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Korean Immigrants and Shopkeeping in North American Literature

by

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Korean Immigrants and Shopkeeping in North American Literature

Dissertation Abstract—Idaho State University (2022)

This dissertation studies the numerous appearances of Korean immigrant shopkeepers in the United States and Canada. The Asian shopkeeper character has become a stereotype in North American literary texts, including novels and popular media; however, despite the prevalence of Asian shopkeeper characters in North American texts, the shopkeeper is rarely discussed as a character trope in the discourse of multiethnic American literature. Therefore, this dissertation explicates the Korean shopkeepers in American and Canadian literature and explores how the Korean shopkeeper narrative reveals the complex issues about race politics and immigration identity. Using critical race theory, including hybridity, mimicry, double-consciousness, and code-switching, this research will investigate Korean shopkeeper narratives' portrayal of the modern American and Canadian race politics and immigration identity. Finally, this dissertation will also propose a pedagogical approach to teaching Korean American shopkeeper literature, multiethnic American literature, and critical race theory in the college classroom.

Keywords: Korean American literature, Korean Canadian literature, hybridity, mimicry, double consciousness, code-switching, teaching ethnic American literature.

Introduction

The word “immigrant” carries many connotations, both negative and positive. On the one hand, immigrants symbolize exploration, opportunity, and diversity, and, on the other hand, immigrants insinuate invasion, poverty, and disorder. Although each of these words ostensibly seems to be the other’s opposite and contradict each other, they all hold some truth about immigrants, or at least how they are perceived in modern society. Immigration signifies exploring to find new homes, as well as an intrusion from outside forces; immigrants symbolize the freedom to seek new opportunities, as well as the risk and sacrifice one must endure when seeking such new opportunities; and immigrants create a social venue for diverse cultures to intersect, and, at the same time, are in the center of strife. Whether these perceptions, especially the negative ones, are propagated by the media or by political means, they should not be dismissed simply as stereotypes. Stereotypes are never simple; stereotypes are carefully orchestrated ideas that are highly political. Racial and ethnic stereotypes, specifically, can reveal the political and social status of a particular racial/ethnic group. Therefore, whether stereotypes are true or not and whether they depict a distorted image of an individual’s life or a specific group, they are the reality. That is, racial and ethnic stereotypes are the reality that minorities have to encounter, endure, and, sometimes, resist in their everyday lives. Hence, in minority literature, there is a constant battle. It is a battle between the powerful social/political forces of dominant mainstream culture that want to erase individual experiences and the individual voices that strive to reclaim their authenticity and self-authority in their narratives. This dissertation aims to illuminate individual immigrant experiences and study how conflicting identities are dealt with in immigrant narratives.

Thus, this dissertation is about immigrants, Korean immigrants to be more specific: their family, children, community, and their stories. Since the division of Korea in 1945 and the Korean War in 1950, the United States and South Korea became political allies. What started as an ideological and military relationship—combat between the communist regimes of the Soviet Union allying with North Korea and the capitalist force of the United States allying with South Korea—has been maintained throughout decades. From war refugees to migrants of elite workers, Koreans became one of the largest ethnic groups who immigrates to the United States. Both collectively and individually, Korean immigrants have been involved in several significant historical incidents in the United States, which affected and were affected by racial relations in the United States. By examining Korean narratives regarding race in the United States, this project will shed light on marginalized voices and provide a deeper understanding of race and ethnicity.

Most importantly, this dissertation focuses on Korean shops. Small store entrepreneurship has been an integral part of Korean American and Asian American history. Small store entrepreneurship allowed self-employment, independence, and business expansion to Asian immigrants. Urbanization and the rapid growth of Asian stores created the Asian shopkeeper stereotype; however, this project will read texts beyond the Asian shopkeeper stereotype and closely analyze Asian shops and Asian shopkeepers in US and Canadian texts. Through analyzing Korean shopkeepers, I aim to reveal how Korean shopkeeper narratives enrich the discourse of race in the United States and provide a deeper understanding of race politics. This dissertation also discusses the contradicting perceptions and identities of immigrants in Korean American literature and the gap between the reality that immigrants must face and the ideal that immigrants dream of.

The matter of whether immigrants can or should achieve a complete reconciliation between their conflicting identities is not the focus of this project; instead, this research focuses on the irreconcilable state of immigrant identity itself. By studying this irreconcilable identity in the individual narratives of Korean immigrants, I reveal how Korean immigrant and Korean shopkeeper narratives respond to racial politics and social structure in the United States. In studying the Korean immigrant and Korean shopkeeper narratives, I will use hybridity, double-consciousness, and code-switching.

I argue that because immigrants have irreconcilable contradicting identities, immigrants themselves become a paradox, an embodiment of cultural and linguistic hybridity. In *The Location of Culture*, Homi Bhabha introduces the concept of hybridity, a process by which one's culture can change by interacting with different cultures. Bhabha's hybridity, thus, emphasizes the malleability of culture:

. . . we should remember that it is the 'inter'—the cutting edge of translation and negotiation, the *inbetween* space—that carries the burden of the meaning of culture. It makes it possible to begin envisaging national, anti-nationalist histories of the 'people.' And by exploring this Third Space, we may elude the politics of polarity and emerge as the others of our selves. (56)

This "inbetween space" or "Third Space" breaks the perception that culture is a fixed entity (Bhabha 56). According to Bhabha's theory of hybridity, culture is ever-changing, receiving influence and giving influence through the interactions among people. Thus, hybridity challenges the either-or thinking of cultures, the West versus the East.

Nevertheless, hybridity does not simply indicate a mixture of different cultures—although the concept may encompass that oversimplified generic definition; hybridity infers a

strategy for survival and subversion against colonialism. By studying the behavior of the colonizer and the colonized, Bhabha discovers mimicry, the act of the colonized subject who imitates the colonizer's behavior and culture. Through mimicry, the colonized subjects are able to regain and reclaim their agency. Bhabha states: "... colonial mimicry is the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, *as a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite*" (122). This "almost the same, but not quite" state means when the colonized subject does not entirely comply with the colonizer's culture. Instead, it is a state where the colonized actively negotiates to adapt to the colonizer's culture while maintaining their own native culture. Thus, rather than completely submitting to the colonizer, the colonized subjects can exert their agency to choose which aspects of the colonizer's culture to adopt and which aspects of their own traditional culture to preserve. This ambivalent state, or mimicry, can ostensibly seem like compliance but is, in fact, an active choice to regain and reclaim one's agency, which Bhabha calls a "sly civility":

Such a disjunctive space of temporality is the locus of symbolic identification that structures the intersubjective real—the realm of otherness and the social—where 'we identify ourselves with the other precisely at a point at which he is inimitable, at the point which eludes resemblance.' My contention, elaborated in my writings on postcolonial discourse in terms of mimicry, hybridity, sly civility, is that this liminal moment of identification—eluding resemblance—produces a subversive strategy of subaltern agency. (265)

Bhabha's theory of hybridity, thus, emphasizes the subversive power that colonized subjects can perform through mimicry and sly civility.

While Bhabha's theory of hybridity focuses on the complex and unsettled state of culture based on his analysis of the colonizer and the colonized in India, they are still applicable to the study of race and ethnicity in the United States. Hybridity, to some extent, shares similar ideas with W. E. B. Du Bois's theory of double-consciousness, especially on understanding one's identity. While hybridity shows the unsettled state of one's culture, Du Bois's double-consciousness reveals the unsettled state of one's identity. More specifically, double-consciousness elucidates the self-contradicting state of African American identity. Du Bois writes:

It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. (Du Bois 3)

Du Bois asserts that African Americans hold self-conflicting identities that make them see themselves through both the white American and African American's points of view. Living in a dominantly white system, where white American perspectives dictate the national narrative and national identity, it is almost impossible for one to ignore and reject white American perspectives. Nevertheless, an individual from a marginalized racial or ethnic group cannot become a complete "white American" because the system itself rejects the marginalized individual. As Du Bois argues, double-consciousness does not necessarily mean that one can create an entirely new identity through adapting different views; rather, African Americans are "being torn asunder" (Du Bois 3) because of the unnegotiable values and perspectives within their identities.

However, neither Bhabha's theory of hybridity nor Du Bois's double-consciousness perfectly fits the Korean American experiences. Since hybridity is mainly about the interaction between the colonizer and the colonized, it does not perfectly fit Korean immigrants' situations. In addition, Korean immigrants have a drastically different history of immigration than that of African Americans whose earliest ancestors mainly were forced to migrate to the Americas as slaves, which makes Du Bois's double-consciousness of Black diaspora inapplicable to Korean Americans. Nevertheless, Korean American texts still exhibit experiences of colonialism, labor exploitation, and racism; during the 19th, 20th, and 21st centuries, Korea experienced imperial invasion, colonialism, war, and diasporic migration. In other words, Korean Americans are in an ambivalent state where they are almost like the colonized subject but, at the same time, not quite. I further assert that because of this ambivalent state of Korean Americans, Korean American texts reveal the more nuanced discourse of race that is almost invisible and easily neglected. By using hybridity and double-consciousness as the main critical lenses to interpret Korean American texts, I discuss how Korean shopkeeper narratives are almost but not perfectly fitting to Bhabha's and Du Bois's theories.

While discussing hybridity and double-consciousness in Korean American texts, this research also examines linguistic hybridity in the Korean American narratives: code-switching. I argue that code-switching is one of the various ways that one can express their cultural hybridity and double-consciousness. Code-switching is when "...varied combinations of two or more linguistics varieties occur in countless bilingual societies and communities" (Garnder-Chloros 4). Code-switching is commonly found in spoken language, but it also appears in written language and literary texts (Garnder-Chloros 4). Studies of code-switching have mainly been conducted in linguistics in various contexts to understand not only the linguistic features of code-switching but

the sociolinguistic and psycholinguistic features embedded in code-switching. In *Code-Switching*, Penelope Gardner-Chloros explains that code-switching is a way of expression to display individual and communal identities that are mixed and multicultural:

The characteristic ways in which bilinguals combine their languages in a particular community constitute a way of expressing their group identity—like a characteristic accent. Both the languages themselves *and* the sociolinguistic environment play a role in the patterns which emerge. ...Code switching therefore helps us to understand identity formation and expression in bilinguals. (5)

Gardner-Chloros acknowledges that there is “fuzziness” in defining code-switching (167); Gardner-Chloros explains that while code-switching, “[lexical] borrowing, pidginization, convergence and language shift” all common linguistic features what difference languages come into contact (20), distinguishing one from another can be sometimes unclear since “one person’s ‘code-switching’ is another person’s borrowing, or community bilingual choices” (170-171). Thus, even language—both spoken and written—of racial minorities displays multicultural identities, hybridity, double-consciousness, which ultimately is the experience of an ambivalent state.

Although there is some ambivalence in how we define code-switching, code-switching still plays a significant role in displaying multicultural identity through text. Code-switching is often intentionally used in literary works to debunk the myth that monolingualism is the ideal way of establishing national identity, that there is a *right* or *correct* English, and that *other* Englishes are wrong, incorrect, or broken. The myth of Standard American English and the myth of English with “no accent” are often criticized by linguists (Lippie-Green 44). The problem with the myths of standard language and non-accent, or any kinds of myths that arbitrarily

determines the right and wrong in a language, is that they create an ideology: an ideology that there are inferior languages and superior languages, and thus, an individual who speaks/performs one or the other is also inferior or superior. In *English with an Accent*, Rosina Lippi-Green examines how the myth about Standard English is systematically causing discrimination in various realms of our society, including educational institutions, media, and workplaces. There are numerous studies, including Gardner-Chloros's *Code-Switching*, Lippi-Green's *English with an Accent*, and Evelyn Nien-Ming Ch'ien's *Weird English*, that attempt to demolish the myth of Standard American English and superiority/inferiority in language; nevertheless, the myth has yet to be broken. Therefore, I aim to contribute to the effort of breaking the monolingualism myth and the myth of Standard American English by examining code-switching in Korean American and Canadian literature.

In summary, hybridity, double-consciousness, and code-switching are the main critical lenses in this research about Korean shopkeeper narratives. By applying these critical theories in reading Korean shopkeeper texts, this project focuses on the following questions: How do Korean shopkeeper narratives depict cultural hybridity and double-consciousness? How do Korean shopkeeper narratives inhabit an ambivalent state or an in-between position in American and Canadian literature? How do Korean shopkeeper narratives attempt to subvert racial norms through language and code-switching?

In Chapter 1: "History of Korean Shops," I present a brief historical overview of the development of Korean shops and the Korean American communities. Like many ethnic communities, "Korea Town" is a physical space and district that represents the long history of Korean immigrants in North America. The most famous Korea Town in the United States is the Los Angeles Korea Town. There are several other Korea Towns throughout the continent,

primarily located in urban cities, and these Korea Towns are formed by Korean shops—not schools, churches, or other non-profit organizations, a clear indication of Korean shops and Korean American shopkeepers as the center to the Korean American community. By examining the history of Korean shops, Chapter 1 establishes a historical background for the following chapters about Korean shopkeepers in literature.

In Chapter 2: “Korean shops, Boycott, and Uprising,” I focus on the issue of Black/Korean conflicts during the late 20th and early 21st centuries. I examine two literary texts Carol Park’s *The Memoir of a Cashier* (2017) and Leonard Chang’s *The Fruit ‘N Food* (1996). In both texts, the main stories center around Black/Korean conflicts in the United States. Black/Korean conflicts are a serious social and racial issue that involves violence, boycott, racism, and murder. In both scholarly and popular discourses, the history of Black/Korean conflicts, and the fact that the conflicts continue into the present, receive too little attention. Through examining Park’s memoir and Chang’s novel, I discuss how Korean Americans are placed in an ambivalent state: almost treated as White, but not quite. Chapter 2 explores how Korean Americans and East Asian immigrants were granted the “honorary white” (Koshy 174) status and the “model minority” title, and how this “symbolic whiteness” (Koshy 174) was used to persecute African Americans. Hence, Chapter 2 sheds light on how Black/Korean conflicts are ramifications of racism which were especially developed through the model minority myth and the black/white racial binary system in the United States.

Chapter 3, “Citizenship and Becoming American,” discusses the relationship between citizenship and identity. Obtaining citizenship holds a significant meaning to one’s identity; citizenship can be an official validation of one’s legitimacy to claim their identity as a “true” American. However, as I discuss in Chapter 3, for immigrants, and especially immigrants of

color and working-class immigrants, obtaining American citizenship can be an arduous process due to the capitalism of citizenship and covert racism in immigration laws. By examining Suki Kim's novel *The Interpreter* (2003), chapter 3 will discuss how Korean American shopkeepers, a representation of working-class Korean immigrants, struggle to obtain citizenship and acquire legitimacy as true Americans because of the absence of US citizenship. Chapter 3 further explicates how the discordance between Korean Americans' legal identity and psychological identity places them into an ambivalent state where they are, again, almost American, but not quite.

Chapter 4, "Korean Shopkeepers in Popular Media," studies the representation of Korean American shopkeepers in popular media. Chapter 4 specifically examines the portrayal of the Korean American shopkeepers in *Gilmore Girls* (2000-2007), an American TV series, and *Kim's Convenience* (2016-2021), a Canadian TV comedy series. The chapter briefly discusses the history of the portrayal of Asian Americans in popular media and analyzes how *Gilmore Girls* and *Kim's Convenience* offer a newer and more in-depth representation of Korean Americans. I contend that the two TV series attempt to reclaim the narrative of Korean American shopkeepers by demonstrating complex character developments in their series.

Finally, in Chapter 5, "Teaching Race, Ethnicity, and Literature," I discuss the challenges and objectives of teaching multiethnic literature in American college classrooms. The common challenges of ethnic study classes include microaggressions, student resistance, and white guilt or white fragility. By examining these challenges in the classroom, Chapter 5 will explore pedagogical theories and praxis in creating a student-centered and community-centered learning environment for teaching multiethnic literature.

Chapter 1: History of Korean Shops

Before discussing Korean shopkeepers in literature, it is necessary to understand the history and development of Korean shops in the United States. Korean shops and Koreatowns are closely related to the history of East Asian immigration and the evolution of the American Dream. The purpose of immigrating to the Americas can vary from person to person; nonetheless, for many East Asian immigrants—Chinese, Korean, and Japanese—the most common and popular purpose of emigrating to the United States was to achieve the so-called “American Dream.” In *The Epic of America*, James Truslow Adams famously defines the American Dream as the “dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for everyone, with opportunity for each according to ability or achievement” (404). The idea of a “better and richer and fuller” life can be interpreted in various ways, but the modern American Dream has grown to fixate on economic success and socioeconomic mobility. Indeed, economic success and socioeconomic mobility are recurring themes when it comes to Korean shopkeeper narratives. Allusions to the pursuit of economic success are common throughout the history of Asian Americans, as early as the Asian settlers in the 16th century.

Asian settlers have a long history in the American continent, which began with the Spanish colonization of Southeast Asia and their trade monopoly between Asia and the Americas. Because the Spanish empire was on the leading edge of colonizing the Americas and Southeast Asian countries, they were also in a position to monopolize international trades, especially between the Americas and Asia. Furthermore, because of the Spanish trade monopoly, Asians were also able to get access to the Americas. The first arrival of Asians, los chinos¹, to the Americas occurred around the 1580s (E. Lee 24). Erika Lee, a historian and scholar of Asian

¹ Los chinos literally means “the Chinese” in Spanish.

American studies, states that this first migration of Asians to the Americas began with the Spanish trade between Manila, Philippines and Acapulco, New Spain (now Mexico), which lasted from 1565 to 1815 (*The Making*, 19). This trade imported goods from Asian countries, including China, Japan, India, Cambodia, Siam, Ceylon, and Sumatra, to New Spain, which allowed Asian sailors from China, Japan, and the Philippines to migrate to the Americas (E. Lee 20-21). These Asian settlers in New Spain became fishermen, farmers, and farm laborers and assimilated into the local culture by adapting Spanish names and embracing Catholicism (E. Lee 25-26). The trade between Asia and the Americas was mainly managed by the Spanish empire until 1783 when US trade ships headed to China, which was the beginning of direct exchanges between Asia and the United States (E. Lee 30). Thus, the earliest migrations of Asians to the Americas were established mainly to import Asian goods. The second wave of Asian immigration, on the other hand, started for the purpose of finding opportunities from the Americas and American goods, rather than importing Asian goods to the Americas; it was the era of Chinese gold miners in the 1800s. In 1849, three hundred twenty-five Chinese gold miners—who are also known as the forty-niners—arrived in California, and the number of Chinese miners arriving in the United States grew drastically² (E. Lee 30).

While Chinese immigrants were the first largest group of Asian immigrants, the second largest group was Japanese (E. Lee 109). Though there were some Japanese immigrants in the 1600s, the great immigration wave of Japanese began in the late 1800s (E. Lee 110). To Japan, immigration was not simply seen as a personal opportunity; the Japanese government actively promoted emigration abroad for two reasons, and the first was for the “imperial expansionism in Asia” (E. Lee 110). Japanese imperialism expanded its territory to Hokkaido, Okinawa, and

² Each year, the number of Chinese miners arriving in California grew drastically: 450 Chinese immigrants in 1850; 2,716 in 1851; and 20,026 in 1852 (E. Lee 30).

Korea, and in order to effectively control each state, the emigration of Japanese to these new territories was encouraged (E. Lee 110). The second reason for promoting emigration was to ease Japan's "population explosion" (E. Lee 110). The growth of the Japanese population, especially the low economic class Japanese, became an obstacle to economic growth in Japan (E. Lee 110). The Japanese government promoted emigration to this demographic, expecting that young Japanese would send money back to Japan for their family, which would ultimately benefit the Japanese government and could possibly create new trade routes (E. Lee 110).

Whether trade, colonization, and politics are being involved, the common motivation found in the history of Asian Americans is economic success, hence, making the Asian American dream specifically about economic mobility. The epitome of the Asian American dream of economic mobility is the Asian shops and ethnic towns—Chinatown, Japan Town, and Koreatown. These East Asian districts are not simply ethnic gathering places; they are physical and tangible representations of the East Asian American dream and the pursuit of economic success. The emergence of Asian shops, for instance, has a strong relationship with finding sustainable income. While earlier Asian immigrants mostly found jobs as field laborers—miners, farmers, and plantation workers—later immigrants had to find jobs within the urban city system due to urbanization and industrialization in California. After all, mining was an unsustainable, "exhaustible" industry (Ong 97). The massive number of laborers that California gold mines attracted had to ultimately find a more sustainable resource for the economy, and small store entrepreneurship became the answer. By the end of the 1800s, the laundry business in California was dominated by Chinese immigrants, who were "three-quarters of the workforce" of California's laundry business (Ong 95). Many Asian immigrants took waged jobs from white employers, but many others who had family ties were able to find jobs from Asian employers.

Chinese washhouses usually required five workers to be effectively operated (Ong 102); therefore, for newly immigrated Chinese, Chinese laundries were an easier employment opportunity.

The growth of the Chinese laundry business led to the emergence of Chinatowns in the urban US. California and the West Coast US states formed the earliest Asian communities due to their geographical location being close to the Pacific Ocean. Yet large-scale Asian communities are common in urban cities in Eastern states, as well. The transcontinental railroad was a major enterprise that led many Chinese immigrants to the East during the mid- to late-19th century (Wilson 12). These Chinatowns functioned as social and cultural refuges for Chinese Americans since they were ostracized and persecuted due to systemic racism and anti-Asian laws—which will be further discussed in chapter 3. The leading members of these communities were often the shopkeepers. In Philadelphia Chinatown, for instance, Chinese laundrymen played an important role in supporting the community. They formed a bachelor society where they held recreational events and shared business information and news about China (Wilson 11-12). Chinese laundries and shops often provided temporary lodgings for new immigrants who were still searching for jobs (Wilson 12). Therefore, the strong bond between shopkeepers and these ethnic communities attests to the fact that capitalism and economic mobility are the foundation of these communities. In addition to capitalism and the pursuit of economic mobility, Asian communities were fabricated with Asian cultures and traditions.

The arrival of Koreans to the United States was relatively late, compared to their East Asian counterparts; one reason that the immigration of Koreans to the United States was later than China or Japan was due to the Japanese colonization of Korea from 1910 to 1945 (E. Lee 138). Due to the colonization, the Japanese government held control over the emigration of Koreans.

While allowing some emigration of Koreans, Japan at times banned the emigration of Koreans in order to lower labor competition between Korean and Japanese immigrants in the United States. (E. Lee 138). The fact that Korea was a colony of Japan even affected the lives of Korean immigrants in the United States. The mindset of being a citizen of a colonized country remained even when Korean emigrated to the United States, causing them to feel that they have no homeland to return to (E. Lee 138). Earlier Korean immigrants, therefore, experienced a loss of status in two ways: they were alien immigrants who also did not have a homeland. Because of the annexation of Korea, Korean communities overseas formed a strong “Korean solidarity” to preserve a stronger Korean identity (Lee and Yung 183). Erika Lee and Judy Yung explain that this “ethnic solidarity” among Koreans aimed to protect Koreans overseas who did not have a government to protect them; having its “regional headquarters in the US mainland, Hawaii, Siberia, and Manchuria,” Korean immigrants created the Korean National Association to support “national independence and to aid all Koreans living overseas” (Lee and Yung 183). While being persecuted by Japanese immigrants, Korean immigrants also faced racial discrimination from white Americans: “Lumped with the Chinese and Japanese, Koreans were subjected to the same kinds of racial taunting, hostilities, and discrimination in the job market, housing, education, and public facilities” (Lee and Yung 183). Lacking resources and enduring persecutions from white and Japanese Americans, earlier Korean immigrants struggled with a similar yet harsher immigrant experience than that of Chinese and Japanese immigrants.

Nevertheless, because Korean immigration started later than Chinese and Japanese immigration, Korean immigrants had a model to follow; particularly in the ways, Chinese and Japanese immigrants built ethnic enclaves and in the success of the small store entrepreneurship. Korean immigrants rapidly adapted to the new environment and soon began working as

shopkeepers and running small store businesses rather than trying to find jobs where Asians are unwanted (Lee and Yung 183). The growth of Korean-owned small stores led to the expansion of Koreatowns in urban cities across the country, making them a notable geographical and ethnic presence in the United States.

Such ethnic enclaves, however, are not distinctive to Asian immigrants. In the studies of immigrant enclaves and ethnic communities, John R. Logan et al. state that the function of a neighborhood unit is crucial to new settlers in finding affordable housing and work (299). Furthermore, ethnic enclaves were quite common across the United States, especially when the immigrants were non-English speakers, including Italians, Puerto Ricans, Dominicans, Jews, and more (Logan et al. 302). Meanwhile, these ethnic enclaves have often been ostracized as “others” in US history. Jan Lin, a scholar of urban sociology, explains that because of such ethnic enclaves, Chinese Americans have historically been regarded as “clannish and unassimilable” and Chinatowns were treated as “social problems” where crime, violence, exploitation, and poverty prevail (3). Including Lin, scholars criticize such belief that ethnic enclaves and racial minorities are inherently unassimilable, which overlooks the impact of institutional racism in the US urban system; ethnic enclaves are not the result of inherent clannishness but rather the result of the social and legal system, immigration laws, and language barriers that exclude racial minorities.

Although ethnic enclaves are a counter-reaction to institutional racism in US social system, this does not mean that these communities create a different society that is opposite to the racist system of the United States. On the contrary, I argue that some ethnic communities, especially many Korean small store businesses, would replicate or reproduce the US racial system within their community, which perpetuates racial and socioeconomic hierarchies. As

much as Koreatowns promote cultural diversity, provide a support system for other Korean immigrants and Korean Americans, and preserve Korean tradition and culture, they have historically been part of perpetuating the system of oppression. In the following chapters, especially in chapter 2 and chapter 3, I further explore how Korean shopkeeper narratives reveal the reproduction of American capitalism and racial hierarchies through racism and labor exploitation in Korean shops.

Chapter 2: Korean Shops, Boycott, and Uprising

Overview

One significant historical issue regarding Koreatowns and Korean American shopkeepers is the Black-Korean conflict. Korean American shopkeepers and Black American customers are known to have a long history of racialized conflicts. There are numerous historical incidents, news reports, and anecdotal records about Black Americans experiencing racism at Korean-owned shops; at Korean shops, Black Americans are often treated as criminals, robbers, and shoplifters, and they have to endure the surveilling gaze of the shopkeepers. Two of the most historically influential incidents of Black-Korean conflicts are the 1990 Red Apple boycott in New York and the 1992 Los Angeles uprising, commonly known as the 1992 LA riots. In addition to these two notable events, small incidents of Black-Korean conflicts are often mentioned in American literature. Despite the continual appearance of Black-Korean conflicts in literary texts, research on Black-Korean conflicts in the field of American literature is still lacking; most research about Black-Korean conflicts has been published in sociology, political science, history, and anthropology. The number of works in literary studies on Black-Korean conflicts is extremely limited; there are only a few available literary studies on Black-Korean conflicts, including King-Kok Cheung's "(Mis)interpretations and (In)justice: The 1992 Los Angeles 'Riots' and 'Black-Korean Conflicts,'" published in *Multi-Ethnic Literatures of the United States* in 2005 and Kun Jong Lee's "Towards Interracial Understanding and Identification: Spike Lee's 'Do the Right Thing' and Chang-Rae Lee's 'Native Speaker,'" published in the *Journal of American Studies* in 2010.

The lack of research on the topic of Black-Korean conflicts in American literature creates a gap in understanding Korean American literature and the development of Black-Korean

conflicts. This gap is a serious problem since when it comes to Korean American shopkeeper narrative, it is almost impossible to avoid addressing Black-Korean conflicts; whether Black-Korean conflicts are treated as the main plot, a subplot, or even a brief mentioning, it almost always appears in literary texts about Korean American shopkeepers. Thus, by examining Black-Korean conflicts in Korean American shopkeeper narratives, this chapter aims to study the racial and socioeconomic structure in Korean shops and bridge the gap between studies of Asian American literature and Black-Korean conflicts. In this chapter, I focus on two literary texts: *Memoir of a Cashier* by Carol Park and *The Fruit 'N Food* by Leonard Chang. These texts directly address Black-Korean conflicts and explore the meaning of being a racial minority, an Asian American, and a Korean American in the early 1990s, when racialized Black-Korean conflicts were at their peak. By analyzing these two literary works, I also study the influence of Black-Korean conflicts on the construction of Korean American identity.

This chapter uses the term “Black” instead of “African American” to reflect Korean Americans’ perspective on race in the early 1990s. Often times in the early 1990s, many Koreans commonly used the word “Black” to refer to Americans with dark skin color who are African descent regardless of whether they identified themselves as African American, Caribbean American, or other.³ The term “Black” also better reflects the discourse of race in the late-19th and early-20th century US and the Black/White paradigm, and how Korean Americans adopted the Black/White paradigm to discriminate against Black Americans.

To bridge the gap between research on Asian American literature and Black-Korean conflicts, this chapter incorporates works of history, sociology, and political science studies to

³ To be more specific, Koreans and Korean Americans whose first language is Korean would use the Korean word “흑인” (heug-in), which literally translates to “black person.” The word refers to people of dark skin of African origin, including Africans and the African diaspora.

establish a foundational understanding of race politics in the United States and Black-Korean conflicts. For example, this chapter first studies the Black/White binary paradigm and the development of the model minority myth. I especially attest that the model minority myth emerged in the United States as a result of the Black/White binary paradigm, which forces individuals to identify themselves as either Black or White. Secondly, this chapter reviews the two historical events that happened between Black American and Korean American communities in the early 1990s: the 1990 Family Red Apple boycott in New York and the 1992 Los Angeles uprising. The 1990 Family Red Apple boycott and the 1992 Los Angeles uprising are the two most well-known incidents that drew national and international attention to Black-Korean conflicts. The two events are also a reoccurring topic in Korean American literary texts and the central topic in Park's *Memoir of a Cashier* and Chang's *The Fruit 'N Food*. By studying Black-Korean conflicts and the manifestation of the model minority myth in *Memoir of a Cashier* and *The Fruit 'N Food*, this chapter analyzes the complexity of Korean American identities.

Black/White Binary Paradigm and the Model Minority Myth

The Black/White binary paradigm is one of the most pervasive ways of understanding race in the United States. The paradigm specifically indicates “the conception that race in America consists, either exclusively or primarily, of only two constituent racial groups, the Black and the White” (Perea 1219). The invention of Black/White binarism is almost indivisible from the history of the United States, especially because of the history of slavery; the concept played an integral role in justifying and regulate Black slaves and later enforcing racial segregation. The Black/White binary paradigm's oversimplified way of understanding race has obvious limits and creates ludicrous racist laws, including the one-drop rule and the Jim Crow laws. Another limit

of the Black/White binary paradigm is the exclusion of other races and ethnic groups in the discourse of race in America. Scholars argue that the Black/White binary paradigm ignores other minority groups, including Native Americans, Latina/o Americans, Asian Americans, and more. Juan F. Perea asserts that the Black/White paradigm not only is a self-perpetuating idea that limits the discourse of race in America, but it also perpetuates “negative stereotypes of Latinos/as” by excluding them from the discourse (1215). The paradigm also overlooks multiracial identities; even when an individual may come from a multiracial background and identify themselves as “mixed-race,” the paradigm puts them into an either-or situation.

Asian Americans also encounter dilemmas of the Black/White binary paradigm. The matter of where Asians belong in Black/White binarism has been a debated issue in American history, and this debate reveals the complicated relationship between race and politics. The pseudo-scientific belief is that Asians are not biologically white. Political relations, however, complicate the issue. For instance, the growing political power of the Japanese government in the late-19th and early-20th centuries made the United States government delay exclusion of Japanese immigration; the Chinese were banned from immigration by the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1908, while the exclusion of Japanese immigrants was not until 1924 (Koshy 169). Susan Koshy explains that the US government delayed excluding Japanese immigration to avoid provoking the Japanese government, a country by then had a growing influence on the international economy and trade (169). Thus, the growing international impact of the Japanese government created benefits for Japanese immigrants over other Asians and potentially challenged the belief that Asians are biologically not white. Some Americans even argued that the US government should allow the naturalization of Japanese immigrants because their culture is “more civilized and modern than their Asian counterparts” (Koshy 169). The different

responses that white Americans had towards Chinese and Japanese immigration are clear evidence that whiteness in America is not solely based on biological reasoning. Eventually, Japanese immigrants were drastically restricted after the Immigration Act of 1924⁴, and their lives were severely destroyed due to the internment of Japanese Americans during World War II. Nevertheless, the controversy about Chinese and Japanese immigrants shows that politics and economic impacts have a more significant effect on US naturalization acts and the discourse of whiteness.

Despite the exceptional treatment that the Japanese have received, one must not forget that Asians, including the Japanese, were eventually excluded from American naturalization in the nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century. The exclusion of Asian immigrants means that Asians ultimately fall into the “Black” category of the Black/White binary paradigm. Nonetheless, because of the nature of the Black/White binary paradigm, Asians, like many other minority races who failed to prove themselves “white,” were positioned in a gray area where they were identified as neither Black nor White. And in this gray area, two types of desire manifest. One is the desire to subvert the system that created the Black/White binary. This kind of desire, when expressed in a productive way, can bring positive changes in society, promote equity and inclusion, and ultimately break the Black/White binary paradigm. The other is the desire to concede to the system and strive to bring oneself to a higher position in the hierarchy. This desire will urge individuals of a racial minority to seek to become white. Because this desire does not challenge the social system, it perpetuates the Black/White binary paradigm and reinforces the system that oppresses racial minorities. This second type of desire—the desire to

⁴ The Immigration Act of 1924—also known as the Johnson-Reed Act of 1924—banned immigration of people who were “ineligible for [US] citizenship”; the Immigration Act of 1924, according to Erika Lee, was specifically aiming to restrict Japanese immigrants (135).

make a non-white race white—is not a complete pipedream. The controversy about Japanese’s racial status in the late-19th and early-20th centuries proves the ambiguity in the definition of whiteness. The postponement of the Japanese exclusion act is clear evidence of the possibility of revamping the status of Asian immigrants in the United States by overthrowing the pseudo-scientific belief that Asians are not white with the power of politics and economy.

In addition to the postponement of the Japanese exclusion act, Chinese Mississippians in the 1920s also show the possibility of revamping the social, political status of Chinese Americans. What happened to Chinese-Mississippians is a poignant example of the second type of desire, the desire to be identified as “white.” Koshy explores the unusual case of the Chinese in Mississippi who were identified as “honorary whites” by white Mississippians (174). In the 1920s when the Jim Crow law was still in effect, Chinese Mississippians claimed their right to attend white public schools (Koshy 174). The controversy began in 1924, when Gong Lum, a Chinese Mississippian merchant, asserted his right to send his daughter Martha to a white public school in Rosedale, Mississippi (Koshy 174). Gong Lum’s appeal was reviewed by the school district and later taken to the Mississippi Supreme Court and the United States Supreme Court (Koshy 174-175). Lum’s lawyers appealed that “Since [Martha] was not colored or of mixed race, she was white” and, therefore, had the right to attend a white public school (Koshy 175). However, when this claim was taken to the Mississippi Supreme Court and the United States Supreme Court, the appeal was rejected. Despite the rejection from the Supreme Court, “the Lums had the support of the vast majority of the township; and the case was taken pro bono by a prestigious law firm” (Koshy 175). Moreover, after Lum’s case, many other Chinese Mississippians started to refuse to send their children to Black public schools, and they chose to send their children to “out-of-state and Catholic institutions or [hired] white private tutors”

(Koshy 176). The regional support that Gong Lum received and the status that Chinese Mississippians were able to claim was unusual compared to how the Chinese immigrants were treated in the Western United States where Chinese communities are much larger and more common; most Chinese immigrants were living under severe racial discrimination due to the Chinese Exclusion Act (Koshy). Chinese Mississippians and Gong Lum's case is another piece of evidence of the ambiguity of whiteness in the United States.

The excruciating truth about Chinese Mississippians' "honorary white status" or "symbolic whiteness" (Koshy 174) is that such social status is gained by oppressing others: Black Americans. In the process of obtaining symbolic whiteness, Black Americans were once again the target of persecution. Under the Black/White binary paradigm, to be White meant to be not-Black. In other words, to obtain the honorary white status, Chinese Mississippians had to prove their difference from Black communities. Koshy points out that Chinese Mississippians actually had a strong relationship with Black communities at the beginning of their immigration as many of the Chinese Mississippians' businesses were located in Black neighborhoods, and interracial marriage between Chinese and Black Americans was common (177). Black-Chinese relations decreased drastically as the Chinese Mississippian community began to claim the right to access white institutions (Koshy 177). Along with decreasing Black-Chinese relations, Chinese Mississippians also mimicked white culture, holding "events and activities such as birthday parties and funerals modeled on white prototypes" (Koshy 177-178). Ultimately, the symbolic whiteness Chinese Mississippians gained in the 1920s was through strategically showing "their cultural similarity to whites and their racial and cultural difference from blacks" (Koshy 178).

Chinese Mississippians were, in a way, adapting to the United States culture and revamping their social and racial status by mimicry. As Bhabha states, by selectively mimicking the colonizers' culture and custom, mimicry "provides a subversive strategy of subaltern agency" (265). In the case of Chinese Mississippians, they were able to obtain symbolic whiteness through mimicry of white culture. The problem with the mimicry of Chinese Mississippians is that while it grants Chinese Americans a higher social status, it eventually solidifies the racially oppressive social system by discriminating against Black Americans and reinforcing the Black/White binary paradigm. It is a distorted type of mimicry that only gives temporary agency to the Chinese Americans; as long as the Black/White binary paradigm persists, immigrants of color have to continue to prove their whiteness by oppressing Black Americans.

This distorted mimicry—persecuting Black Americans to obtain symbolic whiteness—persists to this day. The modern type of symbolic whiteness appears in the model minority myth. The term "model minority" is commonly used today as an accolade for Asian Americans for their diligence and success in American society. However, the history of how the term model minority became popularized reveals the negative impacts of the concept. The term model minority was coined by William Peterson when his article "Success Story, Japanese American Style" appeared in *The New York Times Magazine* on January 9, 1966 (Wu & Wang 26). In his article, Peterson praises Japanese Americans' diligence and success despite the discrimination they had in American history. He directly compares Japanese Americans to other minority groups whom he calls "problem minorities." He describes the so-called problem minorities as having "poor health, poor education, low income, high crime rate, unstable family pattern, and so on and on" (180). It is not difficult to decipher to whom Peterson is referring by "problem minority": Black Americans. In his article, Peterson further argues that "the well-meaning-

programs and countless scholarly studies” focus on Black Americans with little success since the American society “barely know[s] how to repair the damage” that slavery and racism had brought to Black Americans and American society (180). By pointing out little achievement that public programs and scholarly research have accomplished, Peterson’s article highlights the relationship between one’s success and one’s ethnic background and deems governmental support and scholarly research as fruitless efforts.

Therefore, while the meaning of the “model minority” concept may ostensibly seem to appraise the diligence and success of Asian immigrants, the less evident, yet more detrimental, impact of the model minority myth is the persecution of Black Americans. According to Claire Jean Kim, the period when the model minority myth appeared is a clear indication that Black Americans were being persecuted as the problem minority. Claire Jean Kim asserts that the discourse of Asian Americans meets a sudden shift during the 1960s and the Black Power movement (“Unyielding” 348). Before the 1960s, Asians were subjected to exclusion; political acts such as the Chinese Exclusion Act, the Alien Land Law, and the internment of Japanese Americans are evidence. However, as the Civil Rights movement in the 1960s became a growing threat to white supremacy, US media changed their strategy to sustain the system of white privilege and the Black/White binary paradigm; the strategy was to highlight the success stories of Asian Americans so that, in comparison, Black Americans would be seen as societal culprits, failures, and problem minorities. Before the 1960s and the Civil Rights movement, the reputation that Asian immigrants had was as “inscrutable, foreign, devious, and incapable of progress” (C. Kim, “Unyielding” 348). After the Civil Rights movement, “journalists and other opinion-makers reconstructed Asian Americans as a ‘model minority,’ lauding them as intelligent,

diligent, family-oriented, thrifty, and, perhaps most importantly, more interested in economic mobility than political protest” (C. Kim, “Unyielding” 348).

As Kim points out, the model minority myth is politically used by U.S. society to avoid finding a structural defect in a nation that supports racial inequality and discrimination and that imposes accountability on individuals for their success and failure. More importantly, Kim states that the essence of emphasizing the model minority myth may be in advocating compliance to the social system in order to maintain the privileges that mainstream Americans receive (“Unyielding” 348). Hence, the model minority myth sustains the Black/White binary paradigm and reproduces a social structure that oppresses racial minorities.

Black-Korean Conflicts: the 1990 Family Red Apple Boycott and the 1992 LA Uprising

Black-Korean conflicts are rarely discussed in literary studies, and people seldom understand the broader story about how Black-Korean conflicts arose. Black-Korean conflicts were tacitly known among residents in urban cities, such as New York and Los Angeles, where immigrants and people of color from various backgrounds coexist. To comprehend the conflicts more fully, it is important to bring an analytical and critical lens to the issue. With the rise of Asian American studies, more and more scholars have shed light on Black-Korean conflicts and discovered that the conflict involves a complex mix of biased ideologies and systemic racism. Along with racist ideologies, I argue that Black-Korean conflicts were also developed through racial capitalism, which still impacts today’s socio-economic status of Black Americans and Korean Americans. Black-Korean conflicts are crucial to understanding systemic racism in the United States. The conflicts reveal how financially challenged immigrants and people of color are exposed to violence and crime, and how capitalism perpetuates racist structures.

One of the earliest incidents that brought the Black-Korean conflict to light was the Family Red Apple Boycott of 1990. The Family Red Apple Boycott began with Bong Ok Jang, the store manager of the Family Red Apple Store in Flatbush, Brooklyn, and Ghislaine Felissaint, a Haitian American home care worker, who was accused of shoplifting and was harassed by workers at the Family Red Apple Store. It was reported that Jang insisted Felissaint open her bag and Jang, with two other employees of the store, kicked and beat Felissaint. The incident fueled Black-Korean tension in the city, and what started as a protest developed into an over a-year-long, boycott of Korean-owned stores in the community (C. Kim, “The Politics” 74-75).

The boycott drew national attention to the Black-Korean conflicts. Numerous reports were published in *The New York Times* during the year of 1990, giving updates about the boycott, providing a brief history of the long tension between Black and Korean communities, and raising concerns about racism in the United States. The boycott encouraged changes to resolve the conflicts between the two groups. There were several attempts to reconcile Black-Korean conflicts in New York. Kyung Ho Park, the manager of Church Fruit and Vegetable, which was one of the targeted Korean-owned stores of the boycott, hired a black employee in the hopes of assuaging the tension (Gonzalez). David Dinkins, the Mayor of New York City, also paid a visit to support a harmony between the two groups, though he was criticized for having waited too long to finally visit the site (“The Mayor Visits the Red Apple, Finally”).

While the Family Red Apple Boycott is less known to the general public nowadays, in the year 1992, the more well-known incident occurred that became a clear indication and example of the Black-Korean conflict: The 1992 Los Angeles uprising, commonly known as the 1992 Los Angeles riots. There are two major incidents that caused the LA uprising. The first was

the police brutality case against Rodney King, an African American resident in Altadena, California. On March 3, 1991, King was arrested and beaten by California police officers. This was videotaped by George Holliday, a resident who lived near where the incident happened, and the video was spread out widely in national news. It eventually brought the Black community in California to rise together to protest racism against Black Americans in the United States (Ablemann and Lie 3). Another seldom-remembered incident that triggered the LA uprising, which occurred not long after the Rodney King's police brutality case: the death of Latasha Harlins. On March 18, 1991, Latasha Harlins, a fifteen-year-old African American girl, was murdered by Soon Ja Du, a Korean American grocer (K. Park 492). Harlins was shot after a dispute with Du over a shoplifting accusation. It was the court's sentence that was particularly infuriating for the Black community; Du was fined and put on probation because the court said Du was not "a menace to society" (K. Park 492), practically leaving the murder of Latasha Harlins unpunished. The death of Latasha Harlins and the sentence that Du received became a catalyst for the LA uprising, and the Korean community became one of the targeted areas of protesters.

The two events contradict the national narrative of the United States being a racial and cultural melting pot. They are reminders of the racially discriminating social structures where non-white races are politically marginalized and ranked on the lower status of the US racial hierarchy. The two incidents are also evidence of the Black/White binary framework showing how Black Americans have been a main target of oppression. Under the Black/White binary paradigm, racial minorities have to prove their differences from the Black Americans in order to raise their social status in the US racial hierarchy and possibly gain an honorary or symbolic "white" status. In fact, during the LA uprising, there have been voices in the media advocating

for Korean American store owners, portraying them as the hard-working model minority while rendering Black Americans, again, as the problem minority. William Murchison, a white American columnist, stated in 1992:

For Korean merchants the looters reserved a special fury. I should ask parenthetically, isn't it time our society showed some concern over the well-being of these honest, hard-working, lovable people, the Koreans, who prosper in the black ghettos only to arouse their customers' wrath when they prosper too well?" (qtd. in Ablemann and Lie 9)

Murchison's remark once again criminalizes Black Americans, ignoring Black American victims like Ghislaine Felissaint, Rodney King, Latash Harlins, and many more who suffered from discrimination. According to Nancy Ablemann and John Lie, the authors of *Blue Dreams: Korean American and the Los Angeles Riots*, some voices criticized the labor exploitation of Korean American merchants. Nevertheless, in a society where the model minority myth is popular and deemed to be the desired goal for immigrants, it is not hard to imagine the accusation of the boycotts and riots mainly pointing toward the Black community.

Some studies in sociology and history use the middleman minority theory to analyze Black-Korean conflicts. According to Pyong-Gap Min and Andrew Kolodny, in human history, there has often been a particular ethnic group that plays "the role of tradesmen and small businessmen" and, therefore, is called the "middleman minority" (179). Ethnic minorities that played the middleman role in human history include "the Jews in Europe, the Chinese in Southeast Asia, the Indians in Africa, and the Parsis in India" (Min and Kolodny 179). Min and Kolodny state that historically middleman minorities have been the target of aversion because they are perceived as "clannish, disloyal, and unscrupulous outsiders" (179). Min and Kolodny

further argue that the Black-Korean conflicts are due to Korean shopkeepers playing the middleman role in Black communities:

Korean merchants operating businesses in white and Hispanic neighborhoods have not received overt hostility whereas Korean immigrants operating businesses in black neighborhoods have suffered boycotts, press attacks, arson, and murder. ... Many black nationalists have emphasized the importance of economic autonomy in their communities and are opposed to non-black businesses in their neighborhoods. (198-199)

Min and Kolodny's analysis of the Black-Korean conflict provides an explanation for why Korean shopkeepers struggle in Black communities. The middleman minority theory is also used in Edward Taehan Chang's study of Black-Korean conflicts. Chang explains that "Hostility between the middleman minority and the customers whom they serve emerges from day-to-day customer/merchant interactions" (67), which explains that Black-Korean conflict is almost unavoidable and even "exacerbated when the sellers are 'immigrants' and the buyers are 'poor'" (67). Chang admits that the middleman minority theory is not "the sole, or even the most important, factor" in the Black-Korean conflict, and explores a deeper analysis of the conflict (68).

Nevertheless, the middleman minority theory has its limits. Claire Jean Kim contends on the limits of the middleman minority theory in her research of Black-Korean conflicts ("The Politics"). Claire Jean Kim agrees that the middleman minority theory adequately analyzes "the structural juxtapositioning of Korean merchants and blacks in the American economy" and that the system "provokes [Black Americans] to scapegoat or vent their frustrations on [Korean merchants]" ("The Politics" 75). However, she argues that the middleman minority theory "cannot account for either the timing of such events or the precise mechanisms by which they

occur” (“The Politics” 75). In other words, the middleman minority theory separates the Black-Korean conflict from the larger conversation of racism in the United States; the middleman minority theory ultimately classifies the Black-Korean conflict as a distinctive interracial conflict and overlooks its connections to the broader racial politics in the United States. Kim thus claims that Black-Korean conflicts should not be analyzed separately from the larger conversation of racism in the United States but rather as continuing activism of the Black Power Movement. She writes, “[T]he Red Apple Boycott was not an isolated eruption of black frustration but rather a purposive protest campaign designed to mobilize the black community in New York City against patterns of racial domination in American society” (“The Politics” 75).

It is true that the middleman minority theory dissociates Black-Korean conflicts from the Black Power Movement. As Kim explains, considering the historical timing of Black-Korean conflicts and the racial politics in the United States, Black-Korean conflicts are beyond the middleman theory. The middleman minority theory renders Black Americans as, once again, criminals and social nuisances while praising Koreans as model minorities. However, to admit the limits of the middleman minority theory does not mean ignoring the property damage to Korean shops during the LA uprising⁵. As will be further discussed when analyzing Carol Park’s memoir, *Memoir of a Cashier*, the LA uprising has been a traumatic experience for the Korean American community. It was a rude awakening about the violence and racism in the United States to the Korean American community. Not only was the uprising a counter-effect of persecuting Black Americans but also a moment when the model minority was debunked. Nonetheless, the media portraying the LA uprising simply as a riot and Black-Korean conflict merely as an interracial issue rather than a systemic problem ultimately erases stories of Black

⁵ It is reported that “more than 2,300 Korean-owned shops were looted, damaged, or destroyed” during the LA uprising of 1992 (Stevenson xviii).

victims, including Ghislaine Felissaint, Rodney King, and Latasha Harlins, as well as the loss that occurred in the Korean American community.

Literature Review

Aside from the Family Red Apple and the LA uprising, Black-Korean conflicts have been less known to the general public, especially to non-Blacks and non-Koreans. Even so, allusions to the issue have continuously appeared in American fiction and media. Documentaries about “Rooftop Koreans”—armed Korean merchants who defended Korean stores during the LA uprising—are available on YouTube, and numerous articles and books are published which feature the ongoing clash between Korean merchants and Black customers. In literary works, Black-Korean conflicts are rarely the center of the plot. For instance, Chang-Rae Lee’s *Native Speaker* (1995), a canonical work in Korean American literature, briefly mentions Black-Korean conflicts but does not delve into the issue in-depth. Therefore, it is unique that Leonard Chang’s *The Fruit ‘N Food* (1996) and Carol Park’s *Memoir of a Cashier* (2017) are directly discussing Black-Korean conflicts. The main story of each work centers around Black-Korean conflicts and provides a critical reflection of the issue. Despite the unique topic of *The Fruit ‘N Food* and *Memoir of a Cashier*, critical studies of the two texts are extremely limited. There are almost no critical studies about *Memoir of a Cashier* and only one article and one book chapter *The Fruit ‘N Food* were published.

Klara Szymańko’s book, *Visions of Whiteness in Selected Works of Asian American Literature*, includes a chapter about *The Fruit ‘N Food*, titled “Dreaming and Living White Terror in Leonard Chang’s *The Fruit ‘N Food*.” In this chapter, Szymańko examines the psyche of the protagonist, Tom, by analyzing his dreams and argues that whiteness is the invisible yet core

causation of the Black-Korean conflict in the novel. The existence of whiteness is not explicit in the novel according to Szymańko, but rather whiteness is something that “haunts” (Szymańko 129) Tom in his nightmares and evokes and reinforces Tom’s prejudice about the idea of whiteness versus blackness: whiteness as “light and day” while blackness as “darkness and night” (Szymańko 129-130). Because of being haunted by his endless nightmares, Tom “is caught between sleep and sleeplessness, dream-like states and conscious states of mind” (132). Through analyzing the haunting whiteness in Tom’s dream, Szymańko shows how whiteness not only became the core of the Black-Korean conflict but at the same time undermines Tom’s physical and mental state of existence.

The idea that Tom’s existence is being challenged is also found in Hyeyurn Chung’s article “The Korean American Cowboy and the Fallacy of Regenerative Violence in Leonard Chang’s *The Fruit ‘N Food*.” Chung’s article explores how American masculinity is developed through heroicizing violence. Chung claims, on the other hand, that American men of color are unable to legitimize their masculinity through the traditional American way of violence. Chung further argues that violence as masculinity is a product of the white American male hegemony that does not apply to American men of color: “[Tom] seeks to embrace something ostensibly intangible to American men of color—masculinity—by means that further delegitimize their existence—violence” (4).

The two pieces of research on *The Fruit ‘N Food* discuss the double-consciousness of the protagonist, Tom, especially regarding his double-consciousness between his (white) American identity and his Korean identity. However, neither Szymańko nor Chung address the other Korean American characters in the novel, especially the Korean shopkeepers, Mr. and Mrs. Rhee, who continue to have strife with their Black customers. My research interprets not only Tom’s

identity crisis but also the interaction the Korean shopkeepers have with Black customers, and I analyze the emergence of the model minority myth and symbolic whiteness in *The Fruit 'N Food*. The model minority myth and symbolic whiteness will also be the focus of my analysis of *Memoir of a Cashier*, and I further explicate how shopkeeping becomes a mimicry of the Black/White binary paradigm in Korean American communities.

Black-Korean Conflicts in *Memoir of a Cashier* and *The Fruit 'N Food*

Carol Park's *Memoir of a Cashier* and Leonard Chang's *The Fruit 'N Food* both depict the conflicts between Korean American shopkeepers and Black American customers in the early 1990s. While Chang's *The Fruit 'N Food* is a fictional story, *Memoir of a Cashier* is the author's memoir of her life working as a cashier at her mother's gas station in Compton, California. Memoirs are often depreciated due to their narrative style and the nature of being an individual's personal experience. Helen M. Buss, the author of *Repossessing the World: Reading Memoirs by Contemporary Women*, writes that "dependence on narrators who are never fully impartial, and often highly opinionated" in memoirs make the genre be treated as "both bad history (which assumes objectivity) and inferior literature (which prefers narratives that show rather than tell)" (Buss xv). However, the subjectivity of the memoir genre should not be dismissed as a negative aspect. Instead, it is a distinctive characteristic of the genre, which enables memoirs to highlight individual voices. Buss also argues that memoirs are "Life Writing," texts that are written in the "marginal form of a marginal discourse" (xv). Because memoirs are able to represent marginalized individual narratives, they can also "accurately reflect complications of experience" and "act as mirrors of lived experience rather than as fairy tales, moral lessons, or

means of escape” (Gosselin 134). Hence, *Memoir of a Cashier* should also be read like a personal narrative highlighting marginalized voices, rather than as a historically objective record.

In addition, memoirs generally focus on specific moments in a person’s life. In the case of Park’s *Memoir of a Cashier*, the memoir talks about the author’s memory of working as a cashier in Koreatown in California, and most importantly, her memory of the LA uprising. *Memoir of a Cashier*, therefore, tells a story of an extremely marginalized voice: a girl, a cashier, and an immigrant of color. As Park reflects on her memory, *Memoir of a Cashier* vividly captures the violence in the lives in Koreatown, a socioeconomically and racially segregated district in California.

At the beginning of *Memoir of a Cashier*, Park recalls the day when she starts her work at her mother’s gas station in Compton, California. She is only ten years old, but it was common for children to help their parents’ business; in fact, children helping their parents’ business is common in South Korea, and it is especially common among working-class immigrants. Young ten-year-old Park shows naiveness and innocence, unaware of what she will encounter in her new life as a cashier. Soon, Park finds herself amid racism, violence, and crime, and the only thing protecting her is the bulletproof window of the cashier booth. As a cashier, she is exposed to racism, harassment, violence, and crime:

I picked up street lingo and cuss words I never knew existed: ‘whore,’ ‘dog-shit-eating-bitch,’ and so on. I also learned about even more wonderful things like racism. I learned that people saw me as a chink, nip, Jap, oriental, gook, yellow-skinned whore, FOB and slanted-eye “insert derogatory adjective here.” (6)

The condition that young Park is situated in is almost unspeakable. It is no surprise that this horrid environment will have a detrimental effect on a young child’s mind. Soon enough, Park

finds her own way to survive and protect herself from the violent environment. As a ten-year-old girl, Park's way to survive this harsh environment is to become a bitter and angry cashier herself.

It is a defense mechanism, the best way for Park to survive harassment and racism:

“Fuck you” became a daily, even hourly phrase I used. “Fuck you” became a mantra.

“Fuck you” became a weapon. As I got my street education while working shifts and watching people, I picked up racist words I could use, things like the “n” word and other unsavory names. My life as a cashier was anything but joyful. This bulletproof box I lived, breathed, and feared in was a place I hated. (6)

Swearing and talking back are the only ways that Park can defend herself as a helpless young cashier. It is an aggressive defense but is the only way that she can mentally survive.

Park's experience as a cashier is a sheer example of racism passing down across generations. An innocent ten-year-old girl who knew little about race and discrimination is now fully exposed to blatant racism; she even mimics racist and violent behaviors. When Park speaks racially offensive remarks, it seems that she understands the meaning of her words, but at the same time, she does not fully comprehend their offensiveness. For instance, she recalls the first time when she ever calls a Black person the “N-word.” It is when a Black customer starts to complain about the gas pump and swear at Park. Being tired of hearing his complaint, Park bursts out the word. But she soon regrets saying those words and is stunned by the reaction she gets from the Black customer:

“You dumb [n-word],” I finally said as I stared at him. . . .

He glowered at me. He was furious. He balled his hand into a fist. I got scared. I had just called someone the “n” word for the first time in my life . . .

“What did you just say?” he said as he cocked his head to the left. “What did you just call me?” . . .

“You best watch what the hell you say, kid,” he said as he pointed a finger at me. “if you know what’s good for you, watch what the fuck you say.”

I turned away from him. He stood there for a few more seconds staring at me before he finally walked off. I sat down on my blue-cushioned seat and let out a sigh of relief. I had just crossed the line. (C. Park 14)

She is immediately frightened by the reaction, realizing for the first time the impact of the word and the consequences she can face by using it. The racist slurs and insults she uses are adapted out of ignorance of the true impact of the words. Yet, young Park still understands which derogatory word indicates which race—as in “chink” indicating Asians and “N-word” indicating Black people—implying that she is subconsciously learning racism from her environment.

While Park’s individual experience is an example of transgenerational racism through mimicry, as part of a collective community, Park realizes that the Korean American community is in a position that can abuse racism to gain power over other minority races, especially through the model minority myth: “Koreans and blacks didn’t get along. Mexicans and blacks didn’t get along. Koreans and other Asian ethnic groups got along with whites because we were a so-called model minority” (C. Park 8). The fact that Koreans “got along with whites” (C. Park 8) shows that Korean Americans, or whoever may receive the model minority title, can become allies with white Americans. Furthermore, the model minority title grants the Korean Americans a higher status in the American racial hierarchy, and the status of being a model minority creates a sense of whiteness. This sense of whiteness is of course a false whiteness; it is similar to the “symbolic whiteness” (Koshy 174) that the Chinese Mississippians had in the 1920s. The reason that the

model minority title is a false power or symbolic whiteness is that the model minority title is granted only if one complies with the social system. A model minority cannot become the person who controls the system but is only the person who can benefit from the system by being submissive. In the case of the Korean American community, they gain the model minority title not only by their hard-work and compliance with the social system, but also by mimicking racism and discrimination against Black Americans. Therefore, becoming a model minority is an act of mimicry since it allows a model minority to regain agency. The problem is that this agency is only a temporary one that is maintained by oppressing other minorities, especially Black Americans.

Racial hierarchy and symbolic whiteness are also found in Chang's novel *The Fruit 'N Food*. *The Fruit 'N Food* shows several apparent indications that the novel is inspired by the Family Red Apple boycott of 1990. *The Fruit 'N Food* begins with Tom Pak, the protagonist of the novel, getting a new job at the grocery store the Fruit 'N Food, the namesake of the novel's title. The store owners are Korean immigrants, Mr. and Mrs. Rhee, who train Tom for his new job as a grocery store worker. Part of the training is to be cautious of robbers and shoplifters. They tell Tom about past shoplifting and robbing incidents and warn him to watch out for any such occasions. Mrs. Rhee especially tells Tom to keep an eye on "gumdungee" (16), a Korean word equal to the "N-word." These stories startle Tom: first, he feels surprised and uncomfortable about the brazen racism from the Rhees; second, he is surprised by the danger that the Rhees and a small grocery store like Fruit 'N Food can be exposed to. According to Mr. and Mrs. Rhee, all robberies at the store have been committed by Black Americans. Mr. and Mrs. Rhee have witnessed shoplifters, been held at gunpoint, and even been beaten up by a robber. This changes Tom's view of the racial conflict in his neighborhood. The stories also remind him

of the news about a Korean grocery store boycott in Brooklyn, an allusion to the Family Red Apple boycott. Before working at Fruit 'N Food, the news did not interest Tom, but after hearing the robbery stories from the Rhees, when Tom hears the Brooklyn news coming out again on the radio, he turns the volume up and finds himself attentively listening to the news (L. Chang 25). Thus, by working at the Korean grocery store, Tom is able to see the Black-Korean conflicts from a new perspective.

Unlike Park in *Memoir of a Cashier*, who has been ignorant of racism prior to working at the gas station, mainly due to her young age and lack of experience, Tom's ignorance of racism and Black-Korean conflict stems from his indifference to political issues and his lack of family ties. Even though he is born to Korean immigrant parents, he lost both parents—his mother in his childhood and his father when he was still a student—and lost contact with his relatives in South Korea. As a result, Tom's identity as a "Korean" American is extremely weak, almost nonexistent, and, therefore, he is also new to the Black-Korean conflict in American society. Tom's weak Korean identity is not entirely a fault of his own or the fact that he lost both of his parents at an early age. Even when Tom wants to or tries to claim his Korean identity, his attempts are thwarted by other more "authentic" Koreans. Mr. and Mrs. Rhee, who are first-generation Korean immigrants, deny Tom's Korean identity and label him as *not* fully Korean. During Tom and Mr. Rhee's first encounter, Mr. Rhee speaks to Tom in Korean, assuming from Tom's looks that he must be Korean. However, Mr. Rhee soon finds out that Tom cannot speak Korean, which, to Mr. Rhee, means that Tom is not fully Korean:

Tom walked to the counter, and the man [Mr. Rhee] said something to him in Korean. A question.

"I don't speak Korean," he said.

“You Korean, *hanguk-saddem*⁶?”

Tom nodded.

The man said something again in Korean.

He shook his head.

Laughing quietly, the man also shook his head. “Ho, you no Korean. You *gyupo*.” (4)

Tom and Mr. Rhee have different definitions of what “Korean” means. For Tom, he is Korean because he looks Korean, his parents are from South Korea, and even some of his relatives are still in South Korea. Even though his nationality may be American and he does not remember anything about Korea or the language, he recognizes, although vaguely, the Korean side of his identity. Mr. Rhee, on the other hand, does not accept Tom as Korean because he is a “*gyupo*.” *Gyupo* or *gyopo* is a Korean term that refers to Koreans who emigrated from Korea and live abroad. The labeling of “*gyupo*” shows a rigid definition of being a Korean; once someone leaves the country, forgets the language, and lives abroad, they are no longer a true Korean but a “*gyupo*.” Yet it is ironic that Mr. Rhee, who is also technically “*gyupo*”—since he immigrated to the United States—would reject Tom’s Korean identity only because he has stronger ties and more memories about South Korea. Mr. Rhee’s attitude and the ambiguity in the definition of “*gyupo*” and being Korean indicate the ambiguity of identity overall; the issue of identity, especially to immigrants of color, is frequently, if not always, ambiguous and subjective.

In addition to having his Korean identity denied, Tom feels a strong sense of loss when it comes to his identity. One day, when he lost his wallet, Tom thinks to himself, “Without his wallet he had no identification. He had no identity . . . maybe now without his wallet he didn’t exist” (8-9). Moreover, Tom has physical disconnection; he does not have a space that he calls

⁶ *Hanguk-saddem* means “Korean person.”

home. He returns to Queens after being fired from his job in Boston, and he expects to find some familiarity and comfort since Queens is the place where he spent his childhood. Disappointingly, Tom finds out the neighborhood has drastically changed since he left. He finds an apartment to rent where he can return after his work, but it does not feel like a home for him.

Tom's feeling of loss and disconnection shows that his identity itself is a state of "indirection" (L. Chang 8). He does not have a permanent job, any family connection, a stable relationship, or even a physical refuge that he can call home. Tom's life lacks purpose or any clear direction. Therefore, because of his lifestyle, Tom is not a model minority; he does not follow the model minority myth by complying with US society or adapting the stereotypes of Asian model minorities.

Mr. and Mrs. Rhee, on the other hand, strictly follow the model minority path and their lives are full of "direction." They have a rigorous daily schedule to make their grocery store a success, to provide their daughter Jung-mi, or June as she prefers it, better opportunities in life:

they arrived there from Riverdale by five in the morning to meet the truck that delivered the new shipment of fruits and vegetables; they set up, and then ran the store all day until they closed at ten, though they didn't leave Kasdan until near midnight. Tom couldn't believe how much work they put into the store, especially considering that they only cleared about thirty thousand total last year, according to Mr. Rhee. (13-14)

Their purpose in life is clear, focused, and direct: to run a successful business in the United States; financially support the family; help their daughter June receive higher education; and become a successful American citizen.

Tom describes the Rhees as people of direction and "expansion" (23). Looking at the Rhees, Tom remarks, "Expansion was on their minds. They always seemed to be moving

forward” (23). The Rhees’ pursuit of expansion is another common trait found in the model minority myth: hard working Asian Americans seeking economic mobility. Sau-ling Cynthia Wong points out that the pursuit of economic mobility is a distinctive trait found in Asian Americans, for which Wong seeks the cause from the history of Asian immigration to America. Wong states “America is founded on myths of mobility” indicating the Puritan’s migration from the European continent to Westward expansion in the 19th century. Mobility is indeed the center of the American ideology that promises physical and spiritual liberation. Wong claims, however, that Asian Americans have been omitted from the mobility myth. Political acts such as the Alien Land Law, which prohibited Asians from purchasing lands, and the internment of Japanese Americans during World War II have forced Asian immigrants to become physically immobile. Wong argues, due to the restricted physical mobility, that Asian Americans’ mobility becomes more vertical than horizontal; it is upward mobility, spiritual mobility and socioeconomic mobility (158). The Rhees seeking to expand their business shows their search for upward economic mobility, and their hope for June to have higher education from a prestigious university indicates their pursuit of upward social mobility.

As history indicates, the pursuit of upward mobility has been constructed under the history of discrimination. Asian immigrants have no other choice but to seek vertical mobility when the social structure limits their horizontal mobility. Vertical mobility found among Asian immigrants shares similar traits with the model minority myth because they both emphasize the pursuit of socio-economic upwardness to secure their status in the United States. Furthermore, the value of upward, vertical mobility increases when it not only promises economic success but also symbolic whiteness, allowing them access to white privilege. Again, the problem is, as Koshy explains, that symbolic whiteness is gained through oppressing other minorities,

especially Black Americans. Koshy states that “the power of whiteness” comes from “identification from nonwhites and the position of blacks as the definitional ‘other’ against whom ideologies of whiteness are produced and sustained” (174). Identifying Blacks as the “definitional other” (Koshy 174) occurs in the very beginning of the model minority myth. When Peterson praised Japanese Americans as the model minority, he persecuted the opposite type as the “problem minority.” The constant juxtaposition of Asian Americans, as hard-working immigrants, and Black Americans, as insubordinate rioters, in media has a clear agenda: to promote the model minority myth.

Even though Tom lives a different life from the Rhees and does not follow the model minority myth, he is not a rebellious character who challenges and attempts to subvert the social system. Neither is Tom a “problem minority” because, again, he does not actively resist and criticize the social system. Tom is, therefore, in an in-between state where he does not have a label that can perfectly identify what type of minority he is. His sense of loss and indirection comes from Tom’s ambiguous state. Nevertheless, because Tom cannot be labeled as a model minority or a problem minority, he is free from such labels that are created by the social system and politics of the Black/White binary paradigm and the model minority myth.

Despite the potential that Tom has—to become entirely free from social expectations and racial politics—his unstable state causes Tom to be easily influenced by others. Mrs. Rhee, for instance, tries to inject her own ideological views into Tom’s mind. Mrs. Rhee is adamant that all Black customers are potential shoplifters and robbers. She keeps a special eye whenever a Black person comes into the store and demands Tom do the same as well. Mrs. Rhee’s obsession has a strong impact on Tom. He is surprised to find himself beginning to pay attention to the race of the customers. His sudden awareness irritates him because this awareness did not begin with his

own decision but with Mrs. Rhee. What makes Tom especially uncomfortable is Mrs. Rhee's attitude when a "Black" customer comes into the store. Whenever a Black person comes into the store, Mrs. Rhee's stares at them, "almost expecting something to happen" (34), which also makes Tom "watch whomever it was" that Mrs. Rhee is staring at, which most of the time turns out to be "a young black man or woman" (34).

Whenever Mrs. Rhee makes the uncomfortable and noticeable stare at Black customers, Tom cannot help but follow her persistent gaze. By following Mrs. Rhee's gaze, Tom involuntarily participates in the offensive act of staring. Once Mrs. Rhee and Tom stare at Black customers, the power dynamic becomes clear: a model minority surveilling a problem minority. Yet Tom still feels extremely uncomfortable when he inadvertently surveils Black customers. The conflict he feels is because of his newly developed double-consciousness. Since working at Fruit 'N Food, Tom becomes more aware of interracial conflicts and learns about Korean American shopkeepers' racist perspective on Black Americans. As a result, he finds himself in the in-between state where he sees Black Americans in conflicting gazes: the gaze of his own self—prior to working at the grocery store—and the gaze of Korean shopkeepers—the model minority. However, while Tom's inner conflict is similar to Du Bois's double-consciousnesses, it is a different type of consciousness. Tom's double-consciousness occurs when he sees others, the Black Americans, while Du Bois's, or Black Americans' double-consciousness occurs when they see themselves—Du Bois's theory of double-consciousness is the act of "always looking at one's self through the eyes of others" (3). The difference between Tom's double-consciousness and Du Bois's and Black Americans' double-consciousness shows that Tom's social status is higher than Black Americans in the racial hierarchy.

Like Black Americans' double-consciousness, Tom occasionally does see himself in "the eyes of others," especially in his dreams. Throughout the novel, Tom struggles with insomnia and nightmares. In his nightmares, he is haunted by whiteness (Szymańko 129). Tom describes his nightmares as "everything being white" (77), and jokingly tells June that he might have been in "Heaven" in the dream (77). But it is clear that Tom fears the whiteness in his dream. He cannot explain why his whiteness dreams frighten him, yet he remembers the fear he felt during his dream: "He blinked, suddenly remembering a fragment of a dream. Something frightening. He remembered a bright, white light shining into his eyes, hurting him. And it'd been so familiar. Had he dreamt that before?" (9-10). Tom's fear comes from the realization of his double-consciousness. It is a fear that comes from the odd feeling of alienating oneself by seeing oneself in "the eyes of others," in other words, seeing his Asian self in the eyes of the white. Nevertheless, the fact that Tom can use his double-consciousness not only to look at himself but to look at others, especially Black Americans, and to oppress others reveal the power that model minority can have over other minorities.

In addition to inadvertently developing this new double-consciousness, Tom is constantly exposed to crime; he either witnesses petty crimes, like shoplifting, or hears others' stories about serious crimes, like robbery. Mr. Rhee, for instance, was robbed before Tom started working at the store (17), and Mr. Harris, one of the regular customers of Fruit 'N Food, lost his wife two years ago to a heart attack when she was robbed and aggressively pushed down by the robbers (55). His double-consciousness, fear of crime, and insomnia put Tom in a mentally and physically unstable state. Finally, Tom's instability puts him on edge all the time when he is tending the store, and one day, he finally reaches the limit when Mrs. Rhee starts a quarrel with a Black couple. Mrs. Rhee aggressively accuses the couple of stealing food. The couple denies

such accusation, but Mrs. Rhee stays stubborn, trying to reach for the Black woman's handbag. Tom hears Mrs. Rhee being pushed to the shelves and knocked down by the woman. Mrs. Rhee shouts to Tom to push the security alarm and call the police. All the shouting, the loud quarrel, and Tom's unstable state make Tom filled with fear of violence and crime: "he could only think of robbery and he did not want to be hurt and held up and beaten or shot so he had to stop anything and anyone who tried to rob them" (110). Due to intense fear, Tom is unable to stay calm; instead of pushing the security alarm, Tom rushes to Mrs. Rhee and points a gun at the Black woman. It was Mr. and Mrs. Rhee's gun, the gun that they kept under the counter in case of robbery—although they never use it:

he waved the gun and heard someone yell, "He's got a gun!" and someone shouted and people jumped to the ground and he ran straight for the couple aiming the gun at them and the man looked confused, seeing the people drop around him until he saw Tom running to him and his eyes widened and he backed away but Tom moved forward and aimed the gun at the woman and yelled, Give it back give it back and don't ever touch her again do you hear me don't ever touch her again! (110)

Tom's sudden behavior brings chaos to the store. After Tom threatens the Black couple, the couple and the rest of the customers in the store hurriedly leave the place of chaos. The narrative of this moment of chaos is rushed, as if it shows Tom's unstable state. Tom's action was a type of self-protection, a reaction to protect himself from fear, the trauma of urban crimes, and his anxiety of double-consciousness.

His action threatens everyone in the store, especially the Black couple, and it becomes the main reason that the Black community starts a boycott of Fruit 'N Food. The very next day, Mr. Rhee finds five people holding pickets in front of the store. The boycott starts small, but it

rapidly grows into a larger group. Seeing the growing number of people joining the boycott, the Rhees feel threatened and call the police for help. The police's response disappoints the Rhees; according to the police, there is nothing illegal about the boycott and protest, and, hence, the police do not provide any assistance. As the protest grows more violent, Tom and the Rhees feel unprotected, but there is still no help from the police.

The disappointing response from the police is a sheer moment of realization of the falsehood in the model minority myth. It is the moment when the Rhees and Tom realize that the model minority's whiteness is only symbolic. In fact, the Rhees have never felt protected by the police. Whenever there was a robbery at the store, the Rhees had to protect themselves. On Tom's first day of work at Fruit 'N Food, Tom asks the Rhees whether the police ever investigated any robbery cases at the store, and the Rhees replies that the police have never been helpful:

"The Police?"

[Mr. Rhee] smiled sadly, shrugging. He lifted his chopsticks out of his bowl for an instant. "Come too late always. And never find robber. Never." (17)

Mr. Rhee's sad smile expresses his frustration with the police who he believes will never help them to protect their business.

Black/Korean tension and the lack of support from the police reveal the odd social status of the Korean shopkeepers in *The Fruit 'N Food*. Korean shopkeepers seem to hold more power and have the ability to abuse their power over Black Americans. Korean shopkeepers follow the model minority myth and gain symbolic whiteness to establish their higher status in the racial hierarchy. And yet, Korean shopkeepers do not have full access to the power of whiteness;

rather, they are haunted by it. For instance, the Rhees cannot get help from the police, and Tom is constantly haunted by his whiteness dreams.

Asian Americans are, therefore, in an in-between state in the Black/White binary paradigm. Asian Americans gain symbolic whiteness that differentiates them from Black Americans, but due to their whiteness being only “symbolic,” Asian Americans are not treated as perfectly white. David Leiwei Li states that Asian Americans’ social status changed before and after explicit anti-Asian immigration laws. Before anti-Asian immigration laws were removed—which Li labels as “period I”—Asians were “Orientals” and an “object of prohibition” (Li 5). And after the laws are abolished—which Li labels as “period II”—Asians become “Asian abjection” (5). In other words, Asian Americans are still excluded from “the subject status” (6), a social status that has the power to reshape and reconstruct the social system of the United States:

In period II, the Asian American has been turned into an “abject,” into that which is neither radical enough for institutional enjoinment of the kind in period I nor competent enough to enjoy the subject status of citizens in a registered and recognized participation of American democracy. (Li 6)

Thus, Asian Americans are “abject” (Li 6), holding a limited agency and symbolic whiteness.

Korean shopkeepers’ abject state is also found in Park’s *Memoir of a Cashier*. Park’s account of the LA uprising shows that LA Koreatown is abandoned by the police during the uprising. While the beginning of the LA uprising focuses on justice for Rodney King and Latash Harlin, it rapidly grows violent causing enormous property damage, even attacking civilians on the street. Park writes, “the news started to roll footage of a man—Reginald Denny—being attacked by a group of African Americans on Normandie Avenue in Los Angeles. Protestors dragged Denny out of his truck and beat him badly. He nearly died” (68-69). As the protest

grows more violent, Park sees the news being filled with reports about looters and arson targeting local stores, which directly threatens her family's safety and livelihood: "Footage of stores being looted and burned, and well, straight-up rioting, dominated the channels" (69).

Additionally, Korean shopkeepers were unable to receive any help from the LA police to prevent any looting and arson at their stores. While watching the news reports about the violent protests, especially the reports about looters and arson at local stores, Park and her brothers start to worry about their mother at work. Park immediately calls her mother and demands her to return home, but her mother cannot go outside the cashier booth because there are too many protesters around the gas station, as the gas station is located in the center of the protests: "She couldn't exactly just saunter out of there. No one would escort her or Mr. Chung out of the booth. People were looking out for themselves and rightfully so. The police were nowhere to be found. Mom tried calling several times for help. No one ever came" (C. Park 69). The lack of support from the police belies the truth of the model minority myth and reveals that the model minority's whiteness is only a symbolic one. Symbolic whiteness creates a loose alliance between white Americans and Korean shopkeepers in *Memoir of a Cashier* and *The Fruit 'N Food*, and the two texts show that this alliance can be easily broken.

Park's memoir also points out that the damage that Koreatown received during the LA uprising is a socio-economic problem as well as a racial problem. Her mother's gas station is located in Compton, one of the poorer neighborhoods in LA County, and the demographics of Compton mostly consist of people of color, including Black Americans, Asian Americans, and Latino/a Americans. The number of Korean Americans in the community was growing, especially after the Watts riots of 1965; it was because many white Americans, Chinese Americans, Japanese Americans left the area after the Watts riots, and most Jewish and Japanese

stores were sold to the newly immigrated Koreans (C. Park 43). As a result, the district where LA Koreatown is located became a racially and socio-economically segregated area.

Park's memoir also shows that she has been exposed to violence and crime from a very young age. Park describes numerous instances when she witnesses crimes, poverty, and drug abuse. She one time sees a Black woman dying on the street and a man getting shot; all these incidents occur at or near her mother's gas station where she can vividly see everything through the cashier booth window. She also sees how illegal drugs becoming an increasing problem in her neighborhood; customers start to ask if the station sells "glass flowers," which Park later finds out that the glass tubes that hold paper or plastic flowers are being used as a cocaine pipe (34-35).

Racially and socio-economically segregated towns in *Memoir of a Cashier* and *The Fruit 'N Food* are, therefore, physical spaces where intersectionality of race and class emerges; it means that the problems—crime, violence, racism, and more—occurring in these areas are not simply racial issues, but they occur when issues of race and socio-economic status intersect. Kimberlé Crenshaw explains that an individual's identities intersect, and, especially when each intersecting identity is socially and politically marginalized ones, the individual will be more easily neglected by the society, unable to receive almost any support from the society. For instance, Crenshaw explains that women of color have limited resources when it comes to employment, housing, and so on; this is because her identity as a woman and her identity as a person of color are both marginalized identities in a white, patriarchal society, such as the United States (Crenshaw 1245). Korean shopkeepers in *Memoir of a Cashier* and *The Fruit 'N Food* also have intersecting identities; they are non-white, working-class immigrants, residing in a non-white, poor neighborhood. The intersecting identities in *Memoir of a Cashier* and *The Fruit*

'N Food make it difficult for Korean shopkeepers to have access to resources, such as support from government law enforcement.

By revealing the counter effect of the model minority myth and the intersectionality in Korean American retail business, *Memoir of a Cashier* and *The Fruit 'N Food* disclose the social system that aggravates racial and class segregation and discrimination. Park quotes Edward T. Chang, a professor of Ethnic Studies at University of California Riverside who answers “yes” to the question of whether there will be more things like the LA uprising happening in the future: “All the structural conditions that existed back then still exist today. If you don’t address the structural conditions that ignited the race riots, whether another riot happens again isn’t the question. Rather, the question is where and when it will” (qtd. in Park 144-145). Despite scholars’ efforts to resolve the Black/Korean conflict by approaching the problem as a structural problem, rather than simply an interracial problem, the media has continued to highlight the race and the model/problem minority binarism in the Black/Korean conflict. Helen Zia asserts that the news at that time focused on interracial conflicts of the LA uprising rather than analyzing the institutional cause of racial injustice. The news showed violent and provocative images of both Black American protestors and Korean American shopkeepers, especially the Korean American shopkeepers who formed their own armed defense group to protect Korean stores from the looters when the police never came to help, and the media soon used these shopkeepers to “[replay] images of Korean Americans with guns” (Zia 183). The media at that time reported the news from the mainstream’s point of view and failed to bring a balanced report of the LA uprising, especially from the Asian Americans’ point of view. Zia points out that in an article by the *Los Angeles Times*, where they interviewed people about their opinion on the LA uprising,

the newspaper published the survey results as views of “Whites, Blacks, Hispanics and Others” (qtd. in Zia 183).

The LA uprising and the other violent incidents that Park witnesses at the gas station are indeed the untold stories of the American dream and even the model minority myth. To become a model minority and to achieve the American dream, immigrants, especially working-class, non-white immigrants, are first to overcome racially and socio-economically segregated areas where violence, crime, and drug abuse are prevalent. And for Korean shopkeepers and Park’s family in *Memoir of a Cashier*, to become a model minority and achieve the American dream, they not only have to overcome their resource-lacking neighborhood but must economically thrive by running their small businesses. After all, for Korean shopkeepers and Park’s family in *Memoir of a Cashier*, monetary earnings are relatively easier to obtain than are the other things that the American dream and the model minority promise: freedom and equality.

The gap between the American dream and reality truly affects Park’s identity. She finds herself acting differently when she is at school in contrast to when she is at the gas station. At school, she acts like other students, her friends, what she believes to be “normal” for girls her age. And she resents the fact that she cannot enjoy her weekend like her peers because she has to work at the station. As a cashier, she is different, filled with resentment:

At the station ... I would fight with customers more, cussing, yelling, and practically screaming at them as I learned to deal with my emotions, especially anger and hate.

However, at school, I was calm and nice. I did my best to fit in. No one yelled at me there. No one told me I was a chink. I had new friends, and I could at least try to be like a well-adjusted kid. (105)

Park recognizes her self-conflicting identity of herself; she is both a student and a cashier, a “well-adjusted kid” and a “chink,” and an American and an Asian. While school is a place where Park can pursue her version of the American dream—being a “normal” American student—at work, she is forced to face the reality of being an Asian immigrant. In other words, Park experiences a double-consciousness, where her American identity and Asian identity cannot reconcile.

Both *Memoir of a Cashier* and *The Fruit ‘N Food* conclude with the protagonists encountering another robbery case. A year since the LA uprising, Park in *Memoir of a Cashier* is attacked by a group of house robbers. She is startled to realize that the robbers are Asian Americans and thinks to herself, “How could Asians do this to other Asians?” (102). Tom in *The Fruit ‘N Food* also finds a group of Asian American gangs robbing Mr. Harris. As Tom tries to rescue Mr. Harris from the gangs, Tom is shot by one of the gangs (214). The crimes that Park and Tom encounter at the end of each narrative emphasize violence itself rather than violence between different races.

In conclusion, by narrating stories of Korean American shopkeepers and the two major incidents in the Korean American shopkeeper history—the 1990 Family Red Apple boycott and the 1992 LA uprising—*Memoir of a Cashier* and *The Fruit ‘N Food* reveal more than the interracial dispute about the Black/Korean conflict. *Memoir of a Cashier* and *The Fruit ‘N Food* expose the racial politics of White/Black binaries and the model minority myth, the hybridity and abuse of the symbolic whiteness, and the irreconcilable double-consciousness of Korean Americans. Furthermore, the two texts highlight the point of view of the Korean shopkeepers, who are marginalized in their intersecting identities as Asian, immigrant, and working class, over

the two historical incidents. By doing so, *Memoir of a Cashier* and *The Fruit 'N Food* enhance the understanding of Korean American shopkeepers and illustrate a fuller picture of US history.

Chapter 3: Citizenship and Becoming American

Overview

If we fully believe in the saying that “America is a country of immigrants,” immigration policies must be the first thing to examine to understand the United States. Deciding who is qualified or unqualified to become a citizen is a crucial factor when designing a national identity. In fact, this may no longer be an issue that strictly applies to the United States; theoretically, people can now freely move from one country to another and choose to become a citizen of a country that is not their homeland by birth. While human migration has existed since prehistoric times, the modern immigration trend began with the “discovery” of the Americas and the invention of the American Dream. The liberating ideas of democracy and equality of the American Dream attracted immigrants from around the world. The modern immigrant trend also redefined the concept of citizenship and remade it into a more fluid identity. The changes in the definition of citizenship naturally render immigration laws to be the new apparatus to determine who is and is not a citizen. In other words, in the modern immigration era, immigration laws ultimately construct national identity.

Immigrants who do not fit a national identity would not be welcomed and possibly will not be given the right to citizenship. The United States is known to have a long history of explicit exclusionary immigration policies against people of color; in terms of excluding Asian immigrants, the United States implemented the Chinese Exclusion Act, the Alien Land Law, and the internment of Japanese Americans in the past. Though such exclusionary laws were abolished in the mid-20th century, cultural obstacles against Korean immigrants still remain, as we see in Suki Kim’s *The Interpreter* (2003). Kim’s *The Interpreter* portrays the lives of Korean American immigrants in New York through the perspective of Suzy, the protagonist. As a 1.5

generation Korean American,⁷ Suzy has always found herself in a liminal space between her Korean and American identities. Her family consists of her parents Mr. and Mrs. Park, first generation Korean immigrants, and her sister Grace who is, like Suzy, a 1.5 generation Korean American. Suzy is estranged from her family when she has an affair with a married white American professor. Years later, she receives the news that her parents were murdered by robbers, and at their parents' funeral, she meets her sister Grace for the last time—Grace's parting words to Suzy are "*Do me a favor, Suzy; leave us alone*" (117). The novel begins five years after the murder, which remains an unresolved case, and Suzy is now working as a part-time interpreter at the courthouse. At work, Suzy meets a former co-worker of her late parents who seems to know the secret of her parents' death. While investigating her parents' murder case, Suzy recollects her childhood memory of growing up as an immigrant and discovers dark secrets about her family and the Korean American shopkeeper community in her hometown, which involve issues of citizenship and labor exploitation.

Through Suzy and the Korean American shopkeeper community, *The Interpreter* raises important questions about the meaning of citizenship in the United States: who is eligible to become a citizen in the modern United States? Who pursues US citizenship? Who makes the decision to give citizenship? What does it mean to be a citizen and what does it mean to be an American? Is there a difference between being a US citizen and being an American?

In this chapter, I will examine the issues of citizenship, Korean American identity, and the labor and power relationships of American capitalism in Suki Kim's novel *The Interpreter*.

⁷ In this dissertation, I define 1.5 generation as people who were born in non-US countries and immigrated to the United State in a young age—children and adolescent age. Defining 1.5 generation can be arbitrary because such labeling highly depends on how an individual identify themselves; some 1.5 generations may see themselves more as first or second generation immigrants. However, I argue that the most distinctive trait of 1.5 generation is the gap between one's cultural identity and legal identity. 1.5 generations will feel a stronger cultural bond to their immigrated country than their heritage culture, but may not have a legal status—citizenship—of their immigrated country.

The Interpreter utilizes the detective fiction genre as the protagonist, Suzy, investigates the murder case of her parents. While Suzy investigates her parents' murder case, she inadvertently *investigates* the immigrant identity and citizenship issues in the Korean American community, including herself and her family. For its unique combination of immigrant issues and the detective genre, Kim's *The Interpreter* has drawn attention in Asian American literary studies. This chapter first studies US citizenship and immigration laws, especially about the exclusions of Asian Americans. I argue that though explicit exclusion laws against Asian Americans have disappeared by the time of *The Interpreter*, Korean Americans in the novel experience cultural exclusions that make the American dream elusive to the Korean American shopkeepers. Secondly, this chapter explores how US citizenship has been closely connected to socioeconomic factors that have fostered the ideology of American capitalism. The United States has shown a consistent history in the pursuit of economic growth, which has also been reflected in immigration policies. I argue that socioeconomic advancement becomes part of the national goal for the United States, which causes Korean American shopkeepers in *The Interpreter* to be ineligible for US citizenship. Therefore, the Korean American shopkeepers in *The Interpreter* struggle with the intersectionality of cultural and economic ineligibility for US citizenship, which eventually causes Suzy's parents to betray their fellow Korean shopkeepers. Lastly, this chapter discusses the development of liminal identities of the first and 1.5 generations of Korean American in *The Interpreter*. I contend that Korean Americans in *The Interpreter* experience identity crises in the process of changing their national identities. To consciously change one's national identity can be a challenge, especially when one is not a welcomed immigrant. Most Korean American shopkeepers in *The Interpreter* are considered the less desired immigrants who are often ineligible for US citizenship—due to lack of funds, inadequate socio-economic class,

and so on—and to pursue US citizenship causes internal and external struggles of identity to them.

This chapter also examines how these struggles appear differently between the first and 1.5 generations of Korean Americans in *The Interpreter*. While for first generations, changing their nationalities are voluntary, this is often an involuntary process for 1.5 generation immigrants. 1.5 generations are immigrants who were born in non-US countries but move to the United States at a young age, before they reach adulthood. To them, immigration is involuntary because they are oftentimes simply following their parents', family's, or legal guardians' decisions. This involuntary immigration creates a unique experience for Suzy and the 1.5 generations that is different from that of the first-generation Korean Americans in *The Interpreter*. By exploring the issues of citizenship, American capitalism, and Korean American identity in *The Interpreter*, this chapter aims to discover a better understanding of the intersectionality of socioeconomic class, race, and nationality.

Literature Review

Its detective genre and the intersecting themes of race and citizenship in Kim's novel have been the central interest of academic research on *The Interpreter*. Major academic works on *The Interpreter* include Juliana Chang's "Perverse Citizenship: The Death Drive and Suki Kim's *The Interpreter*," Suk Koo Rhee's "Suki Kim's *The Interpreter*: A Critical Rewriting of the Hard-Boiled Detective Fiction Genre," and erin Khuê Ninh's "The Mysterious Case of Suki Kim's *The Interpreter*."

In "Perverse Citizenship: The Death Drive and Suki Kim's *The Interpreter*," Chang discusses antidomesticity and perversion in *The Interpreter*, challenging the myth of the

American dream and the fantasy of the United States as a new, almost-utopian land. Chang states that Suzy displays antidomestic features as she actively destroys American domesticity by seeking an affair with a married man—literal destruction of the most basic unit of American domesticity—and lacking any physical or mental connection with space and relationship—she does not have a permanent home, job, or close friends (146). Chang argues that Suzy’s antidomesticity emerges from her “death drive”—“the compulsion toward jouissance, toward a senseless disordering of Symbolic reality” (146-147). In fact, Chang asserts that it is not only Suzy who actively destroys American domesticity but it is also Suzy’s whole family, Mr. and Mrs. Park and her sister Grace, who commit acts of perversion; later in the novel, Suzy discovers that Mr. and Mrs. Park had been reporting undocumented Koreans to the United States Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) and helped the United States government to deport those undocumented Koreans, and young Grace was, apparently, forced to act as an interpreter for her parents who were not fluent in English. Thus, Mr. and Mrs. Park have been “immersing themselves in the traumatic enjoyment of executing state power and deporting fellow migrants” and forcing their daughter to take part in their act of perversion, a betrayal of their ethnic community (148). Therefore, through Suzy’s and her family’s narrative, *The Interpreter* “reveals the violence and jouissance that underlie dominant fantasies of the U.S. nation, especially the fantasy of America as an exceptionalist site of new beginnings” (J. Chang 147).

Furthermore, *The Interpreter* has drawn much attention for its unique genre: the detective novel, which is not a common genre in Asian American literature. In “Suki Kim’s *The Interpreter*: A Critical Rewriting of the Hard-Boiled Detective Fiction Genre,” Rhee argues that *The Interpreter* is heavily influenced by early American hard-boiled detective fiction, which consists of the following elements: mystery, American naturalism, and masculinity (Rhee 160).

Rhee argues that Suzy's self-serving personality and her strong individualism are typical features of a protagonist of hard-boiled detective fiction (161). As the story develops, the novel portrays other key elements of the hard-boiled detective genre, such as "moral ambiguity" (Rhee 168), cynicism (Rhee 171), and "rugged individualism" (Rhee 174). Nevertheless, Rhee emphasizes that *The Interpreter* is "not simply another hard-boiled detective fiction with a substituted female sleuth" (178). Rhee argues that by portraying an Asian female protagonist and addressing immigrant issues, *The Interpreter* is critically rewriting the American hard-boiled detective genre, which is predominantly a white male genre (179).

On the other hand, Ninh is more interested in the anti-detective nature of the novel than its detective features. In "The Mysterious Case of Suki Kim's *The Interpreter*," Ninh examines the metaphysical aspect of the novel and the anti-detective nature of Kim's *The Interpreter*. As Ninh points out, *The Interpreter* ends with unresolved questions, which is unconventional for a detective novel. A typical ending for a detective novel is the protagonist's heroically unraveling a seemingly unsolvable mystery. The mystery in *The Interpreter*, on the other hand, ends with more questions: "Who were Suzy's cryptic callers, specifically? Was she in fact being tailed from her apartment, and if so by whom? Who was it she herself followed in the Montauk rain, and was he involved with . . . anything?" (Ninh 204). Truly, one of the goals of a conventional detective novel is to unveil the secret, but *The Interpreter* intentionally ends its narrative with unresolved mysteries and without a clear conclusion. Ninh points out that *The Interpreter* once again shows its anti-detective nature at the ending when Suzy deliberately points out the wrong suspect to the detective who was in charge of the murder case five years ago (Ninh 210). This deliberate choice reflects Suzy's "unconscious desire" to protect her family, especially her sister Grace (Ninh 211). The protagonist's selfish choice make *The Interpreter* a detective yet anti-

detective novel, which highlights the protagonist, Suzy, herself as an individual and her desire, rather than the mystery.

While these researches focus on Suzy's psyche, the joissance of Suzy's family, the genre and the metaphysical characteristics of *The Interpreter*, research on the relationship between American capitalism, citizenship, and Korean immigrants in *The Interpreter* is still lacking. The purpose of this chapter is, therefore, to analyze the gap in current research on *The Interpreter*. This chapter will especially explore the issue of Korean American identity and the reconstruction of Korean shopkeeper community in terms of the commodification of American citizenship. In this chapter, I show how Suzy, her sister Grace, and her shopkeeper parents Mr. and Mrs. Park regain their agency through the commodification of American citizenship. By doing so, I argue that Korean shops become a reproduction of American capitalist system, and, therefore, create a hybrid space where the myth of the American dream and Korean American immigration narratives are reconstructed.

Citizenship and Immigrant as Commodities

Early US immigration laws present active pursuit of racial superiority; it is evident that the early United States lawmakers aim for a nation-state that consists of citizens who are—they believed—racially superior, and this racial superiority is directly connected with whiteness (Armenta 17). Early US immigration laws overtly prevented emigrations from people of color, while welcoming white immigrants: the Page Act of 1875, for instance, barred Asian immigrants, especially Asian women who were suspected for prostitution (Armenta 19); the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1882 barred unskilled Chinese laborers and made Chinese immigrant ineligible to apply for citizenship (Armenta 19). Racial exclusion was not limited to Asian

immigrants, of course. African Americans also have a long history of being denied recognition as United States citizens. It was not until 1868, when the 14th Amendment finally and officially accepted African Americans as citizens, as the amendment claims, “All persons born or naturalized in the United States,” regardless of their skin-color, will be considered as Americans (US Const. amend. XIV, sec. 1). The Dawes Act of 1887 granted citizenship to Native Americans only to those who abandoned their tribal life and accepted the “civilized” American lifestyle (Otis 7). Early immigration and naturalization laws are clear evidence that people of color were strategically banned from obtaining American citizenship, which ultimately strengthens the social and political position of white immigrants in the United States.

However, the narrative of the nation-state and its citizens changes during the 1960s, along with the Civil Rights movement and growing voices—especially by people of color—who claimed their rights to be recognized as Americans. In 1965, the Hart-Cellar Act was passed which “prioritized family reunification and established racially neutral quotas” to create a more equal and inclusive immigration legislation (Armenta 22). The United States government abolished any explicitly racist immigration laws, and “allotted the same number of visas” to other countries so that people of different nationalities can have equal opportunity—or at least what seems like equal opportunity—to immigrate to the United States. The Hart-Cellar Act is believed to build a foundation for contemporary immigration laws and to bring a new wave in American immigration, especially since there was a drastic increase in the number of immigrants from Latin America, Asia, and the Caribbean after the year 1965 (Armenta 22).

Despite the end of explicit racial exclusions, scholars argue that racial inequality still occurs in the immigration process and prejudice and hostility against minority ethnic/racial groups still exists in United States immigration culture. Richard A. Boswell, who has published

extensive research in immigration laws, reveals the more tacit racism in current immigration culture. He asserts that although United State immigration laws are no longer explicitly racist, they are still implicit barriers against immigrants of color, which he classifies as structural, doctrinal, and attitudinal barriers (Boswell 333). One example of a structural barrier is the fact that United States immigration laws cater to people who “already have ties in the United States” (Boswell 334); according to the current immigration policy, those who have an immediate family member who are either a United States citizen or permanent resident have easier access to obtaining citizenship (Boswell 334). This policy is obviously a disadvantage for people from an ethnic group who have a history of racial exclusion in the past (Boswell 334). Since the removal of racist immigration policies happened only decades ago, people who have a history of experiencing racial exclusions would naturally have fewer family connections in the United States. Boswell argues, therefore, that the revised immigration policy still fails to completely remove the barriers for people of color (334). As a matter of fact, current US immigration laws still include legal obstacles for people of color, which Boswell calls “doctrinal barriers” (337). Doctrinal barriers occur as the “plenary power doctrine” applies to nation states, granting them absolute power to dictate immigration policies (Boswell 338). Because of the plenary power doctrine, immigrants have limited legal support and restricted “judicial intervention” (339); Boswell states, “many questions of citizenship and admission policies must be settled in the legislative arena and not in the courts” (Boswell 339). Another doctrinal barrier is that consular officials hold “unrestrained and unreviewable power” in determining whom to grant visas and allow admissions to the United States (Boswell 339). Because the officials hold considerable power in the visa obtaining process, the process is inclined to be less objective. Boswell points out that the problems of doctrinal barriers becomes even clearer when “cultural barriers” are

taken into account (340). Boswell claims, “Racism, xenophobia and other forms of intolerance or bias are an inveterate human problem” (340). While these types of intolerance or bias are often overlooked by the society when they are “held by persons with little power . . . when possessed by a person with the power to make a decision affecting lives of others, these biases pose a serious force” (Boswell 340-341). It is easy to expect that a consular official or any person with power in the immigration process with personal biases against a particular racial/ethnic group would tend to act unfavorably to such immigrants, as such personal preconceptions can be difficult to ignore.

The more important problem is that these structural, doctrinal, and attitudinal barriers are easily overlooked and ignored, as they are less obvious than the explicit exclusionary acts from the past. Since the removal of racist immigration policies, people refuse to admit that racism still exists in US immigration culture and believes that the United States equally accepts and treats immigrants regardless of their race. Because of the liminal position that immigrants of color are situated in, they experience an “abject” state, where they are considered “neither radical enough for institutional enjoinment . . . nor competent enough to enjoy the subject status of citizens in a registered and recognized participation of American democracy” (Li 6). Because it is generally believed that US immigration laws no longer contain racially biased policies, whereas in reality immigrants of color still suffer from racial discrimination, current immigration laws render immigrants of color as an “abject” who lacks power to initiate social changes.

In other words, it is impossible to even take the very first step, being recognized as an actual problem, to make any revisions in the current immigration law.

Asian abjection is also found in Kim’s *The Interpreter*. By portraying the lives of Korean American shopkeepers and the conflicts, betrayal, and abuse within the Korean American

shopkeeper community, the novel reveals the abjection that Korean American shopkeepers experience in terms of their nationality and their American identity. Furthermore, by juxtaposing nationality/US citizenship and American identity, the novel questions the relationship between one's identity and nationality: is obtaining US citizenship necessary to develop an American identity? Can one claim to be an American without obtaining US citizenship? Or is one's American identity false when their US citizenship is also obtained in a false or unorthodox method? This chapter will further discuss how the novel explores these issues and how these questions may speak to theories of hybridity, double-consciousness, and code-switching.

Citizenship and Immigrant in *The Interpreter*

Kim's *The Interpreter* centers around its protagonist Suzy Park, a part-time interpreter at New York courts. Her job is to translate between Korean and English, when there is a Korean plaintiff who does not speak English. However, she does not consider the interpreter job a permanent one. In fact, Suzy cannot physically or emotionally commit herself to something permanent. She has been estranged from her family after she eloped with Damian, a white, married male professor she met in college. She is now having a romantic affair with Michael, yet another married man, who, to the readers of the novel, only appears through phone calls and voice mails. Her manners show her aloofness. It is unclear whether this aloofness is her inherent personality or something she develops after many years of having illicit romances and losing family ties; the novel takes place five years after both Suzy's parents were murdered, and Suzy has not spoken to her sister Grace since their parents' funeral.

Suzy's life is defined by her invisibility, but not simply because she is a minority, the daughter of Korean working-class immigrants. Instead, it seems like Suzy chooses to live an

invisible life. When she intentionally avoids Michael's phone call, her friend points out to her that she is "hiding" (22). Suzy feels a sense of comfort in her hidden, invisible state and avoids creating new social ties and relationships. One day when she arrives too early to work for her interpreter job, she decides to get coffee. At the coffee shop, Suzy sits across from a Korean man, whom she recognizes as Korean because he is reading *the Korea Daily* news. She notices the man also recognizes Suzy is Korean but feels a relief when the man does not try to bother her with questions: "He does not harangue her with 'Were you born in the States?,' 'What do your parents do?,' or 'Why is a good Korean girl like you not yet married?'"—the prying questions that fellow immigrants often feel entitled to ask" (6). After the Korean man leaves the coffee place, letting Suzy to enjoy the coffee alone, she thinks to herself that she is in "a perfect hideout" (7), again feeling the strong sense of relief she experiences whenever she imagines herself invisible.

As the story develops and Suzy recounts her childhood memories, the novel shows that Suzy's compulsion to find comfort in invisibility is because, without her consent, she has been badgered to be distinctively visible, unique, different, and, most of all, alien. Suzy feels overburdened by the simplest questions, like "where are you from," which forces her to contemplate her origin and identity in the most complex ways:

When someone asked where she was from, she would pause and run through her mind the various apartment complexes in Flushing, the Bronx, the inner parts of Queens, even Jersey City, where they had lived for a few years when Mom got a job at a nail salon during their first years in America. None of them fit the bill, she thought. Korea, she would ponder, but that also seemed far away. (43)

Suzy's childhood memories and personal attachment to the United States show how she has a stronger identity as an American than as a Korean. On the other hand, Suzy's looks and her family heritage make the society expect Suzy to feel a strong connection to Korea. By her father, she was also forced to have a stronger identity as a Korean. Mr. Park, Suzy's and Grace's father, would remind her of Korean history—the fact that Japan colonized Korea for thirty-six years (6)—and demanded Suzy and Grace to speak in Korean and be fluent in the language; he would argue that if one loses their mother tongue they “no longer have a home” (45). Even though Mr. Park's ways of raising their daughters eventually helped Suzy to speak in near-native Korean, Suzy remembers her father with a sense of frustration and hatred. Mr. Park authoritative parenting deepened the gap of Suzy's conflicting identity as a Korean American and, at the end, make them estranged from each other.

Thus, at a young age, from her family and from the society, Suzy has felt the expectation to establish a perfectly mixed identity where she will be a perfect American, as well as a perfect Korean. She is expected to adjust well in the American life, speak fluent English, be socially successful by completing a college degree and finding a permanent, respectful career,s while at the same time she is expected to preserve her Koreanness by speaking fluent Korean and understanding Korean history, culture, and customs. However, these expectations are burdens that Suzy has to endure. Her parents, especially, force Suzy to find a perfect reconciliation between her American identity and her Korean identity, Suzy's double-consciousness, her “two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings” (Du Bois 63). Instead of struggling to find reconciliation of “unreconciled strivings,” Suzy chooses to hide and become invisible; she elopes with a married man, hides from her current lover, and finds comfort in being invisible.

As a result, Suzy is somewhat content in her temporary job as an interpreter. It is a job that fits her in-between identity, her double-consciousness between American and Korean. When she performs as an interpreter, ironically, she belongs neither to the Korean side nor to the American side:

The interpreter is always hired by the law firm on the side opposing the witness. It is they who need the testimony translated. The witness, summoned to testify without any knowledge of English, inevitably views the interpreter as his savior. But the interpreter, as much as her heart might commiserate with her fellow native speaker, is always working for the other side. It is this idiosyncrasy Suzy likes. Both sides need her desperately, but she, in fact, belongs to neither. (15)

Suzy feels an odd freedom in being an interpreter, where she is no longer forced to commit herself to either identity or forced to find peace in her conflicting identity. Moreover, the interpreter job even empowers Suzy, making her an irreplaceable employee. Neither the US court nor the Korean plaintiff can communicate without Suzy's translation, and, therefore, Suzy becomes the person with the most power and control when she performing at her job as an interpreter. Oddly enough, her compulsion for invisibility give her power and control as a return: "The interpreter . . . is the shadow. The key is to be invisible. She is the only one in the room who hears the truth, a keeper of secrets" (12).

However, while the invisibility empowers Suzy when she chooses to be invisible, when invisibility is forced, "abjection" occurs. One example occurs upon the death of Suzy's parents. Detective Lester, the detective who is in charge of investigating Suzy's parents' homicide, calls the murder of Mr. and Mrs. Park "a useless killing by useless thugs" (33). In the Bronx, New York, where Suzy's parents ran a grocery store, unresolved murder cases with immigrant victims

are not rare, and, therefore, the murder of Mr. and Mrs. Park is seen as only another insignificant event. Thus, Mr. and Mrs. Park's deaths are forced to be invisible, be unrecognized, and treated as a frivolous matter.

It is truly frustrating to be treated as frivolous and insignificant. Suzy occasionally feels this frustration when the US court does not understand Korean immigrants' hardship and cultural differences. During her part-time work as an interpreter, she is occasionally irritated by the US court's ignorance over working-class immigrants' life and the cultural differences between mainstream America and Korean immigrants. For instance, Suzy "finds herself cheating" at the court, helping Korean immigrants to say the right answer in order to avoid any accusations (15). She even applies her own knowledge of cultural differences between Korea and America when she is translating in order to correct any miscommunications:

... the opposing side might try to make a case out of the fact that the plaintiff, when struck by a car, told the police that he was feeling fine and refused an ambulance. "Surely," the lawyer insists, "the injury must not have been severe if you even refused medical attention!" But Suzy knows that it is a cultural misunderstanding. It is the Korean way to always underplay the situation, to declare one is fine even when suffering from pain or ravenous hunger. This might stem from their Confucian or even Buddhist tradition, but the lawyers don't care about that. "Why did you say you were fine at the time of the accident if you weren't? Were you lying then, or are you lying now?" the lawyer presses once more, and Suzy winces, decides that she hates him. The witness gets all nervous and stammers something about how he's not a liar, and Suzy puts on a steel face to hide her anger and translates, "I was in shock, and the pain was not obvious to me until I got home and collapsed." (S. Kim, *The Interpreter* 15-16)

At the court, Suzy is the only one who can recognize and understand such cultural differences. Neither the US court nor the Korean immigrant can fully comprehend when and why miscommunication can occur, but Suzy perceives the “abjection” in Korean shopkeepers’ experience. She understands that miscommunication does not simply happen because of language barriers, but also because of the cultural and power dynamics involved. The pressure at a court hearing can easily make an immigrant more nervous than they should be; she believes that the same level of nervousness would not appear to the witnesses if they were not an immigrant from a non-English speaking country. Of course, the plaintiff’s nervous state, lack of knowledge of American culture, and the lack of English skills are treated as a frivolous matter to the US court. They are treated as personal issues, not something that the court or public/national authority should assist with.

Indeed, at the court, Suzy continues to witness Asian abjection, especially the abjection among working-class Asian immigrants. When Asian abjection occurs, they are treated as insignificant issues which do not require any social reformation, and at the same time, the “abject” Asians cannot be the ones who are in a position to instigate any social changes. Therefore, the Korean shopkeepers Suzy meets at the courthouse are lacking resources, protection, and power, and are forced to become *invisible* Asian abjects.

Whenever Suzy intervenes and adds her personal knowledge to fabricate her translations, she also recognizes the risk she is taking. Her job as an interpreter only requires language translation, and she must stay in a neutral position. Suzy believes that it is unfair to punish immigrants for their lack of English skills and cultural competence: “Suzy knows it is wrong, to embellish truth according to how she sees fit. In fact, she will be fired on the spot if anyone discovers that her translation harbors a bias. But truth, she has learned, comes in different shades,

different languages at times” (16). Suzy’s ability to translate is not simply a lexical translation, but she is able to translate the culture between American and Korea, showing her ability of cultural code-switching. Suzy’s ability to culturally code-switch allows her to understand both American and Korean cultures and the subtle nuances in each language, which makes Suzy the most competent person at such court cases.

The problem is that the lack of language skills and cultural competence happens on both sides: the immigrant plaintiff and the US court. When miscommunication occurs, it is not a one-sided fault but both parties—the US court and the Korean immigrant—are ultimately responsible for causing such miscommunication. Despite the fact that the fault is mutual, it is always the Korean immigrant who will be penalized when miscommunication happens. It is a fixed power dynamic, and as a daughter of a Korean shopkeeper who is culturally competent in both American and Korean cultures, Suzy is the only one who sees the unbalanced power dynamic between Korean immigrants and the US court.

Witnessing Asian abjection urges Suzy to become more empathetic. A character who is mostly indifferent and aloof, Suzy finds herself becoming more emotional when seeing Asian abjection of Korean shopkeepers. Witnessing Asian abjection also forces Suzy to remember her childhood, her parents, and their life as working class immigrants. Like the Korean immigrants she meets in court, her parents, Mr. and Mrs. Park, were also Korean immigrants, had little English skills, and were hard-working laborers. Since the family immigrated to the United States—when Suzy was five and her sister Grace was six—Mr. and Mrs. Park had never stopped working, moving from place to place, and working for places with cheap wages like nail salons and grocery stores. These childhood experiences made Suzy be culturally competent and understand the lives of Korean culture, Korean immigrant culture, as well as the American

culture. Therefore, while Suzy intentionally chooses to be invisible and aloof, she is somewhat compelled to be more empathetic when she encounters forced invisibility.

Another aspect that Suzy recognizes in the Asian abjection of Korean shopkeepers is the role of capitalism in constructing the power dynamic in American society. She understands that the power dynamic is oftentimes governed by the capitalist system, and shopkeepers are lacking power due to the lack of capital as well. Suzy, again, feels great frustration when the US court fails to acknowledge the obvious power dynamic governed by American capitalism. At a court case, when Suzy translate for Mr. Lee, a Korean grocery store owner, Suzy scoffs when the court asks Mr. Lee whether he provides unemployment benefits to his fired employees:

What does he think a fruit-and-vegetable market is? A Wall Street office? A nine-to-five, suit-and-tie job? Does he actually assume that working twelve hours a day, seven days a week, comes with that kind of privilege? Does he believe that the same rules apply to those who don't have the right papers, don't speak a word of English? Does he believe that the American dream is that easy? Unemployment and health benefits? They were never designed with these immigrant workers in mind. No one, not even the owners, have those! (96)

By directly criticizing the court's ignorance about the reality of "the American dream," Suzy challenges the American dream myth, which is ultimately an attempt at subverting the American dream narrative. It is true that since the emergence of the American dream myth, the American dream has been the predominant immigration narrative; however, the novel reveals that the falsehood of the American dream, about how much the American dream narrative has been fabricated to immigrants. One reason that the American dream has become so elusive to the Korean shopkeepers in *The Interpreter* is because of American capitalism and classism. Suzy

believes that people like the Korean shopkeepers were never in the minds of those who designed US employment laws and promoted the American dream. In other words, the American dream is designed to cater to upper-class capitalists.

In United States immigration history, capitalism and socioeconomic factors have often been involved; one's socioeconomic class could determine their eligibility for US citizenship. For instance, in the 19th century, the United States government barred immigrants who would require public aid (Armenta 19). The immigration Act of 1882 barred European immigrants who were deemed to be a burden rather than an asset to the nation, people who the United States described as "any convict, lunatic, idiot, or any person unable to take care of himself or herself without becoming a public charge" (United States, Congress, Senate, Committee on Immigration 98). Though it may seem reasonable to deny the entrance of people with criminal records, the immigration act of 1882 alludes to the significant role that a person's economic status had in determining their eligibility for citizenship. The idea that a government can selectively choose its citizens based on the economic advantages a person can bring to the country fosters the ideology that a citizen's responsibility to their country is to make economic contributions to the nation.

The economic factor remains in immigration policies. Today's US immigration trend is highly associated with the interest of national economic growth through human capital. Immigration policies are no longer selecting people by skin color but education levels and skills, the modern value of human capital. Ayelet Shachar explains that US immigration policies focusing on talent began by President Lyndon B. Johnson when, in 1965, he proclaimed, "from this day forth, those wishing to immigrate into America shall be admitted on the basis of their skill" (qtd. in Shachar 170). President Johnson is a crucial political figure in the history of racism in US laws; he is, after all, the president who signed the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting

Rights Act of 1965 that legally and officially call to an end of racial segregation. On the other hand, there are speculations on Presidents Johnson's controversial perspectives on race. Johnson was known for his use of racial slurs. As a congressional representative from Texas, Johnson once publicly used the term "yellow dwarf with a pocket knife" (qtd. in Chomsky 248) in referring to Vietnamese at a speech in 1948, and as the president, at non-public venues, Johnson would call the Civil Rights Act the "N-word bill" (Caro xv). Johnson's personal background and perspective have challenged his reputation the US president who brought to an end the Jim Crow law and anti-Asian immigration laws. Even if we circumvent all the personal anecdotes and records of Johnson's bigotry and perhaps argue that he discarded his personal bias for the greater good of the nation, his primary agenda for signing the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and proclaiming equal immigration opportunities in 1965 are not about achieving racial equality but rather about promoting economic growth. During his presidency, Johnson's primary agenda was winning the war against poverty and establishing the "Great Society," a program that consists of a set of legislations, including "the Civil Rights Act, food stamp legislation, the Economic Opportunity Act, and programs for mass transportation" (Brown-Collier 260). The goal of Johnson's "Great Society" was "making the poor less dependent and more employable" (Brown-Collier 260), and government programs were to support the poor in the areas of education, healthcare, housing, and more (Brown-Collier).

President Johnson's Great Society program and the national need to boost the US economy had further raised the value of labor and hard work. With the growing value of human capital, especially the ones who have more competitive and profitable skills, immigration from Asian countries and especially highly skilled immigrants drastically increased in the United States. This trend to selectively recruit educated, highly skilled people is not only found in the

United States but among high-income OECD⁸ countries as well (Shachar 152). In order to enhance national strength by economic power and increase their influence on the global market, high-income countries including the United States are competing in this “global race for talent” (Schachar 152-153). Immigration regimes focusing on the global race for talent show that immigration policies attempt to move beyond racial profiling and to achieve talent-based immigration.

This deal is especially attractive for potential immigrants with talent in low-income countries. Shachar states that there are two factors that make this “talent for citizenship exchange” particularly attractive for such people, “the economic factor” and “the citizenship factor” (164). The economic factor is the desire to find “improved employment and development opportunities” (Schachar 164). It is an exchange of talent for capital, one of the basic exchanges in a capitalist society. A person with talent will gain more capital in a high-income country than in a second or third world country. In fact, with a talented immigrant, the nation as well as the individual will eventually gain more capital in the global market. Therefore, the economic factor applies to both the individual immigrant and the country that is accepting the immigrant.

The citizenship factor is the “search for a new home country that will permit them and their families to enjoy the security and property that is attached to membership in a stable, democratic, and affluent polity” (Schachar 164). Therefore, to win the current global race for talent, high-income countries should be able to provide security as well as monetary funds. The citizenship factor is ostensibly related to one’s cultural and social welfare, but it transforms to material value when the individual is treated as a human capital with talent. What the citizenship

⁸ OECD, the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, currently has 38 member countries, including South Korea and the United States. OECD is an international organization that promotes fair and inclusive economic growth for the global community (OECD).

factor ultimately implies is that citizenship becomes a commodity that can be exchanged with talent. As talent has the potential value as capital, the potential value of citizenship can also be capital. In any case, citizenship becomes a commodity and a source of social and economic power.

There is another immigration policy that directly and openly welcomes immigrants with capital; current US government accepts “immigrant investors,” people who can obtain permanent residency—also known as the “Green Card”—if they can invest a certain amount of money to start a business in the United States. According to U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, “noncitizens who have invested or are actively in the process of investing \$1 million (or \$500,000 in targeted employment areas) in a new commercial enterprise that will benefit the U.S. economy and create at least 10 full-time positions for qualifying employees” will be eligible to obtain permanent residency in the United States (*U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services*). This policy is an evident example of American capitalism and the global race for talent commodifying immigrants as capital for the nation-state. This policy literally states that immigrants who can invest capital and “benefit the U.S. economy” will be considered eligible for becoming permanent residents of the United States (*U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services*). Whether an immigrant has literal capital (money) or has a talent/skill that can ultimately produce capital, capital is a significant aspect in US naturalization and immigration laws. Both the history of US immigration and current US immigration policy have shown strong ties between American citizenship and capital. In turn, those who lack capital or talent/skill are consequently excluded from the American dream.

Examples of these excluded people, who are basically valueless in terms of capitalism, are Suzy’s family and the Korean American shopkeepers in *The Interpreter*. Shopkeeping is far

from competitive in this global race for talent. The problem is that pursuers of the American dream will not always be those desirable candidates for the global race for talent but to anyone who pursues monetary success. The attractive narrative that the American dream promotes appeals to many, including the low-skilled laborers of color and eventually increases the number of “underpaid illegal immigrant workers . . . slaving away twelve hours a day, seven days a week” (S. Kim, *The Interpreter* 94). Suzy resents that the US government or Americans of authority intentionally ignore or are ignorant of this gap between the idealized American dream and the reality. Therefore, Suzy begrudges the court’s questions about employment benefits for low-class immigrants. This ignorance shows the contradiction between the popular narrative of the American dream and the reality that immigrants must face.

Therefore, the main issue is citizenship. Without citizenship, one cannot legally claim their American identity, but to obtain citizenship, one must be qualified by having the appropriate types of skills, talent, or capital as an exchange for citizenship. The obsession for citizenship is not only because citizenship can prove one’s legitimate Americanness; citizenship has a practical impact on immigrants’ lives. Without citizenship, one does not have any legal protection and cannot claim their rights as a citizen and an American. Korean shopkeepers in *The Interpreter*, especially the ones that Suzy meets at the courthouse, live in the constant fear of lacking legal protection or worse, deportation.

Due to this underlying fear, Korean immigrants in *The Interpreter* also show extreme vulnerability to the power dynamic governed by capital. Capital in *The Interpreter* is intertwined deeply with the idea of power and citizenship. As US citizenship becomes a commodity through the global race for talent, capital also represents the eligibility for US citizenship. And, as citizenship provides social and legal security, capital also represents social and legal power. Suzy

recalls the time when her father worked at a Korean deli in Queens. She remembers one incident when Mr. Yang, the owner of the deli, gave Suzy a dollar to get a pizza for him from the pizza store across the street and how that made her father upset:

[Suzy] recalls the fiercely unpleasant drive through the neighborhood and the oversized man with the overlapping front teeth named Mr. Yang who owned the store, who tossed a dollar at eight-year-old Suzy to run along and get him a slice of pizza . . . and how Dad had put a hand on the man's right shoulder and said in a quiet but menacing voice, "Don't tell my daughter what to do."

The memory seems slightly skewed. . . . Did he really say those exact words? Perhaps he mumbled with an awkward touch to his shoulders, "Please don't order my daughter around," or lashed with a stone in his voice, "Who do you think you are, ordering my daughter about?" Or is it possible that he did not say anything at all? (41)

Though the memory is vague, Suzy remembers it as an unpleasant memory for herself and her father and, even as a child, understood the employer-employee relationship of Mr. Yang and her father. As the employer and capitalist, Mr. Yang holds the power to control both Mr. Park and Suzy.

The uncertain memory of her father and Mr. Yang is a memory of fatherly love and, perhaps, her first memory of seeing the power relationship between an employer and employee. The memory that her father tried to protect her—or at least felt upset for what Mr. Yang did—shows a fatherly affection. It also reflects the frustration of a father who is unable to protect her own daughter from the employer-employee power dynamic. Also, it was a surprise to Suzy to see her father being the one in a powerless position because to Suzy, as her father was the leader of the family. On a train ride, one day, she finds the same kind of peacefulness that she felt

whenever her father was driving the car: “Perhaps Dad’s Oldsmobile had felt this safe, pure. All you had to do was just hop in and let him take you. . . . Dad was the best driver, never got a ticket, never got into an accident, never drove in the wrong lane” (42). Never driving in “the wrong lane” is the way she felt about her father as a little girl: the family leader who was always confident, and trustworthy. Seeing the family’s leader in a powerless position must have been a shock to Suzy and probably the reason she still remembers the incident. It is also the incident when Suzy first realizes the complexity of the power dynamics surrounding her.

What surprises Suzy is when she later realized that her parents became the employer/capitalist who exploited their employees; the once employee, who was exploited by capitalist, has now become the employer/capitalist themselves. But this information is revealed to Suzy after the murder of her parents and when she unexpectedly meets a former employee of her parents’. At the courthouse, when Suzy was translating for yet another Korean shopkeeper, Mr. Lee, she finds out that he used to work at his parents’ shop. Through Mr. Lee’s recount, Suzy discovers the abuse and exploitation that had occurred in her parents’ grocery store. Her father, Mr. Park, was an especially malicious employer who intentionally did not pay two months of Mr. Lee’s wages and betrayed his co-worker to steal his money. He was infamous in the Korean American community as a malicious employer who manipulated his power to exploit other immigrant workers:

He looked as though he could kill, the way he screamed what a lazy lout I was . . . I knew I didn’t want to mess with him. I’d seen what happens to guys who stand up to him . . . Let me tell you, half the Korean community didn’t exactly shed tears when they heard about his death!” (97)

This information shocked Suzy as she had no knowledge of her parents' business and their relationship with the Korean community. The only thing that Suzy can remember about her parents' shop is that it helped the family's economic stability, helped them finally settle, and stopped them from moving around place to place.

In addition to labor exploitation, unpaid wages, and creating an abusive workplace, Mr. Park had committed the most horrific betrayal against their fellow Korean immigrants: deportation. Suzy discovers that her parents had reported illegal immigrants to the INS and helped the INS deport illegal Korean immigrants. What her parents did is an example of mimicry. Like the mimicry of symbolic whiteness as discussed in Chapter 2, Mr. Park's uses his mimicry not only to gain personal agency but to exploit other people. While the mimicry of symbolic whiteness in *Memoir of a Cashier* and *The Fruit 'N Food*, as discussed in Chapter 2, is used to oppress and persecute Black Americans, the mimicry in *The Interpreter* is used to persecute illegal aliens or illegal Korean immigrants. In *The Interpreter*, Mr. Park gains power by manipulating other Korean immigrants with their fear of deportation, one of the greatest fears that a non-citizen alien can have in the United States. Throughout the novel, the Koreans that Suzy meets at the courthouse are haunted by the fear of deportation, which makes them vulnerable to the US authority. As Mr. Park learns how to manipulate the fear of deportation, he actively uses his newly found power and, in a way, momentarily becomes a US authority himself through surveilling other Korean immigrants.

Like with the mimicry of symbolic whiteness, the mimicry in *The Interpreter* is not completely the same mimicry that Bhabha observes in the relationship between the colonizer and the colonized. The mimicry that Bhabha finds among the colonized subjects is used as a "subversive strategy of subaltern agency" (265). On the other hand, the mimicry of symbolic

whiteness in *Memoir of a Cashier* and *The Fruit 'N Food* and the mimicry in *The Interpreter* are not used as a subversive strategy or to regain agency from the colonizer. Instead, these mimicries are used to actively adopt the oppressor's customs in order to oppress other marginalized groups, such as Black Americans and Korean immigrants. These are, of course, a problematic mimicry because they ultimately reinforce the system of oppression, rather than subverting the system. Therefore, the mimicry in *The Interpreter*, as well as in *Memoir of a Cashier* and *The Fruit 'N Food*, is used to reproduce—not subvert—the system of oppression.

Systemic reproduction is what holds and sustains the system of oppression and capitalism in *The Interpreter*. Mr. Kim, a former coworker of Mr. Park, who Suzy meets at a court case, tells her that immigrants have limited choices when it comes to career path and job opportunities. To survive, they must settle for a job that is most accessible to them: “Some guy once told me that the airport is where the American dream begins. It’s all up to whoever picks you up there. If it’s your cousin who owns a dry cleaner, you go there and learn that business. If it’s your brother who filets fish for a living, you follow him and do that too” (149). Due to lack of resources and their undesirable qualities for the global race for talent, unskilled Korean immigrants become the replaceable productive forces that will be used and abused to sustain the system of oppression. This is a typical reproduction cycle of a capitalist structure; Louis Althusser points out that in order to maintain the system of capitalism “the reproduction of the conditions of production” must be achieved (85). The system is maintained when the system itself is reproduced. Althusser also states that the system should reproduce “the productive forces” and “the existing relations of production” to reproduce the system (86). The productive forces in *The Interpreter* are the unskilled Korean laborers and shopkeepers.

The reproduction of “the existing relations of production” (Althusser 86) also occurs in *The Interpreter*. Althusser argues that Ideological State Apparatuses reproduce the relations of production (100). The ideology of the ruling class has a repressive force that systematically and continuously reproduces the relations of reproduction (Althusser 100-101). Indeed, the employer-employee power relationship is continuously reproduced by social and political capitalist structure in *The Interpreter*. The first employer-employee relationship Suzy witnesses is her memory of her father and Mr. Yang. Even at a young age, Suzy comprehended the power relationship between Mr. Yang and her father. This relation later reproduced the relationship between Suzy’s father and Mr. Lee. Now, it is Mr. Lee who is repeating the employer-employee relationship at his store where he does not provide any benefits to his employees and labor exploitation occurs.

Of course, the position as a shopkeeper is peculiar, in terms of the reproduction cycle of capitalism. Shopkeepers are not exactly a desirable candidate for the global race for talent, nor are they always an example of “immigrant investors” who can afford to invest \$500,000 to obtain a US green card. Thus, Korean shopkeepers in *The Interpreter* are still a marginalized, underprivileged group when it comes to the issue of immigration. However, they still manage to adapt and mimic the capitalist role in the reproduction of American capitalism. Regardless of the size of their business, whether they have a big store or a small corner shop, the Korean shopkeepers in *The Interpreter* display the characteristics of a capitalist. In fact, according to Karl Marx, the amount of money one holds is not the determiner for a capitalist; it is more about *how* the money is being used. In “The Trinity Formula” in *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, Volume III*, Marx states that “Capital is not the sum of the material and produced means of production” (953). Instead capital is the means that can produce a surplus value, a

profit; it is “the means of production monopolized by a particular section of society, the products and conditions of activity of labour-power” (Marx, *Volume III* 953). By using their monetary assets as the means to produce profit, one holds capital and, thus, can become a capitalist. Indeed the Korean shopkeepers in *The Interpreter* use their capital to produce a surplus value by exploiting their employees. Mr. Yang was the capitalist/employer of Mr. Park, Mr. Park abused his role as capitalist/employer and deliberately underpaid Mr. Lee, and now Mr. Lee has become the capitalist profiting by hiring immigrant workers who would willingly work without any employment benefits. In this employer-employee/capitalist-laborer relationship in *The Interpreter* is a stark example of an endless cycle, the reproduction of the system of capitalism.

Although the Korean shopkeepers are able to mimic capitalists and even in some cases—such as the case of Mr. Park—can mimic US authority by manipulating immigrants’ fear of deportation, such mimicry does not grant the Koreans shopkeepers an American identity. This is because such mimicry is not used as a subversive strategy; it instead reinforces the current system of oppression and ultimately renders the subaltern—the oppressed immigrants who mimic the capitalist and US authority—as a replaceable commodity in the reproduction of the system of oppression. Therefore, the mimicry in *The Interpreter* is a failed mimicry, giving the subaltern an imperfect and limited agency.

Aside from obtaining a pseudo-American identity by abusing other immigrants and exploiting laborers, the safer—yet harder—method to obtain a legitimate American identity is, of course, obtaining US citizenship. Nevertheless, the issue of obtaining US citizenship is not simply a legal process. The conscious choice to change one’s nationality can be an extremely distinctive experience for many immigrants whose mother nation does not allow dual citizenship, including Korean immigrants in the 1990s. The South Korean government did not allow dual

citizenship until the 2010 Nationality Amendment Act (N. Kim, 16). Prior to 2010, Koreans had to renounce their Korean citizenship in order to obtain another citizenship, and Koreans with dual citizenship—for instance, Korean Americans who have American birthright citizenship—had to renounce one of their citizenships and declare one or the other when they reach the age twenty-two (N. Kim, 17). Because of the special circumstances that Korean immigrants had in the 1990s, first generation Korean Americans in *The Interpreter* are to encounter a unique identity crisis.

Securing legal status has been a task mainly for first generation immigrants. Whether they obtain US citizenship, permanent residency, or any other kinds of legal status, it usually is the parents' job to find a way that will provide them and the family a place in the United States. Subsequent generation immigrants would not have to worry about such issues if they are lucky enough to have parents who had already solved the legal status problem. And this process of changing one's citizenship and nationality requires a peculiar mental shift. Changing one's nationality is a cognitive process of changing one's identity; it means that a person is voluntarily forfeiting any legal rights they could get from their mother country and consciously choosing to become a citizen of a different country. By renouncing the nationality they are given as their birthright, immigrants must fulfil another task: construct a new identity that matches their new nationality.

Therefore, first generation Korean Americans in *The Interpreter* are to make a conscious choice about their nationality in this process. Becoming eligible to apply for American citizenship may be the first step, but renouncing their original legal rights as a Korean citizen and consciously choosing to become an American would be the ultimate step where immigrants will begin questioning the true meaning of citizenship: what does it mean to renounce being Korean

and becoming American? What does it mean to be a citizen of a nation? How can one become a US citizen when there are racial, cultural, and socioeconomic obstacles? The meaning of citizenship varies depending on its context. The more conventional meaning of citizenship is the relationship between a nation state and an individual including each side's duties and rights (Clark et al 10). In other words, the nation state and the individual are to practice their duties to one another in order to retain their relationship as nation and citizen. In this context, before the 2010 Nationality Amendment Act of South Korea, the South Korean government clearly did not consider it possible for individuals to practice their duties and rights with two different countries.

In the era of global race for talent, the primary duties and rights of a citizen-state relationship can be interpreted in economic terms. When reconsidering Schachar's economic factor and citizenship factor in terms of duties and rights between a citizen and nation, citizens have the duty to contribute to a nation by using their talents to bring economic advancement and obtain the rights for economic and social stability. Therefore, working class Korean immigrants, including Suzy's family, are undesirable candidates for this global race for talent because they do not have a competitive talent/skill nor have the \$500,000 capital to be considered as immigrant investors.

While the ideal immigrants for the global race for talent may be the educated and high-skilled individuals, Korean American shopkeepers in *The Interpreter* show the gap between reality and the ideal. As much as the American dream can be attractive to talented and educated immigrants, the American dream also appeals to the "undesirable" immigrants, like the many Korean shopkeepers in the novel. Suzy's family emigrated from South Korea to the United States in the late 20th century. Though the background story of how they come to the United

States is vague, they also seem to be seeking the American dream where they can find new opportunities for a new and better home with economic success. It is possible to assume that coming to the United States was their own choice; they are not war refugees since the Korean War ended in the 1950s, but possibly are victims of the aftermath of the war, including national poverty and debt. The duty and rights that a war-torn developing country can offer cannot be more satisfying than what the United States can offer to its citizens, which draws an influx of immigrants like Suzy's family.

Thus, in *The Interpreter*, the gap between the ideal and reality of the American dream is clear: the attractive narrative of the American dream promises economic success, freedom, opportunity, and new identity; on the other hand, the reality is that obtaining US citizenship, one of the most basic requirements to become an American, is extremely elusive. As a result, Mr. Park choose to obtain US citizenship in the most unorthodox way. He reported illegal aliens—Korean immigrants who were illegally residing in America—to the INS, and as a reward, his family is given US citizenship. Mr. Park's way of obtaining citizenship is indeed an extreme case. He not only renounces his legal rights and nationality as Korean, but he actively betrayed the communal trust among Korean immigrants.

Mr. Park's unorthodox method of obtaining US citizenship challenges the modern day's exchange of citizenship. Citizenship, especially US citizenship, has truly become an "exchange" between commodity (citizenship) and money (competitive skills by candidates of the global race for talent *or* literal money by immigrant investors). This exchange is often hidden by the embellishment of the American dream narrative, the dominating immigrant fantasy that overshadows the commodification of US citizenship. Therefore, by challenging the modern

exchange of citizenship as commodity, *The Interpreter* is revealing the commodity fetishism of US citizenship.

In *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, Volume I*, Marx introduces the idea of commodity fetishism, the concept which reveals the social relationship between commodity and human labor. As Marx analyzes, commodity is not simply an end-product of labor; instead, commodity holds a “mysterious character” (*Volume I* 164) because it is the physical representation of the social relation between human labor and objects and the representation of the arbitrary or “fantastic” relationship between things—material, merchandise, and money (*Volume I* 165). Marx states:

The commodity-form, and the value-relation of the products of labour within which it appears, have absolutely no connection with the physical nature of the commodity and the material [*dinglich*] relations arising out of this. It is nothing but the definite social relation between men themselves which assumes here, for them, the fantastic form of a relation between things. . . . I call this the fetishism which attaches itself to the products of labour as soon as they are produced as commodities, and is therefore inseparable from the production of commodities. (Marx, *Volume I* 165)

As Marx points out, in the capitalist system, it is true that the material and the merchandise does not have a natural connection nor does the merchandise and money has an immediate and innate connection. Therefore, the exchange of money and merchandise is a “mysterious” process, an implicit social consent constructed under the capitalist system and the only physical evidence of human labor and its surplus value. Marx states “this finished form of the world of commodities—the money form—which conceals the social character of private labor and social relations between the individual workers, by making those relations appear as relations between

material objects, instead of revealing them plainly” (*Volume I* 168-169). Commodity fetishism of citizenship, or perhaps “citizenship fetishism,” in *The Interpreter*, therefore, reveals the concealed social relation between American citizenship and capital.

However, commodity fetishism of citizenship or citizenship fetishism mostly seem to be the experience primarily of first-generation immigrants because first-generation immigrants are often the ones who consciously changes their nationality. On the other hand, 1.5 generation immigrants tend to experience a more mental shift in the process of changing their citizenship and are relatively free from the exchange of citizenship-money. Because 1.5 generation immigrants, including Suzy and Grace, move to the United States at an earlier age, they tend feel a stronger attachment to American culture and their American identity. Suzy, for instance, was born in South Korea, had South Korean citizenship, and moved to the United States with her family when she was five years old. Although Suzy held Korean citizenship when she first came to the United States, she barely remembers anything about her home country and has more memories about living in New York. While Suzy’s parents were obsessed with obtaining US citizenship to legitimize their American identity, the issue of US citizenship never was in Suzy’s mind. Though Suzy feels that she occasionally has to prove her Americanness because of her marginalized ethnic background, she does not have to consider legitimizing her Americanness through US citizenship. Thus, to Suzy, proving her American identity is more of a cultural issue than a legal one. In fact, Suzy has always assumed that she is a legal and official American citizen. She never cared or even knew to question whether she has US citizenship.

Nevertheless, as the story of the novel develops, for the first time in her life, Suzy feels the need to find out about her legal status when she discovers that her parents were secretly involved with the INS. When Suzy discovers that her parents reported illegal aliens to the INS

and may have obtained citizenship as a reward for acting as a spy of the INS, she starts to question her legal identity and whether she has legitimate US citizenship. This question weakens Suzy's confidence and her American identity, which was primarily the experience of first-generation immigrants. When Suzy calls the INS to verify her US citizenship, she feels uncertain about her and her family's legal status and repeats the answer "I think so," which reflects her uncertainty about her legal status:

"I'm trying to find out about my status, and that of my parents, who are . . . both deceased."

"Are you a U.S. citizen?"

"I think so."

"Were you born in this country?"

"No, but I'm sure I am a citizen."

"What's your file number?"

"I don't know. But my name is Suzy Park, and my Social Security number is . . ."

"Miss, I didn't ask for your Social Security number. Do you have a filing receipt or a certification paper?"

"No."

"Did you file for citizenship yourself?"

"No, I believe my parents did."

"Were they citizens?"

"I think so."

"Miss, I can only help you if you are certain of the situation." (187-188).

This phone conversation which Suzy has with the INS represents the uncertainty that most first-generation immigrants have about their own identity. Especially when it comes to their American identity, they feel that they must be approved by a higher authority, such as the INS, as they are immigrants. During this phone conversation, Suzy, who in the past has never questioned her legal status or nationality, feels the anxiety and uncertainty of first-generation immigrants and demands the INS to identify who she is and whether she is an Americans: “Look, if I were certain, I wouldn’t be calling you in the first place. . . . *You tell me, am I a U. S. citizen or not?*” (188; emphasis added).

Though Suzy experiences the anxiety of the uncertainty of her nationality and legal status, it is only a temporary experience. Throughout the novel, Suzy is the most independent character who actively rebels and challenges the American norm. As Chang argues in her article “Perverse Citizenship: The Death Drive and Suki Kim’s *The Interpreter*,” Suzy displays antidomestic characteristics by having extramarital affairs and disconnecting herself from the society by having only temporary relationships, temporary jobs, and temporary lodging. Chang further points out that Suzy’s antidomesticity challenges the myth of America as an immigrant utopia. Indeed, Suzy is an anti-hero, who lacks moral values and is antisocial since she prefers to be hidden and invisible. Furthermore, Suzy’s anti-heroic characteristics are strengthened when she at times uses her position and knowledge to manipulate others for her personal benefit. For instance, when Suzy is translating for Mr. Kim, the former employee of her parents, she purposely changes the court’s question to ask Mr. Kim about her parents and the secret of their death. In this moment, she is abusing her position as the interpreter; of course, Suzy had, in the past, occasionally added and embellished some words in her translation to help some Korean shopkeepers, but when she was mistranslating at Mr. Kim’s case, it was not for the benefit of a

poor, incompetent immigrant, but for her own sake. It is truly an anti-heroic moment where Suzy disobeys a public authority—the courthouse—for personal gains. Nevertheless, Suzy's anti-hero quality ultimately allows her to deconstruct the fantasy of American dream and reveal the commodification of US citizenship and citizenship fetishism.

By defying American norms and the American dream narrative, Suzy resists her double-consciousness and transcends the conflict between her Korean and American identity. Suzy's sister Grace, on the other hand, initially fails to find a reconciliation of her double-consciousness, the conflict between her two identities as a Korean and American. Towards the end of the novel, Suzy discovers that Grace was involved in their parents' scheme to report illegal aliens to the INS. Grace was involuntarily involved in this issue, forced by their parents to translate for them at the INS. Being coerced to translate for her parents has damaged Grace's identity; during her teenage years, Grace was a rebellious child, but suddenly acts obsessed with religion in her adult life. Finally, the novel insinuates that Grace's lover was involved in Mr. and Mrs. Park's deaths—though the novel does not clearly reveal whether he was the actual murder. The novel implies the possibility that Grace attempted to find resolution for her double-consciousness by “hiding.” As Suzy feels peace in hiding and invisibility, Grace intentionally cuts all her ties with Suzy and with the Korean community in New York, and she attempts to live a quiet and reclusive life away from her past. However, the novel also insinuates a possibility that Grace was not able to find reconciliation at the end. At the end of the novel, Suzy finds out a boat accident that happened in Montauk, where her parents' ashes were scattered, and the report of the accident shows evidence that the missing Asian woman of the accident is Grace. The novel does not reveal whether Grace is simply missing or she drowned; this ambiguous ending highlights the ambivalence of immigrants' double-consciousness.

Chapter 4: Korean Shopkeepers in Popular Culture

Korean Shopkeepers and Media Representation

Popular media, including movies and TV shows, has often been considered less important in academia. Nonetheless, scholars have come to agree that people can critically “read text” while watching popular media. Popular media is simply a different type of “text” and narrative style; in fact, popular media is now more prevalent than traditional texts and, at times, more influential—popular media can impact a mass amount of viewers across countries and continents in a rather short period of time—than traditional texts. The domination of popular media in modern society can be concerning to some people, considering that popular media can be a powerful tool to develop national narratives that can affect, shape, and reshape individual identities. In this sense, the representation of certain demographics in popular media can affect the way people perceive the particular group and even influence the way they construct their own identities. For Asian Americans, the absence of Asian American characters or the portrayal of Asian Americans as “others” has been a long issue in popular media. Othering Asians was one of Edward Said’s main criticisms of western views of the east. According to Said, Orientalists, the Western scholars of the east, have dictated how the world sees the east, which ultimately oppresses eastern voices to speak for themselves. Said writes: “Orientalism is premised upon exteriority, that is, on the fact that the Orientalist, poet or scholar, makes the Orient speak, describes the Orient, renders its mysteries plain for and to the West” (20-21).

Orientalism and othering Asian characters have been common in American popular culture. Generally speaking, Asian characters have been featured only as extras, bit-part roles, or, at best, supporting characters. And the characters Asian actors are able to play are also limited and stereotypical: the exotic Asian beauty, the inept immigrant, and the mysterious yet wise

grandmaster of martial arts, just to name a few. Asian shopkeeper characters became a common “Oriental” character in popular culture as well: Apu, an Indian convenience store owner in the animated TV series *The Simpsons* (1989-); an Asian flower-seller who yells at Carrie and Miranda to pay for the flowers appears in season 2, episode 8 of *Sex and the City* (1998-2004); Mr. Park, who has a 30-second appearance as a convenience store owner in season 5, episode 9 of *How I Met Your Mother* (2005-2014), and many more unnamed extras and bit-part Asian shopkeeper characters.

The problem is not the fact that popular culture is overusing the cliché of the Asian shopkeeper. The problem is *how* these characters are portrayed. The personal narratives of these shopkeepers are rarely discussed, and they would be lucky if they are given a proper name or a line in the show. The Asian flower-seller in *Sex and the City* and Mr. Park in *How I Met Your Mother* only have a short appearance in the shows and do not have a proper name given. Apu’s full name, on the other hand, has an opposite problem: Apu Nahasapeemapieton, which is obviously just a way of humor to make the character’s name exotic and “funny,” albeit the fact that *The Simpson* is a comedy show and all the characters are portrayed in their own “funny” ways. When characters are not given the opportunity to tell their narratives or even given a proper name, they become “others,” people that TV viewers have to merely observe and see as non-essential characters to the larger narrative of the show; thus, Orientalism in popular culture occurs.

The two TV shows that reversed the “othering” of Asian shopkeepers are *Gilmore Girls* (2000-2007), an American TV series, and *Kim’s Convenience* (2016-2021), a Canadian TV series. These two TV shows portray Korean shopkeepers who not only have a reoccurring presence in the shows, but also have their own narratives that enrich the Korean shopkeeper

archetype. *Gilmore Girls* and *Kim's Convenience* have been commercially successful in each country, the United States and Canada. The fame and popularity of *Gilmore Girls* are still present even twenty years since its premiere on American television in the year 2000; in 2016, the show even released its revival, *Gilmore Girls: A Year in the Life*, a four-episode miniseries, allowing the viewers to catch-up with the characters' newest updates in their lives. *Kim's Convenience* also gained significant success and popularity; a sitcom that was originally a one-act play has now released its fifth season. *Kim's Convenience* has been supported by its strong fandom and has received many positive reviews. Above all, *Gilmore Girls* and *Kim's Convenience* successfully reversed the "othering" of Asian shopkeepers and decentralized the narrative of US and Canadian popular culture.

This chapter discusses the narrative of Korean immigrants, family, independence and the American dream (or "the Canadian dream" in *Kim's Convenience*) in popular media, more specifically in *Gilmore Girls* and *Kim's Convenience*. These two TV series, which were commercially successful in the United States and Canada, portrays Korean shopkeeper characters and their family. They both feature Korean American family narrative, the experience of immigration and settlement among Korean Americans, and the generation conflict between parents and children. In this chapter, I argue that *Gilmore Girls* and *Kim's Convenience* diversify the United States and Canadian family narrative in popular media by featuring complex Korean shopkeeper characters and by presenting stories of generation gaps and conflicts.

Kim's Antiques: the Korean American shopkeeper in *Gilmore Girls*

Critical reviews and studies about *Gilmore Girls* are profuse. In addition to the show's commercial success and its comedy, drama, and romance, *Gilmore Girls* portrays a strong and

complex narrative of finding the true meaning of independence and achieving the American dream. The main protagonists of the show are Lorelai and Rory: Lorelai, a single mother, a competent businesswoman, a charismatic leader of her community, and her daughter, Rory, another strong female character who displays a great spirit of independence and intellectualism. However, what makes *Gilmore Girls* fascinating is not simply the fact that Lorelai and Rory are strong, independent female characters; it is their relationship that makes the narrative unique and the characters even more appealing to the audience. With having sixteen years of age gap (an age gap that is not common—or at least not considered preferable—in a mother-daughter relationship in 20th-century American society), Lorelai and Rory have an atypical mother-daughter relationship; they are more friendly and close to each other than a typical mother-daughter relationship, which at times almost creates a sisterhood between the two.

Lorelai and Rory's closeness and their unconventional mother-daughter relationship are the major topics of Eugenie Brinkema's article "A Mother is a Form of Time: *Gilmore Girls* and the Elasticity of In-Finitude." In the article, Brinkema argues that *Gilmore Girls* displays intertextuality—which Brinkema defines as "the blurring of boundaries, the flow and movement between two forms, the devouring of texts through iteration" (6)—through the "mother-daughter overcloseness" portrayed by Lorelai and Rory (6). Brinkema expounds intertextuality in *Gilmore Girls* through the speed, allusions and the mother-daughter closeness in the show, which blur the boundary between dimensions and forms (8). In Brinkema's article, speed refers to the fast speed of the Lorelai and Rory's dialogue, the fast speed which also becomes the "surface that comes to constitute the text of the show" (11). Brinkema also points out that the show has numerous cultural allusions, which includes numerous references from popular cultures and lines from classical texts, including *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1951), *Shane* (1953), and *Babe* (1995) (9).

Unlike what most TV series expect from their viewers when they make cultural references—which is an expectation that viewers would be able to recognize, understand, and translate such cultural references and allusions—*Gilmore Girls* is intentionally inundating its viewers with the endless allusions and “resist” the “translation and discursive hailing” of its allusions (Brinkema 10). Brinkema ultimately argues that the fast speed of dialogue, numerous cultural allusions, and the unusual mother-daughter relationship blur the boundary between “finitude”—as in “the daughter who will never catch up in time, in history, to the mother” (28)—and “in-finitude” of the mother-daughter relationship, which displays the “paradoxical and irreconcilable nature” (28) of the mother-daughter relationship in *Gilmore Girls*. Lorelai and Rory are clearly the closest confidante to each other but are mother and daughter, which creates an unreachable time gap between them.

Therefore, the unique relationship between Lorelai and Rory that challenges the traditional mother-daughter relationship is what diversifies the narrative of American popular culture and family narrative, as well as what makes the show unique and attractive to its viewers. While the unusual mother-daughter relationship challenges the American norm in popular culture, the show also portrays some limits in representing the diversity of class, gender, and sexuality. In the article, “It Takes a Classless, Heteronormative Utopian Village: *Gilmore Girls* and the Problem of Postfeminism,” Danielle M. Stern explores beyond the relationship between Lorelai and Rory and focuses on the two protagonists’ relationship with other characters. According to Stern, the conflicts that Lorelai encounter and the way she resolves them in the show often neglect the intersectionality of race, class, and sexuality in gender issues. Stern contends that *Gilmore Girls* overlooks that Lorelai is situated in an extremely privileged position: a white, middle-class, heterosexual American woman, and the fact that most of her

problems are resolved through her privileges. One of the most obvious uses of Lorelai's privilege is funding/capital that she accesses through her estranged parents. In the "Pilot," Rory gets accepted to Chilton, a private school that will bring Rory a step closer to her dream of going to Harvard University, which also demands a high tuition that Lorelai cannot afford. As a solution to the tuition problem, Lorelai "symbolically sweeps her pride under the rug and asks her parents for a loan for Rory's private education, which she declares she fully intends to pay back" (Stern 174). Even though Lorelai faces other financial problems throughout the series, these problems mostly "work out nicely within one or two episodes" either by having access to her wealthy parents' funds or by her heterosexual romantic relationships (180).

It can be disappointing to see that Lorelai, a strong, independent female character, solves most of her economic class struggles by manipulating her privilege of class and sexuality. However, just because Lorelai has access to upper-class society and her parents' wealth, her effort to resist the upper-class society should not be completely dismissed; therefore, Lorelai should not be confused as a complete upper-class character. In her article "Performing Class: 'Gilmore Girls' and a Classless Neoliberal 'Middle Class,'" Daniela Mastrocola argues that Lorelai is an "anti-class hero whose eccentricities are beyond *classification*" (17). Although in fact, Lorelai has access to her family funds, in many ways she portrays the opposite of Emily Gilmore, Lorelai's mother, and an archetypical upper-class character. Mastrocola points out that while "Emily's behavior is governed by notions of proper etiquette reminiscent of British aristocracy" (7), which Lorelai was expected to adopt in her own behavior, Lorelai instead deliberately refuses such lifestyle, often mocking her mother's behavior. Along with Lorelai's rebellious attitudes toward the upper-class, Lorelai herself lives a relatively modest and humble lifestyle; her house, her job as a waged-laborer, and her not-so-delicate "excessive eating habit"

(14) prove that Lorelai's performance and life do not belong to the upper-class. Thus, Lorelai's complex family background and her personal lifestyle render her a "classless protagonist" who simultaneously constitutes an economic middle-class fantasy (Mastrocola 17).

In addition to the issue of economic class in *Gilmore Girls*, another salient issue in the show is race. Rory's best friend, Lane Kim, is a daughter of Korean immigrants, and the Kims' eccentric family culture—a mixture of Korean Christianity, Confucianism, Buddhism, American small-town culture, and Rock-and-Roll—escalates the town's quirkiness. The noticeable presence of the Kims, Lane's role as Rory's best friend, and Lane's constant referencing of Korean culture are evident signals that race, ethnicity, and cultural diversity are other critical topics in *Gilmore Girls*. Stern criticizes *Gilmore Girls* for not directly addressing problems about race in the United States, and Lorelai's privilege as a racial majority is overlooked throughout the show (179). It is true that *Gilmore Girls* often focuses on the flaws and idiosyncrasies of the Korean characters rather than condemning the social system that ostracizes Korean immigrants. The way the show features the Kims places them into an in-between position where they are neither a full member nor a complete outsider of the community.

Hye Seung Chung also talks about the odd position that the Kim's are placed in her article, "Escaping from Korea: Cultural authenticity and Asian American Identities in *Gilmore Girls*." In the article, Chung explores Lane's narratives of finding her American identity and argues that Lane is able to claim her American identity only when she rejects her Korean one. It is true that the dysfunctional relationship between Lane and her conservative Korean mother Mrs. Kim, who is "a cultural touchstone evoking the harshness of stoic Asian 'others'" (Chung "Escaping"166), is evidence that *Gilmore Girls* highlights the negative side of Korean culture

and Korean parenting. By “othering” Mrs. Kim and what she represents—Korean culture and values—Lane’s Korean identity is seen as the “other” side that Lane needs to escape from in order to claim her authentic Americanness.

As Chung points out, it is true that Lane’s episode highlights the idea of “escaping” to find one’s identity. In fact, it is not only Lane who escapes in *Gilmore Girls*. The very first episode of *Gilmore Girls* begins sixteen years after Lorelai “escaped” from her parents’ home in Hartford, Connecticut. Everything about Hartford represents the complete opposite of Lorelai’s true identity and independence: upper-class society, tradition, and her parents—Richard and Emily Gilmore—who espouse everything that Hartford represents. Growing up, Lorelai had always been a rebellious daughter, but it was when she became pregnant with Rory that she finally realized it was time to leave her parents and Hartford. Instead of remaining in the upper-class society and living the traditional life by marrying Christopher, Rory’s biological father, Lorelai escapes from Hartford to find refuge in Stars Hollow, a small town that is about an hour away from Hartford. In Stars Hollow, Lorelai raises Rory as a single mother and becomes an intrinsic member of the town. The first independence in *Gilmore Girls*, therefore, is achieved through Lorelai’s “escape.”

The juxtaposition of Lorelai, a person who already has escaped from her parents at Hartford, and Lane, the one who has not yet but is trying to escape from her Korean mother, strengthen the theme of “escape” in *Gilmore Girls*. In the TV series, their desire and attempt to escape is portrayed in a positive light, insinuating that their escape reflects authentic Americanness. For instance, Stars Hollow itself has symbolic features that indicate Lorelai’s journey to Stars Hollow is her journey of the American dream. The first place she comes to find a job and refuge for herself and baby Rory is at the “Independence” Inn. She started working as a

maid but became the manager of the inn. In the article “‘You’ve Always Been the Head Pilgrim Girl’: Stars Hollow as the Embodiment of the American Dream,” Alyson Buckman also claims that by presenting a strong tie for Lorelai to a small New England town, the show presents Stars Hollow as the embodiment of the American dream. Buckman analyzes the very first scene of the pilot; the camera captures the sky and the top of the town church, and the focus slowly moves down to the street and the people. Among them a brunette woman—Lorelai—walks towards the camera. Suddenly the camera moves to the wooden sign by the sidewalk that has the American flag hanging on the side and reads “Stars Hollow, founded 1799.” After clarifying the location, the camera moves back to Lorelai. Buckman argues this particular scene emphasizes the significance of the town and the community: “We focus not on meaningless space but rather on an individual situated within a meaningful place” (134). Therefore, *Gilmore Girls* is both showing Lorelai and Stars Hollow as representations of the modern American dream.

In some ways, Lane resembles Lorelai more than Rory does, who basically pursues a life that Lorelai wanted to escape from, Ivy league schools, upper-class society, and having close relationship with Emily and Richard Gilmore. Because of the resemblance between Lorelai and Lane’s teenage lives, Lane often spends her time at Lorelai and Rory’s place, making Lorelai almost a surrogate mother to Rory. Thus, *Gilmore Girls* depicts Lane’s American dream as more alike Lorelai’s American dream: independence, freedom, and becoming an “authentic” American.

On the other hand, Mrs. Kim has her own version of the American dream that is different from Lorelai or Lane. The most obvious aspect of Mrs. Kim’s American dream is social mobility and economic success. Though it is unclear when, why, and how she moved from South Korea to Stars Hollow, Mrs. Kim is a first-generation Korean immigrant who values hard work and

success. She is a devout Seventh-day Adventist who prefers Korean food and tradition to American culture. She also wants to have complete control over Lane's life including music, diet, and dating. Lane is only allowed to listen to Hymns, eat food approved by Mrs. Kim who calls nutrition bars "chocolate-covered death" ("The Deer Hunters"), and date boys approved by Mrs. Kim. She believes that the world is structured in a hierarchy. Children, for instance, are to obey their parents. When Lane is about to be sent to Korea to visit her relatives, Mrs. Kim refuses to give any details except for the date she will depart. When Lane begs for more information, she says, "Children will know what their parents think they can handle" ("Sadie, Sadie..."). When Lane shows her a movie of *Romeo and Juliet*, Mrs. Kim immediately interprets the tragedy of the tale in a way that will favor her belief about parents' complete control over children:

Lane: I let [mom] watch the *Romeo and Juliet* movie with Leo and Claire Danes.

Rory: Really? I'd have thought she'd hated it.

Lane: Oh, she did. But trust my mom to turn one of the greatest love stories into a cautionary tale of what happens when children disobey their parents. ("Run Away Little Boy")

Her belief in hierarchical structures also applies to how she sees social structure. Lane says "Koreans never joke about future doctors" telling Rory how serious it is for her mother to have Lane marry someone successful ("Pilot"). Hence, the American dream that Mrs. Kim pursues is mainly focusing on social mobility.

Though Mrs. Kim and Lane's relationship is portrayed in comical ways, it often worries Lorelai as they remind her of the other mother-daughter pair: Emily and Lorelai. Emily has a controlling personality that distresses Lorelai and overwhelms people around her to the point

where there is always a new maid at the senior Gilmores' house in almost every episode. The hierarchical relationship between Emily and Lorelai was unsuccessful for Lorelai as a teenager, and Lorelai worries that the same will repeat with the Kims. When Mrs. Kim grounds Lane for lying about going out on a double date with a white boy, Lorelai carefully advises Mrs. Kim not to be too harsh on Lane, sharing her experience growing up under a controlling parent (“Double Date”). Because of Mrs. Kim’s parenting style, Lane is only able to show her true self in front of others like Rory and Lorelai; while Mrs. Kim has no idea Lane’s taste and interests, Lorelai and Rory know about Lane’s passion for rock music and her first American boyfriend. Hey Seung Chung claims that the Gilmores are Lane’s “surrogate family” who she “shares her deepest emotions--her joys and bitter disappointments” (170-1). As the show portrays Mrs. Kim and Lane’s mother-daughter relationship as less ideal, so is Mrs. Kim’s American dream.

Compared to Mrs. Kim parenting style and how she is portrayed in the show, Lorelai’s life and her American dream is romanticized. Lorelai comes to Stars Hollow where she has no connections but becomes one of the most influential people in the community. She starts her first job as a maid at the Independence Inn, but she becomes the manager of the inn and later, in season four of *Gilmore Girls*, opens her own inn. She starts as a single teenage mother but builds a successful friend-like relationship with Rory who is, in season three, accepted to three Ivy League schools. The achievements Lorelai makes as a community member, businesswoman, and mother not only demonstrate her autonomy and independence—the spiritual American dream—but also her competence in self-sufficiency and social mobility—the material American dream. By pursuing the spiritual American dream Lorelai is also able to achieve the type of American dream that Mrs. Kim pursues, which emphasizes that Lorelai and her American dream is superior to Mrs. Kim’s and her pursuit.

However, it is hard to say that Lorelai's American dream success story was completely her own independent achievement. As Stern points out, though Lorelai tries to claim complete independence from Emily and Richard, she sometimes receives the high society benefits through her parents: Lorelai borrows money from her parents for Rory's private school tuition; Richard arranges an interview for Rory with the dean of admissions at Yale University by using his personal connection as a Yale alumnus, and Rory receives financial support from Richard and Emily for her education at Yale. Therefore, Lorelai is consciously refusing the high society of Emily and Richard but unwittingly receives the benefit of upper-class privilege. We can still give credit to Lorelai for her conscious battle for seeking full independence. Buckman points out that even though Lorelai receives financial support from her parents, she is able to criticize the problem in Richard and Emily's world and, by contrast, the world she lives in is pictured as more desirable:

The narcissism, sense of entitlement, emphasis on bloodlines, and stress on social commitments (not out of a sense of civic duty per se but from a sense of noblesse oblige and desire for standing in the community) drive the world of Richard and Emily and provide a foil for the development of Stars Hollow as a more authentic community. (145)

In other words, because Lorelai is consciously choosing the life of Stars Hollow instead of Hartford, she and Stars Hollow can be the ideal American dream narrative. Therefore, *Gilmore Girls* promote that the highest and most desirable American dream is Lorelai's and Stars Hollow, not Mrs. Kim or Emily and Richard Gilmore.

While Lorelai's American dream is represented by Stars Hollow, Mrs. Kim's American dream is represented by her antique store, Kim's Antiques. Her store is her realm, a physical space where she has full control. Throughout the series, Mrs. Kim is rarely seen outside of Kim's

Antiques; she rarely attends town events and never appears at town's meetings. The physical and cultural distinctiveness of the house/store creates a sovereign environment for Mrs. Kim. The second floor is where the bedrooms are, rooms that function only as a home for the Kims. The first floor, however, has multiple functions that are controlled by Mrs. Kim. The Kims prepare and have their meals in the kitchen and Lane studies in the living room, but at the same time, every space on the first floor is filled with antique furniture ready to be sold to customers at any time. Selling antique furniture is the primary role of the first floor. The first floor—the shop area—is almost like a maze because of the piled up antiques. They are the tangible objects that represent Mrs. Kim's version of the American dream: commodities that will bring her monetary success. The physical setting of the Kims' house shows that monetary success is the foundation of Mrs. Kim's American dream. The fact that the first-floor functions as the store area—they even have some furniture placed in the front yard—and that the living area is on the second floor shows that the Kims' personal life is built upon the foundation of the pursuit of monetary success.

The idea that physical space is one's embodiment of their own American dream in *Gilmore Girls* also applies to Lane. Lane, who, when within sight of Mrs. Kim, pretends to be an obedient daughter, secretly develops her own version of the American dream. To Mrs. Kim, Lane pretends to be a faithful Christian, an obedient Korean daughter, and a modest girl who does not date boys her parents have not approved of. The truth is Lane listens to rock music, dates white American boys, and plays the drums in a rock band called Hep Alien. Lane openly talks about her interest in rock music in front of Rory and Lorelai, and she has cleverly hidden her CD collection, makeup products, and clothes in her room—under the floorboards, in the

drawer, and in her closet. Lane's true identity is hidden, "closeted," so that at a glance, her room may seem perfectly "normal" to Mrs. Kim.

While Lane constantly attempts to find a way where her mother's and her American dream can coexist, Mrs. Kim is unable to accept any version of the American dream that is different from hers. The night after Lane's band plays at the club CBGB's, which for Lane is a once-in-a-life event, Mrs. Kim finally finds out about Lane's secrets—her band, her CD collections, and other "forbidden" things, such as makeup products and lurid clothes—hidden around her bedroom. Lane finally makes a proposal to Mrs. Kim, which she believes is the best way that their two different American dreams can coexist in this physical space; Lane will follow the strict curfew and stop lying about her identity to her mother, as long as Mrs. Kim respects Lane's ideals and dreams. Disappointingly, Mrs. Kim refuses Lane's proposal:

Lane: I want to please you so badly, but I can't. . . . I've been thinking a lot about this, our situation. And I think I've figured out a way to make everything better.

Mrs. Kim: You have?

Lane: I don't want to go to Seventh Day Adventist College anymore. I want to be able to play with my band. I want to be a drummer. I will happily go to community college, and I will happily live at home and adhere to your curfew, except on the nights when the band plays or practices. This way I can get what I want, and I won't be lying to you or sneaking around. This way, we can both be happy.

Mrs. Kim: Children do not make the rules. You may move out and live like that somewhere else. ("In the Clamor and the Clangor")

Lane eventually moves out of Kim's Antiques and lives at a shabby old house with her band members. To Mrs. Kim, it is impossible to have two different American dreams coexist in the

same house. It weakens her authority and the sanctity of her version of the American dream. In her defense, Kim's Antiques is the only place where Mrs. Kim's American dream is truly valued, as everything outside the store and Stars Hollow itself is governed by Lorelai's American dream. Therefore, Mrs. Kim cannot risk having her American dream compromised in the only physical space where she has full control.

Throughout the TV series, Mrs. Kim maintains her adamant attitude, whether it be about her parenting style or her business style, and her stubbornness highlights her obsession with monetary success and reinforces the idea that her American dream is primarily governed by the pursuit of monetary success. Later in the series, it is shown that Mrs. Kim also pursues other values besides monetary success. In the episode "I Get a Sidekick Out of You" (season 6, episode 19), Lane's grandmother, Mrs. Kim's mother, suddenly visits from South Korea to attend Lane's wedding. Lane and Mrs. Kim hurriedly prepare for the grandmother's visit, which means that they need to hide everything Christian and decorate the house to make it look like a faithful Buddhist household. Rory also helps Lane and Mrs. Kim hide Christian things, and Lane is weirdly amused to realize that her mother has been hiding her Christian identity from her mother:

Mrs. Kim: Did you get the crucifixes out of the kitchen? Go both of you, go, go! And don't forget the Christ's-feet tea towel!

[Rory and Lane runs to the kitchen and starts to collect the crucifixes]

Rory: Okay, seriously you have got to fill me in, or I've got to call my life line. What is with the Buddha?

Lane: Apparently my grandmother's a Buddhist.

Mrs. Kim: Go hide these in your room [handing over more things to Rory and Lane]

Lane: Closet?

Mrs. Kim: Floorboards! [runs back to the living room]

[Rory and Lane enter Lane's bedroom and start to hide crucifixes under the floorboard]

Rory: I don't understand, so your grandma's Buddhist. Why are we . . . oh my god, she doesn't know!

Lane: No.

Rory: Your mother's mother does not know she's a Seventh Day Adventist.

Lane: And it would be a very big deal if she found out.

Rory: That is so weird.

Lane: Tell me about it. I just discovered today that I am simply the latest link in a chain of Kim women who hide their real lives under floorboards away from their mothers. ("I Get a Sidekick Out of You")

Mrs. Kim's secret is finally revealed; her store is not simply the embodiment of her monetary American dream, but it is also the embodiment of her religious freedom.

Thus, in the later season of *Gilmore Girls*, as Lane and Mrs. Kim's story develops, Mrs. Kim's complex identity is slowly revealed. Despite of her rigid lifestyle and stubbornness, Mrs. Kim's life is in fact a stream of negotiation. She lives in Stars Hollow, the embodiment of Lorelai's American dream, but she uses her house/store to create a space where she can negotiate her Korean tradition and American culture. It is also the place where she literally negotiates with her customers with furniture sales. By accepting Lane's rock band, Mrs. Kim is again negotiating her American dream with Lane's. Also, at the end of season 5, Mrs. Kim volunteers to help Lane's band go on tour. Using her connection at Seventh Day Adventist church, she books

church concert halls and arranges accommodations for the tour. By offering to help the band and Lane's dream, Mrs. Kim negotiates her American dream and partially accepts Lane's ideals.

By negotiating, Mrs. Kim becomes a more autonomous character. In the earlier seasons when she refused to accept Lane's rock-n'-roll life, Mrs. Kim's shows limited control. She remains as the odd Korean immigrant with an authoritative parenting style, the parenting style that eventually has driven out Lane from the house and temporarily cut the mother-daughter tie between her and Lane. However, by negotiating and partially accepting Lane's dream, Mrs. Kim regains her mother-daughter tie with Lane and Lane is also able to continue to pursue her dream.

Mrs. Kim's negotiating is, therefore, an act of mimicry; she adapts to the American dream that is represented by Lorelai, Lane, and Stars Hollow, and regains her agency as she subverts her position from a peripheral character to one of the most influential characters in *Gilmore Girls*, one who shows a significant character growth. Mrs. Kim's negotiating is also a prime example of hybridity and mimicry because she is not completely sacrificing her American dream in order to blindly follow and imitate others. Instead, she makes others negotiate and make adjustments as well. When she helps Hep Alien, Lane's rock band, with their band tour, she demands that they adjust their lyrics so that they would only include "clean" words. Zack, the lead guitarist and singer *and* Lane's future husband, initially refuses such adjustment but eventually caves in:

Mrs. Kim: I need to see your songs.

Zack: Why?

Mrs. Kim: To see if you need to make adjustments. Lyrics must be clean.

Zack: Okay, that's where we draw the line. We will not change our lyrics.

Mrs. Kim: Oh, please. Prince made \$57 million take-home last year. He didn't swear, and he mentioned God. Catch up! ("A House is Not a Home")

By negotiating, Mrs. Kim is now able to exercise her influence outside of her shop and outside of her expertise, shopkeeping. She is, therefore, able to maintain the crux of her identity and her version of the American dream, as well as influence and reshape others' American dream. Her negotiating, therefore, allows her to "elude the politics of polarity" (Bhabha 56), the polarity that forces her and Lane to follow either her Korean culture or the American culture, and instead is able to create a hybrid American dream.

Kim's Convenience: the Korean Canadian Shopkeeper in *Kim's Convenience*

The Canadian sitcom *Kim's Convenience*—which is based on the Canadian play *Kim's Convenience* by Ins Choi—aired its first season in 2016. The lead characters of the sitcom are the Kims, a Korean immigrant family who runs a convenience store in Toronto, Canada. The Kim family, including Appa (Korean for "dad") and Umma (Korean for "mom") and their daughter Janet, lives on the second floor of the store. Their son, Jung, left the house when he was a teenager after he was estranged from Appa for his juvenile criminal offense. Janet and Umma still keep in touch with Jung and try to help Appa and Jung to make amends while the two men awkwardly avoid each other. In 2021, *Kim's Convenience* aired its last season, season 5.

Because of being one of the most successful TV shows with a large Asian cast, *Kim's Convenience* drew wide public and academic attention in both Canada and South Korea. The scholarship on *Kim's Convenience* can be found in Canada, the United States, and South Korea. Much of the scholarship on *Kim's Convenience* explores the racial politics in Canada and the language use, specifically code-switching, in *Kim's Convenience*. In "Korean Diasporic

Perceptions of Canada in the Light of the CBC TV Series *Kim's Convenience*,” Judit Nagy and Mátyás Bánhegyi discuss the elements of generation gaps and transnationalism in *Kim's Convenience*. They discuss how the settings of the show, including the convenience store and other public locations featured in the show, portray a transitional environment that shows an interactive relationship between different cultures. Nagy and Bánhegyi provide several examples, such as the Korean restaurant, Karaoke bars, Korean church, and the mentioning of Korean history in the show, as evidence of transnationalism in *Kim's Convenience*. Nagy and Bánhegyi certainly point out the positive features of *Kim's Convenience* and how the show displays a multicultural setting that creates an unrealistically perfect environment for immigrants.

It is true that *Kim's Convenience* has a strong emphasis on multiculturalism and diversity. For one thing, the main cast is all Asian Canadians, and other minorities, in terms of race, gender, and sexuality, appear in the show. While the TV series version of *Kim's Convenience* consists of five seasons (thirteen episodes each) and shows several episodes about race in Canada, the original *Kim's Convenience* play shows a somewhat limited discussion on the topic of race. One reason for this is because the original *Kim's Convenience* is a short one-act play, which does not allow much room to have in-depth discussion over racism and diversity. In fact, the original play is often criticized for being “racist” rather than for challenging racism. Besides the Korean Canadian characters, the other characters that appear in the play are mostly Black customers, which sparks some problematic dialogues between the Korean Canadian characters.

The issue of racism in *Kim's Convenience* is the main focus of Colleen Kim Daniher's article, “On Teaching *Kim's Convenience*: Asian American Studies, Asian Canadian Studies, and the Politics of Race in Asian Canadian Theatre and Performance Studies.” The focus of her research is not simply about criticizing the racism in the play. Instead, Daniher discusses the

pedagogy of teaching *Kim's Convenience*—the original play version—in university theatre classrooms and argues that teaching multiethnic plays can be an opportunity for students to learn not only the “theatrical repertoires” of Asian Canadian plays but also “Asian North American histories, politics, and socio-political modes of analysis that emphasize race, racism, and racialization” (11). Daniher’s research is based on the theatre class she taught at Brown University in 2015. She explains how she used *Kim's Convenience* in her classes to talk about the Black-Korean conflict and the model minority myth, and to encourage students to see connections between the play and the Black Lives Matter movement in the contemporary time. Daniher acknowledges the racism in the play and states “*Kim's Convenience* is an Asian Canadian play that is about a Korean-Canadian family *and* about the disavowed presence—and thus, peripheral status—of Blackness in Canada” (22). Therefore, Daniher’s research proposes a more constructive reading of *Kim's Convenience*; rather than blindly applauding the success of an Asian North American play or having complete contempt for its limitations and flaws, we can use the play as an opportunity to start a constructive discussion on racial politics, history, and Black-Korean conflicts.

Meanwhile, *Kim's Convenience* has another issue that can potentially be deemed as racist: the yellowvoicing of Appa and Umma characters. Yellowvoicing is when actors of Asian descent imitate “Asian accents” to make their characters sound more “authentic.” Hye Seung Chung explains that some actors of Asian descent would do yellowvoicing for “the sake of professional survival” when they play roles as Asian immigrants (190). The actors of Appa and Umma characters are also technically “yellowvoicing” as the actors themselves do not have any Korean accents in their natural voice. In the article, “From *I’m the One That I Want* to *Kim's Convenience*: The paradoxes and perils of implicit in-group ‘yellowvoicing,’” Chung explains

the problem of yellowvoicing; exaggerated “Asian accents” and “broken Asian English” in media perpetuate the stereotypical, incompetent Asian immigrant characters, rendering them as “unassimilable alterity” (191).

However, Chung argues that yellowvoicing in *Kim’s Convenience* is used as a strategic tool to promote different vernaculars in the English language. Chung points out that the Appa character’s yellowvoicing received many positive responses from the Korean Canadian community; Paul Sun-Hyung Lee, the actor of Appa character, was given positive responses from Korean Canadian viewers as his performance reminds viewers of their own family and immigrant fathers (199). Chung also explains that the sitcom highlights Appa’s “quick-witted, competent businessman” (201) characteristics, featuring him in a positive light. Chung especially focuses on one scene in the earlier episodes of *Kim’s Convenience*. In the pilot episode “Gay Discount,” Appa is accused of being homophobic when he complains to two gay customers about the gay parade always being too loud and noisy. One of the customers says that he will report Appa for committing a hate crime and discriminating against gay people. But Appa claims that he is not homophobic because he offers “gay discount” during pride month, which, of course, is an improvised excuse that Appa had to come up with to refute the accusation. When the customers ask how “How do you know someone is gay?” Appa claims that he can tell because he has the “gaydar.” The two customers smile with satisfaction and approval. In this scene, Chung argues, Appa’s wit shows his ability to “[turn] a crisis situation into an entrepreneurial opportunity,” and, therefore, elevates the shopkeeper character as a witty and competent character. Chung explains that by highlighting the positive features of Appa’s character, *Kim’s Convenience* is able to also shed a positive light on Appa’s yellowvoicing

performance and challenges the language ideology of “standard English,” which marginalizes other forms, accents, and vernaculars of different Englishes.

In “Linguistic Representations of Korean Immigrant English in North American Media Space: An Analysis of Appa’s English in *Kim’s Convenience*,” In Chull Jang and In Young Yang also analyze the use of Korean-accented English in the show. Furthermore, Jang and Yang analyze the syntactic and lexical aspects in Appa’s English; while “accents” are often associated with the way a word is pronounced—which is a phonological aspect in language—syntactic and lexical aspects can be significantly different in different “accents” and English vernaculars. Jang and Yang discover that Appa’s accent surely shows syntactic and lexical differences, as well as his phonological difference. Jang and Yang state that in terms of syntax and lexicon, Appa’s English is much more simplified than that of “standard Canadian English,” which increases the risk of rendering Appa as another incompetent alien and perpetuating the Asian immigrant stereotype. In their article, Jang and Yang leave this issue “unanswered” (32) and claim that it will require a more careful analysis of language ideology and sociolinguistics in order to decipher whether the Appa character’s language is perpetuating the Asian immigrant stereotype (32).

It is true that language performance is one of the most interesting aspects of *Kim’s Convenience*. Furthermore, the show not only features English with different accents but also actively incorporates code-switching, both in verbal form and written form. The sitcom occasionally shows Korean actors speaking in Korean or using Korean words and phrases in their conversation. Also, they sell Korean products at the Kim’s Convenience store, go to Korean restaurants and the Korean church, where viewers are constantly exposed to written Korean. Hence, code-switching has a significant appearance in *Kim’s Convenience*. The show’s active

incorporation of Korean-English code-switching is also the central theme of Sung-Shim Hong and Dennis Emmerson's "Types and Functions of Code-Switching: A Case Study of Korean Canadian Bilinguals in a Canadian Sitcom, *Kim's Convenience*." Hong and Emmerson analyze the different kinds of code-switching in the show, including tag-switching (using tag words and phrases, like "well," "right," etc.), intra-sentential code switching (inserting Korean words in the middle of a sentence), and inter-sentential code-switching (using a full Korean sentence in the middle of a conversation) (100-101). By analyzing different types of code-switching in *Kim's Convenience*, Hong and Emmerson infer that Canada is "more relaxed and tolerant for a heritage language, . . . which facilitates this to be one of the most successful comedies" (115). I agree that having numerous occasions of code-switching in such a successful TV series can show the tolerance of a society about different languages.

It is difficult to say that code-switching in *Kim's Convenience* is possible only because Canadian society is more tolerant of code-switching and heritage languages; instead, there is much evidence that *Kim's Convenience* has a specific agenda to promote cultural, racial and language diversity. Throughout the five seasons, *Kim's Convenience* intentionally features characters from diverse backgrounds in terms of race, nationality, culture, and sexual orientation; the sitcom shows Chinese, Indian, Jamaican, gay, and drag queen characters, just to name a few. Several episodes of the show also focus on topics about racism and cultural difference. These marginalized characters and topics about racism are, of course, featured in comical ways, as the show is intended to be a comedy, but openly discussing issues about racism and marginalized culture is evidence that *Kim's Convenience* is deliberately trying to address issues about race, ethnicity, and culture in popular media.

Thus, I argue that *Kim's Convenience* is deliberately raising awareness about multiculturalism and multilingualism and sheds a more positive light on Korean immigrants. By actively incorporating code-switching and bringing issues about racial, ethnic, and cultural diversity, and, most importantly, using the convenience store as the venue where such discussion occurs, *Kim's Convenience* renovates the concept of Korean shops from being a marginalized urban setting to the center of the urban discourse about race, ethnicity, and culture.

Kim's Convenience uses the stereotypical “strict Korean parent” and “Korean shopkeeper” archetype but, at the same time, challenges the Asian shopkeeper archetype by enriching their personal narratives and giving them the voice to speak for themselves. In the earlier North American popular media, Asian shopkeepers only played minimal roles and had short appearances. However, the Asian shopkeepers in *Kim Convenience*, including Appa and Umma, are not only the central characters of the show but their personal stories, desires, and values are addressed throughout several episodes.

Often times in popular media, immigrants' life before they immigrated to America and Canada are rarely discussed; they are simply portrayed as “immigrants” from foreign countries, and their individual stories stay unspoken and obscure. For first generation immigrants, obscuring their story before immigration is a complete erasure of one's identity and personal history; by erasing the life before they come to America and Canada, they are erasing almost half of one's personal history. However, in *Kim's Convenience*, they often talk about their life before coming to Canada. In the episode “The Help” (season 4, episode 3), Appa talks about how he used to be a certified teacher when he was in South Korea, and Umma says that she wanted to become a nurse. The show gives glimpses of other immigrants' lives before they came to Canada. Mrs. Ada, a Lebanese immigrant, says how people always see her as just a cleaning lady

when, in fact, she also used to be an ultrasound technician (“The Help” *Kim’s Convenience*). Mrs. Mehta—the wife of Mr. Mehta, an Indian Canadian restaurateur—mockingly says “I had servants in India. Now I’m married to a man who microwaves cheese on toast!” (“Business Award” 00:10:02). By explicitly mentioning immigrants’ lives before they immigrated to Canada, *Kim’s Convenience* makes their stories more relevant, allowing them a voice to speak about their complex identities and challenging the shopkeeper stereotype.

Appa’s role as an active member of the local community also challenges the Asian shopkeeper stereotype. Unlike Mrs. Kim in *Gilmore Girls*, who rarely attends town events and stays in her Korean American social circle, Appa, as well as Umma, is more sociable not only within the Korean Canadian community but also with other racial minorities, as well as with the mainstream white Canadian society. Surely, Appa and Umma portray some traits of the Asian shopkeeper stereotype; they value hard-work, honor Korean tradition, and maintain the Confucius parenting style which has a strong emphasis on filial piety. They also possess the traits of the Asian shopkeeper stereotype which are typically considered negative: having heavily accented English and a failure to understand cultural differences between Korea and Canada. However, as Chung explained about the positive effects of yellowvoicing in *Kim’s Convenience*, the accented English provides authenticity to the characters and resonates with the Korean Canadian audience, which establishes a common ground between performers/actors and audience/TV viewers. Also, Appa and Umma’s failed attempt of understanding cultural differences is often portrayed as a problem of the generation gap. By focusing on the generation gap, rather than the cultural gap, between Appa/Umma and Jung/Janet, *Kim’s Convenience* successfully avoids perpetuating the incompetent Asian immigrant stereotype.

In fact, Appa is far from being an anti-social, incompetent Asian immigrant stereotype. He easily and actively interacts with his customers, building strong relationships beyond race, nationality, and sexual orientation. Though he spends most of his time at the convenience store, he communicates with local businesspeople and maintains good relationships with his regular customers, including Mr. Chin, a Chinese Canadian restaurateur, Mr. Mehta, an Indian Canadian restaurateur, Frank, a white Canadian handyman, and Enrique, a Hispanic Canadian customer. Even when Appa encounters a new culture, he shows genuine interest in learning their point of view, instead of dismissing and ignoring them. In “Gay Discount” episode, when Appa starts the impromptu “gay discount,” he meets Therese, a drag queen, to whom Appa does not know whether to offer the gay discount or not. Instead of assuming Therese’s identity, Appa openly asks Therese:

Therese: I can’t find the price on this. How much is it?

Appa: Regular \$4.99, but this week, we have a discount only for the uh. . . [Confused look] What you is?

Therese: [intimidating deep voice] Come again?

Appa: You is what kind? Trans, uh, gender?

Therese: I’m a drag queen.

Appa: You is man who dress like girl?

Therese: A woman. Yeah, why? [walks closer to the counter]

Appa: Why you do like this?

Therese: Oh, um, I dunno. Feel like me. Feels like home. Always has.

[Appa nods with a hint of a smile. Therese smiles back] (“Gay Discount” 00:13:30 – 00:14:17)

Initially Therese is offended by Appa's question "What you is? (What are you?)" hence replying back "come again" with a deep, intimidating tone. But as soon as Therese realizes that Appa is showing a genuine interest and effort in learning Therese's identity, Therese smiles back, feeling fondness for the Appa character. Therefore, *Kim's Convenience* shows that Appa is able to effectively communicate and interact with people even beyond his ethnic, racial circle, which highlights the innate amiability of the Appa character.

Meanwhile, the central conflicts in the plot of *Kim's Convenience* mostly occur between the parent and the children: Appa/Umma and Jung/Janet. Jung, he is the eldest child of Appa and Umma is known to be estranged from the family since he drops out of high school. The TV series shows that Jung has been keeping in touch with Umma and Janet, but he rarely talks to Appa and vice versa. Janet also often has a hard time negotiating with Appa's strict parenting style. Appa's parenting is basically "under my roof, my rule" style; he believes in the Korean Confucius filial piety ideals which claim that children must obey and respect their parents. In the episode "Janet's Photos" (season 1, episode 2), when Janet gets angry at Appa for selling her photographs without her permission, App claims that he can sell anything Janet made because he paid for her education, bought her the camera, and basically "gave" her life:

Janet: Appa, you can't just sell my stuff!

Appa: It's not you stuff. You stuff is *our* stuff.

Janet: *I took* these pictures!

Appa: Who pay for camera that take those picture?

Janet: Whose eye looked through the viewfinder and whose finger pushed the shutter button?

Appa: Who give to you that eye and that finger? ("Janet's Photos" 00:13:00 – 00:13)

The generation gap between Appa and Janet, and between Appa/Umma and Jung/Janet, becomes the central plot of *Kim's Convenience*. As the show focuses on the Kim family and the generation gaps, it ultimately makes the show a Canadian family narrative and allows viewers to focus on the family story that is embellished with humorous references to cultural differences.

One risk of highlighting the generation gap in *Kim's Convenience* is that viewers can easily feel empathy towards the children's generation (Jung and Janet) while "othering" and ostracizing the parent generation/first-generation immigrant (Appa and Umma) as, again, the alien immigrant. Since Jung and Janet pursue values and dreams that modern Canadians and young viewers can easily relate to—such as individualism and freedom—they become the more emphatic characters; on the other hand, Appa and Umma follow the outdated and foreign Korean Confucianism, which can be difficult to empathize with for modern Canadian viewers. Despite the fact that the generation gap is the central motive of the show, *Kim's Convenience* still sheds light on the similarities between these two different generations: the pursuit of independence and opportunity. In the episode "Janet's Roommate" (season 2, episode 1), Appa, Umma, and Janet have an argument about Janet moving in with her friends and leaving their family home. Being the strict parents, Appa and Umma disapprove of Janet's decision, of course. When Umma tries to convince her that staying with them is the best choice for Janet, Janet tells Appa and Umma that she is simply trying to do the same thing that Appa and Umma did when they left South Korea and moved to Canada. She is simply trying to find independence and new opportunity in her life:

Janet: I just want to move across town. You crossed the ocean.

Umma: We have to. To make better life for you. [looks at Appa for agreement]

[Appa nods]

Janet: Yeah, I know, but wasn't it also for you? Because you wanted to move?

[Appa and Umma stay silent.] (“Janet’s Roommate” 00:17:35 – 00:17:50)

Appa and Umma’s silent response shows that Janet is right about their immigrating to Canada. Although Appa and Umma may have told their children—and perhaps themselves—that immigrating to Canada was to give their children a better and better opportunity, the primary reason is to give them a new life and opportunity for themselves.

The juxtaposition of Janet’s pursuit of freedom and opportunity and Appa and Umma’s immigration allow Appa and Umma to become a character that modern viewers can empathize with. It also shows Appa and Umma’s complex desire; they are not simply strict Asian parents or shopkeepers who merely seek monetary success, but they also dream of a “better” life and opportunity. Their complex character traits ultimately allows them to create the convenience store to be a physical venue where different values, immigration narratives, and family stories can be discussed and people of diverse backgrounds, in terms of race, ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation, can join such conversations.

Chapter 6: Teaching Race, Ethnicity, and Literature

Why Teach Ethnic American Literature?

Teaching is a task that can have many obstacles. Depending on the pedagogical approach, the subject matter, and the time and place of teaching, teachers face different types of struggles. In this era where the Black Lives Matter movement is at its peak and anti-Asian hate crime is a rising issue, teaching multiethnic literature is a challenge but is undoubtedly a necessity. Because we live in a time where racial tension is high, teaching about race and ethnicity often causes anxiety. The anxiety comes from the misperception about what race and ethnicity classes teach. For instance, at a stand-up comedy show, writer and comedian Ali Wong jokes about her unexpected financial success as her degree was in Asian American studies. She says “Ethnic studies is a major where you study how to blame everything on white people. It’s not supposed to yield income.” This joke immediately brings laughter from the audience because they understand the popular belief about ethnic studies; people commonly see studies about race and ethnicity as an impractical field, a field that “excludes” white people and caters to people of color. When this idea is taken as a joke, it brings laughter, but when the idea is taken seriously, it brings anger, harassment, and an excuse to oppress. One example is the recent bill that was passed in Idaho to ban the teaching of critical race theory in schools (Dawson). While the case in Idaho is an example of state government suppressing the study of race and ethnicity, negative reactions also occur at university levels and individual student levels; there are cases when race and ethnicity studies are dismissed by university administrators, by fellow faculty members, and by students.

In this chapter, I aim to identify the challenges that multiethnic American literature classes and Asian American literature classes can encounter. In order to effectively overcome the

challenges, it is important to analyze where the problem stems from. This chapter will discuss some of the challenges that professors of multiethnic literature or ethnic studies have experienced. Then, I will discuss three pedagogical approaches by Elaine Showalter, bell hooks, and Paulo Freire on how to overcome the challenges in multiethnic literature and Asian American literature classes.

Conflicts between the University and the Teaching of Asian American Studies

In her article “Letter from an American Professor,” Jennifer Ho, a professor in Asian American studies, discusses her experiences teaching Asian American studies in the Southern US at the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill. The challenges she faced at UNC Chapel Hill involved the people she met on campus.

Ho was first surprised when she discovered that her students were not able to distinguish the difference between Asian literature and Asian American literature (20). When Ho asked her students about the Asian American novels they read, they would name Japanese writers, including Banana Yoshimoto and Haruki Murakami, not acknowledging the difference between Japanese authors and Japanese American authors (20). Ho was even more surprised when she found the same issue among her fellow colleagues. Ho was asked by her colleagues about how she is able to conduct research on Asian American literature without being a fluent Mandarin speaker or whether she has any difficulties finding translations of Asian American literature (21).

The confusion between Asian studies and Asian American studies among students and even fellow faculty members indicates many things about the perception of Asian American studies or Asian Americans in US academia. For one thing, the confusion shows that Asian Americans are still perceived as aliens. Blending Asian studies and Asian American studies

reveal that Asian Americans are still not fully accepted as “Americans” and can easily be removed from the “American” demographic.

Another challenge Ho faced while promoting Asian American studies at UNC-Chapel Hill, a predominantly white institution (PWI) in the South, was the confusion of the target student audience for Asian American studies courses. Ho recounts how her Asian American colleague, whose profession was not related to Asian American studies, argued with good intention that the university needs more Asian American studies classes for the sake of Asian American students at the university. According to Ho, the college argued “Asian American students who were not exposed to Asian American history and culture would be lost, white-washed souls” (22). Ho points out that a class designed to fulfill such a goal would be “a type of self-help group therapy, where the professor acts as a counselor for the students’ healthy resolution of their identity troubles” (22). Obviously, self-therapy is not the goal of any ethnic studies classes. This is another common misperception that people have about race and ethnicity studies—to be a field that only cares about emotional and sentimental subjects where the teacher and students would shed tears over the tragic immigration stories while condemning white people.

This misperception is an unwelcoming image for non-minority students. Ho argues that Asian American studies is crucial for all students regardless of their racial and ethnic background. She states:

A stronger argument to make to the administration of UNC Chapel Hill for the formation of an Asian American studies program was that Asian American epistemology was a vibrant and growing field: that Asian American studies courses would benefit ALL students, particularly non-Asian American students. Furthermore, as a state that has a

burgeoning Asian immigrant community, North Carolina students would certainly benefit from learning about the history of Asian Americans in the United States as well as from reading (and discussing) Asian American literature. (22)

Her argument that “all students” will benefit from Asian American studies is a significant point that people often overlook. Asian American studies, African American studies, Native American Studies, Latin American studies, and other race and ethnicity studies should be and often are an inclusive, diverse environment, and they are certainly not designed only for students of color.

One’s race and ethnic identity should not be a reason to discourage them from taking an ethnic studies class. Studies on race and ethnicity and reading multiethnic literature should be promoted in universities that will allow students to have a fuller understanding of American history, literature, and culture. After all, America consists of all ethnic and racial communities, including White American, Native American, African American, Asian American, Latinx American, and more. The problem is that White Americans and their culture are commonly assumed to be the representatives of the overarching word “America,” and one goal of multiethnic American literature is to challenge this hegemony. Therefore, I argue that multiethnic American literature classes and Asian American literature classes are vital for university students to have a fuller understanding of American history, literature, and culture.

Conflicts between Students and the Teaching of Multiethnic Literature

Another challenge of teaching multiethnic literature comes from the students. As teaching is an interactive process, students’ response is key to creating a successful class. Mary Frances Pipino, a professor of English, discovered many “resistant, even hostile, responses” from students when she taught a multiethnic literature course (175). In the journal assignment, one

student wrote: “The whole sobby immigrant thing is starting to get a little old ...”—in this context “The whole sobby immigrant thing” was referring to Mary Gordon’s short story “Eileen” (175). Pipino recounts that some students would even “[refuse] to respond at all ... in averted gazes and roaring silence during class discussion” (176). Pipino attempts to interpret such negative student responses as a sense of weariness or “compassion fatigue,” as known in Psychology (177). “Compassion fatigue” can be found in helping professions that are required to assist patients or clients with traumatic experiences and symptoms (Pipino 177). Pipino reassures that she does not mean to say the experience of reading multiethnic literature is compatible with working for patients or clients with trauma; nevertheless, “compassion fatigue” offers one explanation for why students would resist feeling compassion for the literary texts. After reading a stream of unsuccessful and unhappy narratives—as many multiethnic literary texts can be—towards the end of a semester, students can feel weary of reading another adverse narrative.

As Pipino points out, Norman Holland’s reader response theory and “identity theory” provide additional support for Pipino’s theory. Holland explains identity by using the musical analogy of “variations” (815). Holland states “identity is like a musical theme on which variations are played: not the notes themselves but their structural relationship to one another remains constant through a lifetime or transformations” (815). The focus on the “structure” rather than the individual notes in a musical theme in Holland’s theory emphasizes the “structure” in one’s identity rather than the individual experience and traits in one’s lifetime. In terms of identity, this “structure” would mean that one’s identity is about *how* an individual interprets and constructs the “self” through the elements of their experience as a whole (815). Holland states:

Identity defines what the individual brings from old experiences to new ones, and it is the newness of experiences, both those from the world without and those from the biological and emotional world within, by which the individual creates the variations which are his life lived in historical time. (815)

As the act of reading and interpreting literary texts can be an “experience” one lives in his or her “historical time,” reading and interpreting literary texts can be the individual “note” in one’s musical variations, or identity (815).

Because reading and interpreting literary texts become, as Holland would say, an act to “re-create” one’s identity, reading a series of frustrating narratives can exhaust students or even make them resist reading another frustrating narrative. Pipino also states that resistant student responses may stem from the “difficulty in reconciling their identities as free, hardworking, autonomous individuals with narratives that present such qualities in defeated circumstances” (179). The unfortunate truth about these negative student responses is that it shows a highly similar trait to racial microaggressions. Racial microaggressions are subtle verbal or behavioral racism which can be intentional or unintentional. Derald Wing Sue et al. defines racial microaggressions as “brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, and environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults to the target person or group” (“Everyday Life” 273). Racial microaggression can be so subtle that oftentimes it makes people believe that they are *not* racist. One common saying of racial microaggression would be the famous “I don’t see color,” which many use as a way to boast their ability to see beyond a person’s skin color. However, this popular saying only reveals their disinterest in, or even ignorance of, the issue of racism; to say

that one “does not see color” is a convenient excuse to overlook and ignore the racism that is occurring around them every day.

It is not just Pipino and multiethnic literature classes that experience such resistance from students. When it comes to education and college experience, racial microaggression is prevalent. Sue et al. conducted research about racial microaggression in the classroom at Teachers College, Columbia University. Sue et al. interviewed students, who “self-identified as a person of color,” about their experiences of having “difficult dialogues on race in the classroom” (“Difficult Dialogue” 184). They asked students questions such as “Can you recall a classroom situation where the issue of race was involved?” and “What makes it difficult to discuss race in the classroom?” (Sue et al. “Difficult Dialogue” 185). The result revealed the subtle racial microaggression was prevalent in the university classrooms. The research showed that students of color experienced many difficulties whenever there were conversations about race in the classroom. When students of color wanted to start a conversation about race, they were often deemed overly sensitive and received derogatory comments such as “not everything is racial” (Sue et al. “Difficult Dialogue” 186). One student said, “when I share personal experiences of discrimination in class, they always want to find another reason for the behavior” (Sue et al. “Difficult Dialogue” 186).

If we treat students’ personal experiences and the act of sharing those experiences in the classroom as *texts*, perhaps we can apply Holland’s identity theory in these situations. Whenever we have a conversation about race or whenever we have a student of color share their experience about race, the conversation itself can be a text that can “re-create” our identities. Therefore, reading literary texts and participating in conversations about race become acts of interpreting racial and ethnic texts to “re-create” our identities. We then now must explain whether

compassion fatigue and racial microaggression have any relationship with each other. Do people refuse to participate in or listen to conversations about race because of compassion fatigue? Can compassion fatigue become a cause for racial microaggression? Applying compassion fatigue in every situation can be dangerous because it gives an excuse for those who perform racial microaggression. However, I believe that some students are genuinely interested in the issue of race but fail to complete the process of re-creating their identities through interpreting text because of compassion fatigue; students in Pipino's class also were highly sympathetic towards the protagonists at the beginning of the semester, and resistant students responses were developed after they read a series of frustrating narratives (178). I admit that there are students who do not even try to listen to such conversations, as ignoring this reality can be convenient; once they face the reality, they have to admit that they live a privileged life, which can even cause a sense of guilt. These types of students undoubtedly perform racial microaggression through ignorance or intellectual laziness.

Regardless of where my students are coming from, whether they fail to reconfigure their reading experiences of multiethnic texts despite their genuine endeavor to do so, or whether they are intentionally or unintentionally performing racial microaggression out of ignorance or intellectual laziness, I myself, as an educator, believe the college classroom is one of the best spaces in which to expose students to new texts and provide them an opportunity to "re-create" their identities through texts. I do not want to blame college students, who are barely over 18 years old just graduating from high school, or any returning adult students, who are trying to broaden their knowledge, for their failure to understand difficult conversations about race or their inexperience with the issue. Many are products of their environment; they did not intentionally choose to learn American history from the perspective of White Americans, be exposed to

movies and TV series with a large cast of white actors on a daily basis, and take literature classes consisting of literary texts by white male authors. It is common to have students who resist, and I think that is one of the aspects “of our vocation that is sacred” as bell hooks puts it (13).

Teaching Multiethnic Literature and White Guilt

Another reason for student resistance and microaggression in the classroom can be white guilt. Defensive and even aggressive responses we get from people when we address issues about racism and white privilege are found not only inside the classroom but in our everyday lives. Scholars have found that these aggressive and hostile responses to conversations about racism are often caused by “white guilt.”

Shelby Steele argues that white guilt comes from knowledge; a white person can feel guilty by recognizing that the society is unjust and unequal and that they are the beneficiary of the unjust society:

. . . white guilt, in its broad sense, springs from a knowledge of ill-gotten advantage. More precisely, it comes from the juxtaposition of this knowledge with the inevitable gratitude one feels for being white rather than black in America. Given the moral instincts of human beings, it is all but impossible to enjoy an ill-gotten advantage, much less to feel at least secretly grateful for it, without consciously or unconsciously experiencing guilt. (Steele 499)

As Steele points out, perhaps white guilt is a natural response and part of the “moral instincts” that one might get when they obtain the knowledge of how they are involved in societal oppression. Therefore, we can easily imagine white students in multiethnic literature classes feeling guilty when they are reminded that they are the beneficiaries of today’s society. This

brings up the question of an instructor's role when we witness white guilt in the classroom. White guilt, Steele argues, can be used in a constructive way as it did for the 1964 Civil Rights Bill (502). Steele calls it "a sober white guilt," a type of guilt that is "more selfless and that makes genuine concern possible" (502). However, because the feeling of guilt can sometimes be overwhelming, it can also create "fear" that can cause "pressure to *escape* the guilt-inducing situation" (Steele 502).

We often witness intense guilty feelings that cause fear and pressure to turn into aggressive responses. Robin DiAngelo, a scholar who coined the term "white fragility" which refers to "a state in which even a minimum amount of racial stress becomes intolerable, triggering a range of defensive moves" (DiAngelo 247), discusses how white guilt can bring intense emotional responses from white people when conversations about racism take place. DiAngelo explains that many college classes choose not to address conversations about race in order to avoid intense emotional reactions from white students. DiAngelo states "It is far more the norm for these courses and programs to use racially coded language such as 'urban,' 'inner city,' and 'disadvantaged,' but rarely use 'white' or 'over-advantaged' or 'privileged'" (246). Meanwhile, when conversations about racism and white privilege are directly addressed, it is common to receive aggressive reactions from the crowd, especially the white students:

... if and when an educational program does directly address racism and the privileging of whites, common white responses include anger, withdrawal, emotional incapacitation, guilt, argumentation, and cognitive dissonance (all of which reinforce the pressure on facilitators to avoid directly addressing racism). So-called progressive whites may not respond with anger but still insulate themselves via claims that they are beyond the need

for engaging with the content because they “already had a class on this” or “already know this.” (DiAngelo 247)

These types of responses inhibit constructive discussions and lower student engagement.

Therefore, to make the classroom a successful learning environment, it is crucial to understand student responses--are they showing compassion fatigue, white guilt, or white fragility?

I argue that students should be able to correctly identify their feelings as well as the instructors. At the beginning of the semester, a class should have an ample discussion on the responses that they can expect from themselves, including compassion fatigue, white guilt, and white fragility. Identifying these different feelings and responses can help students see themselves more objectively. And it will help students to separate their emotions when reading multiethnic literature for a more critical reading experience.

Labeling, Community, and Praxis

When teaching “dangerous subjects,” Showalter emphasizes the importance of “candor and clear labeling” at the beginning of the course (126). Showalter explains that “candor and clear labeling” is

telling students in advance that they may be offended or upset; contextualizing the topic with some sociological or historical background; being prepared for some students to be shocked or upset no matter what you do, and allowing opportunities for them to respond. (126)

Allowing students time to prepare for reading and responding to difficult topics can help them understand the content before they turn to immediately resisting difficult texts. This approach is

not limited to issues about race but other difficult issues like suicide and explicit sexual language (Showalter 126-128).

One example of “candor and clear labeling” in college classrooms is the “trigger warning,” or any type of warning and clear statement in the syllabus or announcement at the beginning of a semester that will inform students about the difficult topics that will be discussed in the course. On the other hand, recent conversations have raised doubts about the effectiveness of trigger warnings in college classrooms. Trigger warnings were beginning to be used in the classroom with the development of study of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD); doctors and psychologists discovered that PTSD patients can “relive” their traumatic memory or be “triggered” by certain “sensory input” (Colbert 3). As more people become aware of the concept of PTSD and “triggers,” the need and demand to “warn” possible “triggers” have risen in modern society and even in the academic world. In recent years, college students at Oberlin College, Rutgers University, George Washington University, and University of California-Santa Barbara have been reported to show growing student demand for trigger warnings (Colbert 12). These demands claim the importance of creating a safe environment for professors and students with PTSD and of understanding the impact of sensitive topics—including race, sex, disability, and more—on individuals with PTSD in the classroom.

However, as the demand for trigger warnings in college classrooms arises, concerns over the effectiveness of trigger warnings have also increased. One problem with trigger warnings is that the boundary can always be ambiguous (Colbert 14). Because the trigger points can be different for each individual, it is difficult to draw the line between what is triggering and what is not; something that can be plain and banal one individual can be triggering to another. For college professors, especially most who are not certified medical doctors and psychologists for

PTSD treatments, it is almost impossible to identify all possible trigger points in the course material. Also, trigger warnings could violate the belief that “the nature of higher education is to make students uncomfortable, even shocked, as they face new ideas and experiences” (Laguardia, et al. 885). In the field of humanities, uncomfortable topics are inevitable to expand students' knowledge and experience. Again, because humanities professors and English professors are not medical doctors or clinical psychologists, it would be difficult to determine whether a student is actually experiencing PTSD symptoms or simply feeling anxious when discussing uncomfortable topics in the classroom.

Despite such concerns and doubts about trigger warnings, trigger warnings or any types of warnings in college classrooms are found to be helpful for students (Colbert 15; Laguardia, et al. 890). When students are given the information early on in the semester that some contents of the course can be “triggering,” they have the opportunity to mentally prepare themselves or even choose to drop the course (Colbert 15; Laguardia, et al. 890). All in all, trigger warnings can be a helpful tool for college instructors; whether students are truly being “triggered” or simply feeling uncomfortable over difficult topics, trigger warnings still help students understand what to expect from the course. Whether we call it “trigger warning,” as the popular use nowadays, or “labeling,” as in Showalter’s *Teaching Literature*, the essence is to create the safest and best classroom environment for successful teaching and learning.

In a multiethnic literature classroom, the trigger warning or labeling approach is important for both practical and ethical reasons. It is widely understood that topics about race can often bring uncomfortable feelings for many different reasons. The history of racism itself is already a depressing, traumatic topic; human history of slavery, segregation, and incarceration all entail the issue of race. Reading texts about Native American massacres, African American

slavery, Jim Crow Laws, and Japanese American internment camps can be troubling. Language can also be a problem; for instance, Showalter points out how the constantly repeated “N-word” in *Huckleberry Finn* can be an obstacle when teaching the text (125). However, when students are given the time to prepare themselves for reading such topics, they are more likely to better understand the issue, rather than dismiss or avoid. Therefore, trigger warnings can help instructors consider such practical questions and possible issues that can occur in the classroom. Trigger warnings are also ethically beneficial; the purpose of using a trigger warning is to promote inclusivity, especially for those who suffer from PTSD. I argue that promoting inclusivity and respecting individual experience by giving trigger warnings corresponds with the purpose of teaching multiethnic literature. Since multiethnic literature classroom is to help students understand the importance of diversity, equity, and inclusivity, it would give a good ethical example to have trigger warnings in the beginning of the class, showing that the professor and the course respects individual differences and struggles.

Supporting diversity, equity, and inclusivity in the classroom ultimately will help students learn the importance of “community.” Building “community” in the classroom is what hooks focuses on to make a successful learning environment. According to hooks, “community” in the classroom brings students together and stresses the objectives of the course (40). Building a community in the classroom, as hooks points out, will highlight the value of multiculturalism and amplify students’ desire to learn (40). Building a community, valuing diversity, and creating shared goals can be effective strategies to promote an ethical learning environment in a multiethnic literature classroom. However, hooks’s idea of community in a classroom does not focus on creating a “safe” space to learn which is the main purpose of applying “trigger warnings” in a classroom. She states:

Rather than focusing on issues of safety, a feeling of community creates a sense that there is shared commitment and a common ground that binds us. What we all ideally share is the desire to learn—to receive actively knowledge that enhances our intellectual development and our capacity to live more fully in the world. (hooks 40)

Though hooks's community theory does not perfectly correspond to the purpose of trigger warnings, I believe that applying both approaches can make a respectful learning environment where students can feel safe as well as feel a sense of community.

In regard to building a community, hooks emphasizes the importance of having each “individual voice” heard regardless of the class size (40). In order to do so, hooks has students write journals, write paragraphs in class, and read or share their ideas with one another. The endeavor to hear each individual student's voice stresses the importance of diversity in our community and removes any possibilities of causing invisibility in the classroom: “To hear each other (the sound of different voices), to listen to one another, is an exercise in recognition. It also ensures that no student remains invisible in the classroom” (hooks 41).

Small group discussions and journal assignments are already common and popular teaching strategies; studies have shown that small group discussions and journal writing promote student engagement and enhance critical thinking. Kerstin Hamann et al. surveyed students at an upper-level political science class at University of Central Florida and compared students' satisfaction with the class activities. In the study, students had the highest satisfactory level with small-group discussions compared to full-class discussions or online discussion forums (Hamann et al. 70). They responded that small-group discussions raised new questions and stimulated student interest (Hamann et al. 70).

More importantly, small group discussions are especially effective in developing critical thinking. Class discussions are common, sometimes even the basis of a college English classroom. Leading class discussions is a typical inquiry-based learning method that allows students to be active participants. While lecturing makes the professor the center of a class, discussions put students in the center and urge them to answer, question, and ultimately think critically. The famous education scholar John Dewey contends that the purpose of education is to develop students' "ability to think" (179). Dewey also famously said that successful teaching methods "give the pupils something to do, not something to learn; and the doing is of such a nature as to demand thinking, or the intentional noting of connections; learning naturally results" (181). There can be several important purposes in learning literature, such as to understand the aesthetics of the art of language, the history of literature, and more. Nevertheless, I believe that developing critical thinking skills is a purpose that students can expect from reading any type of literary text, and the best way to create a classroom environment to help students develop such skills is a classroom that implements a student-centered, inquiry-based learning approach.

Needless to say, hooks' approach to small-group discussions perfectly matches the nature of multiethnic literature classes. The purpose of teaching American literature by authors of color about people who are underrepresented is to bring the narratives that have been marginalized throughout American history to the center of the discourse in American literature. To value individual student voices in the classroom is to practice the idea of bringing marginalized voices to the center, which shows a great model to students.

Another issue we must consider when teaching literature is the practicalism of the study. We often hear professors or students using the term "the real world" to refer to the world outside of the classroom. The term "the real world" is used in many different contexts, and oftentimes to

claim that college is to help students prepare for “the real world.” Without further explanation about what this term means, there is a mutual understanding between students and professors of “the real world.” The problem with using the term “the real world” is that it promotes the false dichotomy of “the real world” versus “the classroom,” which renders the world inside of the classroom “unreal.” With this division of “real” and “unreal” world, whatever we discuss inside the classroom will also seem unreal or impractical. This problem can be especially true in multiethnic literature classes; in a classroom where topics like racial inequality or social justice are often discussed through literary texts but no actions are taken outside of the classroom, students could feel the classroom discussions to be only theoretical without a strong and pragmatic impact in their lives.

Stephen A. Raynie discusses the problem of English majors being considered impractical degrees. Raynie tells a story about when he ran into a student who was thinking about changing her major from English to human services to what she believed to be a more practical degree (76). The conversation he had with the student made Raynie ponder the growing issue that English and many non-STEM majors encounter—that college degrees are pressured to prove their worth by showing future financial stability and vocational connections for future careers. Despite this pressure to prove vocational, economic values of a major, Raynie argues that the English major should still “promote itself for what it is: a discipline of intellectual richness that enables people to lead fulfilling, prosperous lives in a variety of fields” (77). I agree with Raynie in that English inherently is a field that pursues intellectual growth and is focused on a specific career path. Nevertheless, because of the impact that English studies can have on one’s intellectual growth, critical mind, and understanding of texts, English studies can be applied in various ways to fields that require critical thinking, reading, and writing. I argue that the idea of

English studies being impractical is a misconception which stems from failing to understand how critical thinking is required in our everyday lives. I also believe that this misconception can be easily rectified with simple guidance from the instructor. As English instructors, if we can show students some examples of applying critical thinking to our lives, they will soon be able to overcome the misconceptions.

Therefore, Freire's approach to praxis can be helpful when it comes to the teaching of literature. Freire famously defines praxis as "reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it" (51). Freire argues that revolution in an oppressive society can be achieved through praxis. Revolution is an integral part of ethnic American studies. As a teacher of multiethnic American literature, I believe that our classes ultimately aim to foster students to make changes in our society to achieve racial equality. However, at the same time, I understand that praxis can be hard to achieve in a literature class. Students may not immediately understand how a literature class can achieve revolutionary changes.

Therefore, I propose a simple, but what I believe to be a meaningful, assignment that will help students understand how narratives can make changes in our society. The assignment is to have students introduce a multiethnic literary text to the class, whether it be a poem, short story, novel, or film. Through this assignment, I expect three outcomes. First, I expect students to understand the diversity in "American" literature. As I believe that narrative is something that can shape not only one's personal identity but also the identity of a society or an entire country, integrating racially and ethnically diverse voices to the "American narrative" will help students better understand what it means to be an American. Second, I expect students to understand that the texts we read in the class cannot represent an entire racial or ethnic group. Oftentimes when it comes to the topic of race and ethnicity in literature, students build a misperception that what

they read can represent the entire group of a certain race. Having students explore more literary works will help them see how many and diverse narratives exist. Finally, I expect this assignment will help students expand their reading choices.

This assignment will not achieve an immediate revolution in our society, but I believe it can be a stepping stone to change. As students can expand their knowledge of American narrative, I argue that the assignment will give students the opportunity to become more independent readers and apply their critical reading skills when reading outside the classroom.

Appendix

Presentation Assignment:

The purpose of this assignment is to give students the opportunity to explore multiethnic literary texts on their own and expand and diversify the narrative of US literature. You will read/watch a literary work (poem, short story, novel, film, etc.) that has race and ethnicity as one of its central themes and introduce the work to the class. You will also read at least four articles about the literary work to see how others interpret, analyze, and respond to the work. Please include a short summary of each article in the presentation. Finally, you will present a “personal response” where you will explain how *you* understand and interpret the text.

Presentation must include the following:

- A brief plot summary of the text.
- Some historical background information to understand the plot of the text.
- At least four articles that discuss and analyze the text. Articles should be published in a credible, reliable source and do not include review comments on websites like “Goodreads” or “Amazon.” A peer-reviewed article will be counted as TWO articles.

- Your personal response to the text.

You may use the following questions to generate ideas for your response:

- What made you choose the text to introduce to your classmates?
- How did the text broaden or deepen your knowledge of American history, art, and/or literature?
- How did the text shape or reshape your understanding of being an “American?”

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