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Finding Our Way Home

Korean Americans, "Homeland" Trips,
and Cultural Foreignness

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NUMEROUS SCHOLARS have ably documented how younger generations of Asian Americans are racialized as foreigners despite their U.S. citizenship, their residence in the United States, and their so-called model minority achievements (for an overview see Kim 1999). In contrast, most scholars have not studied how later-generation Asian Americans often become *cultural* foreigners when they visit their ethnic homelands. As Mia Tuan (1999: 106) contends, these Asian Americans face an "authenticity dilemma" in the United States as neither real "Americans" nor real Asians. In this chapter I analyze this authenticity dilemma in a transnational context by examining how young Korean Americans make sense of their tourist visits to their home country (see Kibria 2002a). In fact, because Korean Americans are racially marginalized as foreigners in the United States (Tuan 1998) and are exposed to their parents' exhortation that Korea is their "roots," they construct a romanticized view of South Korea as the country where they *racially* belong, akin to the manner of the Korean Chinese (see Chapter 11). Yet, like the so-called *joseonjok*, these Korean Americans find that racial similarity to South Koreans means little in light of the ethnic homeland's restrictive definitions of cultural "Koreanness." Given the importance of phenotypic appearance for the United States' racial categorization system, Korean Americans' inability to gain acceptance from people who look just like them proves strikingly disappointing. Whereas in the United States they are racialized as Asian even if they do not act "authentically" Asian or Korean, in South Korea they are not seen as authentic unless they are both racially *and* culturally Korean.

As racial foreigners in the United States, where they are treated as Asian, not American, and as cultural foreigners in South Korea, where they are seen as too

American, not Korean, the younger generations must persistently wrestle with some form of foreignness and “homelessness,” in the words of Espiritu (2003). Korean Americans’ tourist trips to the ethnic homeland thereby bring their struggles with race/ethnicity, nationality, and culture into bold relief. Specifically, they come to define home as the place of cultural familiarity, that is, the United States. Like the Korean Chinese, they also come to define the homeland as the place of their ethnic roots and ancestors but not necessarily where they feel at home. Although most young Korean Americans become more convinced that the United States is where they belong, they cannot deny the way in which their treatment as nonwhite guests in the American house renders the United States a place where they feel only partly at home.

Theory and Background

Although mainstream America has positively racialized Asian Americans as model minorities, often for hegemonic political purposes (Kim 1999),¹ many scholars have documented how Asian Americans have been negatively racialized as foreigners and “inauthentic Americans” (Tuan 1998, 1999; see Ancheta 1998; Espiritu 1992, 2003; Jiobu 1988; Kibria 2002a; Kim 1999; Lowe 1996; Min 1995; Palumbo-Liu 1999; Takaki 1987, 1998; Wei 1993). As both model minorities and forever foreigners, Asian Americans experience dual and seemingly opposed racialization processes. Yet at the same time Asian Americans’ status as foreigners, despite being model minorities, reveals how Asians’ subordination hinges on cultural notions of who is an insider and who truly belongs. In other words, anti-Asian bias hinges on cultural notions of citizenship (Ancheta 1998). The subordination of Asian Americans stands somewhat in contrast, then, to the traditional notion of racial subordination, which hinges on color (mostly with regard to African Americans). Rather, Asian Americans’ foreignness is defined in relation to the authentic and deserving Americans, a status held by whites (Lipsitz 1998). In her empirical study Tuan (1998) found that even third- to fifth-generation Asian Americans who were successfully middle class and far removed from ethnic culture endured the foreigner bias. Kibria (2002a) found that second-generation Korean and Chinese Americans—most of whom had little practical ethnic engagement—were similarly marginalized.

Although the racialized foreignness of Asian Americans has been well established by scholars, less has been said about their status as what I call cultural foreigners in their ethnic homelands. At its simplest, the concept of a cultural foreigner in the ethnic homeland differs from that of a racial foreigner in

U.S. society insofar as culture, not racial phenotype, is the key marker of social difference. More specifically, young Korean Americans are rendered culturally foreign for having a “Korean face” but lacking facility in the Korean language and history, Confucian norms, and styles of dress and comportment. They are especially foreign in a nationalistic society that conflates race and culture (e.g., Korean blood explains our diligence; Koreans *naturally* love kimchi). In this way children of immigrants completely disrupt South Koreans’ sense of identity. The United States, however, as a historically diverse immigrant nation, does not define itself by way of *one* culture. Rather, it prides itself on incorporating many cultures, as multiculturalist ideology bears out. Furthermore, the United States has not had to trumpet ethnic or cultural nationalism because it has been a superpower largely since independence and has not had to overthrow more racially powerful oppressors. To be sure, U.S. society tends to rely more on phenotype than on culture to categorize peoples, as American panethnic categories of race lump and homogenize many different ethnic and national groups. Yet foreigner stereotypes of Asian Americans have also led white Americans to expect “Asian” cultural behaviors to match an Asian racial phenotype (Tuan 1999). As an example, Tuan (1999) found that Americans expressed surprise when the Asian Americans she interviewed did not act ethnic enough (“You don’t know *your* language, *your* country?”).

Because American sociologists tend to focus their studies on U.S. society and have only recently turned their attention to the younger generations’ transnational links to the home country (Levitt and Waters 2002b), they have underappreciated young Asian Americans’ struggles with cultural foreignness in their ethnic homelands. For instance, although tourist visits make apparent their cultural foreignness, Asian Americans in particular are constantly told by the older generations and by white Americans alike that “where they’re really from” is a foreign land, not the United States (see Tuan 1999). The parents, for instance, draw on their own nationalist sentiments, notions of identity as phenotype and blood, and efforts to resist racism in the United States to urge their children to maintain their Koreanness and be proud of it. But owing to their busy work lives, the parents often cannot transmit “explicit ethnic markers or behaviors” (e.g., language, customs) to their children (Kibria 2002a: 302). In addition, given that the youth grow up and are educated in the United States, they are culturally more mainstream American than South Korean.

In light of anti-Asian racism and U.S. society’s racial homogenization of Asian ethnics in general, the younger generations often look to their ethnic

identity as an important resource to resist racism and racial homogenization (Fernandez-Kelly and Schaufliker 1994; Glick-Schiller 1999; Kibria 2002a, 2002b; Waters 1999). In particular, the youth sometimes draw themselves closer to their ethnicity by also conceptualizing the home country as a place where they truly belong. Because they do not feel like authentic Americans and insiders in the United States, as evidenced by whites' association of their group with Asia, they long for a place where they *are* racial insiders. They romanticize the ethnic homeland as such a place (Kondo 1990; Louie 2002; Tsuda 2003; Chapter 9). These longings are part of their *symbolic* transnational ties to their ethnic homeland, which scholars contend are just as important as *literal* transnational ties, that is, immigrants shuttling back and forth for work or political involvement or sending remittances (Espiritu and Tran 2002). Indeed, symbolic transnationalism influences the way the younger generations "imagine themselves, their social membership, and future plans" (Espiritu and Tran 2002: 370) and how they view and act on familial and other emotional ties (Wolf 2002).

Despite largely symbolic ties among Korean Americans (Kibria 2002a) and other second-generation groups (Espiritu and Tran 2002; Louie 2002; Wolf 2002), studies have shown that these ethnics find not a warm welcome but "othering" and rejection when they visit their ethnic homeland (Chapters 7, 9, and 11; Kibria 2002a; Kondo 1990; Tsuda 2003). Part of the rejection stems from the nationalistic home country's derision of those who went to the United States as traitors who left when times were bad. When the children of these immigrants visit South Korea and have weak Korean proficiency or know little about their ethnic homeland, their ignorance adds insult to injury. The younger generations must therefore wrestle with the contradiction of ethnic homeland residents' essentialization of them as "one of us" (Louie 2002) but "othering" of the youth as linked to the "traitors." Because the younger generations have already had to wrestle with contradictions in the United States, such as the country's promise of equality for all yet unequal treatment of nonwhites, South Korea becomes another site of unsettling contradictions. Young Korean Americans therefore experience a rude awakening that precludes them from romanticizing their authentic belonging in the ethnic homeland.

Methods

For this study I conducted in-depth open-ended interviews with 22 younger-generation Korean Americans from Los Angeles County, California, in 2001. All but two interviewees in the sample are second generation, those who were

born and raised in the United States or who immigrated by age 11. The remaining two informants are part of the 1.5 generation and came to the United States at the ages of 12 and 14 (they will be specified in this chapter). All the informants were asked to comment on experiences and meanings of race, ethnicity, nationality, and culture in their everyday American lives, with respect to their various transnational ties and, most important, with respect to their tourist visits to South Korea. I recruited the overall sample by means of snowball sampling (using as many diverse starting points as possible); through churches and schools; and through a few social, community service, and political groups.

In line with demographic trends, most of the interviewees came from families who fell somewhere in the middle class, from small business to professional classes (most of the first generation hail from a middle-class background and have regained some semblance of that position in the United States)² (Ong and Azores 1994). A few had working-class parents who over the years had achieved middle-class status. With regard to education, all were college graduates (eight were currently in graduate school), except for two college-bound high school seniors and one college student. Those who were old enough to have their own careers had also attained middle-class status (throughout, social class status was determined by parents' and informants' education, occupations, and incomes and by self-description). The full-time workers included attorneys, physicians, teachers and others in educational arenas, nonprofit administrators (community workers), and a few others in journalism, design, business, and the ministry. Specifically, the sample included 12 men and 10 women who ranged in age from 17 to 42, with only three interviewees in the 17–18 year range and only one in his 40s (average age is 25). Each interviewee is identified in the text by a pseudonym.

All the Korean Americans went to their ethnic home country as tourists, often to visit their families and relatives. One informant had temporarily worked in South Korea at a Christian camp. Some had gone to South Korea every summer or every few summers in their youth for a series of years. One young woman went every one or two years to visit her parents. Most, however, had gone once or twice for stays that ranged from two weeks to three months. As part of these tourist visits, some of the informants had gone for summer language and cultural study programs, and three had traveled as part of a summer activist program to learn about, and make links with, South Korean social justice activists. Because most of the informants were visiting similarly middle-class family members and friends or were attending summer university programs, their interactions were mostly with members of the same social class.

Overall, the interviews I conducted ranged from one and a half to six hours (depending on how much the interviewees shared and how busy they were); the interviews were transcribed and coded for spoken and unspoken themes using Atlas.ti software.

Being Racialized Foreigners in the United States

Like most Koreans in general, the Korean American informants conformed to the hegemonic U.S. identity of American as white. Since the founding of the nation, the United States has racialized itself as white and has defined Americanness as white, unless otherwise qualified (Lipsitz 1998). In line with U.S. ideology, the Korean word for a person of European descent in the United States is *miguk saram*, literally, "American person." Virtually all the young Korean American informants attached the term *American* when talking about themselves and other nonwhite Americans (e.g., Asian American, Mexican American). They did not do so for whites. Their language supported their own accounts that they were treated like foreigners while whites were the authentic Americans (some even specified "blond people"), and that African Americans were next in line in terms of belonging (see Kim 2008). Given whites' entitlement to authentic Americanness (Tuan 1998), most of the respondents agreed that even if Korean Americans reached the exact same level as whites in all facets of society, whites would still not treat them like fellow whites. In essence, Koreans and other Asians would always be outsiders in some way. Jenny, a 28-year-old graduate student, replied in this manner to the question "Would whites treat us like one of them if we reached all the exact same levels as them in U.S. society?"

Jenny: No. . . . I think that [way] because we're always going to be different.

Nadia: You mean, in the way we look?

Jenny: Yeah! The way we look . . . I think like with other immigrants, Caucasian immigrants from Europe or whatever, it's easier for them to blend in. And you can't really tell so you talk to somebody [who says], "Oh my parents are actually from Italy" or whatever. . . . But with Asians or Koreans I think it's very obvious. . . . I think it's always a sense like, "Oh, they're the outsiders."

In response to the same question, 42-year-old Joe, a nonprofit administrator, paused briefly, then replied emphatically:

Joe: No.

Nadia: Why do you not think that?

Joe: Um, 'cause whites think Asians are foreigners.

Nadia: . . . even if we were just like them in all levels of society?

Joe: No.

Even others who proffered a more sanguine view were still not optimistic about equal treatment. Lance, a 24-year-old financial analyst, replied that there would "be a lot less" prejudice but still concluded that prejudice against Koreans or Asians would always exist.

These notions of forever foreignness among Korean Americans tend to foster their romantic construction of South Korea as a place where they would not be seen as the "other," as a racialized minority. For instance, Todd's beleaguered outlook on the United States given his bouts with racial bias, especially at the mostly white law firm where he worked, led to his idealized lens on South Korea. He starts his narrative with a view he has shared with his cousins in Seoul.

[I told them] "In Korea you have the advantage [because] race is not a filter through which you have to view life." And that is actually incredibly, like a stress-reducing thing to have, and so they're very fortunate in that way. . . . I'm very tied to my ethnic identity. . . . I think for some Koreans, yeah, that's what you turn into. That's what you turn to when you become disappointed with certain aspects of life in the U.S.

Todd's narrative reveals his direct connection between the racism he experiences in the United States and his "love" for South Korea. Similarly, a 27-year-old teacher named Poppy linked her resistance to the racism that she experienced in the United States to her strong sense of attachment to South Korea. She expressed that her attachment was fostered by her immigrant mother, with whom she was close.

Poppy: I was always very strong, strong about my identity. . . . And part of it is [because the] one person that I talked to most growing up was my mother, and she couldn't speak English.

Nadia: [referring to Poppy's earlier comments] Oh, I see, so do you think partly your ties to Korea being strong had to do with, you know, you feeling like a minority here, feeling like some things about Korea were better than [the United States]?

Poppy: Oh, yeah!

In short, most of the Korean Americans linked a sense of racialized foreignness in the United States to their transnational romanticization of South Korea.

Culturally Foreign South Korea

Koreans celebrate their country as ethnically homogeneous and as boasting pure Korean blood (despite increased inflows of labor migrants; Lie 1998) (see Chapter 11). This bloodline courses through the veins of all Koreans and explains the group's common cultural attributes as a people (smart, hardworking, resilient). In other words, a Korean racial phenotype gets conflated with Korean cultural tendencies. As noted earlier, this expectation serves as one major point of contention between South Koreans and the children of Korean immigrants in the diaspora.

Another point of contention between these two groups points to nationalist ideology. The mainstream Korean conception of nations generally attributes the strength or weakness of a nation to the strength or weakness of its people (see Balibar 1991; Stoler 1995). As noted earlier, Korean nationalism and collective memory have prompted those who stayed behind to malign those who left for America as national traitors. South Koreans often trace the mass out-migrations to the wealthy Koreans of the 1970s who were enamored with "America" and left without helping rebuild their country or elevating its status (after Japanese rule and after the Korean War). Moreover, those Koreans who left went to the imperialist power, the United States, which has occupied South Korea since the 1940s and has long been the target of nationalist movements. Had these Korean immigrants not left, perhaps South Korea (or Korea writ large) would be a much more powerful nation today. Locals also dislike the boastful and ostentatious swagger of some Korean immigrants who visit from the United States. Although South Koreans recognize that the offspring of these immigrants are not as culpable as their parents, they often assume that the children have been indoctrinated with pro-American ideology just the same.

In addition, once young generations of Korean Americans themselves visit the ethnic homeland, their romanticized outlook is often disrupted by what they consider the stark cultural differences of South Korean society. Not only do the local residents see Korean Americans as culturally foreign, then, but Korean Americans see the ethnic homeland as culturally foreign as well.³ For instance, some expressed disdain for Korean cultural norms such as "impolite" and "aggressive" people who do not conform to queues or respect personal space (it is normative in Seoul for people to forcefully bump each other). Others cited the incredibly long work hours and the overcrowded, polluted, fast-paced character of Seoul as intolerable. Owing to their culture shock, Korean Americans did not desire to live in South Korea.

For example, although Samuel, a 29-year-old area development manager for learning centers, really enjoyed his ethnic homeland the first time he visited, especially because he was not a minority for once in his life, he was not so laudatory of his second visit about four years later. He explained:

Samuel: They were very, . . . like, their impatience, they're—I mean, I'm not patient either—but they are very impolite and very, uh yeah, *yeah, I didn't feel at home.*

Nadia: Oh, you didn't? . . . So when you were living in Korea until the age of eleven, do you remember if Koreans were like that then too?

Samuel: Yeah, but . . . I noticed that they were a lot more materialistic. [emphasis added]

It is noteworthy that Samuel links his sense of not feeling at home in Seoul, Korea, to the ethnic homeland's cultural norms of impatience and materialism (elsewhere in the interview he derides the intense working culture of twelve-hour days and six-day weeks). His statement also reveals his expectation that South Korea *should* feel like home, especially because he felt so the first time he visited. His narrative suggests that home is a place where people treat members of their same group well and value human relations over material gain.

Sarah, part of the 1.5 generation, concluded that despite her fluency in Korean and familiarity with Seoul, she no longer belonged there after visiting. After she cited "too many differences" as the reason, I asked her, "When you went back to Korea, what were some of the differences you noticed between you and the rest of Koreans in society?"

Sarah: Ah, thinking. [Our] minds are just, just *absolutely* different.

Nadia: Like, for example . . . ?

Sarah: They're not honest, they always have to hide [their problems or low status]! So even though I saw my old friend [from] when I was young, they don't tell the truth. . . . I changed when I got here, 'cause I look at things differently, honestly! You don't have to be a showoff, just be a truth person.

Following this statement, I asked her if she desired to visit Korea more often or perhaps desired to live there in the future. She replied:

Sarah: Ah . . . I would like to visit, but I've, I've *never* dreamt about it.

Nadia: Of living there?

Sarah: Of living there or just visiting.

Nadia: Why do you think that is?

Sarah: I . . . don't think I belong there anymore!

In addition, several of the women cited more restrictive gender norms as the reason for their reluctance, or opposition, to living in the ethnic home country. For instance, a 30-year-old attorney named Audrey condemned the South Korean norm of middle-class women "not working" and just "worrying about shopping and the next handbag they'll get." She was critical despite her strong literal transnational ties; that is, she corresponded with her family and visited often, desired to live there with her husband and child, and believed that all Korean Americans should know their roots. Other women were deeply disturbed by South Korea's more "traditional" gender norm (a concern that the men rarely aired). Whether female or male, however, the visitors were often shocked and disturbed by the cultural differences in South Korea from etiquette to pollution to gender. As a result, they began to realize that *cultural familiarity was what made a place feel like home*. Despite their romanticized hopes, then, South Korea did not match the criterion.

Being Culturally Foreign in South Korea

As noted, South Koreans often celebrate a unified and unproblematic notion of Koreanness until they meet immigrants from the United States or elsewhere. Young Korean Americans who return to the home country to visit or live are especially treated as cultural foreigners despite their status as racial insiders. Typically, the biggest difference is young Korean Americans' inability to speak Korean or their American-accented Korean. In addition, South Koreans expressed contempt for the youths' lack of literacy in Korean culture, which ran the gamut from Confucian norms to styles of dress. Also, cultural norms of frankness prompted local residents to be quite vocal when they noticed their American brethren's differences. The youths' encounters with these marginalizing experiences were usually highly traumatic given their romanticized expectations and their disempowered status in South Korea. Although many informants considered the noted lifestyle differences in South Korea disconcerting, most of them were much more affected by the "othering" and rejection they experienced in the home country. For example, Carol, a 23-year-old part-time graduate student and teacher, was born and raised in Spain (and did not move to the United States until she was 11), but she had visited South Korea as a little girl nearly every summer with her parents. She had thus maintained a

relatively high level of Korean language proficiency and practiced Korean cultural norms. As she grew older and visited Seoul as a college student, however, she felt "less like a Korean."

Carol: One time we went into the city and we met up with some of our roommate's friends. . . . We went to this café, and we were just talking and stuff and then out of nowhere this guy, he was like, "You know, aren't you embarrassed that you can't speak Korean?" . . . And my friend got really upset and she was like, "What!?" right? He's like, "You're Korean and you should be able to speak Korean between you. . . . You're not Korean, you're just American." . . . When they see me they don't even see a Korean.

Nadia: Do . . . they think you act like a white American?

Carol: Yeah.

Carol's bouts with exclusion and foreignness led to identity conflict, distress, and a lack of desire to live in her ethnic homeland. Following her statement about the encounter in the café, she rhetorically asked, "I mean, how do they know that I'm not from Korea?" She noted how many of the residents' cultural antennae picked up on her different clothes, yet she surmised that it had to be more than that, because she would intentionally wear clothes from local stores and would still be singled out. Other informants remarked how South Koreans noticed differences in body shape by pointing to Korean Americans' sometimes heavier and stockier frames than typically wiry, thin South Koreans (largely because of diet).

David, a 26-year-old graduate student, felt similarly distressed by his cultural foreigner status. David was part of an activist group that organized a yearly summer program in which Korean American and South Korean activists met to build transnational bridges (I use the pseudonym KAN for this group). As someone who was excited about learning more about the ethnic homeland and finding his roots there, especially given his bouts with American racism, the alienation he suffered in Seoul was painful.

David: I so wanted to identify as Korean, 'cause, you know.

Nadia: Why?

David: Just because, like, you're going back to your roots, you've, like, found your homeland, you want to be, like, "Yeah, I'm there, I'm with the people." Yeah, so that [rejection] was real eye-opening. In fact, I was real bitter about it and decided to write a piece about how . . . I felt like a Korean

American when I was in Korea. . . . One of the most extreme positions I heard was on KAN where we visited one group of [activist] men and one of the guys was, like, kind of yelling . . . about us . . . : “Why are these people here visiting us? If there’s a Korean War they’re not going to be here! . . . So what if they’re Korean? They’re not really Korean, they don’t live here, they don’t know our pain.” . . . [So] they’ve put me in their box already.

Like many others, David had romanticized his trip to the homeland, not least because he was there as an activist concerned about the Koreas and desiring to be part of transnational social justice movements. His rude awakening had embittered him so much that he wrote a critical article about it. The fact that David, a progressive activist who understood South Koreans’ anti-American politics, felt so bitter indeed speaks volumes about the younger generations’ need to belong. His long-standing woes over his exclusion and foreignness in both the United States *and* South Korea were a persistent theme throughout his interview.

Other informants noted their confusion over the ways that phenotype mattered more in the U.S. racial categorization system than it did in South Korea’s. Sunhi, a 31-year-old marketing manager for a large pharmaceutical company, noted her perplexity as part of the reason that she did not want to live in South Korea.

Sunhi: I think I’d be actually a little bit more uncomfortable. . . . I remember feeling . . . , actually I was pretty sad coming back from my trip. That was the first time I think that I was old enough to realize that I wasn’t all full Korean either.

Nadia: Like the Koreans in Korea?

Sunhi: Right, right, and . . . they definitely noticed that there was something different about me as well. I remember thinking how weird, we don’t really belong. We belong out here more so than there; *but in terms of physical appearance, we don’t look like a lot of Caucasians here; whereas you go to Korea and you may blend in in terms of your looks but when you open your mouth they realize right away that you’re someone different.* [emphasis added]

For Sunhi, not only does this cultural exclusion foster her reluctance to live in her ethnic home country, but also its paradoxical nature saddened her. That Sunhi’s Korean phenotype and background meant little in her ethnic homeland struck her as odd, given that race was precisely the major division between

her and “Americans” in the United States. This also struck Carol (from an earlier example) as odd.

[In Korea] they look at me and they don’t think I’m Korean and it’d be really strange. Here at least [*pause*], it’s weird but it’s kind of normal, . . . *you don’t look American so they don’t really treat you like that* [a white American], *it just kind of feels natural.* . . . *But in Korea it’s like really strange when you go; you kind of blend in* [racially], *but then they always point you out, you know?* [emphasis added]

As the historical whitening of Southern and Eastern immigrants bore out, a European phenotype in the United States is racially categorized as white regardless of a cultural enactment of whiteness. Such a consolidation of whiteness came about through Europeans’ desire to dissociate from blackness (Ignatiev 1995). As such, cultural behaviors are less central in the United States. In fact, American racial categorization has hinged on homogenizing and lumping together ethnic groups that are culturally distinct and often at odds with each other. Korean Americans find out that having a shared racial phenotype in the ethnic homeland does not automatically make them Korean. Rather, their phenotype and their cultural behaviors must match. Such a conflation of race and culture is not surprising in light of South Korea’s national identity as homogeneously Korean (despite increasing ethnic diversification) and its emphasis on collectivism and conformity. Moreover, Korean nationalism is less forgiving toward Koreans from *America*. That is, South Koreans’ animosity toward so-called national traitors and attempts to quash any sense of superiority on the part of U.S. immigrants have intensified the demands that “the kids from America” act culturally Korean.

Such a demand ultimately prompted the young adults to decide that home was where they felt culturally at home. They became more cognizant that America was where their cultural ideas, acts, and lifestyles were more normative. Liza, a seminary student, recounted how she was culturally considered the “other” in Seoul, despite her proficiency, when she visited as a teenager. A taxicab driver reprimanded her for supposedly speaking the language poorly, and this experience fostered her identity as both Korean and American.

In one taxicab ride . . . the taxicab driver started yelling at my mother how she [had] poorly raised me, thinking, like just because we went to America we weren’t Korean anymore. . . . And so my mom got so mad and she yelled at him and said, “Drop us off right here!” She totally defended me. . . . I felt so

bad for my mother and then *so angry* at this guy. I just picked up on things in the Korean culture that I realized I really don't like! . . . And then I realized, you know, that I don't think I'm totally Korean. . . . That's when I realized maybe I'm Korean American. I have to accept both sides.

Liza's narrative reveals how South Koreans' cultural denigration of her (yelling at her for not speaking perfect Korean) also feeds her cultural "othering" of South Korea ("I just picked up on things in the Korean culture that . . . I really don't like!"). More important, her struggles with cultural foreignness in the ethnic homeland caused her to temper the proud Korean identity and strong identification with South Korea that she had honed in response to white American dominance. Rather, she realized that she needed to accept the culturally American side of her and accept America as more her home than she had previously wanted to acknowledge. Similarly, another informant, Poppy (see earlier example), strongly identified as Korean, articulated a strong transnational connection, and was angered by U.S. nativistic racism, yet her visits to the ethnic homeland confirmed to her that she felt fewer constraints of class and gender in the United States. When I asked her if she desired to live in South Korea in the future, she replied:

Poppy: No.

Nadia: Why is that?

Poppy: Because even though I consider myself very strongly attached to my mother country, I think that I'm very American. I'm more American than Korean. . . . Another reason why I don't want to live in Korea is that they're very status-conscious. . . . And I think there is much more to status, much more to life than status, and so I feel like I have to be someone that I'm not or, you know, also as a woman, I have to follow some kind of standard; over here too [I have to follow the standard], but it's not as, it's not as constraining.

Although Poppy realized that she was more "American than Korean," whereas Liza came to identify herself as equally both, they similarly understood their tourist trips as signaling their cultural Americanness. Not surprisingly, neither of them wanted to live in South Korea in the future.

Even the two 1.5-generation Korean Americans, who spoke more fluent Korean and more accented English and were more comfortable in first-generation Korean circles, described their realization that the United States was their home. As noted, however, such sentiments do not mean that Korean Americans feel completely at home in the United States either. Rather, they resign themselves

to feeling in-between. They grow resigned to the fact that they will continue to be treated and feel like guests in what I call America's racial house. Although the many earlier narratives on perpetual foreignness in the United States already conveyed Korean Americans' guest status, perhaps Sarah provides the most apt summary.

Nadia: This is where you belong?

Sarah: Yeah, hmm, but I, I don't think 100%. I'm not satisfied . . . both here [or] there. I would say in America about 75% and in Korea [*pause*], I only belong there like 25%!

Sarah's statement supports many Korean Americans' belief that they cannot escape being seen as the "other" in either societal context. At the same time, they realize that the country that is culturally familiar is the place that feels like home, although the conclusion feels bittersweet. The Korean Americans thus no longer associate South Korea with the *feeling* of home, as they had transnationally imagined before their visits. After the visits they supplant their wishful and emotive view with the more factual view that Korea is where they or their parents were born.

Conclusion

As is true of Korean Chinese with respect to their two countries, the later-generation Korean Americans in this study clearly had to navigate the authenticity dilemma (Tuan 1999), that is, being inauthentic both in the United States and in South Korea. As Kibria (2002a: 307) found in her study of Korean and Chinese Americans, people in the United States homed in on the younger generations' Asian *racial* identity, whereas those in the ethnic homeland homed in on their American *cultural* identity. The fact that South Korean society treats co-ethnics from both China and the United States in this manner betrays the country's ambivalence about its brethren abroad. South Korea's own insecurity about its position in the racialized global economic hierarchy also sheds light on why state immigration policy prefers Korean Americans (and Korean Japanese) above the so-called *joseonjok* (see Chapters 2 and 11).

In light of young Korean Americans' racial foreignness in the United States and their romanticized view of the ethnic homeland, these children of immigrants wished for a seamless connection to South Korea. They believed that such a connection meant that they would have racial insider status and that, accordingly, they would *feel* at home in a way that they could not in white-dominated

America. They were rudely awakened, however, by their cultural foreigner status in the home country. South Koreans' cultural discrimination against them despite racial similarity was bewildering and spurred emotions of sadness, disappointment, and anger. These strong emotions are paralleled by Espiritu and Tran's (2002: 392) work on Vietnamese Americans, in which the parents' charges against their children as not Vietnamese enough deeply hurt them. Indeed, such accusations "essentially strip[ped] the young Vietnamese Americans of all meaningful identity," given their exclusion also from an American identity (Espiritu and Tran 2002: 392). Adding to the Korean Americans' dismay was their view of South Korea as more culturally divergent from the United States than they had expected. Although some simply criticized South Korea's demographic environment, public norms, and gender arrangements, others' critiques came on the heels of harsh rejections by South Koreans.

Beyond having their romanticized hopes crushed, the Korean American informants struggled with South Koreans' distinct construction of race relative to that in the United States. Whereas U.S. society categorizes ethnic groups primarily based on racial phenotype or lineage, South Koreans categorized race/ethnicity based on the uniformity between race and cultural behaviors. Moreover, South Koreans likely felt that they had cause to be more critical of Korean Americans owing to the latter's residence in the most dominant nation and sporadic arrogance. To be certain, a primordial essentialist notion of ethnic identity did not just haunt Korean Americans in the home country; it haunted them in the United States as well. Although white Americans' expectations were considerably milder and more varied given the United States' superpower status and lesser need for ethnic or cultural nationalism, they still invoked "forever foreigner" stereotypes of Asian Americans (Tuan 1998). That is, they expected Korean Americans to be more culturally Korean than was usually possible. Moreover, these expectations by mainstream Americans and South Koreans seemed at times to attribute Korean Americans' lack of cultural awareness to individual failings rather than to constraining structural and contextual factors. Such factors include U.S. society's English-language focus and assimilation pressures as well as the immigrant parents' busy lives. These expectations also revealed contradictions. For instance, although mainstream American ideology stresses minority groups' assimilation into whiteness as a key to making it, the public often expects Korean Americans to be versed in Korean language and culture and are sometimes surprised when they are not (see Tuan 1999). Similarly, South Korean ideology stresses making connections with Koreans

in the diaspora for political, economic, and cultural reasons (see Louie 2002). Yet, when these children come, the South Korean public typically derides their cultural difference rather than seeing the children's visit as an expression of Korean ethnicity. As a result, South Koreans help to sever rather than nurture ties with young Koreans in the United States and elsewhere.

Perhaps some would argue that the young Korean Americans should have been prepared for their treatment in Seoul, given the many first-generation Asian immigrants in the United States who also chastise them for not being ethnic enough (Pyke and Dang 2003; Tuan 1999). But the fact that the youth were surprised once they got to South Korea suggests their romanticized hopes. In the end, the Korean Americans respond to their otherness in both contexts by differentiating between Korea the *homeland* and America the *home*, a differentiation that Song and Tsuda (Chapters 9 and 11) find true of Korean Chinese and Japanese Brazilians. The Korean Americans here come to define home as a place of cultural familiarity and belonging where they can speak the language, interact with others, and navigate information and social structures in a familiar social context. Their homeland trip affirms to them that the United States feels more like this home. They come to define the homeland, then, as the place of their ethnic roots and ancestors but not necessarily as a place of cultural familiarity and belonging. Although some of the later-generation Korean Americans continued to participate in a transnational social field (see Glick-Schiller 1999), for which they frequently traveled to see family and forged other key relationships in South Korea, most maintained a more symbolic version of such ties. That is, they identified with the country as a place of ancestors, parents, and origins. In realizing that the United States was their home, they simultaneously expressed a heightened sense of in-betweenness and hybridity. Indeed, some became resigned to seeing themselves as culturally both Korean *and* (white) American but not fully either. Such a realization was often bittersweet, because it meant that race still mattered in America. That is, the Korean American informants still had to resign themselves to making the most of an American home in which they are treated as guests, or, as Sarah believes, where they are "75 percent" at home.

Notes

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1. Scholars have problematized the model minority notion as a myth that depends on essentializing the culture of Asian Americans (all are exceptionally hard-working, thrifty, politically passive, and so forth) (Kim 1999). This essentialization

is further supported by its marking of Asian Americans as “minorities” and cultural “others” rather than as those deemed more “one of us,” “us” being white America. Finally, the stereotype also erases the many social disparities among Asian Americans (see Takaki 1998).

2. Yoon (1997) claims that more working-class Koreans have emigrated in recent years.

3. I am indebted to Takeyuki (Gaku) Tsuda for this point.

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