

Close-Knit Kin, Korean America, and the U.S. University¹

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(NOTE: see end of file for a kinship chart)

The Asian American family is an American cultural trope; modify “Asian American family” with “close-knit extended” and the trope takes particular shape. This paper builds from the understanding that there is a powerful cultural contest therein, one between the model minority (nuclear) family that successfully propels its children through the ranks of U.S. schooling; and an extended ethnic family that conjures signs of difference with its somehow illegible networks and connections. This contest is further complicated by the popular American understanding that ethnic families bear the “culture” of a homeland; in this way ironically both imagined families are rendered similarly cultural.

In this paper, I will argue that Korean Americans take up these tensions in both conflicted and self-conflicted ways. Specifically, I assert that Korean Americans are torn between the celebration of the liberal individual whose development proceeds unfettered by any meaningful difference; and the importance of ethnic family and community in the face of the racialized realities of the United States. Further, I dub this a contest between liberal multiculturalism with its “comfortable” “ethnic” differences and racialized difference. With a focus on college students and their parents, I bring this contest to the American university where it takes a particularly legible form as a struggle between the promise of the value of a liberal education and a college degree posed against a more critical and racialized understanding of the engine of American higher education and employment. As such this paper considers the tense relationship between “ethnic” family and the U.S. university.

I explore this contest through the “extended kin talk,” namely the talk about vital kin ties both in and beyond the nuclear family, of one extended Korean American family in Chicagoland, the Kims.² All of the Kim family members I introduce here, several in

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² I came to the Kim family through my research for a book I am finishing up, The Intimate University: College and the Korean American Family. Beginning in 1997, I

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the immigrant generation and several of their second- and 1.5 generation children, had something to say about “close knit kin”; it is not an exaggeration to say that each of them mobilized the close knit family to communicate something very important about the course and commitments of their own lives. Important, however, is that many of them performed “close-knit kin” to mean something very different from one another. For some Kim men (of both generations), the close-knit family bespoke their cultural capital, specifically a cosmopolitan, liberal upbringing that is part and parcel of their very immigration; this close knit family, then, is very particularly classed and gendered. For other Kim men, the close-knit family was mobilized against a liberal project, instead as a living network through which to make their way in a racialized U.S. society – again a particularly gendered and classed project. Finally, for some Kim women (of both generations) the close-knit family is signified again quite differently: neither as a sign of cultural capital and a liberal beacon, nor as a valuable ethnic network, but instead as a particularly gendered formation.

The way in which I have just assigned “positions” to persons aside, none of the people featured in this paper are in fact so coherent in their narration of family: we do not, for example, meet coherent cosmopolitan liberal individuals, racialized ethnics, or again simple victims of patriarchy. Rather, we meet people who articulate these seemingly distinctive projects in close articulation with their seeming obverse; in short, what we often encounter are people asserting their difference and their trajectories at the complicated intersection of these apparently opposed projects. Such, I suggest is the racialized immigrant’s predicament as she lives and imagines her family in the context of a highly elaborated “American” gaze at the Asian American family. As such the portraiture turns its lens to points of internal struggle to render and live, in this case, a “close-knit” Korean American family.

Important to note is that in all of these instances of “close-knit kin,” none of them represents a simply cultural narrative in which “Korean” family form is privileged. Rather, their enunciators themselves understand them to be at least in part fashioned in the immigrant crucible; this runs contra, to the popular imaginary I indicated above in which ethnic family is so easily rendered cultural. Thus I argue that the performance of kinship ties in the diaspora runs against the grain of the cultural shadow that is so easily cast on Asian American families. This paper thus asserts that the talk of close-knit kin offers a window on both heterogeneous and conflicted assertions of Asian American difference.

This paper builds first on the work of many Asian Americanists who have documented the important ways in which Asian Americans challenge the various American cultural tropes that: assign Asian American families cultural or symbolic capital as “traditional” family forms (e.g., “family values”); assign them value as signs of the economic vitality of Asia (Koshy 2001:39); and envision the drama of Asian

followed a cohort of Chicagoland Korean Americans (i.e., Chicago and its suburbs)

through their college careers, meeting as well their parents and some of their un-

immigrated uncles, aunts, and cousins in South Korea.

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American families in terms of generational divides of cultural retention and loss (Lowe 1996:62-3, Wong 1995). Other scholars, in a similar theoretical vein, point to instances of the Asian American performance of Asian American family distinction not to reveal “Asian” cultural continuities, but instead to document the meaning of cultural mobilization – or even invention – in a racialized United States (Espiritu 2001). In keeping with these approaches, this paper underscores the multiple “valence[s] of difference” that speak through the assertion of “cultural” difference (Lowe 1996:81). These perspectives build on broader immigration scholarship that challenges mainstream scholarship and popular images with an appreciation that immigrant families and households are divided by hierarchies of power (Pessar 1999:582; see also Eng 2001:207 on the challenge to received immigration kinship study posed by the notion of “queer diaspora”). Taking up Nancy Foner’s (1997:972) important call for increased attention to the “meanings that immigrants attach to their kinship and family relations,” this paper’s ethnography calls particular attention to the gendered divides of immigrant family networks and meanings (cf. Hondagneu-Sotelo 1994).³

This paper draws second on the burgeoning literature on the fraught relationship between multiculturalism and liberalism. This literature asserts that prevailing ideologies of multiculturalism are interested in cultural difference that presents no challenge to the fundamental tenets of liberalism: the “free and equal” universal individual (Held 1996); the “detached and self-sustaining individual ... unmarked by culture and bodied experience” (Alemán and Salkevar 2003); and the premise that “what was good for everybody was known and given from the outset” (Chakrabarty 1998:479). This scholarship calls variously for multiculturalism that exceeds classical liberalism. Dipesh Chakrabarty (1998:473), for example, offers “interactive multiculturalism” as “a politics ... that goes beyond the usual liberal-pluralist stances of seeing the culture of public life as one and homogeneous”; in a similar vein, Ana M. Martínez Alemán and Katya Salkevar (2003:579) champion “learning with not through difference” (see also Prendergast and Abelman n.d.).

Building on this understanding of the complex relationship between liberalism and multiculturalism, ethnographers of racialized students have documented the often painful “tug” of ethnic vs. “mainstream” or white affiliation (Woo 1997:132; also Lewis, Chesler, and Forman 2001). As Deborah Woo (1997:130) demonstrates, many Asian Americans raised in largely White suburbs fear that association with other Asian Americans poses a challenge to their “individual identity or development.” Amanda E. Lewis, Mark Chesler, and Tyrone A. Forman (2001:80) describe the painful push/pull in

³ This call for attention to the lived experience of kinship for immigrants echoes parallel moves in a rekindled anthropological study of kinship as “one of the most important arenas for creative energy” (Carsten 2004:9; cf. Faubion 2001). As Janet Carsten (2004:36) notes, it was the anthropological shift from “form to substance” and “structure to process” that transformed the study of kinship.

which students of color are required to simultaneously blend in “while at the same time the application of academic and behavioral stereotypes emphasizes their group characteristic and difference.” Eduardo Bonilla-Silva and Tyrone A. Forman (2000:70) describe the liberal tenets of “color blind racism” that in valorizing the effort of “individuals” “invoke[s] the *free market* or *laissez-faire* ideology ...to justify contemporary racial inequality.” The Kim family student members I introduce here reveal this complex relationship between liberalism and multiculturalism, albeit variously.

In the larger study from which this paper’s ethnography is drawn I examine the ways in which Korean Americans move to and through the American university in a web of familial and ethnic kinship ties; this is so in large part because as extremely popular destinations for Chicagoland Korean America, the campuses I studied have an intimate relationship to this ethnic community. Both this ethnic network and the campus’s intimacy, however, posed an enormous challenge for many of my interlocutors because of their anxiety that the college life that does not push them out of their “comfort zone” does not really qualify as the “real thing,” the liberal ideal described above. This liberal ideal understands this college project as a highly personal matter (see Berlant 1998:284 on this sense of liberal intimacy). I am thus interested in the ways in which this ethnic, or even familial, “comfort zone” runs against the grain of both the “multicultural” “family of diversity” and the liberal education that many students have come to understand as *sine qua non* of the “American” college

I begin this paper with the family “farm,” a veritable symbol of Kim family ties. Immediately apparent is that the farm is hardly a “Korean” legacy, but rather speaks to very particular race and class coordinates and performance in the immigrant crucible. I then introduce first cousins Owen and Tony, underscoring their highly divergent rhetorical mobilization of kin ties, while at once appreciating that both of them are responding to the contemporary liberal and multicultural ideals and racial gaze of the American university. Where Owen wholeheartedly embraces the liberal project of the U.S. university, he feels compelled to mobilize kin ties exclusively as a mark of class and cosmopolitan distinction; Tony, on the other hand, offers his kin network in hearty tension with the project and promise of the American university. The cousins’ conversations about their futures, however, reveal their projects as fraught and conflicted. The tension in the cousins’ close-knit kin talk is echoed by Owen’s Father. On the one hand, his immigrant story speaks to the cosmopolitan, classed family of Owen’s talk. On the other hand, in his discussions about Owen’s older brother, his first son, he offers a very different performance of close-knit kin ties in the diaspora; in neither instance, however, do we find unmediated Korean cultural legacy; rather, as with Owen and Tony, both are mobilizations squarely located in the racial context of the United States. In “the Farm, Take 2” I introduce Kim women: Tony’s Mother, the pioneer immigrant; girl cousins, including a late immigrant; and a wife of one of the immigrant Kim brothers. Together, their accounts underscore the profound work of gender across all talk of close-knit kin. The farm looks very different through their gendered lenses.

“The Farm”

I turn to December 20, 2003, a Saturday evening Kim family Christmas gathering with 3 of the immigrant parent siblings present, and members of the second generation there from five of the families and various friends, among them me. This was an

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ethnographer's dream: 5 of the second-generation that I had been meeting for years alone or in pairs, and a few of the parent generation – and all in one milieu, a ranch home with a sprawling addition in the back – perfect for a large Christmas party – in a squarely middle class Chicago suburban neighborhood. The party was held several days before Christmas because 6 of the second generation were off in the morning for a long-planned dream-come-true trip to Hawai'i.

At the party, I was most excited to finally meet the tailor, the youngest of the Kim parent-generation immigrants and the father of Mary, one of the second generation I had been meeting. I'll call him Mark, a plausible name for a Korean American Catholic; the Kims are all Catholic and this is a detail that matters in the overwhelmingly protestant evangelical landscape of Chicagoland Korean America. I had heard so much about Mark, his largesse to the extended family, his rough and tumble spirit, his sailor language, his huge reputation as a skilled tailor, but most of all about the farm. The farm was Mark's baby, near 100 acres two hours Southwest of Chicago. Everyone calls it the farm but really it is a piece of land in farm country, a place where the extended Kim family has been retreating to for weekends and holidays for over a decade. The farm is distinctive: one just doesn't hear about first generation Korean immigrants purchasing tracks of land in farm country, especially with no intent to farm. Although Mark has impressive blue prints, to date the only structure is a large lean-to – the kind one finds in the sort of Korean village where Mark and his siblings spent their early youth. The blue prints that he unfurled ceremoniously that evening sketch an interesting structure, nearly 80% of it a single room to preserve space for the open gathering of Kim kin into the future.⁴ That the structure remains imaginary is telling, for so too are the future contours of the Kim family uncharted. There is no question that “the farm” is the sine qua non symbol of this family's close-knit ties for it is a space designated for nothing other than the gathering, in private, of this large extended family, with occasional visits from family friends.

That the farm is distinctive and distinctively familial is not lost on the Kims: it never stopped coming up in conversation. But it was not until that Christmas party evening that I finally learned something about the origin of the farm. Mark described that it was 1992 and the entire family had traveled to a rural state park for a family barbecue; Korean countryside barbecues are hardly light fare – and neither are they quiet or short-lived gatherings. As they unpacked the grills and various paraphernalia, Mark described that “people looked at us as if we were monkeys.” “Like monkeys,” he repeated again and again. Then and there he resolved to buy a place where they could all go: “The farm” then, the ur-symbol of Kim family solidarity, was in one sense a refuge from the racialized gaze at a large ethnic family performing kin-ties in the American landscape. But, let me quickly complicate that gaze. Several minutes later in our conversation, Mark bothered to tell me that beyond the barbecue items, the Kims stood out that day because “we arrived in cars that were nicer than any that had ever been there!” Mark was describing an ethnic performance that was at once classed, perhaps in ways that were jarring for the onlookers, jarring in the landscape of prevailing images of immigrant

⁴ As Janet Carsten (2004:55) notes, kinship is made in houses.” In this vein, I have come to think of the farm as a space, a hearth, in which kinship is fashioned.

families. The farm the was purchased against that racialized gaze and we will see that it stands for a highly gendered performance of ethnic family against the grain of prevailing images of Asian American family as comfortably secured in the American fold.

I turn now to same-aged second generation Kim family cousins, Owen, the son of the long-time eldest Kim male in the U.S., and Tony, the son of the sister who was the first to immigrate, and quite typically of the era, as a nurse. In their junior and senior year, the cousins shared an apartment close to campus; in his underclassman years, Owen had roomed with his brother John. I introduce the cousins' often opposed narration of what we might call their university and family "projects."

An (Anti-)Asian American Premed vs. A Family Guy

Over the years I talked with Owen, a pre-med (and now in medical school), he always struck me as serious and meditative, as if he was bearing the weight of the world. Owen had a very well articulated vision of a college education, a classical liberal humanist project. He spoke about the urgency of college. His terms were dramatic: he needed to figure out how he was going to live – and this was his "last chance." The "how to live" came down to this: he came to college searching for truth beyond the happenstance givens of his life – namely that he happened to be Catholic (he attended Catholic school through middle school) and that he happened to be Korean American. Owen devoted all of his electives to courses on ethics, religion, and philosophy. He was busily stripping away all the contingencies of circumstance, grasping for the universal human that the university should educate (see Znaniecki 1994 on the social role of the university student); elsewhere I describe at length the numerous occasions on which the university did not answer fully to his liberal call (cf. see Brodtkin 2000:31). As I look over our years of conversation, I think of Owen as having performed (both for me and for himself) an energetic anti-Asian American pre-med narrative: Owen yearned for an education that would allow him to grapple with what it means to be "human" against the racialized stereotype of the Asian American pre-med and her pushy parents interested in nothing other than financial reward, professional prestige, and family standing.

The "family" of Owen's narrative needed to be uncharacteristically Asian American -- anything but an ethnic sign. Owen went to enormous lengths to distance himself from any Korean American or Asian American fold, although he had to admit that when it came down to it he had spent a great deal of time with his cousins -- and he did regret, vaguely, not making more of college's multicultural community. Owen aspired to a diverse cohort, an aspiration that was most satisfied in his research experience in a lab with many international graduate students.

When Owen spoke of close-knit family he meant mostly to distinguish himself from Korean America at large. Owen hemmed in his "Korean" consociates this way: "Really the only Koreans I associated with were people who were Catholics, who were born in the United States and could speak fluent English and things like that." At another point he said this, "I think there's a lot of tension in race... My opinion about my, how comfortable I feel being a Korean, I mean.. [About] the reason that I don't fit into the Korean American society... As I see it, it's because I don't feel comfortable ... having the assumption put on me that I speak Korean, that I do Korean things and things like that." Owen's phrase, "tension in race" is apt: it refers, I think, both to the racialized

gaze of mainstream and Korean America against which he clamors in his university project to be human beyond the contingencies of race, family, and religion.

Owen's same-aged cousin and roommate cousin Tony could not have been more different. Where Owen is serious and meditative, Tony is light hearted and kid-like and boyishly stylish in the way that college guys can be. Tony spoke vaguely about a desire to be "well-rounded," but quickly dismissed it as impossible for someone like him. And where Owen aspired to multicultural social circles, Tony described his as largely Korean American and becoming more so over the course of college.

Tony, an engineering major who dreams of someday racing cars and who had long set his sights on one of the "big three" American auto companies, spoke of the extended family this way: "I think of us as a big network... John's [i.e., Owen's older brother] probably going to be the head of the family once all the members pass away... like in next century." Tony's "family" is decidedly patrilineal, and as the different surnamed son of a Kim sister it was not lost on Tony that his foothold is precarious: "I mean technically, I'm not even supposed to be on that side of the family." A conversation about the possibility of two of the cousins becoming doctors gives meaning to Tony's sense of a network: "But if both of them go into medicine, we have too many doctors... We need someone in accounting, we need someone in business, and you know we need someone who's a lawyer. I just think as a family, we have to just, you know just kind of build resources as a big family... like a huge network of people referring someone else to someone else." In this vein, Tony spoke of family entirely against the grain of Owen's liberal individual: it was precisely in the thick of particular ties, that Tony imagined making his way in the world – at least at some moments. Tony was matter of fact that he and his cousins Owen, and John "don't really care to integrate with the entire university ... 'cause we're pretty content with what we have I guess." Owen, on the other hand, acknowledged the same reality but named it a problem.

Tony's sense of family and ethnic social life builds from his cynicism about the university. In his junior year with middling grades Tony began to fret over what an engineering degree would really promise; he spoke skeptically about "hard work that supposedly pays off in the end." When Tony told me that he was thinking about transferring to the college of business, he brought up his maternal uncle Uncle Mark (of "the farm") who he described as the "anchor of the family" and "mentality-wise pretty young" and who had by then been encouraging him to go into business. Tony described, "'cause like, if I were to graduate with a business degree I'm sure through family connections I could probably get a job with some investment firm because Mark has a lot of friends who are pretty high up there." Tony described himself as "family-oriented in the same way as Mark." Tony's consideration of a move to business and employment with the help of kin-connections registered his deep-seated doubts about the value of college credentials. In a related vein, Tony was also skeptical about the university's supposed commitment to producing "well-rounded" students, something that he knew was not happening for him. With "well-rounded," Tony gestured to both a broader liberal arts education and to a social life beyond kin and a small cohort of Korean American high school buddies, even as he described himself as not really caring to "integrate with the entire university." Like the contemporary American university imaginary itself, Tony's university imaginaries are conflicted: a university that fosters personal development and rationally confers opportunity commensurate with

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achievement on the one hand; and one whose credential doesn't really matter at the end of the day and one through which people move in racially and ethnically segregated cohorts.

Before leaving Tony and his identification with Uncle Mark the tailor, I want to briefly introduce Tony's father who Tony described as indifferent at best about his in-laws, namely his wife's extended family and its dense Chicagoland social life, in which he does not participate at all. Tony's father makes clear that Tony's mobilization of kin ties, be they against the U.S. university or otherwise, hardly refers to a simple cultural legacy, reminding us that cultural narratives of the seemingly enduring are often fashioned anew in the context of very particular historical conjunctures, such as that of liberalism and multiculturalism in the millennial United States.

Tony described that his father thinks of the Kims as lower level and uneducated; he stressed to Tony that while the Kims are merely "immigrants," "coming here at their own free will, you know, seeking a better life," he was "sent here as a student, a governmental thing." In this second-hand report, Tony's father distinguished himself, the once cosmopolitan student from the economic emigration of his wife's kin; that like most of his wife's brothers, he too became a self-employed entrepreneur, perhaps made this historical distinction all the more important. The American university loomed large in the liberal, cosmopolitan project of the men of Tony's father's cohort – including for our purposes today Owen's Father; theirs was a sensibility that could not be more different from that of Uncle Mark, and for that matter of Tony himself. I suggest that this difference runs against the grain of received ideas of generational divides in which an imagined immigrant son would mobilize a liberal rejection to his immigrant social climbing parent (Trillin 1996). Tony's father is disparaging not only of the close-knit Kim family, but of the flourishes of a close-knit nuclear family as well. While for his part, Tony would like to live close to his parents in their old age, he is saddened by his Dad's attitude, "you go your way, and we'll go ours." Made clear here, is that for Tony's Father, the close-knit family is a classed sign, one at odds with his own youthful immigration and American imaginaries. When, as we saw above, Tony describes the continuity of the Kims into the next generation, and when he sketches the option of a kin-based occupational future, he runs against the grain of his father's dispositions.

I turn now to snippets from an evening conversation over pizza that I had with the cousins together. I highlight two sorts of moments: on the one hand, those that further delineate the distinctions that I have drawn above between Owen's liberal project and close-knit kin cultural capital and Tony's ethnic bastion; and, on the other hand those that instead help us to see that Owen and Tony's projects are neither uniform nor fixed – and both racially inscribed.

Our conversations began on the question of the cousins' extended family's representativeness, of Korean America as it were. Owen insisted that their families were "atypical... more American, sort of anti-Korean" and elaborated, asserting himself as an atypical Asian American pre-med, on his parents not being pushy. Tony interrupted that his parents had been pushy, but Owen was nonetheless comfortable to summarize that both of their families "began with more Western views than most."

In passing, the cousins agreed about their family ties and solidarity: that rather than rivaling – which they offered as typically Korean American -- they help each other

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out. Owen put it this way: "Everyone's always looking out for each other and for the future, and their mentality is that Tony and I are doing well, so we're actually helping the family and helping their kids too ... so there isn't the competition or negative feelings that I would say is typical with other Korean families or Koreans in general." Owen thus suggested that educational passion (i.e., education for its own sake) is somehow irreconcilable with "typical Korean" family ties in which families vie against one another in a race for social mobility. Once Owen described that although the Kims had the same "structure" as other Korean American families, it was unique because the members "really" got along. We can recall Owen's sense of liberal human development, but we can also note that he evokes familial intimacy here in much the same fashion as Tony.

Where Owen stressed the family's particular cultural capital, its Western orientation and so on, Tony turned instead to the ravages of history: "In Korea, I guess, especially during the War, I mean they all had to take care of each other," and he went on to name the siblings, cousins, and matrilineal kin who had helped his mother with her nursing school tuition (because her father had refused to pay) and he concluded "and that happened basically with everybody [in the family] and I think that's [what our family is about]: every body supporting each other and helping each other, and that's kind of what they stressed with us." From here, Owen, persisting with his argument about the family's difference or distinction, shifted the conversation to Catholicism: "Maybe, the supportive family is due to the Catholic religion -- that's my interpretation." By evoking the Catholic religion, Owen at once denied claims to ethnic distinctiveness, underscoring instead their religious minority status as Korean American Catholics (i.e., vs. Protestants). Northern suburban Protestants comprise a veritable Chicagoland "mainstream" against which nearly all Chicagoland Korean Americans calibrate themselves (Abelmann n.d.). It is important to note that in so doing, Owen had eclipsed the historical and gender particularity that Tony had offered with his reference to his mother's immigration story.

The cousin's kin talk came into focus when they spoke about their futures. Tony's embrace of the intimate ethnic family became palpably clear in his worries about what it might mean for him to perhaps, at least intermittently, break away. He mused about some day moving to California, but worried that "I'll probably be labeled as, you know, I mean, I'm sure 'selfish' will come up because I'll be pursuing my personal, you know personal interests over the family." He described, though, a need to "do certain things on my own," to "prove myself" after having had "all this help of the family." As Lauren Berlant (1998:287) notes about intimacy, it is registered most palpably at the very moment when it is threatened. These remarks both reaffirm Tony's investment in the image of close-knit kin and complicate by revealing his need for personal development (i.e., to prove himself) beyond the nest of close-knit kin. As Tony even considers such a move we can recall his once international student father who urges his children to stake out on their own. Interestingly, it was here – at the very moment that Tony imagined pursuing personal interests over those of the family, much in Owen's liberal vein, that for the first time that evening, Owen was moved to speak plainly about their differences: "I don't know, we have different points of view ... I mean my family definitely gave me a good family background and everything but I don't think they gave me everything... I don't feel any need to prove myself or anything." Owen's comments were consistent: for him, "family" (including close-knit kin) was about "good family background" – a mark of distinction and difference -- against Tony's sense of "all this help of the family." But

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Owen too deserves to have his performance of ethnic ties complicated. Over a recent dinner I had with the cousins in Chicago, Owen described being completely bewildered that anyone would go into the likes of dermatology or ophthalmology: “What use would that be to the family!” he said. With this comment we can recall the economic logic of family that Tony spoke of when he had considered a move to business, and employment through Uncle Mark. Such rhetoric of utility, let alone ethnic solidarity, would appear to run against the grain of Owen’s liberal college imaginary.

I have introduced Owen and Tony as first cousins who variously mobilize the rhetoric of close-kin ties as they fashion and narrate their education and personal trajectories. Owen’s close-knit ties, a mark of classed family distinction, are mobilized in accordance with his own sense of liberal personal development, against the racialized stereotype of the Asian American pre-med. Tony’s close-knit kin ties speak against the liberal university and its promise, as he questions both its multicultural rhetoric and the value of its credentials. Both rhetorics take shape, however, in the racialized crucible of immigrant America and of the U.S. university at the moment of an odd marriage of liberal ideals and multiculturalism. I highlight, however, fissures in the narratives of both young men, reminding that kinship, ethnic, racial and other identities are constantly in motion and never easily one thing or another. Tony’s father, I suggested, also complicated the picture, reminding that the liberal project, with its cosmopolitan hues, is an old and classed one for South Koreans, stitched in the transnational fabric of Korean modernity. I explore this project further – and particularly its gendered contours – with a look at members of the Kim family parent immigration generation: namely, siblings Owen’s Dad and Tony’s Mom.

The Class and Gender of Immigration

Turning to the immigrant parent generation, I mean to consider the inter-generational, transnational context of the kin talk we met above. I am here deeply committed to connecting the lines between South Korean “modern” projects as they articulate with those of the immigrant and the second generation. I concur with David Eng (2001: 213; see also 214) that “any serious understanding of Asian American racial formation must be considered in relation to a comparative and internationalist model of subject formation and subjection beyond the real and imaginary borders of the U.S. nation state.” I will particularly highlight the liberal individual of South Korean cosmopolitan modernity and at the heart of many immigration stories. Further it is important to underscore that Korean American families bring this cosmopolitan liberal project to the American university.

Owen’s Father perfectly reveals the tensions between the kin rhetorics of Owen and Tony: on the one hand, he echoes Tony’s father (not a Kim) with his immigrant story speaks to the cosmopolitan, classed family of Owen’s talk, while on the other hand in his discussions of Owen’s older brother John he offers a version of kin ties that recalls Tony and Uncle Mark on “family.” As I have for both Owen and Tony above, I will argue that both narratives, even as they appear inconsistent, are united by the realities of race in the immigrant crucible; namely both refer to Korean American difference. Aihwa Ong’s (1999) insights about the “limits to cultural accumulation” for racialized immigrants go far to explain how Owen’s father can mobilize these seemingly contradictory rhetorics together, each in their own way an assertion his particular “Korean” family capital. Ong

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queries the extent to which racialized immigrants with considerable cultural and cosmopolitan capital are accorded commensurate social capital.

Although Owen's Father for many years stood genealogically at the helm of extended family in the diaspora, it was Uncle Mark, the youngest brother who effectively took the reins. On the one hand, Owen's Father is proud of his close-knit family as distinctive in the broader Korean American landscape – a pride that Owen certainly echoed. Tellingly, Owen and John, and the real names they stand in for, were chosen for meaning “well-born.” Owen's Father once told me that he spent a car ride down to Urbana Champaign “talking [with my wife] about how it is that his family has little *connection* to Korean *society*...” He and his wife agreed that “part of it is *snobbism* because when we meet Koreans they bother us ...they are rude and uneducated, ignorant... we hate the loud talking and the showing off.” On the other hand, however, Owen's Father also likes to think of himself as distinguished within the family on account of his artistic leanings, fine taste, higher learning (particularly in relation to his two youngest brothers, Uncle Mark one of them), and his line of work; unlike his immigrant small entrepreneur brothers, he is as a skilled worker in a printing company. It strikes me that Owen's Father can preserve the family as a cultural domain in a way that is much more difficult for small entrepreneurs, whose families are typically enveloped in the business. Indeed, Owen's Father prides himself on being known to the whole extended family as “Mr. Culture.” His specialty is an unofficial “expert tour” of the Chicago Art Institute that he has performed for many visiting relatives. At the aforementioned Christmas party, Owen's Father showed no interest as Uncle Mark pulled out the blueprints of the sprawling home he plans to build at the farm someday; instead he appealed to me to join him in a discussion about the controversial conductor of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra.

Owen's Father's immigration story offers himself as a paragon of liberal and cosmopolitan virtue. Owen's liberal college project answered perfectly to his father's cosmopolitan vision and emigration rationale: namely the yearning to be human beyond the contingencies of filiation (i.e., to be, so to speak, at home in the world) (Abelmann and Kim 2004; Park and Abelmann 2004).

Seemingly against this liberal, cosmopolitan grain of his immigration story, Owen's Father also prides himself on an entirely ethnically and nationally inscribed kin collectivity through his celebration of the achievements of his eldest son John who is also (functionally) the “eldest son” of the extended Kim patrilineage in the United States, a culturally elaborated family position in the Koreas.⁵ As he put it, if John “does

⁵ We must, however, be cautious to juxtapose cosmopolitan yearnings and ethnic or national ties as somehow antithetical; a burgeoning literature argues powerfully that the cosmopolitan can be powerfully ethnically and nationally articulated (Anderson 1998; Park and Abelmann 2004; Robbins 1998; Schein 1998); parallel then are the tensions

something successfully” it will be the “fame of all the family [in English].” Relevant to this story was John’s deep cynicism about college credentials and his trenchant critique of racism at the university.

In Owen’s Father’s account of John’s employment in the Chicago financial world, he exercised a particular gendered and classed immigrant family imaginary in which Korean family ties (inflected by patriarchy and good upbringing) produce value in the heart of American late capitalism. The story goes like this: John was hired by the Korean émigré friend of an Irish American client of Uncle Mark, the tailor. Owen’s Father was stunned to discover that these financial circles were not all about education credentials (as the South Korean imagination would have it); all the more shocking was that John’s 1.5 generation Korean American boss (purportedly the son of a professor in South Korea) was not even a college graduate. Hearsay from Mark the tailor, Owen’s Father reported on John’s initial meeting with the Irish-American intermediary and the prospective Korean American boss. Speaking as if he had been there himself, Owen’s Father described how the Korean émigré boss was stunned by John, this “wholesome young man who made him feel ‘corrupt and dirty.’” For Owen’s Father, chief among John’s virtues was his familial allegiance. Indeed immediately before telling me this employment story, Owen’s Father had been describing the details of John’s very special kinship role at the helm of the long run of second generation cousins who he extends to tirelessly. Owen’s Father’s third-hand observations on that dinner mobilize the rhetoric of kin ties and family solidarity to explain John’s employment success. It was as if, for each son in a distinctive way, Owen’s Father was able to articulate the efficacy of the capital of kin ties; With Owen’s Father we can, then, hear echoes of the kin-rhetoric of both his son and his nephew Tony.

The Farm: Take 2

A turn to sisters, wives, and daughters from the Kim family will return us to the farm, this time quite differently. Like the talk of close knit kin, the farm is shot through with difference; recalling the workings of race and class in its origins, here its profoundly gendered character will come to life.

I begin on Tony’s mother gender-inflected, narration of kin ties, family capital, and emigration. Where the immigration story of her brother, Owen’s Father, offered a political exposé on difficulties in the translation of his (male) birthright in South Korea, hers underscored gender discrimination. Kim family kin ties are fraught ones for Tony’s Mother: on the one hand, as the pioneer immigrant of the family, she is responsible for Kim family reproduction in the United States; on the other hand, however, it was the workings of Kim family patriarchy that propelled her to emigrate in the first place.

Tony’s Mother’s émigré story, much of it told to me tearfully, had little of the triumphant quality of that her brother “Mr. Culture.” She spoke about her youthful ambition that against great familial odds -- namely, a patrilineage with no interest in

between cosmopolitanism and nationalism in the home country; and liberalism and ethnic ties in the immigrant crucible.

supporting her education -- propelled her to nursing school (a well-worn path for poorer girls with talent and zeal) and to emigrate.

Tony's Mother often mused about the personal costs of her own kin work. When we met, Tony's Mother talked for hours about a "friend" of yore – a woman with whom she had briefly, but deeply, connected while working in Seoul. I was baffled – why all this talk about a fleeting encounter from decades ago? This old friend had contacted her once in her early émigré years, but in the thick of difficult times and with young children, Tony's mother had been entirely unable to welcome her or to even to invite her for a visit – even as and because she sponsored one sibling after another to come. I think she dwelled on this fleeting friendship because of her understanding that her own ambition, itself twisted in the ravages of her familial and Korean past, had left her stranded, alone – alone with all the kin who figure in the "family" stories and celebrations of her son (Tony) and her brothers (Owen's Father among them). "When I think about it," she said, "I have never had the peace of mind (yôyu), the room, for making a friend." Here I underscore that her kin-work left no room for a friend. The friend in question – who as it turns out did not even remember Tony's mother when decades later she tracked her down by telephone (she even called back to try again) – was, she told me, the "only friend" she has ever had. Last month I received a holiday card from Tony's Mother, an effusive answer to one I sent in late December. In that card, she detailed the importance of learning, and particularly of the written word. She wrote that she is learning how to type Korean and that these days she has been thinking about studying Chinese as well. I am inclined to think of these 60-something hankerings as born perhaps of a long life of kin work.

Needless to say in Tony's Mother's accounts we find here little of Owen's Father's stories of family-based cultural capital, or of the triumph of cosmopolitan modern selves; nor do we find the warm embrace of the circle of émigré kin celebrated by Owen's Father on John's employment, and by Tony and intermittently by Owen.

Relatives back in South Korea described Tony's mother to me as the immigrant "pioneer" of the family and as a woman who in order to emigrate had capitalized on "everything that she had," her body and her health. They had surmised that, "had she stayed in [South] Korea she would have drowned having to support all those siblings; by going to the U.S., she won her independence." The contrast is stark: while it is family ties that distinguish the classed emigration of Owen's Father, it is the lone woman, who takes her body – "everything she had" – so as to migrate away from the work and weight of family ties, only to then reconstitute those very ties in the immigrant community. This portrait too, however, must be complicated because her immigration freed her from the responsibility to care for her bed-ridden mother in law.

Once in a conversation, Tony's Mother described herself as "but a little speck" in both her natal family and her husband's family. Relegating herself to the periphery of both families, Tony's mother brings us to the heart of class and gender divides. This said, however, her relation to the Kim family is multi-dimensional – as it is for all the Kims I have featured here. Remarking on the reality that her husband and her husband's kin have long looked down on her and her siblings as ignorant and uneducated, she charged that her husband "could never have become what he has today without my brothers' help." With this she was talking about her husband's own entrepreneurial use of Kim family ties. Like Tony, Owen, and Owen's Father, she mobilized the rhetoric of close-knit kin variously.

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If Tony's Mother waxed ambivalent about close-knit kin, her niece Catherine, the daughter of Patrick, the second eldest male in the Kim family parent generation and the last to immigrate (in 1997), was unabashed in her critique of the Kims. Catherine and her two sisters are the Kim family's 1.5 generation, or as many of the cousins describe, the FOB (for "fresh-off-the-boat") cousins. John once described the run of cousins as "like brothers and sisters...except for Patrick's kids." Catherine, together with the tailor's daughter Mary and Mary's mother, return us to the farm.

For Catherine, Kim kin ties have offered neither the classed/cosmopolitan capital of Owen and his father, nor the ethnic haven or network capital described by Tony and again by Owen's Father when talking about his eldest son John. In her late twenties when she arrived, kin ties found Catherine laboring in a basement at Uncle Mark's store when her father's health had failed him such that he could no longer go to work; kin ties discouraged her from pursuing her own education dreams and desires in the arts; and kin ties derided her mother's family. Catherine minced no words about the naked male chauvinism of her uncles, most of all Uncle Mark the tailor.

Her kin ambivalence aside it was Catherine who until two years ago when her mother passed away, assumed the ritual responsibilities of the Kim family – standing in for her invalid mother who as the eldest wife of the family held ritual responsibility, foremost for the chesa or ancestral services for the deceased Kim grandparents. Catherine rocked the boat after her mother's death when she announced that she would no longer host the entire extended family for elaborate meals several times a year.

It is, however, the first year anniversary chesa services for Catherine's departed mother that return us to the farm. Fittingly, chesa and the farm meet as similarly signs of Kim patrilineal kin ties. The story goes like this. I learned from Mary, tailor Mark's first-born, about an instance in which her mother had refused to join in a visit to the farm. As it turns out, Mary's mother was outraged that her husband and his brothers were heading to the farm the same weekend as the first-year chesa commemoration of Catherine's late mother. (To recall, Mary's Mother and Catherine's late mother are related through marriage, having both married into the Kim family.) While the immigrant generation brothers and their sons headed for the farm, Mary's Mother stayed home to join her niece Catherine in commemorating her recently departed mother. Mary's Mother staked her position on the performance of kin ties at the farm this way: she insisted that not a brick be laid for the house at the farm until her husband refurbishes the nuclear family's home. Mary, who is herself quite a spokeswoman of the Kim family, and the motor behind the last December trip to Hawai'i, once said this about the farm, "the boy cousins love it."

At the farm and elsewhere, close-knit kin ties, are signified in various ways. We have seen, for example, that talk of Korean American close-knit kin at the U.S. university can affirm liberal ideas, decry racism, and challenge the value of the college credential. For Asian American college students, family is easily marked as, and can in turn be variously mobilized as, a "culturally" elaborated site of difference. The interlocutors I have introduced here meddle in that difference, revealing just how productive and creative kin rhetoric can be. On the other hand, the challenges of the transmission or translation of family capital across space and time is a very old story, one implicated for example in the rapid rural exodus at the heart of South Korea's modernity. These old

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stories meet in the U.S. suburb and at the U.S. university, where cross-generational, transnational projects fashion the next generation. I consider “close-knit kin” a particularly rich site for ethnographic analysis because of the surprising ways in which an easily essentialized cultural trope can so productively intervene in the assertion and making of difference. The Kim members featured here reveal the intimacies of family, race, liberalism, and the university in creative tension.

Agnes (divorced) no kids	Patrick (comes in1997) Catherine UIUC 200?	Tony's Mom (1970) Tony UIUC 2000	Owen's Dad (1975) John & Owen UIUC UIUC 1999 2000	Jerry (1977)	Mark (1978) Mary UIUC 2006
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Top line, immigrant siblings, parent generation; 2nd line, date of immigration; 3rd line, children; 4th line college attendance; 5th line, date of graduation; UIUC, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

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