

Christian Universalism and U.S. Multiculturalism: An “Asian American” Campus Church¹

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Following *Amerasia Journal's* call to treat religion as a critical variable in racial formation, this paper builds on the literature on the relationship between Asian American Christianity and racial and ethnic formation, namely, the ways in which people take on racial and ethnic subjectivities and identifications.² To date, most research has focused on Korean immigrant or multigenerational Korean churches.³ Although most of the literature on immigrant churches does not focus on race, they agree that ethnic churches offer a safe haven from racism.⁴ Recently, however, a number of scholars have begun to shift their attention to second-generation Asian American churches, exploring as we do here the tension between Christian universalism and ethnic particularism.⁵ Most of this literature, however, has focused largely on mono-ethnic churches. Further, we extend these discussions by examining how this tension echoes racial formations in the broader contemporary United States. A campus church offers a particularly rich ethnographic window because college offers perhaps American society's greatest investment in multiculturalism.⁶ Indeed, for many students, college offers their first extensive contact with people from other ethnic groups.⁷ However, for the Asian American students featured here, going to college at a predominantly white campus also presents a time of heightened racial and ethnic awareness and for many students, social circles that are con-

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siderably more Asian American than those of their high school years.⁸

In this paper, we observe a burgeoning Asian American campus Christian church (AAC),⁹ which until recently was almost exclusively Korean American.¹⁰ In the name of Christian universalism, the AAC is critically transforming itself into an Asian American-led, multicultural church.¹¹ In spite of its changing composition, some congregants remain unconvinced that the church is really so transformed; in fact, some members continue to think of the church as a “Korean American” institution.¹² We examine the relationship between the AAC’s two largest ethnic groups, Korean Americans and Chinese/Taiwanese Americans.¹³ We are interested in how these two church populations navigate the AAC’s changing self-identity. We argue that the AAC’s commitment to Christian universalism echoes the central tenets of U.S. multiculturalism: race neutrality and the doctrine of universal humanity.

We have found in spite of students’ embrace of these doctrines in the day-to-day social and religious life in the church, there are disruptive moments in which students register racial and ethnic difference. We assert that in these moments, race-blindness is interrupted not through outright contestation or conflict—indeed there is almost none of that at the AAC—but rather through racial and ethnic play. By “play,” we refer to the humorous joking and lighthearted references to race and ethnicity that most often occur in recreational moments and spaces. We identify gender/romance, language, and intra-ethnic distinction as three major domains in which students feel comfortable to critique the church’s prevailing rhetoric of Christian universalism. To a certain extent, this critique echoes moves made by the church itself—the simultaneous recognition of race/racism in the form of lighthearted humor and its subordination to evangelical purposes. Our findings support scholars who argue that race-blindness or neutrality is an ideology that is made and fostered with considerable cultural and political work.¹⁴

The AAC is a non-denominational Asian American church founded in 1990 at a flagship Midwestern state university. Since its founding, the church grew from 145 members in 1990 to 829 in 2005, making it an exceptionally large campus church. Recently, the church made obvious efforts to transform itself to a multicultural institution. Today, Korean Americans make up 58 percent

of the total congregation, Chinese/Taiwanese 26 percent, and Caucasians 5 percent; the remaining congregants include Filipino Americans, Japanese Americans, South Asian Americans, African Americans, and Latinos. Sixty-seven percent of the congregation is from Chicagoland (i.e., Chicago and its suburbs) and 73 percent of the congregation consists of undergraduate college students. International students make up almost 10 percent of the total congregation and half of them are from South Korea. The AAC estimates that nearly 20 percent of Asians and Asian Americans at the university are involved with the AAC. We estimate that well over 60 percent of Korean American undergraduates at the University have had some experience with the church.¹⁵

This paper draws on intensive field research at the AAC, including participant observation in weekly “Small Group” Bible study meetings, Friday night “large group” worship, Sunday worship, baptism services, and informal social activities with Small Group members. Lan has maintained a four-year friendship with some church members and therefore was often invited to attend special events, including a wedding between a Korean American woman and a Chinese American man. Additionally, this paper draws on fourteen interviews conducted with 1.5 and second-generation Korean American and Chinese/Taiwanese American church members.

Spiritual Growth and Ethnic Assimilation

All AAC congregants are assigned to a Small Group, which meets for weekly Bible study and additionally for many social activities.¹⁶ In her first visit, Lan was introduced by the Small Group leader as a graduate student who was interested in how the AAC was becoming multicultural. Everyone seemed to be proud that their Small Group had been chosen. Rich, a third generation Chinese American, was quick to exclaim, “Our Small Group is very diverse!”

Picking up on the multicultural celebratory tone, Jeff, a Filipino American shouted, “We need an Asian Indian!” (i.e., to complete the picture of diversity).

Someone then interjected, “Who is the Caucasian?”

Jeff quickly responded, “Jason!”

Rich added with excitement, “Oh, yes, and we have an Egyptian too!”

This performance of the “rainbow” of “America” is the sort of multicultural celebration that is at the heart of the AAC and

increasingly de rigueur in the United States today.¹⁷ In spite of the AAC's multicultural ideals, however, some congregants continue to perceive the church as largely "Korean American." Part of what renders the AAC "Korean" is its religious distinctiveness, namely its charismatic, evangelical character. For many Chinese Americans, this sense of religious difference is reinforced because they had attended churches that were less charismatic and evangelical. However, the largest concern is with the Church's more outright exclusionary practices.

The AAC ministry has tackled this prevailing perception of ethnic distinction in its sermons. These sermons illustrate how the church ministry on the one hand confronts issues of race and ethnicity head on, while on the other hand obscures race and ethnicity by talk of "culture." They underscore the AAC as an institutional space in which students learn how to talk about race and ethnicity by referring to an ideal religious maturation.

In his January 31, 2003 sermon, "The Heart of Racism," the AAC Senior Pastor drew from a 2002 end-of-the-year survey conducted in AAC Small Groups, quoting some of survey results' hard-hitting criticisms of the AAC's "Korean culture" offered by non-Korean students:

Many times, I feel like being a non-Korean is a disadvantage in being accepted in AAC and it pushes me away from social events. It has been hard to feel totally accepted and to be comfortable, but I know that the pastors look only at our spiritual growth. If it weren't for the strong desire for spiritual growth and the Senior Pastor's sermons I would have already left. Sometimes I feel pressed to adopt Korean culture.

—Chinese¹⁸ student

I'm Asian, but not Korean and there are times when that makes me feel uncomfortable. Often times, AAC equals Korean and it can turn people off. It's not just a matter of attending AAC, but feeling comfortable and welcome in the House of the Lord.

—Thai student

The ministry's recognition of the church's own ethnocentrism in marginalizing other minorities speaks to their determination to promote diversity in AAC.¹⁹ It is, however, important to consider how they reflect on these problems. Despite explicit reference to racial divides, the ministry offers a powerful narrative about spiritual growth vis-à-vis ethnic assimilation (i.e., coming to terms with Korean American predominance). In this vein, the sermon

continued with non-Korean student passages about becoming ethnically (or “culturally”) more open-minded in accordance with their spiritual growth as Christians. The narratives share a pattern: non-Korean American AAC members are at first bothered by the seemingly exclusionary “Korean” cultural and linguistic practices of the church; they then describe their spiritual growth as Christians; and finally they document their changing relationship to “Korean culture,” proclaiming their successful “adaptation” or even “assimilation.” What follows is a small sample of the testimonies the Pastor read to sketch this development:

At first, I really did not like the AAC-Korean culture. It bothered me that people would speak Korean all the time and eat Korean food (kimchee) all the time. But at an Urbana conference, God changed my perspective and instead of getting bitter, I see it as a great opportunity to get to know and understand another culture.

—Chinese student

Being comfortable at AAC has been about ignoring the ethnic differences and focusing on unity in Christ. Since my freshmen year though, it has really been a cultural experience being at AAC. . . understanding what all the Koreans feel like everyday outside AAC. . . Now I hardly notice that I am the “white girl” and life at AAC, it feels comfortable—natural.

—Caucasian member

Students offered nearly identical accounts, where students renounce the logic—the assertion of ethnic particularism—through which they first asserted that the AAC’s “Koreanness” was in some way problematic. Students then embrace Koreanness as central to the religiosity of the AAC.²⁰ In other words, non-Korean American students narrate their religious development alongside their increasing adaptation to “Korean culture” in the AAC. The senior pastor employs student testimony strategically to sketch how the development of racial (un)learning and spiritual development go hand in hand. The juxtaposition of profound critiques of the AAC’s “Korean culture” and the eventual triumph of Christian universalism conveys the powerful message that ethnicity (and by extension, race) no longer matters in the “House of the Lord.” In this vein, one Egyptian student offered, “I admit that there were several instances when I felt out of place but when I examined why I felt like that it was never because anyone made me feel like that but rather because

of my pride." This student dismisses any possibility of ethnic or race-based exclusion, rendering it instead a matter of his own "pride." Although an extreme example, this passage speaks to the larger race/culture logic that we have been sketching here: one in which race is named and then erased or delivered to "culture." Students are thus shown the way to mature as both Christians and multicultural "Americans."

Echoing many U.S. institutions, students at the AAC thus learn how to talk (and to be silent on) race and ethnicity. The church ministry's mobilization (or erasure) of race and ethnicity in AAC public discourse is multifaceted. Instead of simply being relegated to secondary importance as argued by Busto, in the AAC race and ethnicity are simultaneously marked and rearticulated as "cultural" in the name of Christian universalism.²¹ As a largely Asian American church, the AAC is itself self-conscious about race and racial marking. Indeed many sermons in the AAC touch on the immigrant pastors' experiences of racism. However, in the AAC race and racialization experiences were often narrated in a humorous and anecdotal manner and dismissed as "things of the past." In one sermon, the senior pastor told an interesting story about the naming of the church:

Believe it or not, when AAC first started, it was called the Korean AC [pseudonym]. I had told the officers not to put the word "Korean" in there, but one officer (who is a pastor on our staff now) made a mistake and accidentally put it in. I yelled at him for a while, but we had to use it because it was in the bulletin. After the first semester, we changed the name to AAC.

This reinterpretation of the church's history renders the naming of the church (i.e., with the word "Korean") a casual mistake. With this story, the Korean American origin of the church and even the tensions therein, are neatly effaced as a lighthearted joke. Echoing the citation of non-Korean American church voices above, race here becomes a thing of the past, a memory to be strategically deployed towards a more perfect multicultural future.²²

When race and ethnic differences do get mentioned in the AAC in a more contemporary sense, they are often mobilized as evangelical tools through which congregants can most effectively recruit people with shared identities, as in this passage from one of the senior pastor's sermons:

Whenever you're a minority you feel like a minority. It's a factor. Ethnicity is a factor. . . . *We must use it in ministry. . . .* If

you are of certain ethnicity, reach out to similar type of people. I'm not saying that you should reach out to only that type of people. But they will feel more comfortable with you. They might not go to another church but to ours because we have more Asians. . . . If you're Caucasian, if you reach out to some of your friends who may not be Asians, they might feel much more comfortable. *We must use and utilize ethnicity.* Don't just criticize it. *Be wise and use it.* [emphasis added]

With these comments, the pastor skillfully integrated narratives of Christian universalism and ethnic particularism. He acknowledged that "ethnicity" connects people to one another, and that these connections have the power to draw people to the church, while at once noting that this particularism is problematic in the context of the church's embrace of multiculturalism. "Don't just criticize it. Be wise and use it."

The Narration of Race through Gender and Romance

Previous studies on gender and religion in Asian American churches have primarily focused on women of color's resistance against patriarchal church culture.²³ In this paper, we take up gender and romance as an arena where race and ethnic differences²⁴ between Chinese Americans and Korean Americans are articulated and contested in a church that embraces multicultural teaching. In the AAC, there are consistent ways in which students employ gendered characteristics in order to distinguish ethnic/racial groups. Most often the tone of this gendering is lighthearted and playful. Nonetheless, given the sometimes unspoken understanding that the AAC is run by "Korean American men," it is interesting to observe how "Korean men" are characterized in this particular gender-ethnicity matrix. Korean American men are marked as masculine, conservative, and patriarchal; Chinese American men, by contrast, are rendered softer, open-minded, and even feminine. Korean American women in turn are spoken of as feminine and even submissive; and again by contrast, Chinese American women are referred to as strong and assertive. Within this matrix, the most desirable subjects are Chinese American men, whose ideal romantic partners are imagined as Korean American women.

With these gendered attributions, Chinese American and Korean American female members of the AAC sketch a particular portrait of Korean American masculinity as patriarchal, conservative, and traditional. Although it would be wrong to say that

students equate the AAC culture with these attributes of Korean American masculinity, it does seem fair to note that these attributes do characterize some of the "culture" that students assign to the AAC: namely, that the gender roles (e.g., division of labor) and religious practice (i.e., worship style) are conservative. It is important to note, however, that members also describe AAC culture in ways that contradict this gendered portrait entirely, particularly with reference to its family-like warmth and nurturance. By paying attention to the ways in which Chinese American and Korean American members of the AAC denote gendered difference along lines of race and ethnicity, gender offers a system through which members assert meaningful difference, especially ethnic difference. The discourse of Christian universalism is also absent when it comes to gender; if race and ethnicity offer a sign system in which Christian universalism and American multiculturalism must prevail, gender—and its play—is somehow impervious to these rules.

Students typically only made reference to race or ethnicity in the context of gender. One Chinese American girl seemed proud when she offered, "Chinese guys are more desirable. They are less authoritarian, more willing to cook." Popular ethnic/gender "theories" in the AAC include the "CW theory" (Chinese Woman theory), which refers to women's dominant position in the Chinese household, and the "KM theory" (the Korean Man theory), which refers to dominant Korean men. Chinese American women and Korean American men are considered a mismatch because both are dominant. A young Korean American woman shared this popular AAC joke: "If a Korean girl is carrying lots of stuff in her hands, a Chinese guy will offer to carry them for her, while a Korean guy would open the door for her." She went on to comment that most Chinese girls are very strong and dominating. "They beat up their boyfriends. I saw Chinese girls scolding their boyfriends and their Chinese boyfriends were like submissive yes-boys." This Korean American woman considers Chinese men as feminine because they are too timid with their Chinese girlfriends. She concluded, "I feel Korean guys serve me better."

Many Chinese Americans members of the AAC do draw the connection between Korean masculinity and AAC's patriarchal culture. One of the strongest critiques that we heard of AAC's gender hierarchy was from Anne, a Taiwanese woman who immigrated to the United States when she was eleven years old. "I am more conscious of being a girl than being Chinese in AAC."

Anne said that she was very aware of the strict line drawn between “girls and guys” in the AAC. She continued that because the AAC is a rather conservative church, she has to be very careful her church attire was “not too revealing, not too many bright colors. It’s easier for guys, they just need their suits.” Anne compared the AAC with “Asian churches and Caucasian churches” back home in Chicago, where she feels “kind of more relaxed.” Echoing the AAC’s prevailing multicultural logic described above, Anne offered, “I generally don’t feel much difference between Chinese and Korean.” But she quickly added, “When they do things differently, I sometimes do attribute it to cultural reasons. . . Like in AAC during sermon time, it’s always the guys who move the furniture around, who do all the organizing stuff. It’s always the guys who are on the stage and the girls are always behind the scene.” Additionally, she described the “low profile” pastors’ wives who “are always careful about how they behave themselves. They are always behind the scenes.”

Anne is nonetheless hesitant to generalize about all Korean males: “Korean guys are more domineering compared to Chinese guys. . . but maybe it’s just for me. I grew up in a very liberal family. My dad is very relaxed with my mom and he is very lenient with me too. I never feel that my mom and I had to pay due respect to him or obey him and stuff like that.” Retracting her retreat, however, she went on, “Maybe it is a cultural thing Because my dad’s company merged with a Korean one and now his boss is Korean. He told me that his Korean boss is very domineering.” These comments illustrate the complex way in which Anne rendered ethnic or cultural difference via gender. That the AAC is “conservative” registers its “Korean” sexist culture, a culture that she critiques. While she began by noting that at the AAC she feels more conscious of being a “girl than Chinese,” she clearly described being aware of being a “Chinese” girl in a church dominated by “Korean men” or at least by a church culture in which Korean men prevail. Although one young Korean American woman defended the church’s conservative gender culture in biblical terms—in spite of her own personal objections—most Chinese American female members we interviewed were vocal on the problem of gender stereotypes in the AAC.

The jokes about the Korean Man and Chinese Woman Theory take on particular meaning and humor against the landscape of the AAC’s famous (and for non-members, infamous) culture of dating. The church offers strict advice about dating and the

proper course of Christian romance and marriage. When talking about interethnic romantic connections, people seemed freer to express their views about the church's culture and its ethnic hues, although often in a playful manner. Echoing Sherry Ortner's observation that class in the United States is often spoken through other constructs, race and ethnicity in the AAC are articulated through gender and romance.²⁵ This is particularly true for our Chinese American informants, who are hardly touting an assimilationist line when it comes to marriage: not only did they narrate themselves as unlikely partners for Korean men but they also took pride in telling us that Chinese Americans are the males of choice for young Korean American women. This gender and ethnic play signals a discomfort with the male-dominated Korean culture in the AAC, a phenomenon that even Christian universalism cannot undermine. Romance is one domain in which students are less worried about being politically or religiously "correct." Hence, these conversations overtly mention ethnicity in spite of the church ministry's strenuous efforts to promote multiculturalism.

Language Play: Multiculturalism and its Racial Interruptions

Talk about language is a constant and enjoyable feature of AAC life. Students often try their hand at each other's languages, leaving their fledgling attempts open to ridicule. This language play works variously. On the one hand, language is at the heart of almost all marking of ethnic and racial difference in the AAC. But language is also a wonderful domain for multicultural celebration and endearment: namely, learning each other's languages is a way to appreciate people's cultural specificity, to welcome them, and to celebrate difference.

Although most students do not know the extent to which the AAC was once almost exclusively Korean American, they are aware that the Korean language continues to operate as a second tongue in the church. Many non-Korean members were bothered by people speaking Korean in their Small Groups, and felt left out or even worried that they were the topic of conversation. One Taiwanese girl told Lan that the first sentence she learned in Korean was "Stop talking Korean!" Although this may be an extreme case or an instance in which the interviewee meant to joke, it does reflect non-Korean students' unease in the AAC. The Taiwanese girl continued, "It seems most of them can speak Korean really well. They can read and write it too. But some of us Chinese can barely speak the Chinese language."

Chinese Americans' sensitivity to the dominance of Korean language in the AAC can be partly explained by their feelings as a minority in a still largely Korean American church. Chinese Americans consistently account for their imagined difference in language retention by associating this with Korean American small entrepreneurship. One Taiwanese student said, "Most Korean parents I met cannot speak English very well. It's because most of them run ethnic businesses—they don't need to work with whites so they don't need to speak good English. As for most Chinese parents, they work in American companies and they have to speak good English." Like gender, language retention is another site in which Chinese American students articulate their difference in the AAC. This emphasis on their parents' different social backgrounds operates as an indirect way for Chinese American students to contest the predominance of the Korean language in the AAC. Viewed from a Chinese American perspective, the Korean language can be both a language of power for second-generation Korean Americans in the AAC and a symbol of limited social mobility and hence limited adaptation to mainstream U.S. society for first-generation Korean Americans.

While language in the AAC can highlight ethnic and racial differences, it can also work to deflect them. A scene from one Small Group gathering offers a good example of the apparent celebration of diversity. While the Small Group members were waiting in line for food, Jimmy²⁶ said quickly in Korean, "I am hungry." (Being Chinese and not knowing Korean language herself, Lan learned the meaning only later.)

With that Mary, the Korean American Small Group leader, exclaimed, "Hey, you are Korean!" and laughed. By this point, Lan was confused about Jimmy's ethnicity until Jimmy said he is Chinese.

Lan asked, "How come you know some Korean phrases?"

Jimmy answered casually, "I have so many Korean friends and I just learn from them."

Later, while the small group was eating, Jimmy again displayed his Korean language ability by saying three phrases in quick succession. At that, all the Korean American members laughed. It turned out that Jimmy had spoken three random phrases that together made no sense.

Not long after, Mary proceeded to carry on the language performance by murmuring "*Ni-Hao, Gong Bo Ji Ding*" (which literally means "Hello! Chicken cooked with vegetables"). As a

native Chinese speaker, Lan appreciated that these two phrases would never be spoken together in Chinese. Mary was obviously mixing greeting words she had learned from her Chinese friends with food names that she had picked up at Chinese restaurants. Jimmy and Mary's multilingual performance speaks to the metacommunicative function of language. By stringing Korean or Chinese words together, these students are not trying to really communicate with their Korean or Chinese peers but to playfully index the multicultural identity of the AAC in general and of their Small Group in particular. It is clear that learning a few words of each other's language is fun and is celebrated as a lighthearted sign of the Small Group's "diversity."

"It's good," Mary later said of this mutual language learning. "It's a mixing of cultures. We are first brothers and sisters, then Koreans and Chinese. Race is not an issue in our church." This response exemplifies perfectly how race and ethnicity are deflected through linguistic playfulness. This "multilingual show" also demonstrates how language games and play can help AAC members temporarily transcend ethnic differences and achieve interpersonal intimacy—a feeling of "family" in the typical idiom of AAC.

The celebration of multiculturalism by learning a bit of each other's language should not, however, be romanticized as a successful crossover of ethnic or racial boundaries.²⁷ There is often an edge to this sort of linguistic appropriation, given the larger grammar of the church in which the learning is most often one-way: namely, Chinese and other Americans learn about Korean language and culture. Paul, a Chinese American who is himself a Small Group leader and has been in the AAC for eight years, observed, "Well, we hang out together so often that I feel I am somehow assimilated to Korean culture." Paul knows many of the slang words that AAC Korean Americans use and said that many other Chinese Americans in the church do so as well. After describing the adaptation of many Chinese Americans to the "Korean" culture of AAC, Paul said, "If it's the reverse, it won't happen. If a Korean is in a predominantly Chinese group, that person wouldn't end up adopting the Chinese way." In a quiet way, Paul's small comment speaks volumes about what it means to be a Chinese American minority in a "Korean" church.

Other examples show the complexity of the articulation of race, ethnicity, and language. One Friday evening, members of Mary's Small Group decided to play a game on the campus

quad. Teresa, the Korean American Small Group co-leader, had first proposed a Japanese game, but nobody was interested. Suddenly George, who is Taiwanese American, said, "Hey, we can play the Eagle-Catch-Chicken game. What's the Chinese for it? I forgot how to say it in Chinese!" Six Chinese American members and two Korean American Small Group leaders began to play and everyone was having a great time.

At one point Mary exclaimed, "Oh, it's so difficult!"

Just then, Grace, who is Taiwanese American, said to Angel, who is also Taiwanese American, in Chinese, "Let's play *da feng chui* (big wind blowing), O.K.?"

"I know *da feng chui*," Teresa said excitedly.

"Say it again, say it again," exclaimed Grace and Angel, pushing Teresa to say the Chinese words again, because they likely found it amusing to hear a Korean American speak Chinese. But Teresa refused to say the Chinese words again; perhaps, she was self-conscious that she would be teased.

While Grace and Angel went on discussing *da feng chui* in Chinese, Teresa suddenly burst out in Japanese, "*Ohayô gozaimasu. Arigatô gozaimasu!* (Good morning. Thank you!)" Teresa said this while striking a stereotypical posture of a hunched over Japanese woman, and mimicked a gentle, sweet voice, knowing fully well that she was performing a stereotype.

"Oh, you are such a racist!" Angel cried, but she started to mutter some imitation Japanese herself. (It was clear, though, that she knew no Japanese.)

This scene is a moment of reversal of AAC culture, a scene in which Chinese Americans became the temporary majority and in which a Korean American is being ridiculed for imperfect mimicry of Chinese. Teresa managed her uneasiness by replying with a third Asian language, Japanese, and by performing an essentialist stereotype. Perhaps she felt that her multicultural command (she had proposed the Japanese game) had been wrested from her. When her Chinese accent was spotlighted, she felt the need to defend herself by transporting the ridicule to something else, namely her own performance of the quintessential Asian stereotype. In turn it was because Teresa's Japanese essentialism revealed insights about the culture of race in the AAC that Angel responded in the half-accusative, half-humorous way that she did.

This example of the complexity of language games in the AAC demonstrates that the celebration of multiculturalism sometimes feeds on existing racial stereotypes. Although race and ethnicity

are downplayed in the AAC with lighthearted jokes and language play, there are moments of racial interruption when feelings of marginalization or disempowerment can be alternatively fleshed out or glossed over.

The Racist Other: The “South Korean” and “FOB”

In this paper’s opening section, we described the AAC as an institution that fosters racial learning. Now we return to this topic by examining how some Korean American students consider recently arrived students from South Korea—often called FOBs (i.e., to refer to immigrants “fresh off the boat”)—as a “racist other.” This displacement of “racism” onto South Korean recent immigrants (and Korean immigrant parents) allows AAC members both to name and isolate racism in the church. The question of who counts as a FOB is complicated; students have diverse local systems of classification. For our purposes, we are interested in “FOB” as a particular discursive site, namely, the racist who is untutored in American ways of multicultural living. This image works as a vehicle through which Korean Americans in the AAC grapple with tensions about Korean dominance in the church. The discourse on the Korean FOB is a rich site that highlights the overlap between racial learning in American schools and universities and racial learning in a Christian setting such as the AAC. While this student construction of the Korean FOB as the “racist other” is not shared by the church ministry, this negative portrayal is a consequence of students’ internalization of racial learning both within the university as an American educational institution and the AAC as a Christian setting.

Most Korean American students distanced themselves from South Korean international students and from FOBs. One Korean American student described South Korean international students this way:

They are pretty much like those back in Korea. They form small clans and only hang out with their own. They speak Korean among themselves and refuse to get to know people from other backgrounds. . .they are racists. In Korea, we have people from South East Asia, and Filipinos go there to work; they are treated like Mexicans were treated in this country. They [Koreans] treat those workers really bad.

Judy, another Korean American student, told a story about taking a class in “Introduction to Japanese Culture,” where they

watched a Japanese movie about the death of a poor Japanese boy. “I was so touched by the movie and I told one of my FOB friends, ‘What a sad story,’” said Judy. “He’s kind of like, ‘They deserve it!’ I was shocked by this remark. It seems every Japanese is evil in their [i.e., FOB] eyes.” Judy said she knew all about the colonial history of South Korea and that she knows why Korean FOBs hate Japanese but that she still found his remarks racist. Judy blamed the South Korean education system for “making everyone think the same. People from Korea have the same mindset. . . . Korean people are not exposed to so many different ethnic groups in their country and that’s why they tend to display this closed-mindedness when they came to the U.S.” Judy distanced herself from Korean FOBs by emphasizing the American side of her Korean American identity. “I guess it’s because here we see people from different ethnic groups all the time and we got used to it.”

Echoing Judy’s emphasis on her own early exposure to diversity in the United States, Teresa, a Korean American Small Group co-leader who grew up in Japan and immigrated to the U.S. at the age of seven, attributed Korean FOBs’ racism to the differences of their racial learning experiences from that of U.S.-born Korean Americans:

I guess it’s because in the U.S. we were taught to be sensitive about race and never talk blatantly about others in a negative way. When I was in Japan, I didn’t realize any problems about race. Even in Korea, we don’t have racial problems. I guess it’s because race is so prominent a problem in the U.S. that we learned how to be cautious talking about it. . .they [FOBs] say things about African Americans, Hispanics, and Whites too. They say it in Korean and it’s hard to translate to English. It’s really bad.

According to Teresa, these international students have not learned how to adapt to the American “sensitivity” to race—she is referring to the fact that FOBs are more blatant in the way that they offer negative comments about people from other racial and ethnic groups. She admitted that they might have developed these racist ideas back in South Korea through media influence, but she also emphasized FOB students’ lack of exposure to the American educational system, which is responsible for teaching American youth how to talk about race in a “proper” manner. In other words, Korean FOBs stand out as “racists” precisely

because they have not been initiated into American multicultural learning.

In both women's narratives, Korean racism is made "foreign"—"un-American." It is not envisioned as the product of Korean immigrants' racial encounters in the United States but rather as "Korean" baggage transported to the United States. By blaming the South Korean educational system for fostering racism among FOBs, multicultural learning in the AAC and in the larger college campus is rendered an "American" and "modern" achievement for some Korea American church members. The calculation is most often as follows: an acknowledgement that there is real "Korean" racism but that it is the racism of those (homeland or recently immigrated) "Koreans" who have not benefited from "American" multicultural learning and ways of speaking. The South Korean or Korean American "FOB" becomes the Korean who is "behind," the victim of South Korean schooling.

In addition to charging that South Koreans or Korean American FOBs have missed out on U.S. multicultural learning, they are also chided for their biological model of racial difference and purity, one that contrasts with the American way of talking about race in cultural terms. One Korean American young woman distinguished her immigrant dad from South Korean parents in the following way:

When my dad doesn't want me to marry someone, say Caucasian, or African American, he is worrying about cultural difference. He worries my marriage will not be stable because we may have cultural clashes. It's not race that bothers him. But for those Korean parents, they want their kids to marry Koreans not for cultural reasons, they just want to keep the family bloodline pure Korean.

This student's understanding of race resonates with the contemporary U.S. idiom in which race is spoken through or tamed as "culture." Implicit in this understanding is an evolutionary view of racial knowledge in which the South Korean version is "primordial" and the American one "modern." This young woman's emphasis on a cultural understanding of race also strongly echoes the AAC's prevailing church narrative. The displacement of race into culture and the celebration of multicultural learning as a unique U.S. phenomenon speak to the combined power of U.S. multicultural racial ideology and Christian universalism in the AAC. With this portrayal of Korean FOBs as the

“racist other,” the AAC is rendered American and multicultural and its Korean American members are those who have either been raised in a “modern” racial crucible or who have self-consciously left behind their “Korean” racist-learning.

We have argued that the AAC offers a window into larger practices and idioms in the U.S. racial landscape, namely race blindness and multiculturalism. The church featured in this paper, like the larger U.S. social world, is coming to terms with changing demography and prevailing mores. This paper’s ethnography presents an instance of racial and ethnic reconfigurations happening across all U.S. institutions. In spite of the dominance of Christian universalism and a cultural approach to difference, race and ethnicity haunt many of the discursive practices of the church members. It is often in the most quotidian and seemingly benign speech and other practices, what we dub “play,” that we can find meaningful ways in which people mark, assert, or even contest difference. On the one hand, we understand this play as moments of interruption in which students’ perception of racial and ethnic differences within the church has the potential to challenge prevailing church narratives of Christian universalism and multiculturalism. On the other hand, however, appreciating that the AAC is an Asian American church in a white-dominant Midwestern university, the AAC serves as a racialized space for Asian American students, such that interethnic differences between Korean Americans and Chinese Americans are downplayed or even made light of. In this way, this lighthearted interethnic play can sometimes domesticate intra-Asian American differences and thus paradoxically reinforce the AAC’s identity as a racialized Asian American refuge. The fact that there are various attempts in the AAC to “deal” with race by not dealing with it directly speaks to the absent presence of race in the AAC’s multicultural ministry.²⁸ Moreover, what happens in the AAC also reflects the contested meaning of race and ethnicity in a world of migration and globalization. The relegation of South Korean FOBs as the racist Other foregrounds the hegemony of U.S. racial ideology of multiculturalism in a transnational context.²⁹ As a multicultural church in the making, the AAC provides a glimpse at the changing landscape of Asian America and Asian American Christianity in a globalized society.

Notes

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2. See Russell Leong, "Racial Spirits: Between Bullets, Barbed Wire and Belief," *Amerasia Journal* 22:1 (1996): vii-xi; Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States: From the 1960s to the 1990s*, 2nd ed., (New York: Routledge, 1994).
3. See Karen Chai, "Competing for the Second Generation: English-Language Ministry at a Korean Protestant Church" in R. Stephen Warner and Judith G. Wittner, eds., *Gatherings in Diaspora: Religious Communities and the New Immigration* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1998): 295-331; Kwang Chung Kim and Shin Kim, "Ethnic Roles of Korean Immigrant Churches in the United States" in Ho-Youn Kwon, Kwang Chung Kim, and R. Stephen Warner, eds., *Korean Americans and Their Religions: Pilgrims and Missionaries from a Different Shore* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2001): 71-94; R. Stephen Warner, "The Korean Immigrant Church as Case and Model" in *Korean Americans*, 25-52.
4. See Kim and Kim, "Ethnic Roles of Korean Immigrant Churches in the United States."
5. For research on second-generation Korean American churches, see Kelly H. Chong, "What It Means to be Christian: The Role of Religion in the Construction of Ethnic Identity and Boundary among Second-generation Korean Americans," *Sociology of Religion*, 59:3 (Fall 1998): 259-287; Rebecca Y. Kim, "Second-Generation Korean American Evangelicals: Ethnic, Multiethnic, or White Campus Ministries?" *Sociology of Religion*, 65:1(2004): 19-34.
6. See Catherine Prendergast and Nancy Abelmann. "Alma Mater: College, Kinship, and the Pursuit of Diversity," *Social Text* 24:1 (Spring 2006): 37-53.
7. See Sunaina Marr Maira, *Desis in the House: Indian American Youth Culture in New York City* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2002).
8. See Nancy Abelmann, "The Intimate University: College, Segregation, and the Korean American Family." Book manuscript under review.
9. "AAC" is a pseudonym, as are all of the personal names that appear in this paper.
10. Throughout the paper, we use the terms "Koreans" and "Korean Americans" interchangeably because this is in line with the church language in the AAC. We specify in the case of Korean international students.
11. For a definition of an Asian American-led, multi-ethnic church, see Russell Jeung, *Faithful Generations: Race and New Asian American Churches* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2005).
12. We put "Korean American" in quotes to indicate that the church remains "Korean American" both in terms of its demography and its prevailing cultural orientation.

13. The largest Chinese population in the AAC is in fact Taiwanese Americans; likewise, all of the Chinese Americans featured here are Taiwanese Americans.
14. See Amanda E. Lewis, *Race in the Schoolyard: Negotiating the Color Line in Classrooms and Communities* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2003); Lisa Lowe, *Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996); Vijay Prashad, *Everybody was Kung Fu Fighting: Afro-Asian Connections and the Myth of Cultural Purity* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2001).
15. These statistics are cited either from the AAC website or from the senior pastor's sermon based on the 2000 survey.
16. The Small Group is the basic cell unit of AAC. Students are organized into Small Groups at the beginning of each fall semester; the Small Group then becomes the student's primary group for social and faith activities throughout a particular school year. Besides meeting weekly for Bible studies, Small Group leaders also organize social activities for members to hang out and to get to know each other better so as to develop a sense of tightly knit community.
17. See Lowe, *Immigrant Acts*, 84-96.
18. These ethnic/racial terms are the ones employed by the AAC.
19. For literature on multicultural ministry, see James and Lillian Breckenridge, *What Color is Your God?: Multicultural Education in the Church* (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1995).
20. Karen Chai notes that in Korean immigrant churches, Christianity and Koreanness often become very closely associated in congregants' lives. See Chai, 295-331.
21. See Rudy V. Busto, "The Gospel According to the Model Minority?: Hazardous Interpretation of Asian American Evangelical College Students," *Amerasia Journal* 22:1 (1996): 133-147.
22. See Busto for a discussion of the ethnic church's negative role in promoting Asian American activism. For an illuminating discussion of combination of Asian American Christianity and Asian American activism, see Sang Hyun Lee, "Pilgrimage and Home in the Wilderness of Marginality: Symbols and Context in Asian American Theology," *Amerasia Journal*, 22:1 (1996): 149-159.
23. See Jung Ha Kim, "The Labor of Compassion: Voices of 'Churched' Korean American Women," *Amerasia Journal* 22:1 (1996): 93-105; Soyoung Park, "The Intersection of Religion, Race, Gender, and Ethnicity in the Identity Formation of Korean American Evangelical Women" in *Korean Americans*, 193-207.
24. Here we refer to ethnicity with the understanding that undergirding the articulation of difference is recognition of their shared racialization in the U.S. landscape.
25. See Sherry Ortner, "Reading America: Preliminary Notes on Class and Culture" in Richard G. Fox, ed., *Recapturing Anthropology: Working in the Present* (Santa Fe: School of American Research Press, 1991): 163-190.

26. That day he came to the Small Group for the first time, so Lan was not sure about his ethnicity.
27. See David R. Roediger, "In Conclusion: Elvis, Wiggers, and Crossing over to Nonwhiteness" in *Colored White: Transcending the Racial Past* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002): 212–240.
28. See Faye V. Harrison, "The Persistent Power of 'Race' in the Cultural and Political Economy of Racism," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 24 (1995): 47–74; Catherine Prendergast, "Race: The Absent Presence in Composition Studies," *College Composition and Communication*, 50:1 (1998): 36–53.
29. See Howard Winant, *The World is a Ghetto: Race and Democracy Since World War II* (New York: Basic Books, 2001).