (17).

While the authors particularly analyze Ken Jeong’s performances in a *GQ* photo spread, they also point to various other examples such as “Henry Cho’s country Western-style comedy routines, Sandra Oh’s cross-racial romantic and robotic medical show performances, and Ming-Na Wen’s performance of Americanness, qua whiteness,” to demonstrate that “Asian Americans perform Asianness in ways that conform to normative and racialized White expectations,” and that “Asian Americans participate in a relational performance that allows for White supremacy.”⁴¹

Meanwhile, despite the recent emergence of minority-led representation in television and film, scholars like Conway also problematize the ways that the cultural translation of racial and ethnic minority communities is impacted by how successfully the depiction of diversity can “sell.” Conway observes that even in minority-led productions in post-multiculturalism environments of Canada and the U.S., a compromise takes place between what he refers to as

⁴¹ See the chapter “Asian American Performance in White Supremacist Representation” in *Interrogating the Communicative Power of Whiteness* (2018).

cultural translation, the “negotiation and mediation performed by people—the show makers” to make “a foreign object or text intelligible in a new context,” and “saleable diversity,” the “commercial logic” governing the media industry and forcing producers to “erase visible signs of difference in the name of diversity” (4-5;11). As the under- and mis- representation of minorities have dominated the history of media and television industries for decades, Haramoto points out that the participation of minority artists in television production does not necessarily guarantee the erasure of “controlling images” of Asian Americans as Other or model minorities (2). The gap between the irony of the post-racialist logic and the invisible hands of commercial and racist logics leave room for minority-led televisual representations of their racial and ethnic identities to “miss the point” or to disseminate cultural inaccuracies while appearing to raise the bar of racial diversity on screen.

IV. Humour and Asian North Americans

Humour is arguably social and political, reproducing social norms and ethical values. Jokes require the listener to “get it” or “find it funny”; they rely on a sense of shared worldviews between the joker and the listener, triggering a noetic response or an affective resonance from the audience (Carroll 79; Brodie 155-156). Noël Carroll points out that “[every] instance of invented humour occurs against the background of a great deal of information common to every party involved in the humorous transaction” (81). Although humour may not be the origin of the norms that it disseminates, it “reinforce[s] our command of these norms—to rehearse and perhaps sometimes to refine our access to the pertinent norms and deviations from them” (83). As a case in point, Simon Weaver argues that racist humour “acts as racist rhetoric, has a communicative impact, is persuasive, and can effect impressions of truth and ambivalence” (1). Humour can also involve ridicule and malice, scorn towards infirmity, or an ethically dubious anaesthesia of

sympathy and moral concern for comic amusement (87). In these respects, humour has immeasurable value in societies to (re)shape power structures and to maintain/disrupt existing social and political orders.

Caroline Kyungah Hong, in a timely nuanced discussion of “Comedy, Humour, and Asian American Representation” in the *Oxford Encyclopedia of Asian American Literature and Culture* (2020), juxtaposes how comedy and humour have been a vital part of Asian American culture and history on the one hand and how, on the other, Asian Americans have been cast as unfunny or as the object of mockery for their physical, social, or cultural differences in historical representations by mainstream U.S. culture. She traces Asian Americans as both the objects and agents of humour from the presentation of Asians in American museum exhibitions as exotic “human curiosities” in the mid-1800s and the Yellowface minstrelsy that markedly continued into the twentieth century to the explosion of comedy and humour produced by and about Asian Americans in the twenty-first century. The late-twentieth century marked Asian Americans’ slow conversion from comic objects to comic agents and their steady expansion of representation in popular U.S. comedy and humour industries. This conversion process however involves the problematic featuring of Asian Americans on screen as “perpetual foreigners, often in concert with the model-minority stereotype” (Hong). Concurrently, emerging independent Asian American filmmakers of the 1980s and 90s used comedy and comedy-drama to reflect on various issues including immigration, inter- and intra- ethnic cultural and class differences, intergenerational family conflicts, and gender and sexuality.⁴² This progress of the late-twentieth

⁴² Hong offers a comprehensive list of examples here:

Notable comedic Asian American films of the late 20th century include Wayne Wang’s comedy-dramas *Chan Is Missing* (1982), *Dim Sum: A Little Bit of Heart* (1985), and *Eat a Bowl of Tea* (1989), which all center on stories of Chinese American families in Chinese American communities; Peter Wang’s comedy-drama *A Great Wall* (1986), the first US feature film shot in the People’s Republic of China; Ang Lee’s *The Wedding Banquet* (1993), a transnational, bilingual romantic comedy about a gay Taiwanese immigrant man who marries a mainland Chinese woman and the nonnormative family they form together;

century, amplified by new technological innovations such as social media, Netflix, and YouTube, has moreover expanded the range of contemporary Asian American comedy. This new range includes traditional print media forms and genres such as novels, short stories, creative nonfiction, drama, poetry, and comics and graphic narratives, as well as new visual forms such as musical comedy, improv and sketch comedy, films, television sitcoms, and live and televised stand-up comedy shows.

In Canada, a similarly comprehensive study on Asian Canadians' relationship to humour does not yet exist. While comedic representations of Asian Canadians on mainstream television have been rare, largely in the twenty-first century, some funny Asian Canadians have been finding their spaces of visibility through stand-up comedy, eventually making their way onto the screen. In 2018, comic and producer Vong Show established the first all-East Asian comedy show in Canada, "RICE: The Asian Comedy Showcase," featuring emerging comedians such as Cassie Cao, Jennifer Hsiung, and Leonard Chan and providing a unique platform for Asian Canadian comedians to speak up, share their stories, and to dispel stereotypes (Dutt). As an extraordinary exception among Canadian comedians of colour, Russel Peters, the Canadian comic of Indian descent, has become a popular international phenomenon with his race-based humour, stretching and challenging the acceptable limits of racialized discourse in stand-up comedy. Drawing upon "heavy accents, caricatures, and in-jokes informed by common stereotypes" and at times, evoking shared cultural understanding of audience members, Peters has struck a chord with audiences in culturally diverse cities such as London, New York,

Timothy A. Chey's cross-cultural comedy *Fakin' da Funk* (1997), about a Chinese son adopted by black parents in South Central Los Angeles, perhaps the first Afro-Asian comedy; Chris Chan Lee's *Yellow* (1998), a coming-of-age comedy-drama about Korean American teenagers, also set in Los Angeles; and Nisha Ganatra's comedy-drama *Chutney Popcorn* (1999), about a young Indian American lesbian in New York City navigating her romantic and familial relationships (7).

Mumbai, and Toronto, skewering followers of Chinese, Ukrainian, Italian, and Jamaican backgrounds and more (Hirji 568). Peters' viral popularity largely began from his performance on the Canadian TV show *Comedy Now!* shared on YouTube in 2004, although he began performing in Toronto as early as 1989.

This recent propagation of humorous Asian representation in North American popular culture has however come at a cost. As several critics and scholars have argued, such comedies also perpetuate racist stereotypes, misrepresentation of cultures, and cultural appropriation, upholding White-supremacist portrayals of racial minorities. The emerging inclusion of humorous Asians has generated growing debates regarding the ethics and operations of comedy involving Asian North Americans as the central and/or self-reflective subjects of humour. For instance, Fiza Hirji problematizes how Peters' race-based jokes draw upon and validates processes of racialization (568). Thessaly La Force points to a scene from *The Hangover* (2009) where Ken Jeong jumps out of a car naked, showing his flaccid penis, to highlight that the audience would be laughing at the Asian actor's expense, reinforcing how racializing cultural norms have shaped social and popular-culture imaginations of Asian men. Reminiscent of Paul Sun-Hyung Lee's discussion of Appa's accent in *Kim's*, Leila Lee, in *Ricepaper Magazine*, suggests that "the Korean parents do not have proper Korean English accents" in *Kim's* and that the use of the honorific terms "*umma*" and "*appa*" (mother and father in Korean, respectively) is "incessant and sometimes inaccurate." The critic asserts that "[t]he point is not to criticize the acting but to ask why these actors are being forced to put on an accent they do not have and struggle to imitate." Although the concept of a "proper Korean English accent" begs further clarification, paired with the actor's mention of the modifications to his accent in the *Maclean's*

interview, the inauthenticity and misrepresentation of the Korean English accent in *Kim*'s invites further scrutiny.

As another example, scholars Shinsuke Eguchi and Zhao Ding claim that the “uncultural masks the cultural” in *Dr. Ken*, referring to a statement by the sitcom’s actor and producer Ken Jeong’s statement in *Slate* magazine describing his show as “refreshingly uncultural” (Yang). Responding to the interviewer’s observation that “*Dr. Ken* is an Asian American family comedy, but a totally different Asian American family comedy from, say, *Fresh Off the Boat*,” Jeong explains that although *Dr. Ken* brings in issues of culture in some episodes, he felt that “the cultural aspects had to be organically introduced” and “[n]ot the way a white writer might introduce it into a sitcom.” While Eguchi and Ding recognize Jeong’s efforts to reframe the images of Asian American characters as cultural Others, they nevertheless argue that “Jeong’s language of *uncultural* is a trick, a red herring” (297; italics in original). The scholars elucidate that “[t]he uncultural narratives about Asian Americans in *Dr. Ken* subtly operate as a rhetorical method of postracialism, that is, colorblinding the historical and contemporary realities of racism to secure the territory of whiteness as the center” (297). By analyzing several scenes from the sitcom’s first season that visualize Claire Jean Kim’s concept of racial triangulation, thereby (re)positioning Asian Americans as “*almost Whites*,”⁴³ and that depict Asian Americans as a “(nonthreatening) Other,” the authors attempt to disrupt the so-called “uncultural” assumptions surrounding *Dr. Ken* that draw “attention away from its reproduction of norms of whiteness at the expense of Asian Americans” (297, 301).

These discussions regarding the price of Asian North American representation underscore the escalating need to reflect more deeply on the changing meaning of Asian North American

⁴³ As Eguchi and Ding define, “an ambiguous domain for non-Whites in which the economic and cultural capital enables them to visualize their proximity to the center maintained by whiteness” (301).

identity and the opportunity costs of laughing *at/with* Asians in the twenty-first century.

Although the influx of representation in popular culture is a matter of celebration for Asian North American communities, as Asian comedians in Canada and the U.S. increasingly serve as gate keepers and role models for aspiring performers and artists, the social utility, exchange, and costs of humour shaping the identities and culture of Asian North Americans should be a subject of ongoing scrutiny for scholars of race and culture. As this chapter explores the representation of diasporic Koreans shaped by diasporic Koreans in two popular genres of televisual comedies—situational comedies (sitcoms) and animated cartoons—as a critical contribution to this ongoing inspection, the next section briefly traces the development of televisual comedy and the relationship between sitcoms and animated cartoons and race in recent decades.

V. Popular Televisual Comedy Genres: Sitcoms and Animated Cartoons

Tracing the early development of television comedy, Christina Von Hodenberg links the unprecedented value shifts in 1960s and 70s Britain, Germany, and the United States to the maximised impact of television entertainment that arguably accelerated and broadened the wave of sociocultural changes during this period (1-2). She points out how three influential sitcoms, *Till Death Us Do Part* (BBC, 1966-1975), *All in the Family* (CBS, 1971-79), and *Ein Herz und eine Seele* (One Heart and One Soul; WDR/ARD, 1973-76), commonly centre on a “working-class bigoted antihero and his family” and feature fierce arguments about race, politics, gender roles, and sexuality that reveal the deep-seated social and generational divisions of the time (2). Scholars have further noted *Saturday Night Live*’s (NBC, since 1975) immeasurable impact on television and political comedy with its iconic uses of satire, political parody sketches, black comedy, and mediated humour (Marx et al. 4-5). Chiara Bucaria and Luca Barra argue that the use of humour involving taboo references—the unconventional, often-humorous, and explicit

treatment of subjects such as sex, death, homosexuality, and illness—has become more prevalent in Anglo-American television programming since HBO's two ground-breaking shows, *Sex and the City* and *Six Feet Under*, premiered in 1998 and 2001 respectively (1).

Sitcoms, or situational comedy, have become one of the staples of broadcast television for adults, migrating fully formed from radio to television and continuing to attract popularity today with only a few fundamental changes to its generic conventions (Hartley 96). As a genre, sitcoms sit between “sketch comedy” and “situational drama” in serial form, often as episodic series (96). Essential attributes of sitcom storytelling are minimal despite its evolution since the broadcast-network era: “(1) the series must have a repeatable premise and (2) individual episodes must be segmented to allow for commercial interruptions. Everything else about sitcom narrative then and now is essentially up for negotiation” (Butler, “Understanding the Sitcom” in *The Sitcom*). Frank Krutnik and Steve Neale highlight how sitcoms, like their predecessor, soap operas, build a sense of psychological-emotional “realism” through the pattern that “characters repeatedly move through the same scenarios and keep making the same mistakes” (“Broadcast Comedy and Sit-com” in *Popular film and Television Comedy*). Not only does this pattern establish familiarity with the character and setting for the audience, but unlike soap operas, sitcoms rely on a more circular form of repetition whereby “the situation is not allowed to change but is rather subjected to a recurring process of destabilization-restabilization in each episode” (“Broadcast Comedy and Sit-com”).

Over the ninety years since radio shows' debut, sitcoms have also “veered from exploitation to near total erasure of minority faces and voices to a more diverse representation of American cultures” (Butler, “Comedy, Race, Ethnicity, and Religion” in *The Sitcom*). The situational comedy genre was built on the foundation of humour “targeting racial, ethnic,

national-descent, and religious subcultures” exploiting stereotypes against racial minorities and thereby soliciting the listeners’ amusement based on superiority above the program’s stereotyped characters (“Comedy, Race, Ethnicity, and Religion”). Analyzing contemporary representations of racial minorities and race relations in sitcoms since the 1970s, Butler utilizes Herman Gray’s theory regarding the ways that television tells stories about African Americanness to suggest that there are three paradigms through which televisual racial depictions can be organized: “Assimilationist (invisibility),” “Pluralist (separate but equal),” and “Multiculturalist (diversity)” (“Comedy, Race, Ethnicity, and Religion”). According to Butler, incarnations of the assimilationist discourse in sitcoms imply that “Other” subculture groups must fit it, or assimilate, into the broader culture, thereby downplaying the “otherness” of subculture groups. Such assimilationist sitcoms de-emphasize racially charged physical signifiers of subcultures to favour stories about the “universal” human condition, which do not relate to the specifics of race, ethnicity, national origin, or religion. As a result, assimilationist programs orient characters with no markers of distinctive subcultures to appear as White (“Comedy, Race, Ethnicity, and Religion”). Pluralist sitcoms, on the other hand, segregate the representation of characters belonging to a social subculture to largely take place within that culture, reminiscent of the legal doctrine of “separate but equal” in the post-Civil War culture of the southern U.S. While Black-cast sitcoms, socially split from White-cast sitcoms, of the 1990s and 2000s best exemplify the pluralist discourse in action, these examples show how the separate sitcom worlds of Black and White were *not* equal in their size of audience, economic pull, and the reach of networks; “Many black-cast programs were as entertaining and humorous as white-cast ones, but the former were severely curtailed in their access to a national audience and their impact on mainstream culture” (“Comedy, Race, Ethnicity, and Religion”). Finally, multiculturalist sitcoms in their ideal form,

favour incongruity humour over superiority humour by neither suppressing and exploiting subcultures nor relying on stereotypes at the expense of subcultures. Although some characters inviting laughter through the viewers' sense of superiority may exist in multiculturalist sitcoms, this sense of superiority is "not built on racial or ethnic chauvinism" and rather through the characters' fate in or reactions to comical situations ("Comedy, Race, Ethnicity, and Religion").

A proliferation of successful animated cartoons broadcast on television and aimed at adults began in the 1990s, designed predominantly as hand drawings and paintings as well as clay animation and most recently, incorporating CGI (computer-generated imagery) technology. Exemplified by successful series such as *King of the Hill*, *The Simpsons*, and *South Park*, U.S. animations in the 1990s were primarily concerned with sex and violence (Donnelly 185). Scholars have also flagged the prevalent racism in adult cartoons—*The Simpsons* was publicly condemned on numerous occasions including its depiction of Brazil as a country filled with "child criminals, taxi-driving kidnappers, [and] transsexual television presenters"; the representation of Apu Nahasapeemapetilon, Springfield's convenience store worker of Indian birth, as the synecdoche for India's population problems, arranged marriage customs, and Hindu gods in Bollywood movies; and the portrayal of Australia as a "backward, boorish, alcohol-obsessed nation with criminal tendencies" (Dobson 46-47). Michael Chaney adds that cartoons such as *Static Shock*, *King of the Hill*, and *South Park* "perpetuate their black-face heritage, representing white appropriations of cultural forms marked as nonwhite, which typically take the form of racialized speech" (167). Despite this, animated cartoons have emerged as an influential part of North American and global popular culture, deeply embedded in people's consciousness. Broadcast in seventy countries and reaching over 80 million viewers over its fifteen-year run of more than 300 episodes, *The Simpsons* has birthed memorable vernaculars such as "D'oh!"—

Homer's exclamation of stupidity—which has recently been entered in the *Oxford English Dictionary*. In 1999, a survey found that 91% of U.S. children and 84% of U.S. adults “could recognize images of the Simpson family more readily than images of their own political leaders” (Dobson 49; Pinsky 3). Therefore, the evolution of the two iconic televisual comedy genres in tandem with their current popularity illustrate the mass impact of televised humour on modern understandings of race and race relations.

VI. Humour Through Differentiation: Diasporic Korean Diversity, Internalized

Racism, and Intra-ethnic Othering

Turning to recent forms of diasporic Korean representation in televisual comedies, within the larger purview of Asian North Americans' relationship with humour and the development of televisual comedic genres in association with race relations, the scholarship on *Kim's* (see S. Yu; Nagy and Bánhegyi), *Dr. Ken* (see Eguchi and Ding) and *ALAG* (see Ono and Pham) has been limited. Nevertheless, scholars have recognized the ways that diasporic Korean representation has been diversifying to portray the perspectives and imaginations of Koreans that deviate from the perpetual foreigner and model minority stereotypes as well as beyond the views of first-generation of Korean immigrants to Canada and the U.S. For example, Sherry S. Yu highlights the de-marginalization of the Kim family and their corner store in *Kim's* that allows the main characters to (re)interpret the world around them “according to their ethnic, socio-cultural, economic, gender, linguistic, and generational experiences,” thereby asserting their diversity in their own ways and offering a twist to old and new images of Koreans in Canada (6). Yu points out that *Kim's* moreover offers nuanced cultural translations of Korean Canadians to show their heterogeneity within, as the characters share their struggles of identity construction according to their respective notions of otherness or through the “*Korean Canadian gaze*” (8). Judit Nagy and

Mátyás Bánhegyi similarly explore the differences between the first- and the second-generation Korean immigrants' perception of Canada and the representation of a new transnational culture in *Kim's* (48). Eguchi and Ding notice that *Dr. Ken* revolves around "second-generation middle-/upper-class Asian American parents" as well as their children and migrant parents, while the series attempts to avoid "cultural" depictions of Asian Americans according to pervasive media stereotypes (296;307). Regarding *ALAG*, Kent A. Ono and Vincent Pham state that the characterization of Kim, the main character, is "anything but the dominant media's stereotypical depiction of submissive Asian women" (143).

Despite such observations of the growing diasporic Korean diversity on screen, most of these examinations fail to consider the effects of internalized racism and othering among Koreans that shape the texts' humour. These effects partially relate to the texts' reliance on generational conflicts as a source of entertainment and their bias toward the vantage point of second-generation Korean immigrants in some episodes depicting generational conflicts. As several scholars point out, the three comedic texts analyzed in this chapter offer nuanced portrayals and perspectives of the second generation of Korean Canadian and Korean American immigrants, elucidating the heterogeneous identities and worldviews within diasporic Korean populations. Relevantly, recent televisual representations of diasporic Koreans in North America showcase a rise in the voices of the so-called "second generation," "the children of immigrants, whether born or raised in [Canada or] the United States" (J.Z. Park 545). The texts' diasporic Korean creators, Ins Choi, Ken Jeong, and Lela Lee can also be identified as belonging to this group.⁴⁴ Although generational markers do not sufficiently depict the multilayered and dynamic

⁴⁴ Other notable "second generation" Korean North American celebrities include the comedian Margaret Cho, the actor and director, Steven Yeun, and the cast members starring in *Kim's*, Paul Sun-Hyung Lee, Jean Yoon, and Andrea Bang.

characteristics of ethnic identity, these models indicate some prominent differences in the processes of identity formation between first-generation and second-generation immigrants (see Omi and Winant; Prtes and Zhou; Rumbaut; Tuan; Zhou). For instance, second-generation immigrant children, unlike their parents, are expected to evaluate themselves and construct their identities in association with the standards of the new society rather than the “old” country of their parents’ birth (M. Zhou 1-2). Jerry Z. Park additionally points out that the second generation has “largely been raised in a context where the term *Asian* is normally applied to them,” socializing their identity in a racial culture that routinely categorizes certain ethnicities as “Asian” with all its attached meanings (545).

Internalized racism refers to the often-unconscious acceptance and internalization of mainstream racist values and rationales by the racial subordinates, thereby justifying the oppression of their group with a belief in their own inferiority (Pyke and Dang 151; see Essed; Feagin and Vera; Baker). The last chapter on women’s narratives explored the ways that internalized racism affects diasporic Koreans’ self-perpetuation of the model-minority myth. The consequence of internalized racism informing this chapter pertains to the racial subordinates’ tendencies to disassociate themselves from their racial/ethnic identity, emphasize their assimilated status, and to distance themselves from their co-ethnics in order to cast doubt on the validity of their stigmatized status and to gain acceptance from oppressors (151-152). A major concern surrounding internalized racism is its reproduction of oppression through victim blaming and turning the attention away from racist institutions and practices, while forcing racial subordinates to constantly define themselves in association with racial schemas and meanings, regardless of “whether they construct identities that internalize or resist the racial ideology of the larger society” (151). As Pyke and Dang explain, “[by] displaying an assimilated status and

denigrating ‘other’ coethnics as ‘too ethnic’ or too stereotypical, some Asian Americans can carve out a positive self-identity” (152). Schwalbe et al. define such dynamics as “defensive othering,” where the racial subordinates who seek to belong to the dominant group attempt to distance themselves from the stigma of their status, thereby “accepting the legitimacy of a devalued identity imposed by the dominant group, but then saying, in effect, ‘There are indeed Others to whom this applies, but it does not apply to me’” (425). Pyke and Dang use the term “intra-ethnic othering” to describe these specific “othering processes that occur among coethnics in subordinated groups” (152).⁴⁵

I argue that these implications of internalized racism are not only portrayed within the diversity of diasporic Koreans in *Kim’s*, *Dr. Ken*, and *ALAG*, but furthermore operate as the mechanism of humour by delegating and assigning anti-Asian stereotypes to certain groups of Koreans and laughing at the difference between the co-ethnics. These problematic stereotypes include, but are not limited to, eccentric and foreign Korean/Asian parents who characteristically speak English with incorrect grammar and “Asian” accents, tiger mothers, nerdy and feminine Korean/Asian men, and cute, docile, and sexualized Korean/Asian women. While the dynamics of intra-ethnic othering can reveal the significant differences among diasporic Koreans, when mined as a source of humour, they can perpetuate and normalize the racialization of Asian North Americans by inviting amusement with a sense of superiority from the audience. Moreover, given the social and political power of humour, the comic amusement derived from intra-ethnic othering can shape a dynamic resembling Claire Jean Kim’s concept of racial triangulation within the ethnic community, whereby the more assimilated group is relatively valorized

⁴⁵ In Pyke and Dang’s study, manifestations of intraethnic othering, caused by internalized racism, can be seen in the use of the negative identity terms “FOB” (Fresh Off the Boat) and “whitewashed” by second generation Asian Americans to socially categorize and describe their coethnic peers (149).

compared to the less assimilated group at the expense of further alienating the latter group of co-ethnics. This humour through differentiation among Koreans is subtle and dangerous because it masks the racism perpetrated against the less assimilated group as the “authentic” viewpoints of the more assimilated group without considering the effects of internalized racism, while soliciting humour through a sense of superiority from the texts’ dominant (White) viewers.

Moreover, I suggest that several scenes in *Kim’s*, *Dr. Ken*, and *ALAG* depicting the “diversity” of diasporic Koreans wander too far to perpetuate racism and racializing stereotypes not only against Koreans and Asians but also against other people of colour. Such humour at the expense of alienating co-ethnics or other racial minorities should also be explored in association with the political layers of production behind the scenes of televisual comedy, as all three recent diasporic Korean texts have been heralded as the grassroots of Korean-led comedy about Koreans. Especially in the case of *Kim’s*, the public outcry by the sitcom’s actors regarding the lack of diversity in the writer’s room and the show’s racist overtone question the perspectives shaping racial humour overtone raise questions about the “authenticity” of perspectives shaping the racial humour in the first place. In the following sections, I analyze scenes from the three texts that derive their humour from racist and racialized depictions of Koreans and people of colour.

VII. *Kim’s Convenience*

i. A Brief Introduction of the Sitcom’s Evolution from the Stage to the Screen

As the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC)’s first sitcom with an all-Asian main cast, *Kim’s* first episode, aired on October 11th, 2016, attracted flashy headlines such as “Breaking new ground: *Kim’s Convenience* to be Canada’s 1st sitcom led by Asians” and “Canada’s First Asian Sitcom Family Finds Voice.” All seven of its shows at the two-hundred-

seat Bathurst Street Theatre sold out, with advance tickets (50 percent of the run) picked up prior to the play's opening (10). The play was subsequently remounted as the opening play of the Soulepper Theatre Company 2012 season, selling out its entire thirty-eight-show run in the two-hundred-seat Michael Young Theatre in the opening week; in the following years, *Kim's* was toured around several cities across Canada and around the world (11-12). Beginning in 2014, the sitcom adaptation was co-produced by Soulepper Theatre Company and Thunderbird Film, under the leadership of Ivan Fecan, the Executive Producer of Thunderbird Film and the sitcom series (110). *Kim's* for television was co-created by Choi and Kevin White.

As a critically acclaimed show worldwide, *Kim's* soon garnered both Canadian and international fans, winning a range of awards at the Canadian Screen Awards and expanding its reach through the show's launch on Netflix. By 2017, *Kim's* collected eleven nominations at the fifth Canadian Screen Awards, with its actors winning the Best Actor (Paul Sun-Hyung Lee, in the role of "Appa") and Best Supporting Actor (Andrew Phung, in the role of "Kimchee") awards. In 2018, the sitcom won the Best Comedy Series award in addition to the Best Actor and Best Supporting Actor awards at the sixth Canadian Screen Awards. *Kim's* made its international debut on Netflix in July 2018 after completing its second season in Canada. Despite this trajectory of high-flying success, the series concluded both abruptly and inconclusively at the end of its fifth season in 2021 (Weaver). This sudden conclusion drew both surprise and outrage from the show's worldwide fans as the CBC had previously announced a sixth season (in March 2020; Kim).

The central characters of the sitcom series come from Choi's play, which the playwright describes as a "love letter" to his parents and "to all first-generation immigrants who call Canada their home" (Choi 1). In the play, the Kim family is composed of Appa, Umma, and their two

children, Janet and Jung. Appa is a “59-year-old first-generation Korean-Canadian man, and owner of Kim’s Convenience Store,” while his wife, Umma, is a “56-year-old first-generation Korean-Canadian woman” (19). Both parents appear in the play as speaking English “with a thick Korean-Canadian accent,” as marked in the *Dramatis Personae* of the play published by House of Anansi Press in 2012. Jung and Janet are respectively described as a “32-year-old second-generation Korean-Canadian man” and “30-year-old second-generation Korean-Canadian woman” (19). The play is set in its entirety in a “convenience store in Toronto’s Regent Park, a low- to middle-income neighbourhood made up mainly of recent immigrants” (20).⁴⁶

The world of *Kim*’s as a television series deviates noticeably from the world of the play, although some characteristics of the Kim family remain the same. As the co-writers, Choi and White, had agreed that the strength of the play largely came from the unresolved conflict between Appa and Jung, the Kim family is ten years younger in the sitcom than they are on stage, to explore how the family arrived at where they are in the play (Choi 113). In the new characterization, Appa and Umma are in their mid-to-late fifties, Janet is twenty and studying photography at the Ontario College of Arts and Design University (OCADU), and Jung is

⁴⁶ The play’s plot features the story of intergenerational struggles between the parents and children, particularly when Appa is faced with an offer to sell his beloved store. While Janet frequently visits her parents to help them out with the store, she aspires to pursue a career as a photographer rather than taking over the store as her father wishes. Jung is largely an offstage character who is estranged from the family, and his absence is explained throughout the play by other characters through references to his past troubles with the law and unresolved conflicts with Appa. In the rising action of the play, Janet explains to Alex, a “32-year-old black police officer and a childhood friend of Jung,” who later becomes Janet’s love interest, that Jung ran away from home at the age of sixteen, after a heated argument during which Jung had accused Appa of being a “horrible husband” who treated his wife like a slave and Appa had hit him, hospitalizing Jung for a few days (59). Although Jung had returned home from the hospital, he subsequently emptied his room and ran away with stolen money from Appa’s safe. Umma is seen sneaking out of the store to meet Jung at her church during the play. At the play’s end, the prodigal son returns home to reconcile with Appa, and instead of selling the store and retiring comfortably, Appa bequeaths the store to Jung, who confesses that he hates working at the Discount Car Rental while struggling to support his young family (99-101; Kim Daniher 15).⁴⁶ Meanwhile, Janet’s romance with Alex also takes off with Appa’s quirky blessing, and by the play’s conclusion, the Kim family’s future looks optimistic with the father and son heartwarmingly reconciled, the daughter romantically engaged, and the legacy of Kim’s Convenience and Appa’s story secure in the happiness of his children.

twenty-five years old, having recently begun his work at the Handy Car Rental. Despite rolling back the clock in terms of their age, the setting is more contemporary: the show is set in 2016, and the Kim family has continued to run the store that they had bought in 1984 at the intersection of Sherbourne Street and Queen Street, between Toronto's Moss Park and Regent Park neighbourhoods (113). Whereas Umma and Appa in the play are modelled on the generation of Koreans who arrived in Canada in the late-1960s, in the show, the same characters appear as having arrived in Canada in the 1980s (114-115).

The sitcom's focus shifts from the story of a Korean Canadian family to the story of a larger, local Canadian community. In the first season alone, some examples of dynamic story premises include: Appa offering a "gay discount" at the store to escape an accusation of being homophobic by a customer; Umma's reaction to her church peers' gossip when Jung tries to apply for a promotion at the car rental company; Janet's navigation of what it means to be "Korean" around her Canadian friends during her cousin's visit from South Korea; and her dilemma after Appa disciplines a child at the store, who turns out to be the five-year-old son of her stubborn and culturally insensitive art school professor. As noticeable in such examples alone, the story and conflicts of the Kim family are no longer bound to the confines of their family business or their intergenerational struggles. The characterization of the Kim family is outstretched from the original play through their often-thought-provoking encounters with the new characters, and the conflicts that drive the plot frequently reflect the concerns of various groups outside the Kim family regarding their race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, religion, customs, and beliefs.

ii. Comparing "Korean" Masculinity: "Cool, Christian, Korean Boys"

Since the sitcom's first season largely sets up the characterization and dynamics of the Kim family vis-à-vis their community members, some episodes portray and concretize the identities of the main characters comparatively by juxtaposing the images and traits of certain diasporic Korean characters against others. For example, in several episodes including "Gay Discount," "Janet's Photos," "Frank and Nayoung," and "Rude Kid," the differences of language abilities, beliefs about jobs and career paths, awareness of socially acceptable codes of behaviour, as well as cultural norms of disciplining children between the Kim parents and their children are emphasized to situate the diversity of Korean Canadians. As signalled in previous sections, troubles arise when such comparisons intentionally or unintentionally highlight the otherness of certain diasporic Korean characters at the expense of asserting other characters' traits or status of belonging to the mainstream (White-centred) society.

Two key examples of such problematic comparisons based on intra-ethnic othering can be seen in the first and fourth episodes of the season—"Gay Discount" and "Frank and Nayoung," respectively—involving the gendered racialization of diasporic Korean men and women according to negative, persisting stereotypes. While "Gay Discount" contains stereotypical portrayals of diasporic Korean men and the analysis of the gendered racialization in "Frank and Nayoung" is focused on women, both depictions are linked to the (re)positioning of *Kim's* main, second-generation Korean immigrant characters, Janet and Jung, as more assimilated, and thus more belonging to the mainstream Canadian society, relative to other diasporic Korean characters.

In the first episode of the first season, "Gay Discount," Umma desperately urges her daughter, Janet, to find a "cool, Christian, and Korean boyfriend," as the premise of a comical subplot throughout the episode. Umma insists in her broken English that Janet should come to

the church, soliciting that there are “so many boys to choose from.” Frustrated by her mother’s persistence, Janet asserts to her mother that there is “no such thing as a cool, Christian, Korean boy”; the daughter explains matter-of-factly, “If they’re cool and Christian, they’re not Korean. And if they’re cool and Korean, they’re not Christian. And if they’re cool, Christian and Korean, they’re girls.” Later in the episode, Umma shocks Janet by putting up a fake job ad on her church bulletin to lure potential “cool, Christian, Korean” suitors to come by the store for a fake “interview.” When two young Korean men arrive at the store counter inquiring about the job, Umma nonchalantly checks off a list while reading from it, “cool, Christian, Korean” to the daughter’s horror. Janet catches on to her mother’s scheme and abruptly dismisses the interview by apologizing to the young men and storming away angrily. After Janet and Umma exit, Appa, who is unaware of the previous interactions between Umma and the two young men, approaches the counter. Observing them, Appa announces to the young men, “We have fifteen percent gay discount only for this week. It’s lucky day for you.” When the baffled young men protest that they are not gay, Appa responds insouciantly, “It’s okay. Sometimes, gay take time, hmm?”

The humour in this ironic subplot occurs from the affirmation of the emasculating stereotype against Asian males as uncool, Christian, and docile. Janet’s assured argument that “cool, Christian, Korean” men do not exist are comically confirmed by Appa’s mistaken assumption that the two young Korean, Christian men are gay. This subplot about Korean men adheres to the longstanding racialization of Asian men as “sexually impotent” in heterosexual relationships and their perceptions as feminine, nerdy, subordinate, and “not sexy” (Hyunh and Woo 364). What further exacerbates the perpetuation of anti-Asian male stereotypes is the identity of Janet and Appa as Korean and Asian Canadians themselves. The cleverness of comedy becomes its inherent risk when the ethnic identity of the perpetrators of racialization

normalizes the racist images, positioning the myths about Asian males as acceptable, easy to mistake, and even believed among Korean Canadians. The problematic roots of such myths such as internalized racism and the historical emasculation of Asian men in Canada are assumed—if considered at all—than shown, at the expense of comedy.

The unfunny truth behind the joke of the uncool, Christian, “gay” Korean men is that there are real consequences to the stereotypes against Asian males that link to their historic oppression, muted representation in mass media, and the harmful effects on the emotional and physical well-being of gay Asian men. As Michael Kimmel points out, “The masculinity that defines white, middle class, early middle-aged, heterosexual men is the masculinity that sets the standards for other men, against which other men are measured and, more often than not, found wanting” (124). This hegemonic practice of masculinity, based on homophobic, racist, and sexist ideas of gender and sex, has stigmatized and negatively affected men of colour from the attribution of qualities such as “sexual promiscuity, toughness, thrill seeking, and the use of violence in interpersonal relations” to Black men to the perception of Latino men as hypermasculine and therefore as “violent and dangerous” as Black men (Harris 279; see Morris). Joseph Boone refers to the long history of gendering Asian males in Western narratives as a conceptual root of the feminization of Asian men. He explains that the abundance of sexual politics of colonization in early European writings about the “orient” has marked “oriental” men as feminine in contrast to the construction of European men as masculine (50). As pointed out in the first chapter, the systemic policies including Asian exclusion and anti-miscegenation laws in North America have further contributed to the gendering of Asian males in popular imagination (Han 86). While such stereotypes against Asian men have led to their rendering as invisible in mass media due to their underrepresentation (see Schug et al.), Chong-suk Han discusses the

implications of racializing Asian males on gay Asian men, contributing to their low self-esteem, possible victimization in domestic relationships, and engagement in unsafe sex (93).

In the same episode, some brief moments challenging the stereotypes against Asian males aim to show the diversity of Korean Canadian men. Although I commend the efforts of the show to broaden the characterization of Asian males, I suggest that these depictions serve either as deviant exceptions to the dominant narrative of racialization or moments where the “uncool” Korean male is silently accepted *despite* (or perhaps even *because of*) his stereotypical qualities rather than negating the stereotypes altogether. Examples of such moments include Umma’s insistence that Jung is an exception to Janet’s claims about Korean men and the beginning of a voluntary romantic date hinted at the end of the episode between Janet and one of the Korean suitors that had visited the store for Umma’s fake job interview. During the mother and daughter’s conversation about Janet’s need to find a “cool, Christian, Korean boyfriend,” Umma responds to Janet’s assertion that such men do not exist by asking, “Jung is cool, Christian, and Korean, is he a girl?” Janet deflects Umma’s question rather than correcting her previous claim, firing back, “So, you’re suggesting I date my brother?” While Janet never rejects her mother’s description of her brother, she also does not change her own belief, thereby rendering and quickly dismissing the only acceptably masculine Korean male figure as an unviable option, and therefore, irrelevant to the discussion. As a result, Jung is positioned as an exception to the rule defying the gendered stereotypes against Korean men, even prior to his physical entrance in the episode.

Jung’s status as an “exception to the norm” and as a relatively attractive Korean/Asian male character also relates to his detachment from the Korean Canadian community and cultural proximity to “Canadian” mainstream society. In the first episode and throughout the series, Jung

appears as a muscular, suave, and rebellious character who easily connects with people and attracts the attention of women. The relative valorization of Jung's "coolness" subtly contrasted against other Korean men in the first episode is however structured by highlighting the generational differences between Umma and Appa, first-generation immigrant parents, and their children. Jung's attractiveness in this first episode also relates to his detachment from the Korean community and proximity to "Canadian" culture. The relative valorization of Jung's "coolness" is structured by highlighting the generational differences between the first-generation immigrant parents and their children.

For example, in the conversation between Umma and Janet, Umma's broken English is emphasized as she repeatedly makes sexual innuendos without intending to such as that Janet should "hook around" with boys at the church or when the mother explains to her daughter confidently, "I go to church, find the Jesus, find cool, Christian, Korean boy and we hook around." Nervously giggling, Janet attempts to correct her mother's expression as a native speaker. In these lines, as the first impression of Umma and Janet in the show, Umma's foreignness is underscored by her accent, fragmented English, the ridiculousness of her sexual innuendos, and the alliteration of "cool, Christian, Korean" that lightens the seriousness of her claims, while Janet further challenges this list of adjectives as being paradoxical. The contrast between the mother and daughter in this first scene betray underlying colonial logics⁴⁷ and the intra-ethnic othering of the first-generation immigrant, as Umma's linguistic abilities and the "oddity" of her beliefs are positioned as the subjects of laughter. Through this scene, long before the two Christian, Korean men appear at the counter to attend to Umma's fake interview, their

⁴⁷ Colonial logics refer to the underlying association of "civilized" progress with the colonizers, rationalizing colonization and epistemic ordering through discourses of progress, science, reason, and nature (Chartland 72; see Hall and Gieben).

subjectivity is coloured by Umma's underscored foreignness and the ridiculousness of her meddling in Janet's life. Therefore, the othering of Korean men and their characterization according to stereotypes are set up not only through Janet's claims but through the relative valorization of the generation further away from "Korean-ness" in the comparisons between the Kim parents and children. Jung's desirable masculinity within these contexts is built by his distance from the so-called "Korean" norms and expectations in relation to his features of Westernization and acculturation to "Canadian" society; he is the exceptional and ambiguous male figure, who is different, untamed, and not "Korean enough" to be attractive.

Turning to moments where the "uncool" Korean male is accepted *despite* (or perhaps even *because of*) his stereotypical qualities, at the end of the first episode, Janet leaves the store on a date with one of the Korean suitors that had earlier visited the store for Umma's fake job interview. This ironic scene appears as a delayed vindication of Korean men, as the voluntary arrangement of the date without Umma's meddling, and thus Janet's choice, seemingly redeems the desirability of the Asian male. Nevertheless, since there is little context between the scene of the interview and this surprise ending, no character development of the Korean male suitor takes place before the date, and Janet never bothers to change her previous claims about Korean men throughout the episode. In his sharp critique of Ester Pan's *Newsweek* article, "Why Asian guys are on a roll" (2000), Chong-suk Han points out how the increasing desirability of Asian men by White women is explained not by proving the "smart, studious, and hardworking" stereotypes about Asian men as false but rather by re-interpreting them as positives (87). Han argues, however, that if such qualities are positives and women are now finding Asian men attractive, then by extension, the assumption is that these stereotypical characteristics must have been true (88).

A similar logic applies to Janet's sudden "selection" of the Korean suitor at the end of the episode; while the irony and open-endedness of their romance may be funny, this ending scene is hardly redemptive as the previously othered Asian man is made as newly attractive despite, or perhaps even because of, his stereotypical qualities rather than challenging them altogether. Additionally, when the young couple turns to exit the store, Appa abruptly asks the date what the Korean Independence Day is, to which the young man responds unhesitatingly with a noticeable English accent in his Korean pronunciation, "August 15th, 1945. *Gwangbokjeol*." Upon exiting the store with Appa's approval, Janet smiles smugly at her date, saying, "I told you he'd ask." This brief exchange reveals the date's lack of cultural knowledge about Korea and as a result, positions his identity closer to Janet's in the moment of his desirability. I suggest that such jokes continue the narrative of intra-ethnic othering and valorizing the desirability of the Korean male based on his distance away from the "home" culture that marks his otherness.

Finally, some attention is warranted by the association of Christianity with the "uncool" Korean male identity in the first episode. I point out that Umma's insistence for her daughter to specifically date a "Christian boy" confirms her religious identity, and in turn, Janet's characterization of "Christian, Korean" boys as "uncool" subtly alludes to the significant role that Christian churches play in the lives of Korean populations in North America. Several scholars, including Ann H. Kim et al., Don Baker, Soon Young Jang, and Seong Man Park, have underscored the multifaceted prominence of Korean Christian churches in local communities across Canada to facilitate Korean language learning, maintain cultural customs and practices, and to reduce isolation while providing social support for Korean newcomers adapting to Canada. Jungwee Park reveals that according to the census data on religion provided in the 2001 census, the profile of religious affiliation among Korean Canadians notably contrasts with

Koreans in South Korea (27). In the Canadian census, 51 percent of Canadians of Korean descent reported belonging to Protestant or non-Catholic Christian denominations while 25 percent indicated that they were Catholic.⁴⁸ Comparably, only 29 percent of Koreans in South Korea were members of Christian denominations (18 percent Protestants and 11 percent Catholic), while 23 percent reported themselves as Buddhists and 47 percent declared that they had no religious affiliation in 2005 (27). This discrepancy of religious affiliations at first glance may suggest that more Korean immigrants in Canada may have gravitated toward Christianity as a way of assimilating to Canadian culture—which has more Christian elements than Buddhist. Nevertheless, taking a comparative perspective on Korean religiosity in British Columbia and observing the dominant presence of Korean Protestant churches in the lives of Korean immigrants living in B.C., Don Baker suggests that “Korean houses of worship, whether Protestant, Catholic, or Buddhist, have provided places for Koreans to be Korean more than to help them become Canadian” (165).⁴⁹

⁴⁸ Four percent were Buddhists and approximately twenty percent indicated having no religion (Kim et al. 27)

⁴⁹ This function of the Korean church in a diasporic setting is ironic, given the history of European and American Christian missionaries in Korea in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries who sought to play a role in the “civilizing mission” of converting the “heathens” in Asia (H. Choi and M. Jolly 3). Despite the relatively short history of Christianity in South Korea (since Protestantism was introduced in 1884), the rapid growth of Christianity in the country and the success of mission work has been described by the historian Spencer J. Palmer as “one of the marvels of modern history” (23). From a global, transhistorical perspective, the “Korean” Christian church in North America finds its deep roots in Western colonialism, attempting to abolish beliefs and practices of Korean culture on the peninsula during its period of modernization, and yet has ironically become a space for allowing diasporic Koreans to be “authentic Koreans” in their new setting—the “home” of Christian missionaries to Korea in the late-nineteenth century (see Y.S. Yoo).

In a rare doctoral thesis focusing on the role and impact of Christian missionary work in modernizing Korea at the turn of the twentieth century, Young-sik Yoo highlights how “the vast majority of Korean emigres [in Canada] are Protestants, or at least Protestant ‘church-goers,’” as Korea is no longer a missionary-receiving country but a missionary-sending one with 498 Korean missionaries sent to 50 different countries (according to 1988 statistics) and 4.7 million Bibles published in 102 different languages by the Korean Bible Society in 1993 (Y.S. Yoo 1). Yoo adds that the stresses of adapting to a new social environment appear to turn new immigrants into new congregation members, as seen in the case of Korean immigrants in Canada (2). Such conditions, intertwined with more pre-existing structures of Christian churches than Buddhist temples in Canada, further help to clarify the significance of Christian churches in diasporic Korean societies.

Therefore, Korean Christian identity in Canada, as well as the U.S., often signifies a person's closer relationship with the "home" culture of South Korea in terms of celebrating traditional Korean holidays, communally following Korean traditional customs, and maintaining Korean language proficiency. In *Kim's*, as several scenes of Korean Canadian mothers' congregation and gossip at church and Umma's Korean-food cooking for church-related events routinely appear throughout the series, the matriarch's Korean Christian church identifiably represents the history and realities of Korean Christian churches in Canada in maintaining Korean heritage and culture abroad and offering an ethnic enclave, especially for first-generation Korean immigrants, "to be Korean." This added dimension to "Korean" Christianity helps to explain Janet's logic in her assertion that if men are "cool and Christian, they're not Korean" and "if they're cool and Korean, they're not Christian." The Christian identity in relation to the assessment of Korean males indicates their proximity to "Korean-ness," which highlights their cultural otherness. Thus, this consideration of Korean Christian identity in the context of Korean/Asian masculinity reinforces the operation of intra-ethnic othering and the characterization of Korean males with a closer relationship to their "home" cultures as "uncool."

iii. Othering Nayoung, the "Korean-style Girl"

In the fourth episode, Janet's eighteen-year-old female cousin from South Korea, Nayoung, visits the Kim family. Before her arrival, Umma complains to Janet that Nayoung "[does] not wear enough clothes," and that although she is "very nice," she is a "Korean-style girl." When Janet attempts to clarify what Umma means, the mother replies nonchalantly that the cousin dresses too much like a "slut." Though Janet confronts her mother by saying "Nayoung should be able to dress however she chooses and not be judged," Umma is fixed on her point of view and asserts that "if she dressing like that, she gonna get pregnancy." Nayoung enters Kim's

Convenience a few minutes later, wearing a short black skirt, lacy light-pink top, platform heels, and a pink, cat-ear shaped ribbon on her head, with her reddish-pink hair raised in high pigtails. She drags in two suitcases that are of darker shades of pink than her outfit and a panda-shaped character backpack sitting on top of one of the luggage. Nayoung's voice is high-pitched as she greets the Kim family one by one, hugging and shouting their names. The Kim parents' conversation with Nayoung is mostly in fragmented English and a mix of some scattered Korean words and expressions, while Janet speaks fluently in English. When Janet, who looks startled by her cousin's outfit, asks if what she is wearing a costume, Nayoung punches Janet lightly on her arm, replying with laughter, "Oh, so funny, Unni!"

This cousin "from Korea" is marked as a "Korean-style" girl by Umma and sexualized even before her body first appears on screen. Despite the humour arising from Umma's characteristic obliviousness to her sexual innuendos, the matriarch sets up centuries-old stereotypes against Asian women as sexual objects and prostitutes by referring to Nayoung as a "slut" and commenting that she does not wear enough clothes. The viewer's attention is drawn to Nayoung's attire through these comments, and when Nayoung enters Kim's Convenience, she is dressed in a manner that makes Janet wonder whether her cousin is wearing a costume. Nayoung's flamboyant attire in this scene resembles the outfit of *kawaii* girls portrayed in Japanese *rorikon* manga⁵⁰ with her striking red hair, the pink ribbon on her head, her lacy top, and short pinafore skirt, rather than a realistic portrayal of the day-to-day fashion of Korean women. In the comic book world of imaginary *kawaii* girls, the fetishized Lolita-esque female

⁵⁰ The Japanese term *kawaii* translates into English as "cute" but has a wider social meaning such as "childlike, soft, colourful, round, and cuddly" (Hinton 1592; see Kinsella). As *kawaii* represented a culture that provided an escape from the harsh realities of adulthood, adults "sought to capture some pleasures contained in *kawaii* culture" through objects such as roadwork signs and credit cards designed to be *kawaii* (see McVeigh), and this culture had a widespread impact on gender ideals (1592). While male characters in comic books became more feminized, in a genre of manga called *rorikon* (a Japanese abbreviation for Lolita complex), young women were portrayed as "undeveloped, cute, childlike, nonthreatening, and obeying the male characters' erotic wishes" (1594).

characters, idealized by teenage boys in contrast to the sophistication of real young women, are often unconstrained by reality: as Perry Hinton describes, “they could have green hair; they could be aliens, androids, or robots; and they could be cat-girls with ears and long tails. . . But they had to inhabit a world outside of the adult sphere, a fantasy world both innocent and erotic” (12).

Nayoung’s cuteness, exoticized and sexualized by her costume-like attire and Umma’s comments, is furthermore emphasized by the cousin’s hyperbolic gestures and mannerisms that depict her as child-like and easily excitable. These “cute” behaviours call to mind a characteristic defined in Korean as *aegyo* (translated in English as “performed winsomeness”), prevalent in contemporary Korean culture. Aljosa Puzar and Yewon Hong describe *aegyo* comprehensively as follows:

A layered articulation of kinesics (such as tantrum-like movements, feet stomping, pouting, sulking, appropriation of pet animal behaviours and so on), vocal and linguistic forms (whispering, high-pitched voice, uptalk, ‘baby talk,’ infantilized or diminutive word choices and similar), more elaborate gestures and movements (such as shadow punching of the interlocutor’s upper arm, child-like vertical clapping, deliberate clumsiness) and occasionally larger narratives (such as singing entire children songs, appropriating other longer texts and so on), objects (such as lollypops or teddy bears) and fashions that are visibly infantilized and infantilized (334).

Nayoung performs many the listed behaviours during her initial interactions with the Kim family as well as with Janet’s non-Korean friends, Jung, and Kimchi. Her voice is characteristically high pitched, and her broken English and Korean accent combine to shape the effects of “uptalk” and infantilized speech. Nayoung hits Janet and Appa’s upper arm as she laughs and claps

vertically and dramatically at small causes of celebration. She is also characterized by “cute” child-like objects such as toy piggy banks and a bear-shaped backpack.

Nayoung’s *aegyo*, however, is overly exaggerated and portrayed with little to no cultural contexts to elucidate the meaning of her behaviours. This portrayal of Nayoung shapes her subjectivity through a Western gaze, whereby she appears eccentric and foreign, while her difference serves as the subject of laughter to an audience that has little knowledge of the sarcasm through hyperbolic representation and cultural inconsistencies. For instance, despite the commonness of *aegyo* in contemporary Korean culture, Puzar and Hong are careful to note that this is a “distinctly ‘cultural’” and social *performance*; *aegyo* appears spontaneous although it can be premeditated then enacted, and “encompasses distinct behavioural patterns, situational contexts and triggers” that pertain to “appropriate social times and places” (336). The authors differentiate this Korean concept of cuteness from other similar concepts of “infantilized vocal and gestural adjustments” in East Asia such as the Japanese *kawaii*, noting that it would be erroneous to misrepresent *aegyo* explicitly through the lens of possible similarities (336). Despite this, in *Kim*’s, Nayoung is a Frankenstein of different East Asian cuteness concepts through her fashion and behaviours, and her identity is further distorted by a consistent Western gaze maintained through the juxtaposition of Janet and Nayoung.

Compared to Janet, Nayoung appears as a perpetual foreigner who is flamboyantly alien and unassimilable to “Canadian” norms of behaviour. While notable cultural distinctions exist between South Koreans born and raised at “home” and diasporic Koreans born and raised in North America, in this episode, Nayoung’s cuteness is problematically accentuated to mark this distinction, portraying the more acculturated Korean woman as “normal” at the expense of the other’s alienation. Though it is important to portray the diversity of Korean populations in

Canada and the intersectional dimensions that shape such diverse identities, I suggest that the hyperbolic accentuation of Nayoung's difference in this episode risks the effects of superiority humour from the show's non-Korean viewers and the perpetuation of negative stereotypes against Korean/Asian women. While *Kim's* producers may argue that the viewers' laughter is meant to arise from the cultural differences between Nayoung and Janet in the fourth episode, the humour in fact comes from a sense of superiority triggered by the cousin's alienness for audiences who are not familiar with how real Korean women dress, how much Nayoung's mannerisms derive from Korean cultural norms, or how much of Nayoung's child-like speech stems from her accent and lack of skills in English.

Language is used in the fourth episode to emphasize Nayoung's foreignness. When Nayoung first interacts with the Kim family after entering the store, their conversation takes place in English, even though most of the characters, Umma, Appa, and Nayoung, are more fluent in Korean. This scene appears awkward and culturally unusual, given the cousin's recent arrival to Canada and Korean customs of politeness that are difficult to convey in English for individuals with more cultural and linguistic fluency in Korean. Although one can assume that Nayoung had visited the Kim family in the past and that they are used to conversing in English, the privileging of English communication in this scene takes Nayoung's behaviours of cuteness out of context and contributes to the infantilization of her speech through disjointed sentences and limited vocabulary that resemble the babbling of children. Moreover, as the subplot involving Nayoung focuses on Janet's internal development of gradually learning to accept the differences between her and her cousin, the initially "alien" woman from Korea is depicted from Janet's point of view. Effects of dramatic irony can be seen in Janet's first interactions with Nayoung as Janet appears as the only bewildered character in the scene that recognizes the

oddity of Nayoung's outfit and behaviours according to "Canadian" norms. Janet's fluency in English and her calmness are also juxtaposed against Nayoung's lack of linguistic abilities in relation to her naiveté and excitability.

The juxtaposition of the two Korean women continues when Janet introduces Nayoung to her Canadian friends Samira and Gerald at a Korean restaurant. The notion of cultural authenticity is cemented as a theme of the scene when Samira asks Janet and Nayoung whether the Korean restaurant that they are at is "authentic." Janet explains that the restaurant is "one of the best in the city," while Nayoung adds that "[it] is same, but also different." Janet looks irritated by Nayoung's addendum. She grows more frustrated when Samira and Gerald take interest in Nayoung's introduction of Korean honorific terms such as *unni*, *obba*, and *noona*, and as they chuckle at the resemblance between the Korean term *obba* and the Greek emotional expression, *opa*, yelling the homonym out loud. Janet takes further offense when Samira asks the two Korean women what to do with a raw egg placed by her spicy tofu soup, and Nayoung attempts to show Samira what to do by cracking her raw egg into Janet's soup, saying, "That's how you do." When Janet frowns and expresses that she did not want egg in her stew, Gerald attempts to crack a joke at Janet, saying, "*Oppa*, that's how you do." Janet remarks curtly in visible anger, "I think I know how I do." She is furious when Samira challenges her further by pointing out that Janet has not yet been to Korea. She then yells at Samira, "I don't have to go to Korea. I am Korean!" As the final blow to Janet's ego, when a Korean waiter asks how everything is going, the waiter does not understand Janet's attempt to reply in Korean and comments to Nayoung in Korean that he finds it difficult to understand when "second generations speak Korean." Offended by the waiter and Nayoung's laughter, when her cousin

attempts to translate, Janet yells at Nayoung: “I don’t care what he said. And don’t call me *unni*! We’re not little kids anymore. You’re eighteen. Act like a fucking grown up!”

This scene centering on Janet’s frustration not only reveals the conflicting notions of “cultural authenticity” regarding diasporic Koreans but also shows Janet’s internalized racism triggering her behaviours of intra-ethnic othering. While Janet is offended by the claim of difference between Korean Canadian and Korean restaurants and feels the need to assert her “Korean-ness,” she is uneasy when her friends are entertained by Nayoung’s discussion of Korean culture. Janet is hesitant to laugh because she is more skeptical than her cousin of whether her friends are laughing *with* Nayoung or *at* her and the cultural differences that she represents. In her refusal to laugh, Janet distances herself from the exoticization of her culture and Nayoung. What is more pertinent to recognize is that Janet’s anger, driven by her internal anxieties and by the reactions of her friends, are directed most pointedly at Nayoung—the “Other” co-ethnic at the table, who challenges Janet’s positive self-identity by appearing as “too ethnic” or too stereotypical (Pyke and Dang 152).

While this scene depicts the diversity of diasporic Koreans in Canada and the negative effects of internalized racism, it nevertheless does so by alienating Nayoung and continuing to accentuate her otherness. Moreover, throughout the episode, Nayoung is a flat and caricatured character who undergoes no psychological or emotional development of her own other than servicing Janet’s journey of cultural acceptance. As the plot and vantage point of the episode are centred on Janet’s experiences, Nayoung is expensed as a hyperbolic and funny embodiment of exotic and fetishized cuteness stereotypes for the validation of Janet’s struggles and the transformation of her identity. As a result, the juxtaposition of the two Korean-born women in this fourth episode, like the comparison of Korean masculinity in the first episode, unveils a

pattern of valorizing the more Westernized or assimilated Korean identities by delegating negative racial images and meanings against Asians to the less acculturated co-ethnic subjects.

These two examples from *Kim*'s first season demonstrate how the first sitcom *of and by* Korean Canadians can still participate in the racialization of Koreans in Canada. However, a macroscopic view of the politics of production prevents a hasty rebuke against the show's Korean Canadian creator or its Asian Canadian actors. What this examination of *Kim*'s shows is rather a need to begin more critical discussions of diasporic Korean representation on television, further in relation to the rising genre of comedy. This conversation should look inward and outward, and into the past and present, involving producers, writers, and scholars, as well as gatekeepers, decision-makers, and commercial funders in the television industry, and furthermore integrating discourses of diversity, equity, and yet, the pervasiveness of White supremacy and internalized racism. In wrapping up this section on *Kim*'s, I note that a more comprehensive investigation of the sitcom promises a fuller critique of the show's character development throughout its five seasons and other examples of conflicting scenes regarding Koreans and people of colour in Canada. This investigation is especially warranted as Yoon and Liu have claimed that the sitcom's Asian Canadian actors increasingly grew frustrated with the sitcom's representations as the seasons progressed and that the production leadership gradually transitioned over from Choi to White. Nevertheless, in this chapter, I have chosen to focus on two case studies of the first season to: first, establish the need to discuss this work in the context of growing Korean and Asian humorous representation on Canadian television, and second, to undertake a comparative, transnational, and trans-textual study of several different works. As I suggest that both microscopic and macroscopic explorations are needed in this relatively new field of studying diasporic Korean televisual comedy, the upcoming sections on *Dr. Ken* and

ALAG further disclose how patterns of intra-ethnic othering and the perpetuation of gendered and racialized stereotypes against Asians re-emerge, drawing attention to a problematic trope that must be addressed in depicting the diversity of diasporic Koreans.

VIII. *Dr. Ken*

i. What's Wrong with *Dr. Ken*? How the "Uncultural Masks the Cultural"

ABC's *Dr. Ken*, set in cotemporary California, revolves around Ken Park (played by Ken Jeong) and his wife, Allison Park (played by Suzy Nakamura)—second-generation, middle-/upper-class Asian American parents—and their two young children Molly (played by Krista Marie Yu) and Dave (played by Albert Tsai) (Eguchi and Ding 209; 299-300). The plot moreover features Ken and Allison's migrant parents and their professional lives, regularly starring Ken's coworkers at the hospital.⁵¹ Ken is an intelligent Korean American physician who strives to be a good doctor, husband, and father, although his efforts are at times misguided. His wife, Allison, is a Japanese American psychiatrist who often reshapes Ken's spontaneous and overly passionate opinions and parenting ideas through her calm and analytical demeanor and professional expertise. Their teenage daughter, Molly, is popular, self-centred, and social, while their 10-year-old son Dave is more quiet, smart, and quirky (300). As Eguchi and Ding assert their frequent portrayals as "almost Whites" through their societal positions, demeanors, and privilege, Ken and Allison seemingly represent the quintessential "model minority" Asian Americans.

According to Emily Yahr and numerous media reports, *Dr. Ken* was "absolutely eviscerated by TV critics," as multiple headlines write themselves: "'Dr. Ken' needs medical

⁵¹ Ken's colleagues at the Welltopia medical group include the new resident Julie (played by Kate Simses), receptionist Damona (played by Tisha Campbell), registered nurse Clark (played by Jonathan Slavin), and office manager Pat (played by Dave Foley) (299).

attention,” “Sickly sitcom: ‘Dr. Ken’ needs a DNR order,” “‘Dr. Ken’s comedy needs a heart and humor transplant,” and ‘Dr. Ken review: A case of malpractice’ (“Why do people hate ‘Dr. Ken’ so much?”). In a review in *The Atlantic*, Lenika Cruz describes the sitcom as “uncomfortable, unfunny, and forgettable,” pointing out how “strenuously average” and culturally neutral—in other words, White—the Park family seems at large:

It’s an effect amplified by seeing them in a setting—the model TV house—visually associated with decades of quintessentially American families from the Huxtables to the Matthews. In fact, you rarely notice their Asian-ness unless it comes up in conversation—like when the Park family imitates Ken’s heavily Korean-accented parents, or when Ken’s boss threatens to fire his “tiny Asian ass.” Which is to say that Dr. Ken doesn’t pay much attention to race, nor does it need to, but when it does it feels oddly forced, much like canned laughter itself does.

Cruz’ perceptive criticism is reminiscent of Eguchi and Ding’s claim that “the uncultural masks the cultural” in *Dr. Ken*. Despite Jeong’s assertion that the “cultural” elements of “Asian-ness” and “Korean-ness” are “organically introduced” in *Dr. Ken* to avoid marking Asians as Others (as they had been represented historically), the sitcom does so by generally erasing the Kim family’s markers of race and ethnicity and whitewashing them to fit the mold of an “average White American” family. When distinctive markers of race and ethnicity are introduced, they serve to emphasize the stereotypical traits of Asian/Korean characters as Cruz points out or to further highlight the relative “Whiteness” of Ken’s immediate family compared to other Asian/Korean or other racial minority characters.

Contributing to this discussion on *Dr. Ken*’s problematic representation of Asian Americans and diasporic Koreans, I analyze the sitcom’s portrayal of Korean/Asian masculinity

to show its overt and repeated perpetuation of racial stereotypes that emasculate and marginalize Asian males. I focus my analysis on masculinity because as some critics have noticed, *Dr. Ken* is overly fixated on Ken's eccentric and awkward qualities and his vantage point, revolving around a dominant frame of cis-gender male centredness, and thus the sitcom wastes the talents of several supporting cast members, particularly Suzy Nakamura (see Fienberg; Yahr). Daniel Fienberg comments that despite Nakamura's rare role as a lead character, *Dr. Ken* "backslides by making her another of those sensible TV wives forced to feign endless loving frustration with her ever-so-wacky spouse." Another example of the sitcom's hyperfocus on Ken is that while Ken's Korean American parents, D.K. and In-sook Park (played by Dana Lee and Alexis Rhee, respectively), make frequent appearances throughout the series to accentuate the cultural differences between Ken and his parents, Allison's Japanese American parents are hardly seen.⁵²

Nevertheless, I argue that this male centredness and the relative emphasis on Ken's Korean heritage still ultimately mark Korean/Asian male figures as Others, according to and further perpetuating racializing stereotypes against Asian men. In the depiction of three generations of Korean American males in *Dr. Ken*, D.K. Park, the first-generation Korean American grandfather, appears as strict and quiet, speaking English with a thick accent, while his second-generation son, Ken, is socially awkward despite (or perhaps as a result of) being an "almost White" model minority. Ken's additional characteristics of quirkiness and femininity are shared with his third-generation son, Dave, who is frequently described as "weird" and different among his family and friends. Despite the ultimate characterization of all three characters according to anti-Asian stereotypes of the model minority, yellow peril, perpetual foreigner, and

⁵² As an unusual exception, in an odd episode centering on Ken and Allison's ethnic heritage in "Thanksgiving Culture Clash," Allison's Japanese American parents make a brief appearance to accentuate Ken's lack of knowledge and awareness regarding Korean cultural customs and food, while highlighting D.K.'s comparable otherness against Allison's father.

nerdy, emasculated males, the characters recurringly disassociate themselves from one another to mark their differences from the Other. These depictions of disassociation contribute to the sitcom's humour as eventually, the audience laughs *at* all three men and their distinctive features as perpetual aliens. Thus, in the subsections to come, I analyze the first two episodes of *Dr. Ken* that particularly juxtapose the relationships and differences among the males in Ken's family to reveal examples of their otherness and othering as the subject of humour.

ii. Three Generations of Perpetual Aliens: D.K., Ken, and Dave

In the first episode, Ken appears as a sarcastic and emotionally erratic physician with rude bedside manners and an over-reliance on his wife, who seems to set him straight whenever he complains to her about his problems at work and with parenting, like the patients she sees as a therapist. When Ken says to his wife, lying on her office couch, "I'm so stressed out. These patients are such whiny, complaining bitches" in the second scene of the episode, Allison responds smiling, "Yes, I know exactly what you mean," staring at her husband. Given the multi-camera set up of the sitcom, the crowd's roaring laughter follows. As Ken over-worries about his daughter, Molly, insisting sarcastically that she must be "taped down," Allison remarks that Ken sounds like his father. Ken denies her claim, mimicking his father's Korean accent, saying, "Tape down. Child cannot run!" After another roar of laughter from the crowd, Allison tells her husband, "Okay, come on. Mama's got to work," gesturing Ken to leave her office. As he leaves, Ken cracks an inappropriate joke at Allison's male White patient entering the office, who accidentally saw the couple kiss: Ken comments, "Just talk about your kids a lot. Gets her super-turned on."

These first moments of *Dr. Ken* already adhere to Eguchi and Ding's claims regarding Ken's characterization as a nonthreatening Other. Moreover, in the interactions with his wife,

Ken is portrayed as whiny, immature, and emotional, while Allison comparatively seems collected and logical, treating her husband like a cross between her child and her patient. Eguchi and Ding point out how a “highly educated doctor like Ken is represented as someone who cannot perform nice, indirect, and nuanced communication that is central to the White middle-/upper-class mainstream United States,” referring to Ken’s rude bedside manners problematized as a subplot of comedy in the first episode (302). While one can argue that Ken’s depiction subverts the quiet, submissive, and passive stereotypes of the model minority, Ken’s over-the-top behaviours (such as slapping his male patient’s bottom) and his awkward and insensitive communication still mark him as eccentric and unassimilable, needing additional training in bedside manners in comparison to his coworkers. Scholars have also suggested the correlation between the social incompetence stereotype—that Asian Americans are perceived to possess unflattering interpersonal traits such as being reserved, unfriendly, or lacking warmth—and the model minority stereotype: “people who tend to stereotype Asian Americans as professionally or academically successful also tend to view Asian Americans as socially incompetent” (Wong et al. 77; see Fiske et al.; Jackson et al.).

In the conversation with his wife, Ken appears as needy and child-like, and while this representation too can be seen as a subversion of the traditional gender stereotypes of males as “strong” and “logical” and women as “weak” and “emotional” within cis-gender relationships, Ken’s exaggerated tantrums and the crowd’s bursts of laughter at his complaints reveal that Ken’s eccentric traits, compared to his seemingly reasonable and composed wife, are intended as the subject of comedy at the expense of identifying Ken as an other, even among other Asians in the sitcom. Moreover, as Ken’s father, D.K., is briefly alluded to in the conversation, Ken’s mimicry of his father’s accent and Allison’s remark that Ken reminds her of his father, when

Ken ridiculously claims that his child must be taped down, introduce D.K. according to stereotypes of an Asian “tiger parent” with unreasonable practice of parenting.

Dave emerges in the next scene dressed in a tight, black full-body suit and a pair of white gloves, rehearsing to be a mime for his school’s upcoming talent show. When Ken asks Dave to show him what he has been preparing, his son begins to perform his miming act choreographed awkwardly and flamboyantly to the chorus of Katy Perry’s pop song “Roar.” The invisible crowd laughs in the background. Ken stops his son’s performance abruptly and says to him sarcastically, “Dave, every kid does one thing in school they’re defined by, and you really don’t want yours to be mime, because that is an invisible box that you cannot get out of.” At the end of the episode, when Dave dances by himself on stage, Ken and Allison look uncomfortable at the sight, as Ken describes the performance as a “train wreck” and eventually jumps onto the stage to dance with his son. Juxtaposed to Molly, who appears as popular, outgoing, and “cool” from the first episode, Dave is characterized as awkward and eccentric, resembling his father’s markers of otherness as the object of laughter.

In the second episode, Ken’s parents, D.K. and In-Sook Park, become the central characters of a comedic subplot as Allison invites them over for dinner, and Ken unexpectedly gets flagged for his bad bedside manners at work, and forced to take a patient-doctor communication training course at the time of the family dinner. Even before the grandparents’ arrival, Ken’s family introduces D.K. and In-Sook as strange and uncomfortable to be around. When Allison announces the dinner to Ken and the children in the dining room, Molly immediately complains, “Do we have to have dinner with grandma and grandpa tonight? It is so painful. They always ask the same two questions!” Molly mimics her grandparents’ thick accents: “How’s school? And you like a boy?” Dave chimes in nonchalantly, “I like it when they

come over for dinner. I find the long silences rather meditative.” After the children leave the room, Allison tells her husband, “This is gonna suck, man.” When Ken protests, claiming his parents “aren’t that bad,” Allison complains that Ken’s parents push her food around on their plates and that they seem to dislike her. She responds sarcastically to Ken’s insistence that his parents adore her, “That’s why every time I try to talk to them, they sit there stone-faced like Korean Mount Rushmore.” Ken explains that his parents are just “not great conversationalists” and mimics their accent again, saying, “When my grandma died, they just said, ‘Grandma dead. Here candy.’” Laughter follows in the background.

This introduction to the elderly couple shapes an image of Ken’s grandparents as perpetual foreigners with limited linguistic abilities, characteristic silence, and stone-cold faces prior to their physical appearance on screen. Moreover, as Ken and his family make fun of the grandparents’ accent and their demeanors, they differentiate themselves from the first generation, marking their status as more assimilated and socially acceptable, while perpetuating stereotypes against D.K. and In-Sook as emotionless, calculating, and uncomfortably different. Pyke and Dang point out in their study of internalized racism among second-generation Asian Americans that “[accent] and foreign language were particularly important markers of ‘FOB’ [‘Fresh Off the Boat’],” a narrative and symbolic device used to “socially categorize and describe coethnic peers on different acculturative trajectories” (156; 149). By mimicking and dramatizing D.K. and In-Sook’s accents, Ken and his children highlight the grandparents’ unassimilated qualities as “too Asian” or “too Korean,” thereby displaying the logic of defensive othering that Schwalbe et al. points out—that there are Others to whom traits of inferiority and difference apply, but that in turn, “it does not apply to *me*” (425). Through the othering and the attribution of anti-Asian stereotypes to the less assimilated group, marked as abnormal and inferior, Ken and his family

then distinguish themselves as “normal,” unconsciously aligning themselves with the dominant oppressive society, as “almost White.”

During the dinner, as Ken is late due to his training, Allison and the children sit uncomfortably around the table with Ken’s parents as they eat in silence. D.K. and In-Sook wear a bizarrely stoic expression, never bothering to flinch nor smile, and robotically ask the same two questions that Molly had suspected, while responding to Allison’s attempts to make small talk curtly and emotionlessly. Allison and Molly are seen desperately checking for the time, and Allison repeatedly sips on her wine frustrated and nervous. Bursts of laughter surround the grandparents’ questions and responses as well as Allison and Molly’s uncomfortable reactions; the scene’s humour is explicitly shaped by D.K. and In-Sook’s odd behaviours, exaggerated to appear ridiculous and nonhuman. As Molly frowns at her mother, and Allison dramatizes her nervousness by obsessively checking for the time and drinking her wine, the humour also arises from a sense of empathy at their desperation, as the viewer acknowledges that Allison and Molly have a reasonable cause to be anxious. A clear barrier exists between the nervous mother and daughter and the first-generation grandparents, not only in terms of their cultural differences, but also in terms of who the audience is laughing *with* and whom they are laughing *at*. This dinner scene furthermore concretizes the perpetual foreigner stereotype earlier assigned to D.K. and In-Sook by Ken and his immediate family. As the viewers are made to observe the grandparents’ obvious signs of difference through the pair’s exaggerated sternness and silence, the empathy established between the audience and the mother and daughter confirms D.K. and In-Sook’s alienness as “true” and “real.”

Near the end of the second episode, another dinner takes place with Allison, Molly, Dave, and Ken’s parents without Ken, as he unexpectedly gets caught up with work again. Although at

first, the dinner begins in a similar way, this time, Allison, who furiously gulps down her wine, determinedly asks Ken's parents why they seem to dislike her. A startled look appears on D.K. and In-Sook's face for the first time in the episode, as D.K. proceeds to tell Allison that sometimes, they think that Allison is too good for their son. In-Sook moreover explains that "Ken is very arrogant about being a doctor," and D.K. chimes in to mimic his son by saying that Ken begins many sentences with, "As a doctor. . ." Marking a surprising twist in the episode, Ken's immediate family bonds with D.K. and In-Sook as they collectively poke fun at Ken's arrogant demeanours about being a doctor and share a laughter. Ken's parents are finally recast as humans through this twist, able to laugh and to be funny as well as to exhibit other emotions and warmth toward their family. This restoration of D.K. and In-Sook's humanness, however, comes at the expense of their son being portrayed as the spoiled "golden boy" of the family, who acts as a know-it-all, is conceited and angry, and requires "doctor-sensitivity training" at the hospital. In other words, only through highlighting Ken's otherness shaped by his socially awkward and insensitive qualities, D.K. and In-Sook are accepted as "normal" by both Ken's family and the sitcom's viewers. As Ken's sensitivity toward his patients and his poor communication skills are problematized at the hospital in the backdrop of his parents' visits, ultimately, both Ken and his parents are marked as alien and inadequate in their own ways, as the viewers take turns laughing at the Korean male characters' respective otherness and othering of one another.

Finally, Dave, the young third-generation son, is seen code switching to fit in with Ken and Ken's parents by underscoring his grandparents' otherness at first, then poking fun at his father's inadequacies to differentiate himself from the object of humour at the table. These habitual patterns of disassociation disclose his tendencies of internalized racism, manifesting

from a young age as a result of observing his parents' and grandparents' behaviours and his subtle attempts to fit in. What is ironic is that the dynamic that Dave tries to fit into among his family members is more often than not characterized by White supremacy. For example, when Ken and his immediate family discuss Ken's parents coming over for dinner, Dave mentions that he finds the "long silences rather meditative," highlighting his grandparents' unusual quietness nevertheless with a positive tone. Later on, when the grandparents take humorous jabs at Ken's arrogance, Dave responds to his mother's comment about Ken needing to go to patient-sensitivity training by shouting, "more like anger-management training!" to solicit the family's laughter. Dave's sense of belonging in both scenes is achieved through disidentification—underscoring his "normal-ness" by pointing at his grandparents and father's perceived social inadequacies and abnormalities. Nonetheless, the viewers' comic amusement in these moments emerge not only from the superiority humour solicited by Dave's comments but also from Dave's quirkiness. Thus, even in the moments that the family and viewers are laughing with the young boy, they are also laughing at him, as Dave's alienness is established in other scenes of the first and second episodes as well as continuously throughout the season: in the seventh episode, Ken's sister, Wendi, tells her brother explicitly, "Dave is turning out to be a weirdo."

The portrayal of the three Korean American male figures in *Dr. Ken* therefore unveils an overarching assimilationist discourse shaping its comedy. Jeremy Butler describes that [sitcoms] that incarnate an assimilationist discourse downplay the 'otherness' of subculture groups—implying that those groups ought to fit in, to assimilate, into the broader culture . . . Racially charged physical signifiers of a subculture are de-emphasized in favor of stories about the 'universal' human condition and the situations

that individuals experience that do not connect to the specifics of their race, ethnicity, national origin, or religion (“Comedy, Race, Ethnicity, and Religion”).

Despite the emphasis on *Dr. Ken*’s multiculturalism by centering on a bi-ethnic Asian American family, the notion of “normal” in the sitcom repeatedly rejects signs of cultural difference, thereby reaffirming the oppression against Asian Americans as part of a “universal” order. These conditions of normalcy and universality are also reinstituted through humour and laughter, barricading the lines between who the viewers are laughing with and who are laughed at. In these ways, the sitcom’s Asian American and diasporic Korean characters’ behaviours of internalized racism and intra-ethnic othering are excused, hidden away by the show’s “uncultural-ness,” as claimed by Jeong.

IX. *Angry Asian Little Girls (ALAG)*

The *ALAG* animated cartoon series, created by the Korean American webcomic and animated-cartoon artist Lela Lee, debuted on the Korean American channel Mnet in 2014 as a twelve-episode version broadcasted over a three-hour block (“Watch out!”). Begun originally as a comic drawn on the floor of Lee’s college apartment in 1994, *ALAG* was hidden away for four years due to Lee’s embarrassment until it was finally screened as an animated short at the 1997 American Cinematheque Film Festival. The artist had started her comic drawings as a response to the fury she felt at the “offensive male chauvinistic behaviour” exhibited in the animated shorts of the Spike and Mike’s Twisted Animation Festival (Ono and Pham 141). *ALAG*’s cartoon characters became a brand in 1998, as Lee began making and selling labelled commodities such as t-shirts, coffee mugs, bags, wallets, and make-up cases online (Ono and Pham 141). Lee notes in an interview that MTV, a popular American cable channel, had initially shown some interest in *ALAG*, though they determined eventually that “it was cute but [that]

there was no market for Asians” (IndieRag, 2001). Despite MTV’s estimation, Lee’s website www.angrylittleasiangirls.com, which the artist used to post her webcomic strips and to sell her branded merchandise online, received about 800,000 hits per month and up to a million hits during the holiday season (141).

ALAG centres around the day-to-day life of the central character Kim, a female Korean American, second-generation immigrant youth who has recently moved to the imaginary U.S. town of Placentia with her Korean American family. As Lee claims, “[Kim] is who I wish I could have been,” the little girl described by the *Washington Post* as a “human explosive” is blatant, outspoken, foul-mouthed, and infuriated, most of the time. Kim confronts several stereotypes against Asian American women, including the model-minority myth and their gendered image as reserved, quiet, and submissive. For example, in the first episode, on Kim’s first day at Placentia Elementary, Kim talks back angrily when her teacher perpetrates microaggressions against her by treating the youth like a foreigner. When Kim introduces herself to the class, her teacher, Ms. Bubelba exclaims, “Very impressive, Kim! For an Oriental girl, you speak English really well! How long have you been in America?” Kim yells in response, “I was born here, you fucking dipshit! Don’t you know anything about immigration? Read some real history books, you stupid ignoramus.” Observing a version of this scene in Lee’s first animated short, Ono and Pham suggest that Kim reconfigures “dominant conceptual maps of Asian Americans” (against the teacher’s traditional conceptual map) by overturning the assumption that Asian Americans are “inherently foreigners and submissive” and by asserting the right of Asian Americans to be in the U.S. as citizens (143).

The recurring characters that surround Kim include her first-generation immigrant, Korean American parents, her close friends at Placentia Elementary—Deborah, Maria, Wanda,

and Xyla—and Deborah’s younger brother who has a crush on Kim, Bruce. Kim’s mother, who speaks English with a thick Asian accent like Umma in *Kim’s* and Ken’s parents in *Dr. Ken*, is strict on Kim and mostly angry like her daughter. In the first episode, the mother wakes Kim up from bed by yelling, “Get up now! Sleep is for child to grow up to ask, ‘You want fry with that?’” When Kim complains about the smell of her lunch, leftover Korean food that her mother had packed, Kim’s mother responds, “We move here so you go to better school. Not make friend. Stupid people have many friend. Guess what? They still stupid.” Her father in contrast, is more soft-spoken, quiet, and gentle, while he too has a thick accent and is seen reading a newspaper most of the time. On Kim’s first day, on the school bus, she meets Xyla, another Asian American character, who appears gloomy and apathetic. Xyla describes Deborah and her group of friends sitting across from them, who, according to Kim, look like “affirmative action Charlie’s Angels.” Xyla explains that Deborah is “super spoiled” and that her parents call her “princess,” while during Christmas, “she gets gifts for like eight days.” Deborah chimes in to assert that this is due to Jewish traditions. Xyla describes the remainder of the group and herself as follows:

The one by the window is Maria. She’s into the environment and pita, even though she has no problem beating the crap out of an animal pinata on her birthday every year. I heard one time, she decapitated a tootsie-roll stuffed Chihuahua with one swing. The other one is Wanda. She thinks she’s a poet or something. I’m Xyla by the way. The thought of suicide is what keeps me alive.

Deborah is featured as a blonde, while Maria, who is Mexican, has a slightly darker skin tone than Deborah and light brown hair. Wanda is Black and her African American identity is

portrayed with a brown-coloured skin tone and short black curls. Xyla appears with shoulder-length black hair, slightly longer and in a different style than Kim's.

This section on *ALAG* examines the characterization of Kim's mother and her friends to argue that despite the animation series' aims to confront prevalent racism against Asian Americans, it does so by relying on negative racial stereotypes of both Asians and other racial minorities through the depiction of Kim's mother as a "tiger mother" and her friends, in accordance with racial/ethnic stereotypes against Jewish, Mexican, and African American individuals. I suggest that this representation furthermore relates to Kim's internalized racism and that it perpetuates the racial triangulation of Asian Americans against other racial minorities, shaping the animation's humour through the viewer's sense of superiority at the minority characters' stereotypical differences. As *ALAG* is a rare humorous intervention of diasporic Korean representation in the form of an animated-cartoon series, this examination exposes the recurrence of issues surrounding internalized racism and the perpetuation of racism among diasporic Koreans across televisual comedy genres.

i. Tiger Mother

The stereotype of the "tiger mother" became explicitly coined and more widely known after the publication of the Chinese American author Amy Chua's memoir, *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother* (2011). In the memoir, Chua describes her controversial endeavours to motivate her daughters' success through what she deems as an Asian parenting style. Tiger mothers are mothers of Chinese or other East Asian ethnic heritage who are "highly controlling and authoritarian, denying their children free time, play dates, and extracurricular activities in order to drive them to high levels of success at any cost, in sharp contrast to the softer and more forgiving Western parenting style," according to the author (Juang et al. 2). Tiger parents

characteristically order their children to achieve A grades in school, are not concerned about their children's self-esteem, "assume strength not fragility," "believe that their kids owe them everything," and "believe that they know what is best for their children and therefore override all of their children's own desires and preferences" (Juang et al. 2; Chua 52-53). As Chua's approaches to parenting were widely contested in the media, on social network sites, and in scholarship, Juang et al. note that the "stereotypical and caricature-like image [of tiger parenting according to Chua] seems to confirm the worst fears about Asian parenting—that it is excessively controlling, harsh, and demanding unquestioning obedience with little to no concern for the child's needs, wishes, or emotional well-being" (2).

In *ALAG*, Kim's mother resembles the stereotype of the tiger mother in many ways. She insists that her daughter does not need any friends, that she should sleep less so that she can escape the fate of working in low-wage jobs, and that they moved to Placentia to improve the quality of her education, in the first episode alone. At the end of the pilot episode, when Kim tells her mother at the dinner table that her first day of school was rough because "just about everyone is Whiter than Anderson Cooper," her mother replies, "It should be rough. Make you ready for Harvard or Yale. Hard is good." In the second episode, Kim's mother further insists on vetting Kim's friend Deborah, saying to her daughter, "I decide if she's good enough for you." By the end of the episode, Kim's mother determines that Deborah and Kim can remain friends despite Deborah's bruised, blue eye from a fight, only because Deborah's parents are "rich." Kim's father, who seems quiet, less assertive, and empathetic in comparison to Kim's mother, accentuates the mother's toughness. For instance, when Kim is leaving on her first day of school, Kim's father tells her, "Kim, good luck on first day. Try to smile. Then your day be happy," immediately following the mother's contrasting advice to her daughter: "We move here so you

go to better school, not make friend. Stupid people have many friend. Guess what? They still stupid.” In such ways, Kim’s father appears throughout the season only as brief juxtapositions to Kim’s mother, while the latter exhibits her characteristic fierceness as a source of humour.

The stereotypical representation of Kim’s mother is thus problematic because it relies on the ludicrousness of her parenting as well as her unchanging foreignness and lack of humanity to draw in the viewers’ laughter. Since *ALAG* is focused on Kim’s point of view, there is little to no background or character development for Kim’s mother, who appears as a flat character that only serves to explain Kim’s anger at home and to give context to Kim’s model minority traits as well as her behaviours of manipulation. In the third episode, for example, Kim goes on a date with Deborah’s naïve little brother, Bruce, because he promises to give Kim his new iPad in exchange. When Bruce arrives at Kim’s door and her mother looks skeptical, Kim tells her mother about Bruce’s promise, emphasizing that “[an] iPad 8 normally costs five-hundred dollars.” Kim’s mother allows her to go on the date without protest, thinking aloud, “Five hundred dollar? Hmm, good deal.” The Korean American mother and daughter in these scenes look calculating and manipulative, especially as the usually strict mother who disapproves of Kim’s social life confirms that she has made a good “deal.” The humour involving Kim’s mother here and in other scenes arises from the ridiculousness of her parenting, validating that Kim has a reason to be angry at home and justifying Kim’s scheming behaviours. As Kim’s mother’s accent in English and her simplistic grammar furthermore accentuate her foreignness, her representation places the first-generation Korean American/Asian American mother back on the traditional conceptual map of U.S. racial identity as a funny alien and a metaphorical noncitizen whose only concern is upward social and economic mobility at any expense of her child’s wellbeing and morality.

What is additionally problematic is how Kim relatively “fits in” to the viewers’ expectations of U.S. White-centred multiculturalism, depicted by the imaginary society of Placentia, compared to her mother. Through her anger, Kim asserts the belongingness of her Asian American identity by challenging forms of racism among her friends and teachers and showcasing her assimilated status. Kim’s ability to blatantly say what is on her mind serves as a kind of vigilante justice and satisfying humour for Asian American viewers, and as a way of laughing at the social incongruities between what should have actually been said and the daily realities of racism in contemporary multicultural America for non-Asian viewers in the ideals of a post-racial climate. Within this representational scheme, however, Kim’s anger is also partially and recurrently directed at her mother. At the beginning of several episodes throughout the series, Kim complains to her mother about packing her a “stinky Korean lunch” that would embarrass her in front of her non-Korean friends, while her mother insists that Korean food is “hip” and better than American food. In the fourth episode, when Kim is surprised to discover that her lunch does not smell like a “fish anus,” her mother says, “I have no time to make you good Korean food today. I have to get ready for my *unni* coming. So I give you lousy American food. It have no nutritional value, will rot your teeth, and make you grow up to be small and stupid.” Kim’s mother’s “Korean-ness” is juxtaposed against Kim’s preference for “American-ness” in such scenes, while the presupposed “American” food is one that does not smell and lacks ethnic qualities.

When Kim’s mother attempts to teach Kim and her friends formal etiquette for women as a premise for comedy in the second episode, Wanda points out Kim’s mother’s blatant racism when Mrs. Lee claims that she is not rude “like a Black person” and refers to Wanda as a “Black friend.” Kim then goes on to educate her mother that the etiquette book that Mrs. Lee has been

following is outdated (from the 1950s) and further discovers that the mother has misunderstood a spam mail as an invitation to a formal event due to her lack of English comprehension, while the mail is the reason why Mrs. Lee had insisted on teaching the girls formal etiquette in the first place. These scenes not only depict Kim's mother as outlandish, ignorant, and incompetent, worthy of being re-educated on proper etiquette and cultural norms by the more "Americanized" elementary-school children, but disproportionately portray the first-generation Korean parent as backward and racist, in comparison to the more assimilated and politically correct, Kim. While the intentions of this second episode may be to satirically portray the internalized racism of diasporic Koreans against other racial minorities and the generational, cultural gaps among women, it simplistically represents the first-generation parent as responsible for perpetrations of internalized racism and sexism due to her unassimilated qualities in juxtaposition to the second generation.

ii. "Affirmative Action Charlies' Angels"

In the "Friends" section of the *Angry Little Girls!* webcomics, Wanda is described as the "fresh little soul sistah" and Maria is noted as the "crazy little Latina," while Deborah is described as the "disenchanted princess." Ono and Pham problematize these characterizations to suggest that the webcomic "problematically and possibly unintentionally stereotypes other marginalized groups in the supporting cast" (144). Such stereotypical characterizations largely recur in the *ALAG* animated cartoons: the African American character is poetic, the Mexican American is slow, unkempt, and "into the environment," and the Jewish American character is "spoiled" and "rich." These stereotypes serve as the repetitive premise of satirical humour in the series, as Kim learns to adapt to the political dynamics amid the "multiculturalism" of her friends. I extend Ono and Pham's observations to argue that such depictions not only trigger a

sense of superiority humour from the viewers, marking socially marginalized characters as deficient and unusual, but perpetuate the racial triangulation of Asian Americans in comparison to and at the expense of other marginalized individuals.

Deborah, Kim's best friend and the Jewish American character in *ALAG*, exemplifies the use of stereotypes when she is depicted as pampered and pompous, clueless of class or financial struggles, and characterized centrally by her wealthy parents and a lack of suffering. Following Xyla's introduction of Deborah as a "super spoiled" princess in the first episode, Deborah appears in the second episode wearing a new mink coat that her father bought her, explaining to Kim, "My mom got sick of me whining about how lonely I am so she told my dad to buy me a puppy to keep me company. But he got me this mink instead. He said it showed our status and I didn't have to pick up its poop when I took it out for walks." When Maria points out that a "beautiful animal suffered a horrible demise just so [Deborah] can look fashionable," the blonde, Jewish little girl nonchalantly responds, "I know. Isn't it awesome?" When Deborah meets Kim's mother later in the episode, she also emphasizes to the skeptical mother who is concerned about Kim's friends that her parents are "very rich." In the last episode of the season, when Kim complains about her parents fighting, Deborah attempts to empathize with her friend by noting that her parents argue all the time over whether they should "get a BMW or a Mercedes" or whether they should "ski in France or in Switzerland." Kim looks irritated by Deborah's comments, as she blurts out sardonically, "Yeah, Deborah. Sounds really tough. I'm sure they throw diamonds and Picassos at each other when they get really mad." Such depictions of Deborah as a spoiled "princess" confirm and propagate ethnic stereotypes regarding Jewish Americans as excessively and undeservedly rich, overindulging, and apathetic to others' sufferings.

Wanda, on the other hand, is represented as poetic, rebellious, and financially impoverished. Her racial identity visually highlighted by her dark skin tone and short, black curls, she is often seen expressing herself rhythmically through spoken word or rhymes with the sound of African drums beating in the background. She speaks with a characteristic African American accent and frequently advocates for social justice causes as a resistant and outspoken activist. In the last episode, when the school principal asks what students do to redirect their anger, Wanda responds confidently that when she needs to vent, she lets it out in her “rhymes.” Wanda’s “rhymes” are however depicted as rudimentary nursery rhymes such as “Violets are blue, roses are red, I need a man like I need a fork in my hand,” highlighting her exoticness and ridiculousness as a subject of humour rather than asserting her artistic skills or intelligence (“Mother Lee’s Etiquette”). Talking to Maria about a “cool” new pair of kicks, Wanda moreover reveals her family’s lower economic status by saying, “I wish my parents could afford them. I’m tired of wearing name-brand knock-offs all the time.”

Similarly, Maria is portrayed stereotypically according to her racial/ethnic identity as a Mexican American. As a “hippy” who is overly passionate about protecting the environment, she appears erratically hotheaded in the second episode, as she plots a surprise attack on Deborah to give the ripped sheep head of Deborah’s mink coat a “proper burial.” Other characters in the episode moreover define Maria stereotypically, as Deborah yells while Maria is being sprayed by a tabasco-sauce filled water gun, “She’s Mexican. She loves that shit,” and Kim’s mother chimes in, “You are Mexican? Can your mother clean my house?” In another episode called “Undocumented Chicken,” Maria arrives at Kim’s house one morning with her “best friend,” depicted as a chicken, who is an undocumented migrant from Mexico and furthermore turns out

to be “dealing illegal Mexican Coca-Cola.” The episode’s comical plotline later involves Kim and her friends getting the chicken out of jail and helping it to escape to Canada.

Much of *ALAG*’s comedy emerging from its characterizations therefore rely on perpetuating racial/ethnic stereotypes against marginalized groups rather than confronting them through two-dimensional caricatures and by taking turns to laugh at the characters’ cultural differences, pronounced only in stereotypical ways. Such stereotypes of marginalized characters combine in the fifth episode, titled, “Sistahood,” to accentuate the racial triangulation of Asian Americans in relation to other race and ethnicities. The episode’s central, comedic plotline begins with Wanda’s reference to Maria as a “sistah” (sister). When Kim and Deborah witness this and Deborah asks why Wanda and Maria refer to each other as sisters, Wanda explains, “Black families were often split up during slavery. Preachers would say ‘You never know when you might meet up with long lost family.’ So, we call each other brother and sister now.” Deborah and Kim then insist on wanting to be “Brown and down” like Wanda and Maria. Wanda refuses, clarifying, “Neither of you are Brown and down. Asians and Jews are the same as White people.” Maria adds, “Your inevitable future success makes you the same as a White person.” The exclusivity of the group composed of Hispanic and Black Americans are underscored throughout the fifth episode by highlighting their disproportionate historical oppression, underprivileged status, and lower performance on standardized tests. At the end of the episode, as Kim seemingly learns her lesson that “sisterhood is complicated” and Wanda and Maria apologize to Kim, the girls temporarily achieve a semblance of solidarity. However, as the final joke closing the episode, Kim asks Wanda and Maria not to refer to her as a “sister” in front of her mother because Kim’s mother “doesn’t like Black people or Mexicans.” Before the closing

music plays, Wanda and Maria appear upset while Kim looks cluelessly nonchalant and Deborah tries to switch the subject.

Although these depictions in the fifth episode problematize the operations of racial/ethnic categories that undermine Asian Americans' social struggles, they also do so by legitimizing existing stereotypes and relatively valorizing Asian and Jewish Americans against Black and Hispanic Americans. For example, when Ms. Bubelba releases the scores of a recent standardized test to the class, Deborah changes her score and remarks, "I got a D. Does this make me an underprivileged minority with bad grades?" Kim follows suit by altering her grade from a B to an F and shouting, "And I got an F. Am I Brown and down now?" At first, the episode seems to reject such bias linking the underprivilege of racial minorities to their low performance on standardized tests, as Maria and Wanda assert that they have respectively received B and B+ grades on the test. However, Ms. Bubelba announces, "The pressure has been on the Black and Hispanic students to bring up their scores. I am happy to report that we saw improvement today. So, kudos to Wanda and Maria." As Wanda and Maria happily exchange high-fives at Ms. Bubelba's announcement, they confirm their improved academic performance as an exception rather than a norm. Moreover, at the end of the episode, although the girls appear to make up from their argument as Wanda says to Kim, "You will never be Brown but you are definitely down," no discussion or progress takes place to reject the previous claims regarding the "Whiteness" of Asians and Jewish Americans and Kim is still seen ostracizing Wanda and Maria by refusing to be labelled as a "sister" in front of her mother. While such inconclusive and ironic moments invite the viewers' humour through some situational incongruities (such as that Kim has not learned her lesson regarding her internalized racism against Wanda and Maria by the end of the episode), this humour arrives at the expense of the continuing marginalization against

Black and Hispanic groups vis-à-vis the perpetuation of their stereotypes as socially inferior and Asian Americans as nearly White.

X. Conclusion and Next Steps

This chapter has surveyed the enlarging relationship between the representation of transcultural Korean identity and humour as strategy for reshaping racial images and order. It also has problematized the ways through which negative racial/ethnic stereotypes, internalized racism, White-supremacist racial and systemic orders, and intra-ethnic and interracial othering impact contemporary depictions of diasporic Koreans in North America through comedy. In closing this chapter, I stress that the intention of such problematization is not to curtail the rising voices of Korean and Asian comedians but rather to reflect critically on the current and future direction of their televisual and popular-culture representation through comedy. As the history of humour and comedy-related industries in North America reveals its White-centredness and scholarship on the growing diversity of diasporic Koreans vis-à-vis post-racial environments of colour-blindness emerges, extra caution must be taken by artists and scholars alike to notice the potential for comedic representation to perpetuate existing harms against racial minorities, intentionally or unintentionally.

This critical reflection on the future directions of diasporic Korean televisual comedy may involve resisting the “easy” ways of representation and popularity for producers, growing the systemic diversity of media industries to better investigate *who* is laughing at *whom*, for viewers of racial humour to continuously explore *why* they are laughing, and for researchers to clarify the tropes and effects of humour that reinforce or confront existing sociocultural norms and stereotypes. As numerous scholars have discovered, stereotyping often results from the need of media industries to “quickly convey information about characters and to instill in audiences

expectations about characters' actions" (J.H. Park et al. 158; see Casey et al.; Omi; Wilson et al.). Stereotypes thus serve as an important function in comedy to "help establish instantly recognizable character types" and for such character traits and stereotype-based jokes to constitute a source of humour (J.H. Park et al. 158; see Bowes; King). Arguably, recurring patterns in diasporic Korean representation such as the generational conflicts between the first- and second- generation immigrants and the overly simplistic depiction of the first generation as "FOB" and second generation as "White-washed" serve similar functions in contemporary North American comedy.

J.H. Park et al.'s study of the impact of racial stereotypes in the comedic blockbuster film *Rush Hour 2* has furthermore found that stereotypes in the film naturalize or challenge racial differences differently for White and non-White viewers (157). While the stereotypes were funny for White viewers because they "humorously portrayed what [the] viewers believed to be accurate, although exaggerated," Black and Asian traits, Black and Asian viewers focussed on the aspects of the film that confronted the stereotypes (J.H. Park et al. 157; Green and Linders 246). The results of this study provide incentives for the producers of media and comedy to consider the different racial and cultural effects of humour for diverse audiences. Additionally, on a scholarly level, a study combining interdisciplinary approaches, textual analysis, and focus group interviews, could lay the foundations for future explorations of how diasporic Korean, racial minority, and White viewers respond to the patterns of humour regarding diasporic Koreans, to find more effective forms of representation. I highlight that the (re)shaping of diasporic Korean identity through increasingly multifaceted and agential modes in North American popular culture involves the growing coalition of scholars, cultural producers, and

consumers to approach the identity making of racial minorities in creative and multidisciplinary ways.

Conclusion

When the South Korean black-comedy film *Parasite* (2019) became a world-wide phenomenon, winning the Best Picture Award as the first foreign film at the Oscars in 2020, several people in Canada asked me for my thoughts on the film as soon as they discovered my Korean heritage. Although many requests arose from “small talk” driven by habitual essentialist assumptions that I must have some profound thoughts and insider knowledge on the “Korean” film as a person of “Korean” background, coincidentally, I did know a thing or two about the social hardships of the polarized South Korean economy and the hyper-competitiveness of the South Korean education system, shaping the film’s plot, from my first-hand experience of growing up on the Korean peninsula and from my doctoral research later in life. However, I was mostly daunted by the challenge to put into words what I had felt and thought about as I watched *Parasite*. The film reminded me of my elementary school days in a small city near Seoul, busily attending countless academic and extracurricular learning academies after school to barely make the cut of an “average” student in an “average” classroom. Flash forward, I recalled some poverty-stricken streets and intimidating luxuriousness that I had witnessed across the North-South border of the Han River as a spectator—an “outsider”—during my recent trip “home” in 2019. Most vividly, and somewhat ironically, *Parasite* resurrected my memories of a cold and damp, one-bedroom apartment on the second story of my parents’ convenience store in midtown-Toronto that my family of five had once lived in for months during a harsh winter in one of our toughest years as newcomers to Canada.

Representation opens up many possibilities: to gain visibility, to reflect on one’s individual and communal identity, and to share one’s experiences and thoughts, even if they are unexpected and different, in spaces where such perspectives may not have been traditionally

welcomed. At the same time, representation comes with old and new questions regarding who is depicting whom, and why, as well as how such portrayals are being perceived (by whom).

During this dissertation research, many older generations of Korean Canadians that had arrived in North America in the late-twentieth century expressed their beliefs that talking about one's "Korean" identity is "easier" today than it was during their early years of migration and settlement. Although such claims warrant further sociological studies, I can empathize with the experience that in the decade of *Kim's Convenience*, *Squid Game*, and *Parasite*, speaking about my Korean heritage to non-Koreans in Canada has been relatively easier with more popularized imageries, metaphors, and references to Korean culture, language, customs, actors, and food readily available in common databases of people's knowledge and interest. The historical trajectory of racism and racialization in North America and the modern development of South Korea from the ashes of war and colonialism to an OECD country in the contemporary era further explain how encapsulating and asserting one's "Korean" identity may comparably be an "easier" task today than it was a few decades prior. Nevertheless, the contemporary experience of contemplating on "Korean" identity, particularly in the diasporic context, is fraught with increasing variability, dizzyingly interwoven local and global cultures (fastened more quickly, diversely, and tightly together through globalization and the internet), and multifaceted complexities of history and geopolitics, rewriting themselves with growing decolonial fervour.

Therefore, visual and verbal representations of Koreans and diasporic Koreans today simultaneously empower and confront me as a diasporic critic with new methods and mediums of inquiry and dynamics of exclusion and inclusion. The strategies undertaken in this dissertation to provide a timely examination of such representations are thus necessarily broad and specific in their scope. For example, this dissertation overall surveys the literary and multimedia portrayals

of diasporic Koreans in North America largely shaped by diasporic Korean writers and artists since the 2010s. The survey includes six texts of various genres and forms: *Kay's Lucky Coin Variety*, *If I Had Your Face*, *Older Sister. Not Necessarily Related*, *Kim's Convenience*, *Dr. Ken*, and *Angry Little Asian Girls*. I divided my textual analysis into two chapters not only separating the texts' respective categorical characterizations as verbal and visual narratives, but reflecting the strategic lens of my analytical approaches, focussing on women's narratives and the (mis)use of humour, respectively, that variously aim to show the diversity of diasporic Korean populations. The thematic concentration on women's narratives and comedy/humour was motivated by the lack of scholarly attention to such paradigms and the affordances of such organization that reveal the varying emotions and intimacies, dynamics of exclusion and inclusion, and socioeconomic and geopolitical barriers influencing modern imaginations of diasporic Korean identities.

With the aim of exploring the transculturality of diasporic Koreans, I also undertook a comparative approach to investigating the modern and contemporary history and geopolitics of Canada, the U.S., and South Korea from the development of Korean communities in North America amidst the historical trajectory of racism, marginalization, and exclusion against Asians to the modernization and economic growth of South Korea over the last century, arriving at world-wide cultural exports of the Korean Wave in the contemporary era. This broad history scattered across geographic boundaries and time inform and shape the daily images and experiences of diasporic Koreans in North America and therefore, must be surveyed fully to understand the nuances and transnational complexities of their representation. In this respect, the dissertation's first chapter establishing the theoretical and historical foundations of the second and third chapters clarifies why comparison *matters*—how the systemic exclusion of Chinese

and Japanese migrants in late-nineteenth and twentieth century Canada and the U.S., the racial triangulation of Asians against Blacks in North America, and the American military imperialism in postwar South Korea elucidate a young Korean Canadian girl's rebellious avowal in 1980s Toronto to "marry a black American soldier," for example. The history of colonialism, wars, racism, gender discrimination, and socioeconomic inequalities in Canada, the U.S., and (South) Korea furthermore impact the lives and subjectivities of "Korean," "Korean Canadian," and "Korean American" individuals multifariously from the desire for plastic surgery for upward socioeconomic mobility to the confusion and isolation felt by transnational Korean adoptees. For the third chapter, tracing the roots and effects of racializing and gendering stereotypes against Asian North Americans show how such stereotypical images persistently shape humour regarding diasporic Koreans, even when they possess more agency of self-representation in a so-called "post-racial" climate. The diversity of diasporic Korean experiences from their rise as the Ummas and Appas of the "Korea Towns" and Korean churches across Canadian and U.S. cities to the increasing acculturation and cultural differences of the second and third generations moreover challenge the inclusiveness of diasporic Korean representation in popular culture vis-à-vis the struggles of internalized racism and intra-ethnic othering.

At large, while the second chapter explored how Korean and diasporic Korean women navigate their self-imagination in their reactions to their histories and experiences of exclusion, the third chapter examined how the new representational space of inclusion in televisual comedy is still fraught with racial and commercial politics, persisting racism, and othering among diasporic Koreans as well as other racial minorities. The findings of the two chapters combine to provide a cautionary recommendation for diasporic Korean critics, scholars, readers/viewers, and cultural producers: to continually unsettle the "Korean Way" and to confront who we are and

how we are *different* in order to reform histories of exclusion and to direct new futures of inclusion. For all readers of this dissertation, I further assert the need to be wary of the diversity flattened within nationalist descriptors of “Korean,” “Korean Canadian,” and “Korean American,” especially as diasporic Korean representation rises in North American popular culture, and to increasingly strive to become transcultural readers and viewers—thinking transhistorically and transnationally about representations of identity.

In closing, the journey of this dissertation began with the central question, “[H]ow is ‘Korean’ identity constructed, portrayed, and consumed across Canada, the U.S., and South Korea?” paired with the task of defining and describing Korean identity transnationally. This question was pertinent for several reasons including my own existential inquiries over the years as a diasporic critic, the recent rise of diasporic Korean voices—locally, as authors in Canada, and continentally, as producers of popular culture in North American television industries—as well as growing scholarly searches toward the agency and transculturality of diasporic subjects. What has interestingly been underscored as a result of my investigation are the ways in which diasporic Koreans are portrayed in the twenty-first century as still persistently negotiating their identities against, or in relation to, old and new images and structures of racism and racialization, including but not limited to the model minority myth, yellow peril and perpetual foreigner stereotypes, the exoticization and hyper-sexualization of Asian women, and emasculation of Asian men. While some negotiations take place explicitly and consciously as reflections through first-person narratives and as the character development of *bildungsromans*, some are shown as intentional or unintentional depictions of internalized racism and racial/ethnic disassociation that diasporic Korean characters seemingly participate in unconsciously and more covertly. These negotiations further combine with expanding portrayals of intersectionality regarding “Korean”

subjects, from a diasporic Korean family living in a ghettoized neighbourhood of 1980s Toronto to marginalized Korean women living in Seoul, a transnational Korean adoptee in Quebec, and a more economically privileged and socially adapted family in contemporary California.

Such representations of identity negotiation and diversifying intersectionality among diasporic Koreans elucidate the deep and transnational historical roots, the pervasiveness of racism and racial stereotypes, and the undefined nature of “Korean” subjectivity that haunt the imagination and self-understanding of diasporic Koreans, both in fiction, and possibly in reality. These findings trigger wariness against simple and hasty celebrations of rising “Korean” representation in North America in the contemporary era. As this dissertation’s investigation shows, the current transculturality of diasporic Korean identities is enmeshed with centuries-old racial politics and intergenerational and intersectional traumas of colonialism, although growing attempts of visibility and inclusion are made by diasporic Koreans in different representational spaces and of traditionally underrepresented identities.

Thus, my exploration so far signals both the resistance and limitations of diasporic Korean representation that warrant future investigations in multidisciplinary fields. As an example, what is missing from the scope of my study are more positive and empowered portrayals of diasporic Koreans in recent decades, if any. *What kinds of progress can more affirming depictions of diasporic Koreans suggest in terms of the issues of racism, racialization, and colonialism discussed in this dissertation, and how would such depictions compare with the less affirming ones studied here?* As another example, while my study has focussed on the textual representations of diasporic Korean identity, my analyses in this dissertation can be combined with sociological approaches to further explore the creative or consumption experiences of diasporic Korean writers and audiences, respectively, through interviews and

focus groups. Future research questions tied to this exploration can include: *how do recent representations of diasporic Koreans across various genres and settings influence their reader/viewer's self-understanding of their diasporic/transcultural "Korean" identity? How do such influences differ across immigrant generations and geographic locations, perhaps? How much agency of (self-)representation do diasporic Korean creators have in literary and visual media industries today?* These extended directions of research combine the gaps of literary, media, and diaspora studies to show how such fields can converge while investigating new methodologies for examining "Korea in the World, and the World in Korean Studies"⁵³ as a timely case study for World Literature. Moreover, they develop a clearer and more multidimensional picture of diasporic Korean identities, bridging a continuing gap between humanities and social science disciplines.

⁵³ I have borrowed this phrase from the title of one of the research projects proposed by the Korean Office for Research and Education (KORE) at York University, funded by the Academy of Korean Studies, and aiming to undertake the study of: 1) "New Critical Korean Studies: Theory, Method, and Practice," 2) "Defining Korean Canadian Studies," 3) "Transcultural Pedagogy in Culture and Language," 4) "North Korea: Translation and Literacy, Cultural and Political Transformation in a Global Context," and 5) "Resistant and Transformative Politics in Korea: Labor, Social Reproduction, and Visual Art" ("The AKS Project").

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@Jean_Yoon. "Dear sir, as an Asian Canadian woman, a Korean-Canadian woman w more experience and knowledge of the world of my characters, the lack of Asian female, especially Korean writers in the writers room of Kims made my life VERY DIFFICULT & the experience of working on the show painful." Twitter, 6 Jun 2021, 4:08p.m., https://twitter.com/jean_yoon/status/1401632203629633542.

_____. "Your attack on my cast mate @SimuLiu, in the defense of my fellow Korean artist Ins Choi is neither helpful nor merited. Mr. Choi wrote the play, I was in in. He created the TV show, but his co-creator Mr. Kevin White was the showrunner, and clearly set the parameters." *Twitter*, 6 Jun 2021, 4:13p.m., https://twitter.com/jean_yoon/status/1401633371495796738.

_____. "This is a FACT that was concealed from us as a cast. It was evident from Mr. Choi's diminished presence on set, or in response to script questions. Between S4 and S5, this FACT became a crisis, and in S5 we were told Mr. Choi was resuming control of the show." *Twitter*, 6 Jun 2021, 4:15p.m., https://twitter.com/jean_yoon/status/1401633791815393281.

- _____. “The cast received drafts of all S5 scripts in advance of shooting BECAUSE of Covid, at which time we discovered storylines that were OVERTLY RACIST, and so extremely culturally inaccurate that the cast came together and expressed concerns collectively.” *Twitter*, 6 Jun 2021, 4:17p.m., https://twitter.com/jean_yoon/status/1401634314815782918.
- _____. “Under Mr. Choi's leadership, S5 restored many of the core values of the original show, and most offensive "jokes" were removed. To give you an idea of what we are talking about, here is one scene from the original S5 drafted under Mr. White's leadership.” *Twitter*, 6 Jun 2021, 4:18p.m., https://twitter.com/jean_yoon/status/1401634678906425353.
- _____. “Pastor Nina comes to the story to pick up Mrs. Kim for a Zumba class. Mrs. Kim is wearing NUDE shorts, and Pastor Nina is to embarrassed to tell her she looks naked from the waist down. Mr. Kim enters, and the joke is that if you're married you can say anything.” *Twitter*, 6 Jun 2021, 4:21p.m., https://twitter.com/jean_yoon/status/1401635370584924163.
- _____. “No one, esp. Mrs. Kim, would be unaware that a garment makes her look naked. Unless she is suddenly cognitively impaired. or STUPID. Stripping someone naked is the first act before public humiliation or rape. So what was so funny about that? At my request, Mr. Choi cut he scene.” *Twitter*, 6 Jun 2021, 4:22p.m., https://twitter.com/jean_yoon/status/1401635710378070019.
- _____. “THAT scene would have aired hours after 8 people, 6 Asian women, were shot in Atlanta, GA in a hate crime spree that shocked the nation. THIS IS WHY IT MATTERS. If an Asian actor says, 'Hey this isn't cool,' then maybe should just fix it, and say THANK

YOU.” *Twitter*, 6 Jun 2021, 4:26p.m.,

https://twitter.com/jean_yoon/status/1401636516884004869.

_____. “And I'm sick of holding this back-Koreans hardly ever get MS: 0.1/100,000 or one in a million. You are 5x more likely to get a blood clot from the AZ vaccine than you are to get MS if you're Korean. The producers: "But why does it matter?" And "Jean doesn't understand comedy.” *Twitter*, 6 Jun 2021, 4:28p.m.,

https://twitter.com/jean_yoon/status/1401637252242018308.

_____. “And hey, if I hadn't spoken up all the Korean food in the show would have been WRONG. Ins doesn't know how to cook or how things are cooked, no one else in the writers room were Korean, and THEY HAD NO KOREAN CULTURAL RESOURCES IN THE WRITERS ROOM AT ALL.” *Twitter*, 6 Jun 2021, 4:30p.m.,

https://twitter.com/jean_yoon/status/1401637739108384774.

_____. “What I find tragic about this situation was the refusal to believe the urgency with which we advocated for inclusion in the writers room. The failure to send us treatments, outlines, the resistance to cultural corrections & feedback. There is so much I am proud of. But.” *Twitter*, 6 Jun 2021, 4:37p.m.,

https://twitter.com/jean_yoon/status/1401639478532452357.

_____. “But S3 & S4 in particular had many moments of dismissal & disrespect as an actor, where it mattered, with the writers. And the more successfully I advocated for my character, the more resistance and suspicion I earned from the Writers/Producers.”

Twitter, 6 Jun 2021, 4:45p.m.,

https://twitter.com/jean_yoon/status/1401641386655600640.

_____. “In the final bedroom scene in S5, Mrs. Kim weeps because she believes that God has

abandoned her. The more she prays for something, the more certain it will get worse.

That's what it felt like. The love died. 사랑 없으면 소용이 없고 아무것도 안입니다.”

Twitter, 6 Jun 2021, 4:56p.m.,

https://twitter.com/jean_yoon/status/1401644084142514176.

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