Race and Racism in Modern East Asia

Vol. II: Interactions, Nationalism, Gender and Lineage

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Contents

        PART 3
Nationalism

PART 4
Gender and Lineage

The United States Arrives: Racialization and Racism in Post-1945 South Korea

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Contrary to the orientation of much of the (global) race and racism literature and the social science canon on migration, millions of immigrants among the Korean diaspora did not suddenly experience a social positioning in relation to the racialized groups in their destinations, but had lived versions of it in South Korea.[1] As Vladimir Tikhonov has demonstrated above with regard to the formation of race and racism in pre-1945 Korea, the advanced West and Japan were influential in the construction of a racial category system that co-mingled with, and moved beyond, mere culture and nationality.[2] The nearly eighty interviews, two years of ethnographic observation, and countless newspaper and popular cultural analyses I conducted between 2000 and 2005 corroborate and build on such history. The interviewees who ventured to Los Angeles, the second largest Korean city outside of the two Koreas, for instance, did not learn American White-Black and anti-Asian ideologies after they settled in the United States, but lived variants of them long before their arrival in the United States. In this chapter, I wish to submit that the American (neo-)imperial rule is mostly responsible for this. More specifically, I would like to suggest that this system of racialization or racism has relied on merging American military and cultural forces and has done so in two key ways: by ruling over and rendering a non-White country such as Korea invisible and by entrenching a White-Black hierarchy.[3]

The broader merger of global militarization and capitalist expansion in which these two processes are nested has yielded "commodity racism," a capitalist-created desire for consumer products that affirms the White racial superiority over "vanquished" peoples of color through products and marketing.[4] In charting the specifics of what I will call a post-World War II "imperialist racial formation" I show that Korean informants draw on largely Euro-American,

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1 N.Y. Kim, 2008.
2 See Tikhonov's chapter in this volume.
3 N.Y. Kim, 2008.
4 N.Y. Kim, 2008.

Japanese, and internal post-1945 ideologies to perceive themselves as existing "in-between" Whites and Blacks in the United States as well as across the globe. Much of Korean society, however, is simultaneously and begrudgingly attuned to Black Americans' significant power over Koreans as agents of the American occupational forces. Finally, many Koreans are aware that the White-Black binary in the United States and around the globe elides a people and nation like them. These multiple inequalities and social locations underscore the fact that South Korean internal hierarchies engage in various ways with those of the United States. To be more specific, it can be said that the peninsular society prioritizes the axes of the nation-state, political recognition, and ethnonationality to structure and hierarchize society within and between countries.[5]

In this chapter I will provide germane historical and contextual information on the advent of American militarism and on the interconnected market and cultural economy.[6] I would then like to discuss the South Korean cultural context of longstanding inferiority vis-à-vis imperial Japan into which the superpower United States entered and co-constructed inferiority vis-à-vis "America." In both cases, much of South Korean society admired and detested the foreign powers, the perennial dualist products of colonial and (neo)imperial subjugation. In the following section, I examine the Koreans' adoption, remapping, and rejection of ideologies shaped by (White) American militarist and cultural imperialism, by transnational exchanges, and—among newer immigrants—by the 1992 unrest in Los Angeles.

Contextual Background: America Marches In and Mass Mediates

The rise of an imperial Japan in Asia and the world was one of the reasons for the American engagement in World War II. At this juncture, the United States sought to gain resources and markets, thwart the spread of Communism, and achieve global hegemony both within and from the Pacific Rim.[7] As part of their World War II treaty, the United States and the then-Soviet Union

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5   Most of the information in this paragraph is derived from N.Y. Kim, 2008.

6   This piece focuses on racialization and racism in South Korea post-1945. In other work (N.Y. Kim, 2008), I empirically document how Koreans were racially primed for the United States' White-over-Black order (and for accepting it) by such factors as Western, Chinese, and Japanese ideologies (see Tikhonov's chapter in this volume), the force of Confucian notions of social groups' proper places, and the lack of a history of *antiracist* movements as well as a discourse concerning Black citizenry.

7   Lowe, 1996.

arbitrarily divided Korea, and thus divided the lives of Korean loved ones, most of whom have been separated and estranged ever since. The American occupation began right after the treaty was signed and its military has remained in Korea ever since. The demilitarized zone (DMZ) at the thirty-eighth parallel currently remains the most heavily armed region in the world. In the almost 70 years since its establishment, many expansive military bases and surrounding camptowns have been built to accommodate both the American objectives and the soldiers' material, cultural, and sexual needs and wants.

In the context of US military power, American mass media and commodities have powerfully symbolized "American Fever" in all its modernity and significantly shaped subsequent emigration to the United States.[8] The convergence between the American military and mass media culture is most readily seen in the American Forces Korea Network (AFKN; AFN Korea since 1997). The United States began this military television and radio broadcasting network for its troops in 1957 and also made it fully accessible to South Koreans, an atypical move given the technical problems that usually preclude it. Yet AFN Korea has transmitted the channel's American movies, soap operas, professional sports and prime-time programs[9] throughout Seoul and other regional bases since the very beginning. Though I could not locate statistics on South Korean viewer demographics (multiple sources claimed they did not exist), many South Koreans have remarked that those who wish to learn English or who simply adore American culture tend to be regular watchers of AFN Korea.[10] In the wake of AFKN's arrival in 1957, two of South Korea's own popular broadcasting stations—Korea Broadcasting Service (KBS) and Munhwa Broadcasting Co. (MBC)—arrived with a bang.

In fact, the consumption of popular culture has spiked so dramatically and citizens have received so much mass media since the 1960s that the country has earned a reputation as one of the world's most media dependent societies,[11] not least because it is also the most wired nation in the world.[12] Furthermore, some of the United States' largest movie markets are in Asian countries like South Korea, which has typically been the second largest Hollywood market outside North America.[13] Although the United States no longer owns and produces most of the world's globalized media like it once had, the actual texts

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8   Abelmann & Lie, 1995: 64; Park, 1997.

9   *The Washington Post*, 15 November 1986.

10   See Kang & Morgan, 1988.

11   Kang, 1991.

12   *The Korea Times*, 30 January 2011.

13   "Asian flu batters healthy o'seas B.O." 1998. *Variety*.

and their cultural "look" are largely American.[14] The "Americanness" of such imagery is no small matter, as the mass media have been considered to be the most powerful influences on contemporary culture.[15] That said, however, the Korean Wave (Kor. *hanryu*) of popular culture that has taken Asia by storm has, along with other examples such as India's Bollywood culture, slowly begun to change the shape of global culture writ large.

South Korea, Japan, and the American Concept of Race

In the nation's own collective imaginary, its early potential and promise were proscribed by external powers: China, Japan, and, most recently, the United States. As with all systems of oppression and marginalization, the subordinated must negotiate the constant reminders of their inferiority, particularly if the foreign power's prowess is etched into many elements of the peninsula. In modern history, most older Koreans condemn the Japanese as evildoers, while young adults tend to be more uneven in their outlook. It is clear, however, that both share a sense of inferiority to the former colonizer. This struggle is partially traceable to the American occupation government's favoring of Japan despite deeming it a race of inhuman savages during the war, a policy that partly inspired Japan's pan-Asian and yellow doctrine.[16] The US army's respect for Japan, perhaps inspired by the lower status ascribed to Koreans by both powerhouses, involved the continued use of Japanese colonial officers in disturbing shows of camaraderie, ushering in anti-Korean prejudices that would prevail throughout the occupation.[17] Bruce Cumings has found that the "The Japanese were viewed as cooperative, orderly ... while the Koreans were seen as ... unruly." These characterizations cropped up repeatedly in the literature and had probably originated from the initial American responses to Korea in the fall of 1945. The occupational forces still called on the Japanese as unofficial advisors and drew on Korean colluders even after the Koreans had expressed their displeasure with regard to American-Japanese camaraderie.[18]

As with South Korea's tortured beliefs in Japan's national, and hence *racial*, dominance given its earlier political-economic successes and imperialist past, Koreans have largely accepted White America's hegemonic construction of itself as the racialized reference point.[19] This self-representation of Whiteness

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14   Ang, 1996; Hall, 1991.

15   Bauman, 1992: 31

16   Dower, 1986; and Tikhonov, in this volume.

17   Cumings, 1981: 138.

18   Cumings, 1981: 138–139.

19   See Lipsitz, 1998.

has boded well with the Koreans' association of a nation with its majority group, i.e., its "owners." It was not until the United States military occupied South Korea and the American mass media followed on its heels that residents came to think beyond "America" as just White. In other words, South Korean society gradually began to receive "America" as a White-over-Black nation. I will later argue, however, that the American mass media seared Black people and anti-Black stereotypes more widely across the country than the military presence. It is noteworthy, for instance, that Kang's survey of 1,835 popular stories revealed the Blacks' absence in Korean literature until 1961, sixteen years after the military had proliferated across the peninsula.[20]

The reception of an ideology of America as a White country in which a lot of Black people live has shaped South Korean society's own sense of its racialized identity. In other words, although Japanese colonization had helped shore up Koreans' sense of oneness as an ethnic nation, the postliberation Koreans were still fragmented along several dimensions such as class, region, dialect, and ideology when the United States occupational forces arrived.[21] The Koreans' sense of their group as a uniform collectivity in relation to the two emerged, therefore, by virtue of the mass arrival of White and Black Americans onto the peninsula. In addition, the American "race" categories collapsed the ethnic and national differences *within* the White and Black groupings (e.g., German, Spaniard; Ghanaian, Haitian), differences that formerly stood at the center of Korean society's orientation. Thus understood, one of the processes of post-1945 racialization was clearly underway.

Because "imperialist racial formations" often beget dualism such as envy and hatred (of, e.g., Japan) among the subordinated population, the Koreans' reverence for and sense of inferiority to (White) America that began under the Western missionaries was intensified and textured by the US military intervention. General Douglas MacArthur, for example, has served as the icon of United States military humanitarianism in the Korean War and continues to be valorized in South Korean history textbooks. Kang notes that within South Korea's popular culture, Korean characters set in the immediate wake of 1945 express intense gratitude to the "Americans" for "liberating" their nation from the Japanese.[22] In my interview research, the informants' expressions of hegemonic "American savior" ideologies were particularly apparent among those who had emigrated or sought to do so, not surprising as most people who choose to leave tend to be predisposed towards a pro-American sentiment. The

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20   Kang, 1991.
21   Personal communication with John Lie.
22   Kang, 1991.

older generations in particular tend to regularly share narratives of "America" rescuing Korea from a near inexorable fate (read: Communism, poverty) thanks to such watersheds as its benevolent intervention in the Korean War and its generosity with humanitarian aid and military protection. Although the younger generations do not generally support a continued US military presence, the students and young professionals I interviewed often expressed a desire to perceive themselves according to White Western modernity.[23]

Korean society's emphasis on ethno-nationality and ranking by blood was fundamentally informed by the White/light and Black/dark ideologies introduced by US militarization and by the Americanesque cultural saturation of the peninsula. Indeed, Korean society's native ethno-national category system corresponded well with the Western powers' nineteenth-century Darwinism in suggesting a dominant White West, an Asian middle, and an African bottom.[24] Despite this history, South Korean society's perception of being "in-between" has been at its most forceful and popular since South Korea's own economic development, and has been fundamentally shaped by Japanese (and advanced Western) discourses. As Japan's economy rose to prominence, and as previously unequal classes converged, a new ideal of a middle stratum embodied by the *sarariman* (salary man or White-collar worker) came into being on the archipelago.[25] Another catalyst was the late 1980s' arrival of low-skilled workers from less-developed nations including South Korea.

Despite many of the foreign workers' middle-class backgrounds and similar skin tones, Japan constructed itself as a "Whiter" and "middle-class" nation above the "Blacker" and "lower-class" migrants and their countries.[26] The seeds of the ROK's own postwar development were planted by Japanese colonization and by this post-1945 racial context.[27] As a later blooming "Asian Tiger," South Korea similarly Blackened the foreign workers who would join them from "lesser Asia."[28] The Koreans considered these oft-darker skinned workers' desperation for Seoul's "three-D" jobs (dirty, dangerous, difficult) as an expression of their inferior national blood and of their own "Whiter, middle-class" standing.[29] Despite their great pride in this economic arrival, the peninsular populace had also fundamentally engaged the downside of their color—

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23   *Chosun Ilbo*, 17 September 1990.

24   See Russell, 1991: 6; see Tikhonov's chapter in this volume.

25   Lie, 2001: 31.

26   Lie, 2001: 19.

27   Lie, 1998.

28   Lie, 1998.

29   See Wallerstein, 1974.

class—ethno-national order: their position not on top but in the (invisible) *middle* of the racialized and gendered global economic order.

The American Military, Whiteness, and Imperialist Racial Formation

As noted above, the US military has been central to South Korean society's construction of the Whiteness of the United States and the advanced White West. A key point to bear in mind is that in the eyes of Americans and Koreans alike White Americans were not just benevolent, but quite possibly the most attractive people in the world. Beyond foodstuffs, the United States military also "doled out" a public relations program offering free reconstructive and elective cosmetic surgery to Korean War victims. One of the main procedures offered was the double eyelid procedure in which a fold is cut into the eyelid. As a result of the US military's actions, Asia's multi-billion dollar cosmetic surgery industry actually enjoyed its high point in South Korea in the wake of the Korean War (1950–53) and not in Japan as commonly thought. David Palumbo-Liu's analysis of a 1955 essay by one of these army surgeons, Dr. Ralph Millard, reveals the doctor's sense of racial and national superiority over the "Orientals." "A slant-eyed Korean interpreter," Millard noted, "speaking excellent English, came in requesting to be made into a 'round-eye.' His future lies in his relation with the West and he felt that because of the squint in his slant eyes, Americans could not tell what he was thinking and consequently did not trust him. As this was partly true, I consented to do what I could." Millard proceeded to give the interpreter a double eyelid and extra nose cartilage. The doctor then pridefully remarked that his patient could now go to the United States in order to study successfully for the ministry.[30]

Nowhere does Millard acknowledge, however, that he and the United States military were partly responsible for the Koreans' sense of inferiority to Whiteness. His stated belief that "Oriental" eyes were problematic legitimates Korean society's sense of shame over their appearance, the shame that motivated them to see Millard in the first place. Indeed, many Koreans' consciousness of their people's aesthetic inferiority intensified in the wake of the Korean War, when "Western-style Whiteness and facial features became the Korean ideal."[31] Besides wanting double eyelids, Koreans also desired to be as tall or as masculine or feminine as the "Americans." To provide but one example, soci-

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30   Palumbo-Liu, 1999: 95.
31   Jo, 1992: 403.

ologist John Lie found that South Korean politicians began to take on "improbable" American names like Patrick Henry Shinicky (Sin Ik-hŭi) and John M. Chang (Chang Myŏn).[32] The South Korean populace, then, had been made to feel inferior not just by virtue of their reliance on a superior United States military, but also by virtue of the military's own *racial ideologies*, with Dr. Millard's views constituting but one illustration of the latter.

The familiarity of the White physical aesthetic from the missionaries to the post-1945 American forces and mass media had secured the Koreans' noted sense of aesthetic inferiority. Advertisements for Western products, for example, especially those produced for personal care and beauty products that proliferated in the top Korean and Asian magazines, often used a White model.[33] Beauty in general is far from a trivial matter for Korean women in particular, since attracting a husband has often been a pathway to economic survival. Job opportunities and chances for social mobility for Korean women are comparatively rare, even today. In addition to the trend of middle-class parents giving their daughters eyelid surgery as high school graduation presents,[34] the Korean men's search for conventional attractiveness has also helped to make the country's cosmetic surgeons the busiest in the world.[35]

Unsurprisingly, Korean women were more explicit than Korean men in the qualitative interviews with regard to their internalized inferiority about their appearance, despite the men's intense exposure to the hegemonic White masculinity of a John Wayne or a J.R. Ewing. In addition, heterosexual South Korean women have long expressed favor toward White Western men or, more accurately, the hegemonic White masculinity that defines these men.[36] Drawing heavily on American and European mass media images, even women in their sixties noted their younger days of idealizing White male icons like Jeremy Irons (the "ultimate gentleman"), Elvis Presley, and James Dean. Younger women considered desirable the likes of Andrea Bocelli, Harrison Ford, Keanu Reeves (incidentally, part Chinese), Leonardo DiCaprio, and David Beckham. These icons, however, must also be understood in the context of American military dominance, given the fact that South Korean women have historically married White (and Black) American servicemen.[37] Informed by this history, Korean women have perceived that White men are more gender egalitarian

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32   Lie 1998: 143.

33   Neelankavil, Mummalaneni, & Sessions, 1995.

34   *Toronto Star Newspaper*, 4 October 2001.

35   Holliday & Elfving-Hwang, 2012.

36   Kim, 2006.

37   Min, 2006: 46–50.

than Korean men, an ideology that has motivated them towards racial comparisons and towards a desire for an "international marriage."[38] This social pattern also exists in Japan.[39] Such a view does not necessarily mean that Korean women are no longer attracted to Korean men or that they harbor no concerns about the White men's potential cultural arrogance. Yet the informants continued to racialize White men as gender egalitarian and Korean men as gender traditional.[40] In so doing, they inadvertently reify a global hierarchy of racialized masculinity.

Another form of racialization that the US military imposed concerned perspectives of "Asians" and Asianness. Despite their respect for Japan, the American military officers were also, at times, ambivalent towards their former enemy. For one, the American forces were also occupying Japan with a view to stripping it down and burying any chance for future military prowess. Inverting Japan's previously celebrated imperial pan-Asianness,[41] members of the US military racialized *all* Asians, including the Japanese, as foreign, strange, exotic, "gookish," the "same breed of cats," and "coolies."[42] Indeed, the blurred line between "Oriental" and "Orient" had already been popularized by the Chicago School in the United States[43] by the time American military officials came to the peninsula at the end of World War II. It is thus not surprising that American soldiers commonly referred to Koreans as "gooks" or even worse as late as the 1990s.[44] That said, however, the United States military has always hegemonically lauded itself as a liberator and ally in front of the Korean state and the Korean population at large.

American Mass Media, White Heroes, and Counter-Hegemony

The above ideologies betray the cooperation between the American militarist state and other types of racial formation.[45] As noted above, the American military and mass culture converged in the form of the American Forces Korea Network (AFKN), and hence the South Korean residents have been exposed

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38   Kim, 2006.
39   Kelsky, 2001.
40   Kelsky, 2001.
41   Dower, 1986; Tikhonov, in this volume.
42   Lauterbach, 1947; *The Nation*, 25 June 1960.
43   Yuh, 2002.
44   Lie, 1998: 144.
45   McClintock, 1995. Cf. Omi & Winant, 1994: 56.

to the same United States military propaganda and pro-American representations that have saturated the bases since 1957. In the case of South Korea, this link between the state and dominant representations has forged the superiority and normativity of White America and, conversely, the inferiority and Otherness of Korea and its people. This, in turn, has been linked to several representations.

"America," the Vast Cowboy Frontier. Although in both sites the Koreans who immigrated to the United States since the late 1980s and the early 1990s have had the greatest and most diverse access to American television news and entertainment, movies, music, and print journalism, American popular culture has also been an integral part of South Korean life for the past forty years.[46] In this setting, even those interviewees who left the country at around 1970, the first year of the mass Korean exodus to the United States, admit to having watched a great deal of American movies and television hits. One pattern was middle-aged Korean men's "absorption" of the United States through their penchant for imported westerns. Exposure to John Wayne's free journeys through the vast terrain of the West provided these men with a portrait of an "America" larger than life. For much of Korean society sharing the common adage "our small country" and frequently attributing shortcomings and even Korean narrow-mindedness to this small size (recall that Koreans believe that people "embody" their nations), the vast geography of the United States is a form of power that is to be envied and admired.

"Americans" Are Richer Than Us. The Korean informants often invoked the wealthier and more powerful White American reference point to construct "America" as an ideal. For instance, none mentioned the Native American sidekicks or enemies in the westerns and rarely discussed the poor people who appeared in the media texts. Invoking White American wealth instead, the South Koreans interpret it in the context of their society's formidable class logic, one that naturalizes the superiority of the rich. The US occupation force's chocolate giveaways, golf courses, and ability to waste unselfconsciously had already alerted Koreans to the fact that common Americans were even richer than the Korean upper class.[47] Indeed, American junk food is still sold in upscale department stores as a luxury item well into the new millennium. Interviewees remarked that watching "America" from a less-developed Korea involved envying, for instance, the more "modern" lifestyle of the upper-crust New England White family in *Peyton Place* (1964–69; starring Mia Farrow and Ryan O'Neal). In a focus group of young South Korean students and

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46   Kang, 1991.
47   Yuh, 2002: 35.

professionals, remarks were in the vein of "Whites wearing tuxedos and drinking champagne." These American media representations reify an essentialization of national development and social class status that attributes America's superpower status to the innate talents of its people. The Koreans are painfully aware that they have been playing catch up ever since.

"Americans" Are Happier, Nicer, and Freer Than Us. During their interviews, Koreans of both genders readily conjured up the classic American films they had seen, the vast majority of which featured, and were exclusively about, White Americans—*Breakfast at Tiffany's, Titanic*, and *Roman Holiday*. In other words, Whites are the reference point in every movie offered. Building on the tropes of kind, selfless early missionaries and of American benevolence during the Korean War, the respondents gleaned the notion of happier, nicer, and more liberated "Americans" from these mass media texts. To reach such a conclusion, Koreans understood White Americans within the logic of the South Korean cultural norms that typically do not prioritize extroversion, smiling, making eye contact, and sharing deep emotions with strangers (however, it must be said that the peninsula has incorporated some of these norms in recent years as a result of cultural globalization processes).

"American" Men Are Better Men. Though fewer in number, some women were not just shaped by Hollywood, hegemonic masculinity and hearsay, but by the personal encounters they had with White men in South Korea. Although long-time immigrants in the United States had fewer chances to interact with White men, newcomers reported some, albeit mostly acquaintance-level, meetings with businessmen, exchange students, and language teachers. Such views are supported by data on spousal preferences from Edward Chang's nonrandom survey of almost 1,300 students (assuming all participants were completely truthful about their sexual orientation).[48] Among females, White American and European men (United States, United Kingdom, France, Germany, Italy—57.1 percent) were a close second to Korean men (South, North, overseas—66.6 percent). The women's preferences disaggregated by nation, however, revealed that "American" and most Europeans (especially from Western Europeans) ranked above even *North Korean* men. This gendered subtext reveals that South Korean women most desire husbands from highly developed "modern" countries, not co-ethnics.[49] In contrast, the Korean men's preferences constellated around perceptions of co-racial and more "gender traditional" women; they preferred Koreans first, then Chinese and then Japanese before White American and European women (41.6 percent).

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48   Chang, 1999.

49   See Hirsch, 2003.

Counter-Hegemony and Race

Korean women have also resisted the hegemonic glorifications of White American men in fundamental ways as part of their anti-American resistance in South Korea. Anti-American sentiment has been sparked and exacerbated by American soldiers' violence and abuses of privilege in general and by the rapes and murders of Korean women in particular. Invoking these, some of the women interviewees in Seoul and in the United States had condemned the United States military as a site of oppression at the intersection of nation, "race," and gender. A student named Ms. Park, for instance, remarked that unlike the handsome celebrities that the women in her focus group had invoked, "arrogant" White servicemen immediately came to mind when "Americans" were mentioned. Other women characterized the troops as "uneducated," "anti-women," and "deceitful." "Uneducated" introduces social class by distinguishing between low-class, crude White GIs (subordinate masculinity) and the normative higher-class, refined White professionals who came as elected officials or businessmen, for instance (hegemonic masculinity).

Korean men had been further compelled by the ideology of "they're stealing our women," a common way in which men exercise power over other men within a racialized patriarchy.[50] These statements reveal that the South Koreans' sense of inferiority to White America's military, political democracy, wealth, beauty, and men did not go uncontested. It is thus not surprising that editorials in this spirit began to appear in *Chosun Ilbo*, South Korea's highest-circulation newspaper, in the 1960s, around the birth of the highly controversial Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA). The newspaper also condemned SOFA's land infractions against poor villagers. The 1980s witnessed the shift to anti-Americanism, particularly against dominant Whites, due in large part to the 1980 Kwangju Massacre in which thousands of pro-democracy student protestors against the rise of a military regime were murdered by South Korean troops.[51] The United States came to be implicated in the killings owing to its supreme command over the military hierarchy of the ROK and USA forces.[52]

A historical watershed of racialization at the transnational crossroads of global and ethnic media involves Korean society's interpretation of the White American state and Whiteness in the 1992 Los Angeles unrest. The social explosion that occurred against urban Korean merchants after four White police officers were acquitted of racial violence against Rodney King signaled an American disposition of derision and dismissal toward Korean ethnics (and,

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50   See Collins, 2000; Espiritu, 1997.

51   Clark, 1988.

52   Yuh, 2002: 73, 245.

by extension, the home country) to many South Koreans. Although some South Korean media outlets tagged the unrest the "Black riots" (Kor. *hŭgin pokdong*), the coverage, even among mainstream and conservative outlets, made it clear how Korean immigrants suffered tremendous losses due to the American forces' protection of predominantly White and rich Beverly Hills and Westwood at the expense of Koreatown.[53] The ROK media also claimed that Korean Americans were scapegoats in what was ultimately a White-Black conflict, yet the mainstream US media insisted on absolving Whites of blame by stressing that the unrest was due to mutual Black-Korean antipathy. The South Korean newspapers accused the American media of continuously airing footage of the Korean merchant, Soon Ja Du, shooting a Black teenager, Latasha Harlins, and of airing inflammatory scenes of Black animosity toward Koreans.[54]

Similar constructions of White American dysfunction flow from the South Koreans' increased exposure to sensationalistic American news broadcasts, as would-be émigrés have been much abuzz about the school shootings in the United States. Such a phenomenon is virtually incomprehensible and wholly bewildering in a society in which civilian gun use is illegal and rarely practiced. Many interviewees asked how White students could shoot and kill each other and themselves in their classrooms, such as in Columbine?[55] In fact, in an Asian society in which schooling is so paramount that in some parts of the year students attend school from 6 A.M. to 10 P.M. and then supplementary schools until 1 A.M., South Koreans often cancel their immigration plans due to the alarming phenomenon of school murders in the United States. Such incidents prompted new immigrant Ms. Paik to qualify that typical Whites were nice as long as "you don't offend any of them."

Blackness and Imperialist Racial Formation

The other side of the imperialist racial formation—Blackness and darkness—also has its fundamental roots in post-World War II American militarism in Asia. The occupation of Japan, for instance, brought both Black soldiers and the White military's racism to the land of the rising sun, giving rise to a

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53   Kim, 1993.
54   *Chosun Ilbo*, 4 and 7 May 1992.
55   More recently, Newtown and myriad other school shootings have only reinforced this perception.

lucrative Japanese market of Blackface minstrel and "darky" goods.[56] These were then exported, in boomerang fashion, to the United States where they were hot commodities. South Koreans had probably encountered the popular "pickaninny" illustrations in Japanese books from the 1960s, themselves inspired by the American work *The Story of Little Black Sambo*.

Although Koreans had some exposure to pre-World War II ideologies about Blacks, Japan's postwar commodity racism industry seemed to have popularized the representations across the widest of audiences. After trade relations were normalized in 1965, Japan began exporting Blackface and "darky" products to its former colony. The Sanrio Company's pickaninny doll was still imported as late as the 1990s, until it was pulled from the shelves after Black American protests.[57] In response to protests and out of concern for its global image, Japan has since discontinued or modified its products, though imagery is subjective and can often be called into question. Black face or "darky" imagery and products have even survived in the United States and Europe despite fierce taboos. Although the narratives below echo these notions, the situational reality of the Koreans' scant contact with Blacks in the flesh before the United States' military proliferation should also be considered. In this case, the fear of the unfamiliar in a predominantly Korean and Asian society should not be surprising, as the Koreans were not only unnerved by the Blacks' appearance but also by White missionaries' alien looks, albeit mostly in the early years. During the Jim Crow era, the small number of Koreans who worked as staff on the bases or in the seedier camptowns observed the separate and unequal treatment of White and Black members of the military. Black Americans also have been highly present along the "front line" of the demilitarized zone and have been denied the White GIs' less dangerous assignments in Seoul.[58] Since the formal desegregation of the military, the soldiers and the camptown restaurants, bars, and brothels have remained, in many areas, informally segregated.

Over the years, the South Koreans' encounters with Black troops have been troubled, in part as a result of resentment over the injustices they had suffered and incurred on account of the American presence. In the 1970s, even White soldiers admitted that they heard Koreans repeat the soldiers' anti-Black epithets without fully comprehending their meaning or the level of animus involved.[59] On the other side of the line, Blacks have either resisted local prejudices or have adopted their stereotypes and abused their power

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56   Russell, 1991: 23.

57   Russell, 1991.

58   Sturdevant & Stoltzfus, 1993.

59   Moon, 1997: 72.

over Koreans, potentially signaling Black Americans' reactionary methods and their oppression of the Korean populace. In addition, shortly after the first big wave of Korean immigration to the United States in 1970, Black nationalism had intensified among soldiers, fueling feverishly racialized conflicts. Fights between Black and White soldiers and between Blacks and Korean residents were common. In a context in which dark skin and Blacks were already seen in a less favorable light, such incidents spurred the idea that Black soldiers cause more trouble than "the Americans."[60]

The multiracial children of American GIs and Korean women, and especially those of part-Black descent, also suffer extreme oppression as a result.[61] Korean society's very language of a "pure" bloodline and consanguinity serves as a symbolic point of resistance against outside powers' intrusions and against the "contamination" of the Koreans' once "pure blood;" the more the marginalized populace can get rid of the evidence, the more it feels sovereign, the more it feels *Korean*. As a formerly colonized and presently dependent people, then, their tendency is to displace internalized inferiority in ways that foster prejudice and discrimination.

It is important to note that Koreans did not always follow the route of racializing Black Americans as "low-class" soldiers and violent occupiers. Although there is a need for more historical documentation of Blacks' relations with Koreans (and others) in Asia during World War II and the Korean War, there is some sparse evidence of Koreans (and Japanese) having treated Black American soldiers with respect. In George Lipsitz's analysis of veteran Ivory Perry, a prominent Black American activist from St. Louis, he finds that Perry attributed the birth of his activism to his understanding of Japan in World War II and the Korean War.[62] In my interviews, an informant named Mr. Roh, a government inspector during the Jim Crow era, said that he had seen many Korean military personnel and Black Americans bonding with each other. Both sought to beat the White servicemen in every way, including in sport, despite the violent racial conflicts that sometimes erupted as a result. Mr. Roh himself said that he felt much closer to the Blacks than to the Whites, especially at the United States Consulate in Seoul.[63]

A number of American mass media texts have highlighted Whites' racist treatment of Blacks under slavery. Some South Koreans were horrified by such movies as *Roots*. Several of the young adults cited Spike Lee's critically

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60   N.Y. Kim, 2008; in press.
61   Kim, in press.
62   Lipsitz, 1995: 63.
63   N.Y. Kim, 2008.

acclaimed film *Malcolm X* as disturbingly eye opening. The younger genera-
tions, therefore, seemed to be wrestling with their indoctrination by White
racism (especially against Blacks). Although Edward Chang's noted survey of
Korean university students' marital preferences, for instance, revealed that
Blacks, referred to as African Blacks, were the least preferred, my data reveal
a more complex navigation of prejudices, their contexts, and a nascent aware-
ness of antiracist and socially desirable talk. These baby steps are likely the
partial product of Blacks' recent protests against Japanese Blackface or "darky"
products. The intensifying cultural interpenetration between the two countries
is also responsible, as manifested in the Korean youths' adoration of R&B and
hip-hop (although a love of culture does not necessarily suggest a disappear-
ance of prejudice), in their increased marriages to non-Whites, in the number
of multiracial military children, in the labor migrants' protests for equality, and
in the (politicized) anger over the 1992 LA unrest.[64]

Racism and Invisibility in Korean "America"

Nancy Abelmann and John Lie have pinpointed American mass culture as a
central force propagating anti-Black *prejudice* in South Korea.[65] The saturation
of American mass media representations have likely stitched the Black slave,
gang banger, drug addict, and one-dimensional entertainer into the South
Korean collective consciousness more than any other source. Accordingly, the
respondents most frequently invoked cultural representations when describ-
ing Blacks' racial characteristics. Although the immigrant cohorts in this study
were exposed to racially stereotypical images, differences existed in the type
and amount of images they consumed. Koreans who had emigrated during the
1970s to early 1980s tended to restrict their images of Blacks to those of for-
mer slaves, servants, and generally poverty-stricken people. Later immigrant
cohorts consistently invoked the ubiquitous images of Blacks (mainly men)
as criminals and drug addicts popular since the 1980s. As the ROK has long
relied on Western news agencies for over 60 percent of its own news content—
usually AP, Reuters, AFP and the BBC—all the cohorts have been exposed to
Western-centered news.[66]

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64   N.Y. Kim, 2008.
65   Abelmann & Lie, 1995: 150.
66   Kang, 1991: 116–17.

Unlike their forebears, however, recent immigrants have been exposed to news images of "ghetto Blacks" and crack, the once White "glamour drug."[67] Writing on the media coverage of the Los Angeles unrest, Herman Gray[68] argues that it is fixated on "neoconservative discourses of immorality and irresponsibility." Interpreting such discourses within the Koreans' dominant cultural system can foster intensified prejudice. To illustrate this point, consider newspaper reports of low-income Black Americans' rage about the large profits made by Korean American small business proprietors in Black communities without living in or giving back to the community.[69] These do not bode well in a Confucianist society that naturalizes social class hierarchies and heralds diligent hard work as the cornerstone of any person who is worth respecting and any life that is worth living.

Although some of the interviewees indicted White racism and the Koreans' prejudices as responsible for the unrest, many new immigrants and South Koreans shored up their anger toward, and fear of, Blacks through the "riots." As South Koreans watched Black Americans set fires, vandalize, and attack innocent White bystanders in a country with few Black citizens, this often sharpened the convictions of would-be migrants like Ms. Paik that they would never open their business in a Black area. As Ms. Paik was also fearful of Black soldiers in the home country she seemed to conflate the potential violence and criminality of the soldiers in Seoul and protestors' violence and criminality in Los Angeles. In fact, many post-1992 emigrants to the United States reached the same conclusion. The Seoul residents who were not driven by the need to stress Blacks' criminal wrongdoing followed the other route: identifying with Blacks. Possibly influenced in part by a number of sympathetic media reports, these Seoul residents interpreted the unrest as caused by White racism and believed that Blacks were as much victims of it as the Korean immigrants.

More normalized and affirming images of Blacks in the United States and within global popular culture have influenced recent South Korean émigrés. These more multicultural representations can be seen as one major difference between the mass media and the occupation forces. Mass media texts have attempted to portray Blacks positively and thus encouraged Koreans' identification with the group while military ideologies rarely did so. For instance, recent immigrants remarked that they saw more Black Americans on screen who "looked smart," like Denzel Washington, who were "living better" and who were "very strong politically." In addition to a more multicultural popular

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67   Reeves & Campbell, 1997: 63.

68   Gray, 1995: 172.

69   *Chosun Ilbo*, 5 May 1992.

culture, the Korean entertainment industry's emulation of Black American hip-hop since the 1990s could also signal one way in which American mass culture has fostered favorable perceptions. It goes without saying that the appropriation of hip-hop could also move in problematic directions. At the time of this writing, however, I have noticed bits and pieces of both in South Korea, suggesting both hope and concern.

While Asians have been portrayed in Hollywood since the early twentieth century and have become more visible in recent years, Asians and Asian Americans are still less prominent in mass media texts than Blacks and even Latinos.[70] In my interview study the South Korean informants could thus rarely recall representations of themselves or other Asians in American mass culture. They also did not see themselves as part of "America." It is worth noting that the college student and young professional interviewees in Seoul—the generation who tends to consume the most American popular culture—had only been garrulous about images of Whites and Blacks in the United States. They fell silent and paused for long periods when they were asked about images of Koreans or Asians in the United States.

The inability to associate Asian Americans with "America" is part of my Korean informants' general dismay over being dominated by the United States but being a nation unfamiliar to most Americans. This paradox, coupled with South Korea's subordinate status in relation to the advanced West in the global order, has secured their overall sense of invisibility and partial presence. Although the US White-over-Black order has reinforced Koreans' sense of "middle" positioning above Blacks, it has also reminded many South Koreans that they are not part of the binary at all, leading to their invisibility in the United States and, by extension, the globe. In other words, the relationship between the globe's White West and brown-skinned peoples has largely muted the existence and importance of other nations such as South Korea. Furthermore, as "American" service people, both Whites and Blacks have engendered and can reproduce the Koreans' sense of partial presence in their own country.

When focusing on their group's social positioning *within* the United States, the interviewees had some idea that White Americans coexisted with Asian Americans. Yet they were clear about Korean and Asian Americans (or Latinos, for that matter) not being part of the mainstream American national identity. Similarly, Whiteness is the reference point in the American mass media while Blacks are the most consistently visible subjects of political discourses

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70   Entman & Rojecki, 2000.

concerning non-Whites in the United States.[71] Many Koreans, then, and especially in recent decades, have come to the United States armed with the knowledge that Blacks are "more American" while they themselves lack political visibility and recognition.[72] In this regard, the 1992 Los Angeles unrest was certainly telling. The Seoul residents believed that if the Korean Americans had not been so politically invisible and palatable—and, ostensibly, if the ROK was a superpower—White America would never have turned a blind eye to Koreans and used them as a buffer between themselves and Black Americans.

The theme of Korean political weakness could also be found in a small number of transnational news stories. Consider a 1988 *Chosun Ilbo* piece on an immigrant by the name of Mr. Choi: "Mr. Choi sued the United States government for racial discrimination after he and his Asian co-workers were fired from a police department for no apparent reason. Mr. Choi claims, *'Asians are more vulnerable to racial discrimination than Blacks because of the lack of human rights protection programs specific to Asians'* " (emphasis added).[73] Transnational media items on the L.A. unrest, on Black Americans in the political arena, and on experiences like Mr. Choi's, especially in the context of a partial South Korean presence, familiarize the people with their political invisibility and weakness in the United States. Simply put, it was not difficult for Koreans to notice that they were not part of a national identity consisting of Whites (as citizens) and Blacks (as second-class citizens).[74]

As further testament to the hegemonic power of the White-Black order, most Korean respondents tended to express little awareness of other US residents of color. In particular, most of the informants expressed surprise at the large Latino population in California (and in other states like Nevada, Texas, Florida, New York) given their weak knowledge of just how big the Latino population was in the United States. This surprise was especially true among those who immigrated in the 1970s and 1980s. Although most new immigrants and South Koreans did not possess an in-depth knowledge of Latino groups, they tended to demonstrate much more familiarity with them compared to the longstanding US immigrants. This is due, among other things, to Latinos' greater visibility in American popular culture in recent decades and to transnational stories from the United States. These have made South Koreans more aware of the exoticized media stereotype of the Latinos' "penchant" for festive parties, dancing, and singing. Names like Ricky Martin, Jennifer Lopez, Marc

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71   Entman & Rojecki, 2000: xi.

72   See Taylor, 1994.

73   *Chosun Ilbo*, 23 February 1988.

74   Collins, 2001.

Anthony, Christina Aguilera, and Shakira are certainly more familiar to them than they used to be. Even those Koreans who had seen images or heard stories concerning Latinos admitted their inability to identify Latinos until they came to the United States (though those with "blond hair and blue eyes" were "impossible" to discern from Whites). In fact, the Koreans' inability to identify Latinos is partly why they continued to perceive the American military in White-Black racial terms.

The South Koreans' access to US military bases as well as to the liquor-serving establishments that surround them has long been restricted (exceptions exist for employees and those with special authorization). Camptown bars and clubs post signs above their entrances that read "Korean Nationals Prohibited: This club is registered in accordance with Article 21 of the Tourism Business Act. Only UN forces and other foreigners are permitted patronage. This establishment offers tax-free liquor; Korean nationals are therefore denied entry—Chairman, Korea Special Tourist Association."[75] That Americans deny Koreans access to parts of their own country certainly shores up feelings of not being fully present in one's own "home." Compounding these feelings is the Los Angeles unrest which further enlightened Korean Americans about their weak recognition and visibility in the United States. Although South Koreans have been told that the United States is their "ally," they allege that they enjoy little to no halo effect from this "partnership" and actually suffer discrimination and invisibility in White-over-Black America. The paradox only affirmed that the United States has also positioned Koreans as subordinates more than as "equals" even within its own boundaries. Moreover, Japanese and Chinese Americans have a longer and more established history in the United States than Korean Americans.

When Seoul became the host of the 1988 Olympics, South Koreans and Korean immigrants alike were predictably enthralled with this hallmark of the peninsula's economic arrival and new prospects for global recognition and respect. This led, for example, to a Korean in the United States writing the following in a newspaper editorial: "Just a few months ago, Americans used to ask Korean Americans they met if they were Japanese, a question that badly hurt Korean Americans' self-esteem. But nowadays, Americans seem to ask all Asians if they are Korean."[76] Yet, 12 years later, the almost 80 interviewees overwhelmingly reported that they felt painfully invisible and insignificant when Americans did not know where Korea was, when the Korean language was only popular within the boundaries of Koreatown, when Japanese and Chinese

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75   Moon, 1997: 31.
76   *Chosun Ilbo*, 29 July 1988.

cuisine were still more "mainstream," and when Americans had very little knowledge about Korean luminaries and about the Korean War. I would venture to guess that if I were to interview my informants again since the viral watershed of K-pop artist PSY and his "Gangnam Style" (buoyed by predecessors Rain, Wonder Girls, Girls Generation and even Yuna Kim) many of them would still not feel that Americans or the world at large had a deeper understanding of Korea or Koreans, smiles of validation notwithstanding.

Concluding Remarks

Within the context of Japanese colonization and American dominance over the peninsula, I have identified and examined South Koreans' and immigrants' sense of inferiority and invisibility vis-a-vis (masculine) White America and their resistance to such a consciousness. What is striking about this process is that Korean immigrants are racialized not just within the United States but also with respect to ROK–United States relations, both then and now. This cross-border relationship largely determines South Korea's overall position in the American imagination and the larger global order—the peninsular people's greatest concern.[77] One dimension is White (and Black) America's racialization and treatment of South Koreans as third world, inferior, and intrinsically foreign, a plight that Koreans internalize, remap and resist. Koreans also racially characterize Blacks as "GIs" and "criminals," adopting White racial prejudices as a way to position themselves above them.

This is not only a strategy of resistance against Black American state power, but also a response to the Koreans' subordinate position vis-à-vis the White West and Japan, to their liminality in a White-Black world, and to a fear of regressing back into the "Blacker" third world.[78] These reactionary politics, however, also exist alongside the South Korean rejection of White superiority and Black inferiority and, thereby, an increased identification with Blacks. This pattern, common to most responses to oppression, involves resisting one hegemony by reifying another.[79] For instance, segments of South Korean society resist Black American state power by drawing on stereotypes of Black people. Indeed, even in a country like the United States that prides itself on its enviable progress into a multicultural, "color-blind", and even "post-racial"

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77   See Espiritu, 2003.

78   See Russell, 1991.

79   Espiritu, 2001; Pyke & Dang, 2003.

democracy, groups of color have reported some of the harshest prejudices toward one another.[80]

As I show in my other work, Korean society's social positioning in the home country below White America and as an advantaged and disadvantaged group in relation to Black Americans is the map with which they navigate and inform the new, but not wholly unfamiliar, domestic United States landscape.[81] As I have stressed above, Korean and other immigrants come to the United States or other diasporic sites already racially triangulated by virtue of the near seventy year American presence in the home country. In more recent years, the ROK state's declaration of South Korea as a new multicultural nation led to racialization and ethnoracism becoming hidden and dismissed by the hegemony of an ostensibly budding multiracial democratic state. The contradiction has not been missed by the multiracial Koreans, particularly those of part-Black ancestry, who saw American Super Bowl MVP Hines Ward (of Black American and Korean ancestry) treated as the Golden Child while they were denied equal rights, schooling, jobs, or even access to Korean mates.

The contradiction was not lost on Indian professor Bonogit Hussain either,[82] whose struggles with blatant Korean racism spurred the country's first contempt charges as well as incipient legislation on criminal penalties;[83] nor was it lost on Jasmine Lee, an ethnic Filipina, who endured an onslaught of racist xenophobia by internet users when she was the first naturalized immigrant to become an ROK lawmaker.[84] Such racism is certainly not lost on the many low-skilled labor migrants from all over the globe. All in all, the prevalence of ethnoracism throughout an apparently un-multicultural Korea begs further analysis of the global and local inequalities that underpin the racialization and race-making of actors here and everywhere.

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80   Cummings & Lambert, 1997; Kim, 2004; Lee, 2000; National Conference for Community and Justice, 2005; National Conference of Christians and Jews, 1994.

81   N.Y. Kim, 2008.

82   There is evidence of discrimination against non-Korean professors, as they are often left out of faculty meetings for their lack of Korean language skills and out of decision-making for their lack of Korean cultural literacy. See McNeill, 2011.

83   *The New York Times*, 1 November 2009.

84   Kim, R., 2012.