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# THE PROMISE OF GAYNESS: QUEERS AND KIN IN SOUTH KOREA

by

TIMOTHY GITZEN

Under the Direction of Jennifer Patico

## ABSTRACT

This thesis examines whether the interrelationship of family and gay identity in South Korea is best understood as one of conflict, pitting a traditional, national, and filial constraint against a presumed global, progressive, and individualistic freedom, or whether it requires (or perhaps, in the narratives themselves, already provides) a different, more recursive understanding. This thesis explores the recursivity between gay identity and filial piety among college students in contemporary Korea while also providing a critique of a global gay paradigm that others may argue infiltrates Korean gay discourse. The aim of this ethnography is not just to collect the stories that these young South Korean college men tell about their experiences of being gay and a son, but to trace how my position as a researcher and a friend are shaped by my experiences with other gay Korean men and how those positions are intimately tied to this ethnography as a whole.

INDEX WORDS: Gay/lesbian studies, Kinship, South Korea, Personhood, Narratives, Affect

THE PROMISE OF GAYNESS: QUEERS AND KIN IN SOUTH KOREA

by

TIMOTHY GITZEN

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

in the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

2012

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2012

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May 2012

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

What began as a seminar paper written at the conference table of the *Papers, Essays and Reviews* office in 2009 while a student in South Korea, surrounded by Judy, Michel, Pierre, and a deluge of books and articles I could barely comprehend, has culminated in this massive, seemingly amorphous project. I would be lying if I swore that my intention was never to write this much, but with the vast amount of information I had collected over the years it was inevitable that this thesis would be this long. But if it were not for my advisor, Jennifer Patico, it could have certainly been longer and much more scattered, unpolished, and simply unsophisticated. I've had dedicated advisors in the past—Julia Bullock at Emory University is still someone I aspire to be like—but none have had both the patience and brilliance that Jennifer has provided in my short time at Georgia State University. From the conference abstracts, IRB proposal, and possible publications to the graduate school application essays and several drafts of this thesis, she has read each with not only a keen eye for detail and significance, but has also brought to each revision and discussion theoretical insight and curiosity that challenged me to read more, think more, and know more. I can only imagine what she had first thought when I emailed her two years ago with interest in the program and with working with her—Jennifer an established feminist anthropologist of Russia and I a pop culture turned queer studies novice focused on Korea. But through it all she has helped me with a smile, in writing, teaching and simply thinking. I am eternally grateful.

I had to be unconventional and enlist four committee members, simply because I loved the classes I took with each and loved the way they thought and interacted with me. Emanuela Guano, Megan Sinnott, and Susan Talburt have each taught me so much in their own respect,

from articulating knowledge and methodological nuances to theoretical savvy and writing techniques. I am pleased that each agreed to take part in my committee because I know that each will bring to the table a unique voice, a powerful presence, and a discussion unlike the others.

The Department of Anthropology has been so very kind and generous to me these past two years. Marty and Adrienne have served not only as czars of university knowledge writ large, but friends and confidants whenever I needed—and both will no doubt attest, I needed quite a bit quite often. Kathryn Koziatis is still one of the most poised and captivating women I have ever had the pleasure to not only meet but work with, have as an instructor, and a professional mentor. Her encouragement coupled with the positive reinforcement from Jennifer has made my time in this department not only memorable, but academically riveting and exhausting. I've only begun to test my limits and knowledge, and this department has opened that Pandora's Box, never to be closed again.

Emotional support is always important. Kristen Kuhns and I started on day one, the two of us sitting at the table in the kitchen eating lunch together and talking as if we knew we would be friends for the rest of our lives. Though the rest of my life is still a ways off, her and I have stuck by each other in this department and continue to provide the support we both need. Allyson Korb has also given so much and asked for so little in return. She has kept me grounded, while not inflating my ego too much, but has always been a motivating factor through this experience.

I have experienced much in the past two years, all the while trying to figure out this project and my own life. I was given the opportunity in the summer of 2011 to teach my first college class—Introduction to Cultural Anthropology—and develop the class from the ground up. It was no doubt tough and frustrating at times, but I knew from the first day in the classroom that

this was what I am meant to do for the rest of my life. Only days after the classes ended I was on a plane to Seoul to conduct research for this project, and while there I was reminded of the other joys of my life. Could there be any better profession than professor?

This is thesis number three, and I'd like to think I'm getting the hang of it, but they all have presented difficulties. Yet through each one, and interestingly enough mentioned in each thesis, two ladies have stood by me with love and support like no other. Beck, no one else can make me laugh the way you do, and no one else can make me feel as special as you do. Talking to you is as natural as tying my shoe or drinking tea. We have known each other for so long now and through our countless conversations, my trips to Japan to visit you and your trips to Korea to visit me, I've come to realize that we have a lifetime ahead of us. Siobhain, you were the kick-ass editor of my first two theses, but this time I thought I'd give you a break. You are brilliant, it is as simple as that, and whatever you decide to do in life you will be brilliant at it. I love you dearly, but you already know that.

Finally, it may go without saying, but this thesis would be nothing if it were not for the members of Come Together and my five friends who have not only been amazing informants but more importantly, life-changing friends. To my boys—Donghae, Changmin, Kibum, Jaejoong, and Yoochun—you each know how I feel about you and what you have given me over the years of our friendships. However, I dedicate this thesis, this gigantic body of research, to Changmin and Donghae. Both of you have transformed me in ways not even you two are aware of, teaching me not only what it means to be a friend but what it means to be gay. I would have never been able to do what I did in Korea and here in Atlanta without you, and for that I will forever be grateful. You both are smart, sexy and have amazing futures ahead. What say we take the journey together?



## NOTE ON ROMANIZATION

All Korean words that have been romanized in this thesis follow the McCune-Reischauer rules and formatting for romanized Korean. The McCune-Reischauer system is the most widely used romanization system for the Korean language outside of South Korea, predominately used by academics outside of Korea. There are two exceptions to the use of this system. All Korean names follow the romanization designated by the individual—authors' names, informants, and historical figures. In the case of informants, I romanized the names based on two factors: 1) the most common form of romanization for the name and 2) approval from my actual informants (as all names have been changed for the purpose of anonymity). Secondly, places in South Korea follow the romanization given to the name by the Korean government. As such, all place names are romanized according to the Revised Romanization of Korean, as this is the official Korean language romanization system of South Korea.

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## PROLOGUE: CAST OF CHARACTERS

*Yet when I am done cutting out her tongue, I will patch together a new tongue for her, an odd tongue that is neither English nor Spanish, but the language of a translated woman.* Ruth Behar (1993: 19)

If I were to open up my book of Shakespeare, each play would contain a complete list of the characters featured in the play and their title or relation to the protagonist. The Playbill for *Wicked* contains not only a list of the characters and the respective actors portraying each character, but also biographical sketches of the actors themselves. In this, the prologue to my project, I provide my cast of characters and a brief biography on each and their relation to me. This may signal that my project will read as a play. Understandable. It is certainly dramatic, but it perhaps reads more as William Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying*, for though the story progresses forward there are multiple perspectives from each of my characters—Faulkner dedicated a chapter to a different family member's perspective. Each of the characters, except for the final one, I met in Seoul, South Korea in 2009 while a member of Come Together, a gay social club at Yonsei University. I've assigned each a pseudonym and their year of birth instead of their age has been provided parenthetically. They follow in the order of their appearance in my personal narrative.

### **Kibum (1990)**

Originally from Pusan, the second largest city in South Korea at the opposite end of the country, Kibum moved to Seoul in the winter of 2009 to attend Yonsei University. He majors in economics. This is not necessarily his choice but he is doing so to appease his family as his grandmother, who lives with his family in Pusan, is sick and he believes acting as a good son before she dies is the least he can do. I met him on a Friday at my first lunch with the members of Come

Together in the spring of 2009 and would regularly talk to him whenever I saw him. He was my first friend in Come Together, but he entered the Korean army for mandatory service after I left Korea in January 2011. He eventually became the president of Come Together for 2010 and is thought by many members as a reformer, but he has received much admonishment from members for it. Kibum has yet to come out to his family, though he does see a point when he tells his family that he is gay—he has known he was gay since high school when he and a friend began a sexual affair of sorts. All of my communications with Kibum were (and still are) in Korean.

### **Jaejoong (1986)**

We first met the Saturday after I joined Come Together (only three days after I joined), but really did not become friends until after I graduated Yonsei University. Jaejoong is originally from Seoul, having lived there all his life in the same apartment with his family. Having majored in Korean linguistics as an undergraduate, Jaejoong also worked towards an MA in Korean linguistics at Yonsei and is currently working on his Ph.D. as well. He has not told his parents that he is gay, nor does he foresee a time when he will—he has only been in one serious relationship, lasting only a few months. All of my communications with Jaejoong were (and still are) in Korean.

### **Changmin (1987)**

Perhaps my best friend while in Korea, and certainly in the group, Changmin was born in Jeonju, a few hours outside of Seoul, but now lives alone in an apartment about twenty minutes away from school. He majors in law though he is a writer and believes that he will be a writer for the rest of his life, never desiring to do anything with his major. I formally met Changmin a few weeks before our retreat in March 2009, but we never really talked until the retreat. Changmin

lived for a few years in California, and so he speaks fluent English—most of our conversations are in English with a bit of Korean here and there. He came out to his mother when he was 20, though he knew he was gay long before as a high school student at the Korean Leadership Minjok Academy.

### **Yoochun (1991)**

The youngest of my friends but one of the closest, Yoochun is from just outside of Seoul (about an hour away) and commutes to school every day. He majors in architecture, though he admitted that he would prefer to major in German philosophy and study abroad in Europe. Yoochun and I met during one of Come Together's weekly lunches after our retreat in March and became rather close since then. He came out to his mother only months after I had met him and currently has a boyfriend, even though, as he says, he is not sure if he loves his boyfriend or loves the idea of having a boyfriend. Yoochun cannot speak English but he can understand and write in English, so the majority of our conversations and communications are in Korean with some English.

Yoochun just joined the Korean army in October of 2011.

### **Donghae (1986)**

I met him last but he and I became extremely close very fast. He, too, is from Seoul and still lives at home, though he is currently in the Korean army for another year. Donghae majored in Theology and Russian and plans to go to graduate school once he is discharged from the army, ideally overseas. We briefly met during a regular weekly lunch of the club but did not begin to really talk until September 2009 when we both attended a joint meeting with other university gay groups. Donghae speaks English, not as fluently as Changmin, but enough to where we can

speak half in English and half in Korean. In November of 2009, only a month after he joined the seminary (having graduated Yonsei the semester before), Donghae told his mother that he was gay. A week later Donghae quit seminary and moved back home until the following September, when he joined the army.

### **Taesub (1980)**

From the Korean television *Life is Beautiful*, Taesub is the eldest son of the drama's protagonist family. His mother died when he was a child and so his father eventually remarried his step-mother, who also had a younger daughter, and together the two had two more children. Taesub is quiet, reserved, and studious, growing up on Jeju Island but moving to Seoul to study and become a doctor. He now lives at home on Jeju Island at his family's resort, but recently moved closer to the hospital in his own apartment as it normally takes an hour to commute each way. Taesub has been in a relationship with Kyungsoo for a year, though their relationship is secret to everyone except Kyungsoo's mother—Kyungsoo used to be married and has a child, but had to file for divorce after his wife found out that Kyungsoo was gay. Taesub came out to his mother around the 20<sup>th</sup> episode of the drama (the drama running for more than 60 episodes), and over the course of two episodes his entire family, except his grandmother and grandfather, were told (though his grandmother was told near the end of the drama). Though Taesub is older than all of my other friends, I include him for two reasons: 1) Changmin's mother had recommended this television drama to Changmin and me, and 2) many of Taesub's experiences with his family mirror those of my friends. It may seem unconventional to discuss a fictional character as an ethnographic "informant," but my choice to include Taesub hinges on the fact that the discourses that

affect the members of Come Together, the other characters in particular, also affect Taesub in very similar ways.

### **Supporting Characters**

*Siwon*: A member who joined with Kibum and I, majors in fashion design, and is the same age as Kibum—he is also in the army right now.

*Jun*: The first gay Korean I met from Come Together, as he and another member interviewed me—he majored in law but is no longer active in the group.

*Taemin*: A senior member that has now since graduated and now attends Yonsei as a graduate student in mathematics—I met him at the same time as Kibum and he and Changmin used to sleep together.

*Junsu*: A senior member I met the third day I was a member at a dance practice for our anniversary event—I have not spoken with him since then.

## QUEERS AND KIN: AN INTRODUCTION

*[The family's] role is to anchor sexuality and provide it with permanent support. It ensures the production of a sexuality that is not homogeneous with the privileges of alliance, while making it possible for the systems of alliance to be imbued with a new tactic of power which they would otherwise be impervious to. The family is the interchange of sexuality and alliance: it conveys the law and the juridical dimension of the deployment of sexuality; and it conveys the economy of pleasure and the intensity of sensations in the regime of alliance.*

Michel Foucault (1978: 108)

Seoul. Every story needs a setting, and every setting deserves a story. The cultural center of the city starts at the national palace, Gyeongbokgung. Walking through the main gate of the palace, Gwanghwamun, the golden King Sejong sits looking south at the vibrant colors of the skyscrapers, cars, museums, and people before him. General Lee Soon Shin stands atop a pedestal, sword in hand, protecting the king and palace from all that may threaten them. Just meters in front of him is an intersection; three directions yield three different goals.

Continue south on the main road, passing by the start of the Cheonggyecheon (a man-made stream that runs through the city from east to west) and city hall on the left. The large field in front of city hall and across from the Seoul Plaza Hotel has been home to protests, concerts, festivals, and picnickers. Eventually Namdaemun, the south gate to Seoul, appears, only a kilometer or so from the historic Seoul Station, both the new terminal and the Japanese-constructed building from 1925; the remnants of Japanese imperialism and colonization still linger. Following south around Namsan, the mountain that sits in the center of the city, we stumble into the Yongsan district, home of the Yongsan military base for the United States that lies directly above the Han River that cuts the city in two. At the center of this district, directly south of Namsan, lies Itaewon, a rather diverse area home to a variety of non-Korean cuisines, non-Korean shops, and a distinct flavor of *oeguk*-ness (foreign-ness). It is generally accepted that Itaewon is home to a number of foreigners, especially given its primacy near the military base, and so English has



become the main medium of language here. Around the corner from the subway station is what we foreign queers in Korea have come to call Homo Hill: An uphill road lined with gay clubs and bars. The further up you move the more foreigner-oriented the clubs and bars become. We dub this the Gay Mecca of Korea.

We return to the center, General Lee steadfast in his dedication as we decide to head east this time. Following along the main road leads us past the Kyobo building; underneath is the largest bookstore in South Korea that connects directly to the subway station. Yet if we weave slightly right, parallel with the main road but now walking along the Cheonggyecheon, we pass various government skyscrapers, the SK building, and couples out on dates (be it daytime or under the moon). When we weave back to the main road we stumble upon the Samsung Life Insurance Building, a rather unique silver construct with three columns atop the structure that hold a sky lounge high above the city. Rule of thumb: if you are downtown and are lost, walk towards this building because you can see it almost always. It also stands as a frequent meeting point for younger gay Koreans heading further east to Jongro3-ga, another gay district in Seoul. This one lies on the left-hand side of the main road (and the subway station) and right next to Insadong, a tourist hot-spot known for its “traditional” Korean merchandise and cuisine. Jongro 3-ga is less known by gay foreigners and even gay Koreans as it stays hidden, presented as any other “normal” district or area in Seoul. Yet the deeper we walk into the district the more we realize that all we see are men, some younger, some middle aged, and some older. We can see neon signs for motels that line side streets, couples walking towards them as the hours of night transition into the early hours of morning.

This story, however, lies to the west. As with the other two, we can simply follow the main road as we first pass office buildings, heading into more residential and local shops, and

finally picking up the pace again with more variety of people. We come across the main intersection for Ehwa Women's University, the area in front of the university housing a number of secret places where lesbians usually congregate. Yet if we continue west on the main road we eventually arrive at the Shinchon Rotary, home to Grand Mart, Hyundai Department Store, and if we turn right down the main street of Shinchon we can see in the distance our final destination, our goal, the setting for this particular story: Yonsei University. A historic university, the site of many student protests in the late 1970s into the early 1990s. If we cantor to the center of campus we can see a familiar sight, at least to those of us from North America: ivy-covered stone buildings in a particular gothic style, reminding us of Ivy Leagues of the Northeast.

Yet closer to the front gate lies the Engineering Building, and directly to its right is a general classroom building. If we walk through the double doors of that building, nearing 5:00 pm this particular Saturday, and head straight through the foyer and corridor to a set of stairs, down one flight to the basement, and then to the left we come across a classroom with a door open. There are some students inside, forming a circle with the tables while talking about their classes. They see us and recognize we are new, but for the time being they ignore us because they think we don't speak Korean. They will soon find out otherwise, that this narrator does in fact speak enough Korean to make his way through the next year and a half of membership. As we take our seats, the president begins: "Welcome to Come Together. Let's go around and introduce ourselves." When they finally get to this narrator, his fingers shaking a bit proving he is nervous, he takes a deep breath and speaks: "Hello. My name is Tim and I'm a student at the Graduate School of International Studies majoring in Korean Studies. It's nice to meet you all."

## **Making Friends, Doing Research**

“In the field” is a problematic phrase, coined to describe where ethnography takes place as if it is demarcated as a space that the researcher is not otherwise part of. To be “in the field” implies the ability to be “out of the field,” thus indicating that there is a time and place for conducting research. However, Dorothy Smith (2010: 396) takes a more humanistic outlook and advocates for what she terms “bifurcated consciousness,” or examining societies not simply as omniscient observers but as active participants: “if we begin from the world as we actually experience it, it is at least possible to see that we are indeed located and that what we know of the other is conditional upon that location.” No longer should we envision our role as anthropologist as observer because if we examine close enough, we will no doubt find similarities in identity between those whom we research and ourselves (Abu-Lughod 1991, Narayan 1993). Anthropologists are cultural, social beings with our own influence on those we study, and that we have long suppressed this fact in an attempt to be more scientific and objective (Rosaldo 1989). We enact change and as such we change as well. Our mere presence presents the possibility of change, and so we act as part of Arjun Appadurai’s (1996: 33) “global cultural flow.”

Long before I was an anthropologist (at least consciously), I was gay, a student, and a member of Come Together. I joined not to do ethnographic research, as that came later, but rather I joined for many of the same reasons the other members did: to make gay friends. Later in the spring semester of 2009 I conducted an ethnography on Come Together for a seminar at Yonsei University, and though I was initially scared to ask the members and my friends if it would be alright to interview them or use their stories, they all found no problem with it. I experienced a response similar to Emily Martin’s (2007: xvi) when she conducted an ethnography on a manic depression support group: “The groups made it clear that it was not a problem for me to

wear two hats—a writer’s and a patient’s—because I had already met the criteria for admission to the group: I had received the diagnosis of a mood disorder and was on medication under psychiatric care.” For *Come Together*, I met the criteria of being a student of Yonsei University and being a self-identified gay man; being a writer would not diminish that initial identity. It is for this reason, that the members consider me first a friend and then an anthropologist, that I will consider them first friends and then informants. Though it may seem colloquial or unethical to some, I shall not refer to Changmin, Donghae, Yoochun, Kibum and Jaejoong as “informant” but rather “friend (*ch’in’gu*)” because that is what they will always be first and foremost.

I remember walking down the sidewalk during a rather crisp night in March 2009 with Changmin. To our left was Gyeongbokgung, the national palace of South Korea that had seen its fair share of sex scandals, and to our right was what used to be a fledgling art district that had transformed in recent years into quite the posh dining center filled with Italian, French, and Chinese delicacies. That night I tried to figure out how Changmin could be both openly gay, particularly to his parents, and yet a proponent of conservative and traditionalist values, such as choosing to pursue an area of study his parents desire rather than his own interest. As he put it, “Who I fuck isn’t public concern, even if I do fuck a lot of boys.” I remember thinking I shared this basic sentiment, that whom I or anyone else sleeps with is of no one’s concern but my own. However, this was one of the few times that Changmin expressed any sense of “pride” in his sexuality vis-à-vis public scrutiny, primarily because he is apathetic towards what he would phrase ‘gay issues.’ Rather, he describes himself as filial, nationalistic, and a lover of Korean history and culture. At that time it seemed like a contradiction to me.

Coming from a different cultural perspective where being gay usually yields some type of resistance to the norm, I initially viewed Changmin’s “double life” as familiar yet still paradoxical.

cal. He is a self-identified homosexual who embraces it and even came out to his parents, and yet he still ascribes the utmost meaning and value to a normative or even heteronormative system represented as family. To be honest, that particular night I was dumbfounded that such a lifestyle could exist. As the night progressed I not only realized that there was no apparent contradiction present for Changmin and other members of Come Together, but also that Changmin and others carve out a particular space, a queer space, that brings what I initially thought of as two opposing lifestyles together. For Changmin, his family informs not only how he perceives the outside world but also how he understands his own sexuality. These are not opposing forces, as I had initially thought, but a recursive relationship between a non-normative sexuality and a normative value system.

There have been great strides within anthropology to conceptualize same-sex relationships and desire, and simultaneously there has been a birth of countless terms in an attempt to categorize people and their actions. Though there have been several histories and discussions of these anthropological strides (e.g., Weston 1993, Kulick 2000, Boellstorff 2007b) along with just as many readers and anthologies (e.g., Lancaster and di Leonardo 1997, Robertson 2005, Lyons and Lyons 2011), my intention in this project and particularly in this introduction is to elucidate the ways in which discourses of family and kinship have been interjected into or intersected with the anthropological literature of homosexuality. While my discussion is in no way exhaustive, my aim is to focus on how recent ethnographic and anthropological discussions have addressed notions of globalized sexualities. In particular, I critique Dennis Altman's (1996, 2001) "global gay" paradigm in order to open a more nuanced conversation about how homosexuality in particular intersects with the family. Since few ethnographic examples exist that take such an approach, the goal of this project is not only to illustrate the theoretical foundations

and steps we must traverse, but also to situate my own research vis-à-vis existing bodies of literature. I argue, similar to Sylvia Yanagisako and Jane Collier (2004), that sexuality and kinship are intricately interconnected and at times cannot be conceived of as separate. Yet I also contend that Marilyn Strathern's (1988) notion of the "dividual" as a node in a network of relations can greatly aid in ethnographic endeavors that attempt to analyze the intersection of non-normative sexualities (e.g., homosexuality) and heteronormative institutions (e.g., the family).

### **Positing a Difference: Acts versus Identity**

Anthropologists have for some time been discussing "native erotics" in their ethnographies as a way to show that our (Western) conception of sexuality may in fact be different than other cultures. Ellen Lewin (2002) delineates two perceived avenues to the anthropology of homosexuality, namely one concerned with homosexual behavior and one concerned with gay/lesbian identities. She notes that ethnographies of homosexual behavior are usually concerned with men while ethnographies of identities often discuss gender politics and females. Yet her description also alludes to another difference, that between ethnographies of other cultures (which frame their research in terms of homosexual behavior) and ethnographies of North America (which address gay/lesbian identities).

There is a deluge of anthropological literature that addresses homosexual behavior. Several ethnographic examples, such as Margaret Mead's (1928) discussion of Samoan adolescent sexuality and Ana Alonso and Maria Loreck's (1993) investigation of same-sex sex among Mexican men, illustrate two crucial points. First, sex and gender are at the heart of any discussion of sexuality (or at the very least the sexualization of the body). Second, our rather Western conception of homosexuality as a category is not universally applicable (or at least experienced), as

such a category has its own genealogy (e.g., Foucault 1990[1978]). In each case, those engaging in male-male/ female-female sexual acts were not interpellated as “homosexual” because such a discursive category did not exist. Gilbert Herdt (1981) explores this concept even further in his ethnography of semen practices in Papua New Guinea in which the ingestion of semen by men and young boys was not seen as homosexual but necessary for the masculinization of men. Yet as Evelyn Blackwood (1986; 2002) notes, most of these ethnographies of homosexual behavior pertain to men and not women.

For Lewin (2002), the omission of women is where the anthropology of gay and lesbian identities ceremoniously begins, out of second-wave feminism and the need (at the time) to reexamine gender and sexuality within anthropology (see Kennedy 2002, Ross and Rapp 1997). Esther Newton (1979 [1072]) was one of the first to critically engage issues of gay identity in the United States from an ethnographic perspective; Newton’s study was one of the first to interrogate political economies of homosexuality in the 1960s and how we may perceive of sexualities as intricately related to performances of gender (Rubin 2002). Gayle Rubin has also been immensely influential as she has shown how our understanding of sex (or biological anatomy and hormones) and gender (or social construction), and by extension sexuality, are not only at times interrelated (1975) but are at other times wholly separate *objects* (1993), or at the very least better understood as *objects* affected by multiple theoretical and institutional discourses (see Butler 1994). Rubin (1975, 1993) notices the importance of the systemic interconnections of sex and gender with the political economy of America, but she also recognizes that there are identities and even pleasures (perhaps those unidentifiable) that do not fit within those systemic rubrics.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Judith Butler (1991), I should note, also sees merit in recognizing systems of sex and gender, but she does so in order to argue that, upon deconstructing both sex and gender, the supposed sex-gender system Rubin (1975) discusses, where sex as biology informs gender as construct, in fact may be reversed. That is, societies hegemonically

Other ethnographies, such as Elizabeth Kennedy and Madeline Davis's (1993) study of lesbian culture in Buffalo, New York and William Hawkeswood's (1996) ethnography of gay black men in Harlem, all illustrate that though gender may be an issue for understanding gay and lesbian identities, such identities are hardly two-dimensional; race, class, and even age are all intersecting and affecting these non-normative identities (see Stoler 1995, Heng and Devan 1997, Talburt 2004, Valentine 2007).

### **Categorization and the "Global Gay" Paradigm**

The distinction between behavior and identity has often been thought of by anthropologists as two sides to the same coin, or so posits Lewin (2002). In Butler's (1994) words, both constitute a "proper object" of study that may in reality be a different dimension of the same object (though Butler is concerned more with gender and sexuality as proper objects of feminism and gay/lesbian studies). Yet as more contemporary ethnographies have shown, distinguishing between behavior and identity introduces an array of politics that surround the very notion of a category (Valentine 2007). Bridging the gap between these perhaps disparate lenses may seem daunting to some (especially Lewin) but is now almost a given for any cross-cultural ethnography of sexuality or sexual practices. As Herdt (1997) aptly notes, we must be incredibly careful and culturally relative in classifying other cultural practices as "homosexual" as such a category may not exist in a certain culture or even if it does it may not aptly describe certain acts (which will be explained further). He instead proposes the examination of "sexual lifeways," or the "specific *erotic* ideas and emotions, categories and roles, that constitute individual development within a particular sexual culture" (1997: 20, emphasis added). As beneficial as such an ap-

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produce gendered categories (such as 'woman') and retroactively define biology based on those categorical subscriptions.



proach may be, Herdt implies a stable or neutral understanding of “erotic” and then further assumes that erotic is always intimately tied to “sexual culture” or even sexuality (as an identity) when they may be addressing two disparate notions (see Sinnott 2004: 15-16).

In challenging the very notion of categories in general, and the category of the homosexual in particular, David Valentine (2007: 29-65) begins his ethnography with a genealogy of transgender and homosexual as categories with very specific, historically situated and culturally manipulated meaning. By channeling Michel Foucault (among others), Valentine argues that not only are the categories of transgender and homosexual constructed within certain contexts, but also that there is a *productive* purpose to these categories that enable the regulation of types of people. For Valentine, we imagine identity categories much in the same way that Benedict Anderson (1991) posits we imagine the modern nation state; for though we do not know everyone in the nation state nor in the category, we assume a certain degree of homogeneity. Yet the imagined categories are political and powerful—we must thus deconstruct them in order to fully understand how they are productive.

Altman (1996, 2002) makes a similar point regarding the globalization of (homo)sexual identities, but further examination shows his reductionism: “the question is not whether homosexuality exists—it does in almost every society of which we know—but how people incorporate homosexual behavior into their sense of self” (Altman 2001: 86). Altman first assumes that such behavior is homosexual in nature (i.e., erotic), then conflates such behavior with having (and doing) a sexuality, and finally declares how such sexuality is not only an identity but one shared across cultures. The context to Altman’s argument is globalization, namely that it is not the spread of homosexual behavior but of a gay/lesbian identity across the globe that attaches itself to specific homosexual behavior in virtually all cultures. The background to this research began

with scholars such as John D’Emilio (1993) who argued that with the advent of late capitalism in post-war America, individuals with same-sex desire were economically able to position themselves outside the home (and family) and thus appropriate a gay/lesbian identity. Altman (1996: 1) globalizes this sentiment by linking the expansion of a consumer society with the spread of “lesbian/gay worlds,” whereby such a sexuality “is the basis for a social, political, and commercial identity.” Altman (2001: 91) ultimately claims that “gay” and “lesbian” identities serve as “markers for modernity.”

There have been several critiques levied against Altman’s “global gay” paradigm.<sup>2</sup> My own criticism of such a paradigm is two-fold. First, Altman’s (2001: 87) assertion that “members of particular groups have more in common across national and continental boundaries than they do with others in their own geographically defined societies” falls dangerously close to primordialism, whereby there exists an inevitability or essentiality associated with these groups all across the world (see Appadurai 1996). The problem lies again in the assumption that such behavior is considered erotic or sexual and thereby *naturally* requires a political identity. While there has no doubt been a globalization of elements of gay identities influenced by the United States and Europe, we certainly cannot claim universality and rapid cultural change of something that, as I will show in the next section, is both historically situated and intimately tied to many other aspects of one’s life. My second critique is that the global gay paradigm reifies the binary of global and local, essentializing both but also inevitably creating a hierarchy where the global will sweep away the particulars of the local (see Puri 2008 and Sinnott 2004).

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<sup>2</sup> Jyoti Puri (2008) criticizes Altman and his approach for practicing an almost academic hypocrisy, castigating the U.S. hegemony within sexual politics while simultaneously reinforcing that same sexual hegemony. In other words, it is predominately the U.S. (with some minor influence from Europe) that supposedly enlightens the remainder of the world as to what it means to be gay or lesbian, awakening such sexual minorities within a purely western hegemonic politic; the flows of globalization never seem to reach the shores of the United States.

In the past ten years or so there have been more ethnographic accounts of the globalization of different sexualities that have attempted to show the complexity of sexual categories in different cultural settings. Megan Sinnott (2004) illustrates how “toms” and “dees” in Thailand are both normative gender categories and non-normative sexualities within Thai society. She borrows the notion of hybridity to conceptualize the formation of these categorical identities as not solely Thai or Western, nor a mixing of two purities into a single homunculus, but rather a discursive construction that involves disjunctive ideas in competition with one another while still dependent on one another. Lisa Rofel (1999: 453), in an attempt to problematize Altman’s global gay paradigm, posits that not only do gay men in China often shy away from foreign gay men but also the diversity of gay Chinese men accentuates that “these interactions [between men] are embodied ways of performing gayness, and they entail competing notions of what it means to be gay.” Rofel (1999: 453) thus offers the concept of “cultural citizenship” in which gay men in China yearn to belong to the imagined Chinese culture, but such desire to culturally belong shapes how they transculturally experience and ascribe meaning to sex, desire, and identity. In other words, identity is not entirely determined by sexuality, for as Sinnott (2004: 27) poignantly asks: “What if, as in Thailand, these groups are not only members of the Western-oriented Thai middle class but also farmers, laborers, and market vendors?”

This leads into one final critique of the global gay paradigm in that the so-called “modern” forms of homosexuality are understood to threaten “traditional” ways of life, including traditional ways of being homosexual (Altman 2001: 88). Such a notion again substantiates the global/local divide, but it also essentializes modernity and tradition and argues that only one can prevail: the modern, global homosexual. There are no doubt a number of epistemological and ontological blunders to be identified in such rhetoric, but one in particular is the supposition that

not only does there exist some entity known as the “traditional family” but also that globalization (and by extension the globalization of homosexuality) will erode and undo such forms of the family.<sup>3</sup> This complexity, or “constellation of forces” as Sinnott (2004: 33) terms it, is neither traditional nor Western, but a “dubbing” of both (Boellstorff 2005).<sup>4</sup> The question is, however, not therefore how we can conceive of new identities that are a mixture of some ubiquitous and ontological “global” and “local.” Rather, we should ask what is it about the categorical separation of “global” and “local,” “traditional” and “modern” that somehow beckons our attention to the Altmanian demise of the “local” and “traditional”? In other words, where do we position a supposed modern “gay” identity within the “traditions” of family?<sup>5</sup>

### **Sexuality and the Family**

In order to more appropriately answer this question, the terms through which we understand family and more broadly kinship anthropologically must be sketched. Butler (2002: 14-15) provides a rather useful definition of kinship, as namely “a set of practices that institutes relationships of various kinds which negotiate the reproduction of life and the demands of death.” For anthropologists like Claude Levi-Strauss (1969), all of culture emanates from kin relations so that all social relations are first and foremost predicated on relations between kinsmen. Though anthropologists have, in some regards, significantly resituated the placement and importance of kin-

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<sup>3</sup> Tom Boellstorff (2005) illustrates that gay men in Indonesia not only find prestige in affiliating with Western or modern notions of gayness but will also aspire to attain a middle-class lifestyle that includes marriage to a woman.

<sup>4</sup> Boellstorff (2005: 5) calls “dubbing culture” a “rubric for rethinking globalization” where “two elements are held together in productive tension without the expectation that they will resolve into one—just as it is known from the outset that the speaker’s lips will never be in synch with the spoken word in a dubbed film.”

<sup>5</sup> For this reason, it may be useful to use queer theory as a tool for analyzing the faulty mechanisms behind this binary. While I will not include a discussion of queer studies or queer theory—I defer to both Boellstorff (2007b) and Sinnott (2010) for a fuller discussion in the field of anthropology and Asian Studies—I will note that I am implicitly working in accordance with queer studies insofar as I am navigating through the cartography of normative and non-normative identities and behaviors in an attempt to destabilize both. My use of the word “queer” is intentionally ambiguous throughout this project, but it should at the very least conjure up images not of a colonial Western hegemonic power (Welker and Kam 2006, Wilson 2006) but of a productive tool that follows along the lines of a feminist critique (Sinnott 2010, Boellstorff 2007a).

ship, others like Pierre Bourdieu (1984) place immense importance on the family as the beginning of *proper* socialization, taste formation, and induction into culture itself; the family begins the doxic process of socialization at an unconscious level to form the habitus.

Yet there was a significant turn in kinship studies following David Schneider (1980[1968]), where he proclaimed the death of kinship (as an analytical trope for anthropology) because all that we know to be “kinship” is in reality a gross overgeneralization of our own, American emphasis on biology. Sarah Franklin and Susan McKinnon (2001) disagree with Schneider’s assertions as they envision kinship as “a kind of doing” that is made aware to those engaged in the doing of kinship (Butler 2002: 36). Part of this “kind of doing” is gender and sexuality. Yanagisako and Collier (2004) argue that it is nearly impossible to conceive of gender and kinship as separate concepts because they are two analytical categories of the same biological phenomenon: reproduction. I would add that a discussion of (often normative) sexuality is also inherent in this understanding of gender and kinship because, for as Rubin (1975: 180) states, “gender...entails that sexual desire be directed toward the other sex,” though we might amend this to include “sex and/or gender” (see also Rubin 1993, Butler 1990). Therefore, kinship must include a discussion of gender and sexuality, as has been acknowledged before, but also sexuality must include a discussion of kinship as it may prove useful in detangling complicated gender and sexual practices (see Abu-Lughod 1986, 1993, Carsten 2004b, Weston 1991).

How then has the anthropology of homosexuality (and all its incarnations) either responded to or made use of kinship studies? In particular, how has it attempted to evaluate the supposed demise of traditional families and kinship with the globalization of non-normative sexualities? The answer is that there have been few, but significant, works in the area. Notable among these is Kath Weston’s (1991) timely ethnography, *Families We Choose*. This work ad-

dresses nonprocreative kin ties between gays and lesbians, disrupting not only the category of fictive kin but our entire American kin system that predicates itself on biology. Weston posits that the fear many have regarding gay individuals as somehow threatening to “the family” illustrates that our basic assumption of “the family” is that it is heterosexual and contingent on the heterosexual (biological) reproduction of its primordial essence by its members. Yet Weston is less concerned with families of origin as she is with these “chosen” families comprised of gays and lesbians. Indeed, much of the contemporary intersection of these two anthropological bodies of literature is found in studies of reproductive technologies (e.g., Thompson 2001 and Carsten 2001; 2004a) or what seems to be the buzzword of “new families” (e.g., Hayden 2005). But have we really exhausted the study of “traditional” families? “Traditional” families of origin often go unexamined in the rush to study “new,” gay families and technologies. In particular, little has been written addressing issues of family and homosexuality (as an appropriated identity) from a cross-cultural perspective (see Dewaele et al. 2011, Wang et al. 2009, Lim 2005, Rofel 1999). Virtually no literature exists regarding the intersection of family and homosexuality in South Korea.

### **Conceptualizing the Gay Dividual**

Although Weston (1991) presents an intellectually stimulating and emotional account of gays and lesbians forming a different type of family, she is at times positioning families of origins and families we choose in conflict with one another. Though perhaps not intentionally, gay families and gay family members are characterized as individuals exercising their freedom (à la Altman), rebelling against the “old” modes of filial intimacy and relations. Saba Mahmood (2005: 31) poignantly asks in her ethnography regarding female subjects and the Islamic revival in Egypt,

“How do we conceive of individual freedom in a context where the distinction between the subject’s own desires and socially prescribed performances cannot be easily presumed, and where submission to certain forms of (external) authority is a condition for achieving the subject’s potentiality?” We often cast “old” as static and unwanted while “new” is freeing and agentive. Yet why can we not also consider “old” or “traditional” as alive and agentive?

In this theoretical gap, that between homosexuality and our families of origin, is where I locate this project and my contribution. In particular, how do discourses of family and homosexuality intersect in the narratives of young (18-28) South Korean self-identified gay men? Need these frames for identity among gay men in contemporary South Korea, both as experienced and in our analysis, be seen as in conflict, pitting traditional, filial constraint against progressive, individualistic freedom? Or does this interrelationship require, or perhaps (in the narratives themselves) already provide, a different, more recursive understanding?

Though all of the literature reviewed in this chapter provides a significant foundation for my research, none offers a theoretical paradigm to conceptualize my research questions. I thus turn to Strathern (1988: 13) and her borrowed notion of the *dividual*.<sup>6</sup> She suggests that Melanesians “contain a generalized sociality within...persons are frequently constructed as the plural and composite site of the relationships that produced them.” The self thus becomes a “social microcosm.” In essence, the dividual is thought of as a node within a network of social relations, where gender, status, sexuality, and the family are all aspects of the malleable and continuously constructed self. The self has multiple identities, multiple subjectivities, one not necessarily more important than the other as each identity is intricately tied to the others and one cannot ex-

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<sup>6</sup> She borrows this term from McKim Marriott’s (1976) work on Hindu transactions in India.

ist without the others.<sup>7</sup> An individual is thought of as already “whole,” or socially independent and complete, but the dividual is constituted through relationships and thus constitutes those relationships in a dialogical construction, similar to Mikhail Bakhtin’s (1981) argument that meaning is not inherent in the self but created by the interaction between the self and other.

My research will thus infuse Strathern’s (1988) dividual with a Bakhtinian reading of dialogical relationships as I argue that to be dividually gay in Korea is to be discursively constructed in multiple ways simultaneously but within the same dividual body. Being “gay” and one’s heteronormative expectations are subjectivities the self dialogically incorporates, but they also represent the entire networks, or discourses, that are associated with being “gay” and being a “son.” In other words, the dividual does not only include the self (or Ego) but it is also a node in someone else’s network and a discursive subject in multiple discourses. Therefore, one’s gay identity and family of origin identity may be in constant tension but they do not self-destruct because the tension is productive, whereby one cannot necessarily exist without the other. Dividuality also incorporates the intimacies produced and experienced between family members and club members. In addition, my focus on dividuality extends to the recognition that I too am a node in a network, a dividual *actor* who uses my own position and set of relations to interact with others, thereby incorporating them into my relational network. In a sense, this is reminiscent of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari’s (1987) idea of an assemblage, where parts are continuously used to morph and reassemble into something seemingly new but still contains the same parts as before. A dividual assemblage, then, is not a layered object with an essential center, but a constantly in-motion set of parts that resembles a whole from—the idea of a single person—but upon microscopic examination we can see that the “whole” self is constructed of countless

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<sup>7</sup> Sinnott’s (2004) discussion of hybridity becomes particularly salient here, as even diametric concepts are dependent on each other if they meet within the dividual.



parts, subjectivities within relationships with other people, discourses, ideologies, histories, and so on, that can reassemble in different ways based on the situation and context. Therefore, this project will also ask how our perspective on gay identities can be enriched through attention to the dialogic construction of shared and divergent experiences of gayness in ethnographic research encounters.

### **Notes on Fieldwork**

A significant portion of the material used in this project was obtained between the spring of 2009 and the summer of 2010 while I was a member of Come Together and living in Seoul, South Korea. The research obtained was for a project I did while a graduate student at Yonsei University and focused on the entire Come Together group—my friends were key informants but they were not necessarily the focus. However, during the summer of 2011 I conducted follow-up research for this current MA project, focusing on coming out, family history/relationships, and memorable stories about being gay (such as when they first knew they were gay or their first sexual experience). The goal of this project was to understand the manner in which my five friends (six if we include Taesub) constructed their gay identities vis-à-vis their strong ties to their families. Therefore, the first method I used was a combination of semi-structured interviews and oral life histories, in which I asked, in both Korean and English, rather broad questions regarding past stories of same-sex desire, coming out (to their family) stories, stories that elucidate their relationship with their family (members), and stories that illustrate their relationship with other members of Come Together and other gays and lesbians. The intention of these open-ended interviews, occurring in a variety of settings (café, dinner table, car, etc.), was that they not only provided my friends with narrative freedom to tell the stories they wanted, but in that freedom

arose a series of conceptual questions I could ask (either internally or directly): why that story as opposed to another; why did you tell the story in that way; why were those elements mentioned but not other elements mentioned in this other story you told; what is really shaping this story? As I knew all five men intimately, the storytelling process was dynamic; I often interjected other questions, requested for clarification, humor (if appropriate), and my own narrative experience. Many of our conversations also focused on sex, and though the members of Come Together will talk about sex with one another, I noticed that they would more readily talk about sex with me. Changmin in particular hardly talks to anyone else except me about his sex life—I will discuss this further throughout this project.

The closeness I shared with my friends and the members of Come Together also significantly enhanced and nuanced my participant observation. For instance, Donghae has a particular fondness for Buddhist temples and when we embarked on our two-day road trip to the southern coast of the peninsula in 2011, part of our plan was to visit a rather famous Buddhist temple. While walking up the hill to the temple we spoke of camping, Disney music, and how beautiful we both found the forest; there was virtually no discussion of “family” and “homosexuality” as explicit topics. But why were those particular topics brought up on our way to the temple? And more broadly, why does he have such affection for Buddhist temples in general? Answers to these questions may not uncover hidden reasons why he only recently decided to come out to his family, but they do speak to his dividuality and how he views his world which are, in turn, crucial to understand how he approaches issues of “family” and “homosexuality.” If Donghae and I had not been such close friends (*jinhan ch'in'gu*), the peculiarities would not have been discernable—his life history provides the context to his idiosyncrasies.<sup>8</sup> In other words, I needed the

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<sup>8</sup> Ruth Behar (1993) provides a brilliant ethnographic example of this notion in her person-centered ethnography of *Esperanza*.

depth of my previous interactions with my friends to make sense of the 2011 stories and experiences.

In practice, then, participant observation included a range of activities: weekly lunches, a retreat, anniversary events, biweekly club meetings, a joint meeting of the different university groups, two two-day road trip (which included driving, multiple meals, a temple visit, an island visit, and many more minor activities), a bus ride from the airport, dinner in my apartment, coffee, lunch at a Chinese restaurant, simply walking around and talking, and the list could continue to include virtually all interaction I had with my friends. Participant observation works best when we engage in the mundane life of the everyday—though it should be noted that something as specific as a two-day road trip may in fact be as far from the mundane as possible. Within participant observation we are presented with the most scattered of narratives as we are not necessarily asking for chronological stories but informally conversing the way two friends (at least in my case) would on any given day. My intimate relationship with my informants allows me to more effortlessly piece these narratives together as I can expect, without saying, the manner in which these pieces fit together. I did not use a tape recorder during my research by the request of my informants and my own distaste for the tape recorder; notes were taken on all occasions and I kept a regular diary I used to reflect on all aspects of my time in Korea.

Let me note that I did not include any self-identified lesbians in this project for three reasons: 1) during my membership, only three active lesbians were in the club and hardly ever joined the members for lunch, dinner or drinking; 2) my focus was on my friends as I have known them longer and would gain greater depth in the stories; and 3) this project also addresses the position of the son in the family, not necessarily the position of the daughter. There are other

reasons why I only included gay men, and those justifications will be indirectly addressed throughout this project.

One final note on the use of language used throughout this project. In the Prologue I discuss the language I used to converse with each friend. The quotes I provide throughout this ethnography are either translations from Korean or are said in English—any quote from Changmin was originally in English while the vast majority of the other quotes from my other friends were in Korean. Let me also note that Changmin is the only friend to use the word “fuck” as the others will either use “sleep with (*jada*)” or “to have sex [with] (*söng kwankyerül katda*)”.<sup>9</sup> If I use the word “fuck” to describe sex my friends are having, I do so to show intensity in the conversation or to accent my own intensity or reaction.<sup>10</sup> Some may argue I am skewing my ethnography by being so cavalier with my language. I’m simply illustrating that my subjectivities and personhood—my dividuality in all its complexities—is as part of my research as those of my friends.

### **Narrative Methodology**

The choice to include myself as an active participant and members of Come Together throughout this project highlights my attention to the importance of a narrative methodology. As James Peacock and Dorothy Holland (1993: 376) aptly note, “life stories have an existence and meaning in and of themselves outside the interview context.” I argue that narratives in general may be expressed a certain way during an interview, but this expression is but one of countless possible

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<sup>9</sup> Another way to express sexual intercourse is by saying “to make love [with] (*sarangül nanuda*),” though this was not common in the conversations with my friends.

<sup>10</sup> To my knowledge, there is no common Korean expression equivalent to “to fuck.” The most common translation of “fuck” that is used when exasperated or angered—“I hate this fucking class,” or “fuck, this is so hard”—would be *ssibal*, which does stem from a verb that vulgarly implies sex. However, while *ssibal* is extremely common slang, the verb form is not. Some may also use the phrase *ttökül ch’ida*, which derives from how Korean would beat *ttök*, or rice cakes, with a big wooden stick or hammer. *ttökül ch’ida* then could loosely be translated as “to bang” as in “to bang a woman.” But again, none of my friends used either the verb form of *ssibal* or *ttökül ch’ida*.

versions as the expression of the narrative is contingent on the directionality, or audience, of the narrator: “life stories are envisioned as a product of the interaction and desire for understanding between teller and listener” (Peacock and Holland 1993: 372). Yet more poignant is the notion that narratives are never static and always reconstructed based on new contexts. Any “analysis” of narratives should not read them as constrained stories but as living texts that are situated within contexts but also contingent on discourses apparent in their telling. In other words, narratives may often pinpoint a particular chronology, as narratives are expressions of experience, and so the experience being recounted has a specific temporal position. However, the expression of that particular experience does not have a fixed position as it changes with each new telling as most narrative and folklore scholars argue no two versions are exactly the same. Therefore, narratives illuminate how we perceive not only our experience but also our current state of being; they are reflections of past selves, present selves, and potentially future incarnations of the self.

The content of our narratives is no doubt important, but the way we express our narratives, the telling, is as crucial if not sometimes more, for as Deborah Schiffrin (1996) argues, “the way we tell our stories also reveals a self that exists within a cultural matrix of meanings, beliefs, and normative practices.” In a sense, content and telling are both indicative of the surrounding contexts and discourses that construct both pieces of the narrative. Margaret Somers (1994: 616) thus defines narratives as “constellations of *relationships* (connected parts) embedded in *time and space*, constituted by *causal emplotment*” that begs the question “why a narrative has the story line it does.” Narratives are thus mechanisms of socialization, but we too become authors of our own stories, and narrators of our own narratives. We are narrating the self but doing so in the conscious presence of the other. The individual self thus arises within the narrative; “we actualize our selves through the activity of narrating” and this activity “places narrators and

listener/readers in the paradoxical position of creating coherence out of lived experience while at the same time reckoning with its impossibility” (Ochs and Capps 1996: 29).<sup>11</sup>

The self is always in dialogue with the other, as meaning arises between the interaction of self and other. So too is the narrative, a representation of self and an expression of experience, whereby it is constructed vis-à-vis other narratives that are also expressions of experience and representations of other selves.<sup>12</sup> Our narratives are both consciously and unconsciously shaped by and through the flow of multiple, at times competing bodies of discourse. When I speak of my experiences in Korea—retell my stories of Korea—my narratives are influenced by both Korean and American discourses of family, education, friendship, sexuality, governmentality, and the list continues, but it will also be influenced by the narratives my friends tell and other stories I encounter, be they from movies, novels, television shows, or even a one-night stand.

Narratives, like individuals, are not bounded entities that are static and closed-off from influence. When the element of the ethnographer is introduced to the world of the informant, it would be a fallacy to assume that the narratives of the informant do not change. For the ethnographer, the self is most definitely present in the fieldwork conducted, as Barbara Tedlock (1991) acknowledges, but the “moral choice” that Herdt (1988: 160) alludes to is the manner in which the ethnographer places him or herself in the ethnography, if he or she chooses to do so at all. I argue that it becomes an inescapable fact that the ethnographer is present in the ethnography

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<sup>11</sup> As Elinor Ochs and Lisa Capps (2001: 2) rightly note, there is an important difference “between telling a story *to* another and telling a story *with* another,” and when envisioning narratives and the self as discursively dialogical, narratives and the self are shared experiences often different than the experiential reference point the narrative expresses.

<sup>12</sup> Somers (1994) articulates that there are four dimensions, or types, of narratives: ontological, public, conceptual, and metanarratives. Ontological narratives attempt to define who we are, thus underscoring that we *become* the self and our identity. Conceptual narratives are constructs of the researcher, which will be unraveled further throughout this project. Metanarratives, or master narratives, embed actors and selves within historical and theoretical constructs, such as Progress or Enlightenment. Finally, public narratives are larger than the individual and symbolize cultural and institutional particulars and abstractions. Each of Somers’s dimensions can be conceptualized as a different form of discourse and hardly ever in compliance with one another.

produced because of what I believe ethnography to be. Ethnography is a narrative form, an act of storytelling as Edward Bruner (1986) characterizes, that is not only representative of the self as ethnographer but also the expression of a shared experience between informant and ethnographer. Our narratives are shared because we are dialogically constructing them together in and around bodies of discourses, both those native to the informant's context and our own. Ethnography is thus the expression of this shared experience, no doubt through the eyes of the ethnographer: "your experience is *made* mine; I experience my experience of you" (Kapferer 1986: 189).<sup>13</sup> In reality, ethnography is but a new starting point—a resituation of knowledge, to appropriate Donna Haraway's (1988) concept—where further dialogue in changing bodies of discourse should take place.

In the essay "Death and Memory," Behar (1996) recalls her trip back to the small Spanish village Santa Maria del Monte after some time to discuss death and funerals with those remaining villagers as it parallels her own grandfather's impending death. She laments several times throughout the essay that she is doing "fieldwork" when she should perhaps be in Miami Beach caring for her grandfather, but these tragedies are not only how the readers connect with her essay but also how she is able to discern the ethos of those with whom she converses in Santa Maria del Monte. The culminating point of her essay is not simply to paint pictures of death in this small Spanish village and compare them to her own troubles, but to understand changing sentiments in dying, funerals, and the relationship between those dying and those living. Yet the essay serves a dual purpose, one to lament death and one to remember life: "it is also about the effort to remember, and the need to remember, *my* effort and *my* need to remember, compelled as I am by duty-memory" (1996: 81). Through the stories of death heard while in Santa Maria del

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<sup>13</sup> Chronologically, ethnography follows the exchange of narratives "in the field" as what some may consider the final narrative, even dominant narrative, of not only the experience of fieldwork but also the culture the fieldwork aimed to highlight.

Monte, Behar is able to not only deconstruct her own trauma of her grandfather's impending death, but also *remember* the life of her grandfather as it relates to her own life, in a similar manner that the villagers remember their family members that had passed. Behar's affect converges with the villagers' affect as both inevitably change, much in the way their narratives change: "I realize, profoundly, how the texts of our lives, like those of our ethnographic subjects, do not sit still" (1996: 86). Ethnography, for Behar, becomes therapeutic, a way to wield her affect that both educates others and cultivates her own emotions to her grandfather's death. I imagine my ethnography akin to Behar's works, not only because writing about Korea is therapeutic for me, but also because I approach this ethnography as a form of self-therapy readers will be able to more readily attach themselves to my friends through my own experiences with them.

### **Things to Come**

Chapter One develops the notion of the dividuality of the anthropologist, and in particular I interrogate anthropological identity while conducting ethnographies in the field. My goal in this chapter is to destabilize my identity as an anthropologist and propose the alternate role of Come Together member. I illustrate my positionality by elucidating the importance of belonging for members of Come Together with stories of enculturation and socialization. The following two chapters act as companions with Chapter Two addressing homosexuality in Korea, the history and context of Come Together, and my friends' use and disavowal of the discourses of homosexuality. In particular, I illustrate that rhetoric of Altman's (2001) global gay paradigm has no doubt reached the shores of Korea, but that my friends as a certain generation of college students find little validity and purpose for discourses of human rights and personal gay freedom that supersedes or rejects the family; instead homosexuality and gay identity are treated as secrets.



This leads into the second part of this discussion, and in Chapter Three I provide a thick historical account of family and neoliberalism in South Korea to demonstrate that the often monolithic rhetoric of the ‘traditional’ family is far more insidious and complicated given the neoliberal paradigm shift that has affected much of South Korea’s economy, politics, and social organization, especially in discourse. I blend in a discussion of the politics and metaphor of blood in South Korea as the substance that connects both members of a nation and members of a family. The stories I tell both reinforce and complicate the notion of traditional family in South Korea.

Following this cluster, Chapter Four explores forms of intimacy between mothers and sons and between my friends and their lovers. This chapter includes a series of vignettes on the issues of relationships (dating, love, sex) and kinships (interactions with family) in order to illustrate that my friends are orienting towards specific “happy objects” (Ahmed 2010), but also that those objects are pulling them in seemingly different directions. Chapter Five takes a step back in order to bring the moving pieces of this project together, offering not a conclusion but some closing thoughts on the project. Chief among them is the theme of becoming and therefore this final chapter will serve as a way to fit all the parts of this project together into a cohesive narrative on becoming—becoming gay, becoming a son, becoming a friend.

I end this project with a discussion of ethnographic longing and the politics of writing ethnography as fiction. In the Epilogue I lay all my vulnerabilities and identifications bare to the reader as a method to understand, more fully, the meaning of correlative recontextualization and how writing is never simply a means to an end but rather a journey worth taking. As Deleuze and Guattari (1987: 11) write, “The book is not an image of the world. It forms a rhizome with the world, there is an a parallel evolution of the book and the world.” In other words, writing hinges on a simultaneous becoming of the world and the stories we write. There is nothing

standard or traditional about this ethnography, except maybe that I use proper citations and rely heavily on anthropological sources. Yet this is still ethnography and I am still an anthropologist—obsessed with theory but with an overwhelming passion for writing fiction—and over the course of this project the madness to my methods will unveil itself and a clearer understanding of the dividuality of my friends and of me will blossom.

## 1. QUEER REFLECTIONS: IDENTITY & THE POLITICS OF BELONGING

*All interpretations are provisional; they are made by positioned subjects who are prepared to know certain things and not others. Even when knowledgeable, sensitive, fluent in the language, and able to move easily in an alien cultural world, good ethnographers still have their limits, and their analyses always are incomplete.* Renato Rosaldo (1989: 8)

It was cold and I was standing in front of the McDonalds in Shinchon, right outside the subway station. It was a Thursday night and the sun had begun to set. It is one of the most famous meeting spots, especially for those of us who were Yonsei University students, and there was quite a large number of college students circulating around me. I felt nervous with my bag thrown over my left shoulder and my cell phone gripped tightly in my right hand; my interviewer was two minutes late. Of all the things I could have done in Korea, all the clubs I could have joined, all the activities I could have involved myself in, I chose to reach out to Yonsei's club for gays and lesbians. I decided to join Come Together.

Yet they had to also allow me to join, and so there I stood exposed to the elements of February 2009 waiting for the club member who was tasked with my "interview." Thinking back to that night and the entire process of the interview makes me wonder about the goal of the club in general. It was founded with the intent to provide its gay members a platform to discuss equal rights and acceptance, not to mention a safe haven for gays and lesbians at Yonsei. Come Together is a university club, its register and paperwork accessible to any Yonsei student who merely asks. And yet I was required to interview to join, not because they are selective, but as I would soon find out, to protect their members from those who may wish to do them harm. They gather in secret in order to share their secrets.

My phone rang and a deep, familiar voice on the other end asked for me in English. As he was speaking we made eye contact in the crowd, and though I would have never even guessed

him to be gay, the woman standing next to him seemed to play that part in my head. He stood perhaps 6 feet 2 inches, significantly taller than me, and looked to be in his late twenties with a dark complexion, very masculine face and physique. More accurately, he looked to be muscular, complete with the cigarette in hand, short black hair, and dark piercing eyes. I would later find out that he was considered the most masculine member in Come Together, which would ironically juxtapose with his sexual position as a bottom (as bottoms are stereotypically thought to be more feminine in South Korea). His name was Jun. His accomplice was named Seohyun and she was shorter, perhaps an inch shorter than me, and given her haircut, outfit, and stride she embodied what I had come to know as the typical butch lesbian, or at least by American popular culture standards. She left less of an impression on me than Jun, primarily because I was dumbfounded that Jun was gay given the way he looked and acted. I had yet to meet a gay Korean man and this was certainly not what I was expecting.

The nervous feeling I had simply waiting for them to arrive skyrocketed when I saw Jun. Though he is not the type of guy I am attracted to, it would be a farce to deny that he is indeed attractive. He looked well put-together; well-groomed, nice clothes, and he spoke decent English. The initial thought of joining Come Together, though exciting, scared me because for the first time in my life I was about to involve myself in the lives of multiple gay men; I was about to enter into a gay social circle. I have had gay friends in the past, but they had always been isolated individuals who were never tied together; the circle ended with just the two of us. Making new friends is never hard for me, but there is a difference: I never had to worry about being attracted to the friends I was making. The possibility of attraction, sex, and all of those feelings and desires the heterosexual dating world flaunts in television and movies were never present for me on such a large scale, and now I was breaking my own silence and taking an enormous

plunge into the darkest abyss I knew (or had yet to know). I would be judged as not just a person but a potential partner, be that simply for sex or for something more endearing, and such potential scared me. So to be introduced to this new world by Jun, the rather fantastically attractive man walking towards me, caused me more anxiety than I previously had thought possible.

They both introduced themselves in English, Jun's English better than Seohyun's, and we made our way across the street to the café A Twosome Place for my "interview." The three of us began with just simple introductory conversation: majors, hometowns, ages, hobbies, and such. They had yet to speak to me in Korean, but eventually Seohyun, who I recalled seemed a bit more cautious of me than Jun, asked if I could speak in Korean. I nodded and realized that the next question would be to ask for a demonstration. Perhaps the most difficult linguistic act one can do is begin a relationship in one language and then switch to another language. I have Korean and Japanese friends to this day to whom I speak only English, even after I learned Korean and Japanese, simply because our relationship began in English and to move away from that routine would be strange. So to be put on the spot, after talking for at least twenty minutes in English, was rather embarrassing and hard, but I managed and from then on we spoke in a mixture of English and Korean. Seohyun mentioned, almost with a hint of skepticism in her voice, that the members of Come Together, save the two sitting in front of me, could not speak English and that I would have to speak Korean if I wanted to "fit in." I expected as much, and strategically hoped this would be the case in order to practice my Korean conversation.

Eventually Jun, putting his cigarette out, declared that "we should start the interview now." I was a bit confused, for if we had yet to start the interview then what was the purpose of all the pleasantries with which we began and what would be asked during this "interview?" I nodded, placing my hands in my lap before he opened his mouth to ask: "Are you Christian?" I

understood, through and through, the purpose now. Jun had explained that in the past they had some students who joined the club only to preach to them the sin they were living in as homosexuals—the interview was the gate that prevented such harassment. But it also sealed the members inside. During a road trip with Donghae in the summer of 2011, I asked him what his interview had entailed and he said that the member who interviewed him asked him a barrage of questions about his love life and sex life, making Donghae feel incredibly uncomfortable. Those questions were never directly asked of me, but there was an indirect nod to such topics when Jun mentioned that Come Together was not a club where people come to hook up, have sex or date. I nodded as a response to this directive, the supposed golden rule that I would soon learn to be utter nonsense as even Jun later underwent a rather public (within the club at least) affair with one of the members and then a just-as-public breakup, prompting his withdrawal from the group. But I would be obedient during my tenure as member of Come Together and not engage in any type of special relationships, be they sexual or romantic, with other members.

I had yet to eat, but rather than inviting me to dinner Jun invited me to karaoke. I had mentioned that I loved karaoke and to sing, and so only an hour after meeting me we decided not to share a meal but to share some songs instead. I learned that Jun was in a relationship and lived with his boyfriend who was ten years older than him, paid all of Jun's expenses, and showered him with gifts in return for sex, or so the other members guessed. I found it strange that someone like Jun, in all his glory, would be in such a relationship until I found out later from Changmin and Kibum that Jun regularly cheated on his boyfriend with other guys. The melodrama of Come Together began for me on the first night.

## Where to Begin?

We would be naïve to think that we anthropologists do not inherently create change simply by our presence “in the field” because even if we are thought of as “native” anthropologists, there may be other aspects of our identity that distinguish us from those we study. And so feminist authors were among the first to realize during the 1970s that when “women study women,” power relations are still present (Kennedy 1996: 172). Their sex and gender were but part of their identities, even though they believed they were in some way part of that community. As anthropologists we have a particular amount of cultural capital embodied by our education and certain access to resources due to our social and symbolic capital (see Bourdieu 1980). Thus we represent a particular class, whether we seek to highlight or downplay our authority. This complexity is never erased, nor should it be.

To conceive of and plan a research project we are in fact engaging in a form of identity politics as we attempt to formulate the best possible methodology to achieve our research goals. We have become authors of our own plays, narrators to our own stories. As Edward Bruner (1991: 4) insightfully states, “we organize our experience and our memory of human happenings mainly in the form of narrative—stories, excuses, myths, reasons for doing and not doing, and so on.” Ethnography proper—the IRB sanctioned fieldwork we conduct—always follows ethnography *improper*—those summer trips we take for language training, the informal conversations we have with friends in the field, and our literature review. We go into the field with questions, yes, but let’s face it: we go with answers as well. My goal in this chapter is not to overturn a hundred years of anthropological methodology, nor to highlight what Clifford Geertz (1976) and later Renato Rosaldo (1989) have argued: we must come down from our high horses and expect the unexpected. Rather, I will discuss both theoretically and experientially the importance of the

anthropologist's identity while conducting fieldwork and the role I played as a member of Come Together, beginning with the interview story retold above. The stories in this chapter draw attention to my position in Come Together by also introducing the club and its members. My identity, my dividuality, is important in this ethnography if only because it highlights the importance of belonging, not just as a member of Come Together, but as a member to any identity category—gay, men, sons, students, friends.

### **My Identity, Your Anthropologist**

Dorinne Kondo (1990) vividly describes the way she was able to relate to her Japanese informants and the people in the community where she lived in Tokyo as a Japanese American because of what she looked like, even if she was still a novice to some of the more formal customs. She is reflexive about how she became so enculturated over time that she began losing sight of her American “self” and thus had to leave Japan in order to recuperate that self. While her ethnography is quite telling of the process of becoming enculturated and how she somewhat suspended her own cultural logic to comprehend fully her surroundings, she was still aware, and also critical, of her own deteriorating “self”—as if it were in some way separate from this other “self” that was becoming enculturated. Her experience culminated in an ethnography that was as much about her *participation* as it was her *observations*, but the interplay between the two yields theory: “experience, and the *specificity* of my experience—a particular human being who encounters particular others at a particular historical moment and has particular stakes in that interaction—is not opposed to theory; it *enacts* and *embodies* theory” (1990: 24, emphasis in original). Kondo was consciously aware, in crafting her self through the ethnography, of her hybrid identity; she readily admits, however, that hindsight is always twenty-twenty and that when “in the field” an-



thropologists do not always have the luxury of foresight. Yet she still illustrates that her in-between position was at times beneficial even if she, at that particular time, was ruefully unaware and simply confused.

The identity of the anthropologist is therefore most definitely of the utmost importance because we are not studying static entities but dynamic humans, a race of people of which we anthropologists are part. If we envision our informants as having multiple moving and fluid parts to their dividuality, then we too no doubt are endowed with the same multidimensionality. Lila Abu-Lughod (1991: 137) notes that the role of feminist anthropologists and what she terms “halfies,” or those “whose national or cultural identity is mixed by virtue of migration, overseas education, or parentage,” is of importance not due to some moralistic superiority, “but in the special dilemmas they face, dilemmas that reveal starkly the problems with cultural anthropology’s assumption of a fundamental distinction between self and other.” This dichotomy between the self and other is present in all ethnography, for our ability to understand another culture is to think of it as somehow *other* than our own cultural contexts. The feminist and halfie do not necessarily view culture in this binary opposition because they are part of that culture which is implicitly being othered. Therefore, the position of the feminist or halfie anthropologist is a peculiar one as he or she plays both the etic role of anthropologist while being somewhat included in the emic consciousness of the community. I would argue, though, that this may also be the case in a majority of long-term ethnographies as we become partially re-socialized.

Abu-Lughod (1991: 146) argues that “cultural theories also tend to overemphasize coherence” rather than acknowledge that cultural dissonance is not only more prevalent but also implicit when we consider the presence of the anthropologist. Kirin Narayan (1993: 681) finds merit in positioning the anthropologist within the ethnography, especially if we are to question

just how native the native anthropologist is, in what she calls “the enactment of hybridity.” She refers to the anthropologist as having multiple voices and argues that these voices, or facets of identity, enact theory; but “when professional personas altogether efface situated and experiencing selves, this makes for misleading scholarship even as it does violence to the range of hybrid personal and professional identities that we negotiate in our daily lives” (681). It is for this reason that we should emphasize variability, action, and ambiguity between our role and our relation to our informants. To some extent, this is what Narayan (1993: 681) means when she says we must adopt “a narrative voice...[that] transforms ‘informants’ whose chief role is to spew cultural data for the anthropologist into subjects with complex lives and a range of opinions.”

Will Roscoe (1996: 203) argues that “the very existence of lesbian and gay culture is politically and intellectually contested” and as such “merely formulating a research project involving lesbian and gay cultures amounts to taking a stand in this debate.” It is an inescapable effect for anthropology at large, he posits, because “simply asking questions triggers changes in peoples’ self-image” (203), and so the gay anthropologist as well is inevitably changing culture and creating culture through his or her representations of culture in his or her ethnographies. This is in part what Geertz (1988: 145) meant when he wrote that “the un-get-roundable fact [is] that all ethnographical descriptions are homemade, that they are the describer’s descriptions, not those of the described.” Kath Weston (1998) tells of her own foray into gay anthropology and the rather immovable stigma and even career death that her advisors and colleagues at graduate school constantly reminded her would follow were she to pursue anthropological research on gays and lesbians. She implies that it is impossible to remove the self from the research. Roscoe (1996: 204) argues that such attempts to do so led to what he characterizes as a “bland, detached, objective mode of discourse when it comes to writing about homosexuality.” It is this blurring of the lines

that Weston (1993) embraces, poignantly asking the question that Roscoe implies others fear, “Who’s the native now?” Weston (1993: 359) concludes her review of gay and lesbian studies in anthropology by answering her own question: “lesbian/gay studies in anthropology is no longer easily separable into the products of ethnographers and natives, or even ethnographers who double as informants.”

As Judith Butler (2010: 563) states, “identity categories tend to be instruments of regulatory regimes, whether as the normalizing categories of oppressive structures or as the rallying points for a liberatory contestation of that very oppression”; but even given the troubling nature of identity categories, “it is precisely the *pleasure* produced by the instability of those categories which sustains the various erotic practices” that both entices Butler and marks us as “candidates” of those categories. Yet this is not to say one is a member of but one identity category; as I have already illustrated we are continuously part of numerous layers of identification. As such, being gay and doing research on gay communities entails awareness and a form of identity management. While conducting research in South Korea, I gained access to Come Together because I was gay, but I sustained the relationships with each of my friends not simply by virtue of whom I sleep with but by all the other multifarious layers in my dividuality. Donghae and I both loved traveling and Buddhist traditions, so we often would take day drips to Buddhist temples in and around Seoul. Changmin and I are both writers and we would lament our latest story or writers block. Therefore, we must not only realize that our methodological considerations and constructions are integral to our study, but also proactively place awareness and negotiation of our position and the positions of our informants squarely at the center of our research and objectives.

As such, we should consider the possibilities of similarities and shared “experience,” particularly between the informant and the anthropologist. This is what Abu-Lughod (1991: 159)

terms “tactical humanism,” that which is “made both politically necessary and limited in its effects by anthropology’s location on the side of domination in the context of a world organized by global inequality along lines of ‘cultural’ difference.” While she is adamant in her problematization of generalizations, she notes that by employing humanism in a strategic manner, we will notice that humanism “is a language with more speakers (and readers), even if it, too, is a local language rather than the universal one it pretends to be” (158).

While gay anthropologists will no doubt face differences (i.e., unfamiliar experiences of “gayness”) in their journey through the field, there is something powerful about acknowledging that similarities within experience do in fact exist that perhaps transcend “cultural” boundaries or work as points of solidarity, not necessarily requiring sameness. Our modern, transnational conception of the world and culture must take into consideration that if we are conducting fieldwork, especially within urban settings, there is a strong possibility that our informants will be aware of the debates that inform the questions we ask them, categories we allude to, and situations we present them with. Our shared “experience” may seem like rhetoric of a shared “gay” history across cultural spaces akin to Denis Altman’s (2001) claim of a global gay paradigm, but in reality it speaks to the power of Arjun Appadurai’s (1996) “global cultural flows” in which “gayness” and the category of gay is most definitely a part. In practice, then, transnational understandings of “gayness” or shared experience become the mechanism by which the informant and the gay anthropologist construct new layers of identity.

### **On Enculturation**

Every semester the members of Come Together travel outside of Seoul on what they call MT, or membership training. This ritual is no exception of Come Together, as most organized groups,

be they in the university, occupations/ jobs (even in corporate Korea), or social/ activity groups, use MTs to orient new members of the group with existing members, and in some cases past members. The phrase ‘membership training’ is somewhat misleading, as it perhaps conjures up images of seminars, roundtable discussions, exercises where members fall into each other’s arms, and meditation.

It was Saturday morning, sometime in early Spring 2009, and a group of us gathered at the Shinchon subway station. I had only really known Kibum and Siwon at this point, so when they saw me we naturally banded together and waited for the ship to sail. However, these two had also made friends with another new member who seemed to carry a rather potent, and visible to all, feeling of disdain for me—no one ever knew why, so I did the natural thing and reciprocated what was given to me with a vengeance (whoever said anthropologists were supposed to be civil, invisible, and defer to the locals had obviously not been 23, gay, and understood the language). I knew that we would be buying enough beer, soju, and food to entertain us for the overnight trip, but I had also brought whiskey and vodka if only because I wanted to seem cool and have the other members like me. As it was explained to me, and as I had experienced the first week I was in Korea with our MT for graduate school at Yonsei, MTs consist of the occasional game and group discussion, but for the most part participants eat and drink the entire night—sleep is hardly ever mentioned, though it inevitably finds everyone sooner or later. The idea, as it was explained to me on my first MT with the graduate school by the president of our graduate student union, is to get everyone drunk to the point that they hold nothing back, spill all their secrets, and bond with everyone else with that naked vulnerability only meat and booze can enable.

I was older than most of the members of Come Together, and had my fair share of drunken stories by that point, so I was both looking forward to our MT and nervous as to how I would be ‘handled’ as former members of Come Together would also be joining us. We headed by bus to a small artist community about an hour outside of Seoul and rented a two-bedroom, two-bathroom apartment for the night to host our festivities. When we arrived, the vice president at the time passed out *kimbab* for lunch, we new members still feeling a bit awkward (myself included). I had brought a deck of cards, because nothing goes better with alcohol than gambling, and asked Kibum and Siwon if they would like to play blackjack. The three of us sequestered ourselves in a corner as I taught them the game, Changmin finally coming over and sitting with us. At the time, I vaguely recognized him as the guy who blew me off during lunch one day. Our group seemed to get a bit bigger as members came and went from the card game, until we left Changmin behind to rest and all of us went outside to walk around the community.

More of the former members and the two lesbians in the club arrived once we returned, and those dealt the chore of cooking made their way to the kitchen to begin preparing our feast. Usually in these settings, and at MTs especially, the newer members were delegated the task of cooking and cleaning as they were junior (*hubae*) to the seniors (*sŏnbae*)—this MT seemed to prove as an exception, though the former members just sat and drank while others cooked. We ate in smaller groups and talked about the nonsense of school, love interests, and each other, but we new members stayed tightly grouped together as few had yet extended the olive branch. Our current meal consisted of grilled pork (*samgyŏpsal*), rice, *kimch'i*, some different sauces, and beer. In my experience, this is typical of an MT meal.

Once we had finished eating and moved the dishes from the center of the living room/dining room, we gathered in a large circle to play some drinking games. Kibum, Siwon and I

were in one of the back corners with my vodka and whiskey, laughing at our own jokes. The game we were to play was a name game, where we first introduced ourselves and then had to go around and list everyone's name in order. However, as most Korean drinking games involve clapping and chanting, we would first start out collectively chanting the motto of the game (which of course rhymes), and then the designated person starts by saying his or her name. The next person in line has to name the person before and then add his or her name, and the game continues until the proverbial baton returns to the person who started. However, if along the way someone forgets a name, mispronounces the name, or says them out of order, he or she must drink the cup of beer mixed with soju in the center of the circle in its entirety. They had decided to start clear across the circle, leaving me with half of the circle to remember. Needless to say, when my turn came, I simply reached for the cup having remembered only a few names at that point. Kibum and Siwon laughed, but some of the former members had said that I did not have to drink the entire thing, even suggesting that I did not have to play the game. Their implication is as clear today as it was then: I'm just not able to remember Korean names because I'm not Korean. In reality, it was a combination of the beer I had at dinner, the cup of whiskey I was drinking from during the game, and just generally a terrible memory for names, regardless of the language, that hindered my ability to remember half a circle of strangers' names. As the game continued I pushed myself out of the circle with my whiskey and phone, feeling a bit defeated, but somewhat pleased that I did not have to play the drinking game—"beer pong is better, anyways" I remember thinking.

When they had finally finished playing their name game, it seemed as if a serious tone befell the circle as one of the former members appointed himself czar of the group and declared that we would now talk about our personal experience. I found it strange that though our presi-

dent was present, he seemed to take a backseat to actually directing conversations and activities as it was more of a platform for the former members to exert whatever force they wanted. As Kibum, Siwon and I sat in our corner drinking the liquor I brought, the new members began sharing with the group their personal experiences of “being gay,” however they decided to interpret that. Most of them shared stories of realization while in middle or high school, boys they had fallen for, how they had no intention to come out (to anyone but the club members), and how it is difficult being gay and a son at times. During one story, Kibum, Siwon and I began to giggle at something I had said, in turn causing one of the two lesbians to look at us and instruct us to keep quiet, causing the three of us embarrassment, but also a realization on my part: no one took us (or at least me) seriously. I was a joke to them, someone looking for sex without appreciating the subtleties of Korean culture and the dynamics of the group. In actuality, I knew more about their group’s history and activities than most of them probably did, including their former members.

Siwon and Kibum also shared, but then the baton once again fell to me and the group czar looked at me and began speaking English, the first time English was spoken to me that night. He said that he would like me to share, and that I could share in English if I so desired. This was the same former member who had ignored me the entire night at our anniversary dinner (*haengsa*), and the same former member who I later learned from Changmin had betrayed him and told the other members about Changmin’s feelings for them. I had been drinking, but in that moment I felt clear-headed, focused, and determined, brimming on vengeful. Everyone looked at me, Changmin on the couch, Kibum and Siwon next to me, and the czar with a look of ‘I doubt he can do it’ written across his face. So I began my story in Korean.



Three men have defined who I am. These three men I met while in college, each gay, and each now dead. The first one was a classmate I got to know, who knew he was gay since middle school, but had been living with AIDS for quite some time. He was young and ignorant, he said, and though he seemed healthy enough, there were days that were tougher than others. While I was abroad in Japan my junior year, he contracted pneumonia and passed away some-time afterwards, his immune system shredded to pieces from AIDS. I remember crying in my room after reading the email from another friend at Emory, the first time I had cried since my parents had divorced when I was in high school. The second man I had known since the first day of college and was with me every step of the way through college as a friend, mentor, and confi-dant as I struggled with my own sexuality and family. He was a year ahead of me, so when I came back to Atlanta from Japan, I attended his graduation ceremony and went to one of the par-ties with him where he met a random guy. In a night of drunken passion, the two of them had unprotected sex. When he got tested sometime afterwards he found out he had HIV. Three days later he shot himself in the head in his car. The third man was someone I met senior year of col-lege; he was only a freshman at the time. He knew he was gay but had yet to tell his parents un-til Christmas break. When he did, his rather conservative, Christian parents all but killed him on the spot, his father kicking him out and his mother drinking herself into numerous drunken co-mas. I never saw him after Christmas because he had taken a razor to his wrists in his bathroom that night, Christmas Eve, with the words “forgive me” etched on his thigh from the razor. The-se three men define who I am, not because I aspire to be like them, but because they will forever be inside me, embodying the fears I have but also giving me strength to overcome those same weaknesses.

The president and vice president had tears in their eyes, Changmin's mouth was a bit open, Kibum and Siwon were sitting closer to each other with shock written on their face, and the group czar sat there, speechless for the first time that night. Though I had just told a rather sad, intimate story that very few knew about, the only thing that went through my mind was "I win." And I had won; I had won the respect of everyone present, both with my ability to converse in Korean and with my emotional journey as a gay man. While I did not simply enter the club with an ascribed status of expert, from that moment on the members treated me differently: I now mattered, and had so-called "gay seniority" over them. For the rest of the night, as well, I was bought into conversations, into games, into makeovers, and into singing—I was the center of the party, not because everyone wanted to be like me or be with me, but because I had the respect of everyone and the ability to speak to them in Korean.

This night was also the night Changmin and I had our first conversation, which lasted for a few hours. I felt like a fool, only then learning that he spoke fluent English, and so the rest of our conversations, up until today, have been in English because of that. Though Changmin hardly ever drinks, he did have some to drink that night and was quite bubbly, the most upbeat I have ever seen him, and so the conversation flowed smoothly and seemingly without effort. He told me about living in the States, he shared with me his favorite American movies and television shows, he explained to me his major and passion for writing, but he did not share with me all of the drama he had experienced with *Come Together* and some of the former members that were in attendance at this MT; those details came later in our friendship. Yet my eyes did seem to follow him around the room as he went from group to group, not the social butterfly that I had morphed into, but still not shy. In one group in particular they were playing a Korean version of spin the bottle, except they used some sort of chanting and pointing in lieu of the bottle whereby two of

the people would have to share a rather intimate kiss to the cheers and jeers of the group. I remember feeling awkward sitting on the couch, giving myself a moment of rest from the alcohol and conversations of the night, and recalling the words bestowed upon me when I first interviewed to join the group: we look down upon hooking up in the club. This was the first instance, among several, that I realized how irrelevant and false that warning had been. Or perhaps they were simply saving themselves from me, the white devil out for rape and pillaging.

Come Together's MT presents a form of discipline—the relationship among the members transforms during the MT, from sharing a meal together, drinking together, learning each other's names, sharing personal stories together, and then playing games. The progression of the event is intentional as in the beginning the usual ice breaker techniques are used (name games) while later more personal stories are shared and then smaller group discussion and games—the night progresses from a tight, regimented schedule to a liberal, free-fallen shindig. Regardless, though, activities are never done alone and are done in order to build camaraderie, to build friendships, and to enculturate members into the club. I was closer to Kibum and Donghae after the MT, but the rather intimate friendship between Changmin and I began that night, as did my friendship with a number of other members.

### **On Ordinary Thursday Lunches**

To share a meal may seem redundant, unimportant, and ordinary, but it is the fact that they are redundant, unimportant, and ordinary that makes them so very powerful and effective in enculturation. But enculturation into what? The regularly scheduled Thursday lunches held on campus for members of Come Together are in no way extraordinary or different—we meet at one of the three cafeterias on campus and simply share a meal together. So what is so powerful about

this rather routine, even mundane activity? If the MT served as the ceremonious moment of enculturation, the liminal event that transitioned non-members into members, then these lunches are crucial to both reinforce this particular form of membership, friendship even, while simultaneously acting as moments of escape from the mundane of the everyday. However, this is not to say that one is actually escaping anything, but rather shifting focus of dividuality to one aspect of one's identity.

The first Thursday lunch I attended was actually on a Friday, the day after my interview. We met in one of the smaller cafeterias at a table far against the wall, almost out of sight from other students and the front door. When we would meet in the other smaller cafeteria, we would also sit far from the door and out of sight of other students, closer to the wall on the end of a table. However, when we would meet in the big cafeteria, we sat at one of the tables that the lunch line passed right by—everyone passed by us and could see us, and as we sat on the end, there was heavy traffic that flooded by. On many occasions I found myself distracted by the people passing by, not because they were looking at us, but because if I sit next to a window in class I am bound to be distracted by what is going on outside. I found it strange, though, that in the smaller cafeterias we sequestered ourselves to corners and out of sight, but in the larger cafeteria, though far from the door, we were in plain sight.

When I asked Jaejoong what he saw as the purpose of Come Together and our congregation, he responded that we acted as support for one another, a time and place for members to let their hair down and engage *al naturale*. The members shared a form of identification, an aspect of their dividuality that they could not share with others because it must be kept secret from all others, including their family. To an extent, Come Together and these ordinary Thursday lunches are moments of catharsis, as I will discuss in the final section of this chapter, but they are also

moments of learning. There is, of course, not one right way to *be* gay, but there are rules and expectations for members of Come Together that must be learned and etched into the practice of *being* gay.

For many members, myself included, this is the first time coming into contact with gays in a social setting that is not predicated on the possibility of sex; we are making friends, not finding our next sexual conquest. Our only way to find sex and romance has been online, but now to introduce the idea of another homosexual as a friend and not a sexual partner attempts to bring our previous experience of friendship in contact with our desires—the extremes of having friends from whom we keep our sexuality hidden and gays with whom we sleep to fulfill our desires must be brought to a middle ground of having friends with whom we can talk about being gay, without necessarily opening the possibility of sex with those friends. Why is Come Together so important to its members? Why do they need such a space? The intersection of a new lifestyle in college, the freedom to come and go as one likes from the home, and a form of sexual liberation (insofar as one is of legal age to have sex, drink, smoke, and move about freely without parental pressures) adds stress to members' experiences of their sexualities. Come Together is a space where all those pulls and intensities in different directions are discussed or simply suspended. I contend that members are all in a similar stage of their lives—whatever that may entail—and Come Together provides both the space (physical and temporal) and the people (i.e., members themselves) to work through this stage. They belong together because they are becoming together. Sex muddies these waters, and even the possibility of sex would present the club, in the eyes of its members, as a space not to share secrets but to hide secrets.

Lunch thus provides a safe environment to practice gay friendship in all its complexities, as catharsis, embodying norms, and a learning instrument—there is little to no possibility that

following lunch two of the members are going to go to a hotel or scurry off into a bathroom stall to pleasure each other. Also profoundly significant is that we are not necessarily trying to sexually impress the other members the way we might have to do if we were on a date or looking for sex. This was perhaps the greatest difficulty I experienced as it took me time to realize that I did not have to worry about my appearance, my sexual attraction level, because I was not attempting to find romance or sex in this group of gay men and they were not viewing me or reading me as a potential partner for sex or love. However, this does not mean members did not break their own rules. Changming had sex with some members, as did Jun and some of the other members. Though members break the rules, it is still important to have the rules in order to shape the space of Come Together as “safe.” As Changmin always noted, the members would gossip and judge each other—we were no different than any other group of friends in this regard—but it always stays in the group like proper dirty laundry.

The MT introduced the interaction between members, the possibility of intimacy and friendship, while these lunches and the everyday meeting and interaction of the members solidified those friendships and defined their membership to Come Together. The mundane is only as significant as it is if the members also attend the MT; those who never participated in the MT tell of how they feel they missed something, and those members often do not come to the meetings and lunches that often. Hence the MT is usually scheduled at the beginning of each semester, again to orient new members to the customs and traditions (and people) of the group. The same unabashed trust and exposure can never be fully captured anywhere else but during the MT, as all members are drunk and all topics of conversation are open—members lay all their secrets and baggage on the table in order to move beyond it and strengthen the intimacy between members. Without such an act, the lunches and meetings can never progress beyond civility and superficial

friendship. The intimacy of the friendship is produced through the sharing of one's dirty laundry, thus facilitating more freedom in conversation and interactions. In other words, I can talk to members like Kibum and Changmin about their sex lives and flirt with them and other members because we already shared a rather powerful intimate experience so early on that little would be considered taboo. If we had never shared that, if we had never participated in the MT, then I doubt we would be as close, as intimate, as we are now, as all the members are. The ordinary moments are predicated on the extraordinary events.

### **On Turning Tables**

Changmin and I were sitting at Au Bon Pain downtown one Saturday evening in September 2009, eating an early dinner before we were to meet some of the other members in front of the Samsung Life Insurance Tower for our long awaited "joint," the coming together of our university group with other university gay groups. Changmin was explaining the last joint he had been to, a few years ago, and how members always ask for the presidents to organize them because they want to meet gays at other universities. Changmin foretold that members I had hardly seen would be there tonight because they usually wait until these joints to show up—it is pretty clear why some members join Come Together. If dating within the group is considered taboo, though it still happens, then dating outside the group is not only acceptable but encouraged. The expressed intent of the joint was not to have members hook up for sex, as they could easily do that online, but to make friends, make connections, and possibly even find potential dates and boy-friends.

The two of us made our way to the meeting point, Changmin verbally wondering if his friend from Korea University would be at the joint. Changmin explained to me that the different

universities were known for the different types of gay students: Yonsei had boyish bottoms, Korea University had boyish tops, and one of the other universities that would be present is known to have masculine tops. When we arrived at the Samsung Insurance Tower, I was surprised how many members had showed up, and how many of them I did not know. I saw Kibum across the way, to whom I shouted to come over to me. He strolled over, a smile on his face and his glasses replaced with contacts. Kibum explained that some of the people here were brand new members, guys he had never seen before either. A few minutes later Yoochun walked up behind me, surprising me as I had not expected him to be there—the last time I had seen him had been at dinner a few weeks back when he explained that his mother had become much stricter because he came out. He said that he could stay for a bit, but would have to catch the last train home so he could make it home on time.

Our group waited, some twenty of us, for one of the other groups to arrive—tonight was apparently a rather large joint between four or five different schools, but we would meet two or three at a time first and then as the night progressed we would slowly integrate the groups together. When one of the other groups did arrive, there were only five or six of them, the school known to have masculine tops (according to Changmin). As they walked towards us, I nudged Changmin before saying aloud, “So where are all the masculine tops?” He laughed, catching the eye of both Kibum and Yoochun, as he replied, “I guess they sat this one out.” But what surprised all of us, prompting Yoochun’s question to me, was that there were only five or six: “Why do we have twenty and they have six?” According to their president, more were coming and were to meet us at the bar we were now heading towards. Changmin walked next to me as I had both hands on Yoochun’s shoulders, directing him forward with our president leading.



The bar looked, smelled, and felt like all other Korean bars—it resembled our regular drinking hole we frequented after our usual Chinese dinner. Korean music played over the speakers, tables and benches were set up in groups to accommodate large conglomerates, and smell of cigarette smoke lingered in the air as if to remind us all that smoking was not only allowed but encouraged while drinking beer and socializing. We sat down, attempting to distribute all six of the other group among us twenty, as if we were to share an apple pie or famous celebrity. Everyone, excluding Changmin and I, seemed nervous, confused, and shy. Perhaps Changmin and I just did not care, or we would eventually be the ones to break the ice and get the groups talking—it was a bit of both. But it did not help my attempt to get to know the other members of the other university as half of the group sitting amongst us I had never seen and yet were still part of Come Together.

To my left was Changmin, to my right Yoochun, and to his right was Donghae; across from us were three new members of Come Together and in the corner were members of the other university, talking amongst themselves. I started with the members in front of me, ironically all three speaking English. This was also the first night I talked to Donghae, for though we met at lunch during the end of spring term in 2009, we had never spoken to each other. No one at our table seemed to be talking with each other, except for the three members from the other school in the corner, Changmin and I, Donghae and Yoochun, and the three across from me. We had gone around the entire table with everyone present to introduce ourselves, most of the people I did not know shocked that I could speak any Korean. Yet by the end of the self-introductions, I felt no closer to the others than I did before and our conversations seemed stale and rather unappealing. Here we were, a rather large group of gay boys and we had yet to really breach the subject of being gay, sex, and all the fixings of what we all secretly wanted to be this joint to be: a big, gay

mixer. I turned to Changmin and asked him if it would be out of line to talk about sex, to which he grinned and said “not if *you* bring it up.” I nodded, turned to face our table once again, and with all my big, gay gusto began our table on a quest of sexual awakening.

I have learned over the years, not as an anthropologist but as a twenty-something with little shame, that the topic of sex is often the hardest to bring up, the most embarrassing, but also the topic that is to stimulate conversation and build a connection across groups of people. By laying oneself vulnerable to judgment, embarrassment, and questioning, one is also stripping off any of those layers that prevent one from fully engaging other people in conversation. This is not to say that we should all discuss our sex lives with our professors, the bus driver, or the Dean of Admissions—instead, by piling up our “dirty laundry” we are building intimacy among groups of people. In short, we are exposing ourselves in order to share with others our (supposedly) most secretive aspects of our personal lives, our sex life, by way of building a network of intimacy and trust with others. This is how Changmin and I became such close friends, through our discussion of sex. Why not try such a method on this group of shy and embarrassed gay boys?

I began rather calmly, showing enthusiasm but not to the point of scaring them; I did not want to come across as the perverted foreigner but rather the cool social bee. The first questions thrown to the group, which we would go around and answer, had to do with our “[ideal] types (*isanghyōng*).” Each seemed to give a similar answer: “a good natured (*ch’akhada*) guy.” I realized I had to be more direct with my questions, as the more indirect, subtle questions received the usual subtle answers. “So, are you a top or a bottom?” I then asked, causing many of them to blush and smile as I could hear the faint laughter of Changmin next to me. Not surprisingly,

many were still virgins, which would have made the topic of sex either hard to discuss or boring, so I ordered more alcohol and used that as a way to appropriately couple my topic of choice.

Our group eventually began to loosen up and more members from Come Together and the other university arrived, causing us to shift seats from time to time to talk to different members. Kibum had come by, rather drunk by this point, to inform me that there was a Korean American studying abroad at the other school and had just showed up and was interested in talking to me. The Korean American eventually came by, followed by one of his friends who looked like he belonged in middle school but in fact was my age and not a student. I admit, I am a judgmental person, and though I practice anthropology, I am still human and still allowed my character traits as it makes for more realistic, and honest, ethnography. When the Korean American came over to my seat, his black skinny jeans leaving nothing to the imagination, I remember thinking he was attractive, but the kind of boy that liked to dance, liked to be the center of attention, and liked sex. Though I had no problem with any of those things, as Changmin would explain it, there is a difference between enjoying (lots) of sex in the privacy of one's home and soliciting sex in public. Sitting comfortably in my armchair today, I do not mind either, but I realize that the narcissism attached to the latter had always deterred me from associating with those individuals. It was his fast talking, the way he had to show off that he spoke fluent English to the foreigner in front of his friends and my friends; it was his perfectly done hair that complemented his perfectly fitting black outfit and shoes; it was the fact that he kept his cell phone in his hand the entire time, asking for my number even though I knew from the start I would never hear from him; it was the introduction of his middle school-looking friend who looked bored to be there but still managed a nod in my direction as if to present an air of superiority.

But I had my own air of superiority and was presented as my friends' prize-winning dog at the Westminster Kennel Club dog show. From the first meeting in the early months of 2009 until I left Korea in the summer of 2010, the members of Come Together continued to struggle with my position in the club because they never had a foreigner join the club and stay active in the club. Other foreigners that "joined," Jaejoong explained, hardly ever attended meetings or gatherings and only joined to find sex. I joined to make friends, and having been able to communicate with members I was in a precarious position that resided somewhere in between full-fledged membership and outside observer. It was awkward, for all of us, but for the most part we ignored the awkwardness that came with internally debating my role and rather treated each other as friends—some were friendlier with me than others. And those I was especially friendly with were navigating their own voyage of becoming—Kibum, Donghae, and Yoochun were also new members and had to overcome their initial awkwardness (though mine perhaps never dissipated). Jaejoong was the only member already fully assimilated into the club that treated me like everyone else, but even our relationship was not nearly as close as my relationship with Changmin. Changmin always bucked against ever fully belonging to Come Together, providing the two of us a similar in-between role. In my awkwardness I made mistakes along the way, but I was able to talk about those mistakes with Changmin, if only because he made rather similar mistakes himself.

### **On Belonging**

When I joined Come Together I encountered a number of obstacles. Even though I was gay, I knew that the members would immediately call my ethnicity, language ability, and cultural knowledge into question. They had acknowledged that they expected me, a white American, to

speak very little Korean and know very little about Korea; but when I did begin interacting with them they all verbalized that not only was my Korean exceptional (I still believing otherwise) but that my knowledge about Korea was impressive. Yet it was only following our MT and my ceremonious enculturation into the group that their treatment of me, including how they spoke and what they said, began to mirror what they would say and how they would say it to other members (though there were no doubt exceptions, particularly with certain members). They considered me part of the club and part of their lives.

My enculturation was not solely due to my attraction towards men. In reality, my interaction with each member was based on a number of different aspects of my dividuality, including my age, the type of men I am attracted to, past relationships, my taste in music, my sense of humor, my connection with my family, my interest in traditional Korean history and culture, and so on. The obvious observation is that this comes as no surprise simply because we all must socialize in such a way that is predicated not on one attribute but several. Still, I would say that my homosexuality as a complex identity, moving part in my dividual assemblage, was exactly what solidified these relationships. This was not some universal, precultural homosexuality we shared, rather, in a similar way to all other members', my habitus was tuned rather specifically to a gay Korean habitus because this was where I was learning what homosexuality was concretely.

The ideologies, beliefs, and even "theoretical" knowledge I knew about homosexuality was contextualized within America, but my practical, relational, and one-on-one knowledge of homosexuality was shaped by what I came in contact with in Korea. Rather than claim a global/local divide, where the difference between my identity as American and their identity as Korean was what facilitated our interaction, here I highlight that it was my age, or even my stage in life as a young graduate student in his early twenties trying to figure out his own sexuality, that

greatly shaped our interactions. At the same time, the global/ local or America/ Korea divide entered our relationships in terms of the culturally specific perceptions we had regarding each other and the eventual solace and even advice I was asked for. I am a gay cultural “halfie” because my experience in Korea gave rise to new interpretive modalities of homosexuality spanning geographic locales that would often challenge my American ideologies, ideologies that are also continuously changing in the United States as well. This is not to say that I will forever be *stuck* in an American situation with a Korean habitus of sexuality—or vice versa as both could be conceived as situation and habitus—but rather I am able to continuously transition from one culturally specific situation to another and feel partially at home *and* foreign in both.

It was obvious to all members, and to myself, that I was unlike all the other members because of my particular “expertise.” Though the members were familiar to a certain extent with American Culture, American Homosexuality, and even American Popular Culture (all capitalized and in their respective singular forms), as many of them pointed out, I did not fit their pre-conceived mold of American or gay. They therefore used me as a way to access the multiplicity of culture, homosexuality, and popular culture. Changmin would talk with me about the television show “Will & Grace” and asked quite candidly, “do all gay men have crazy female best friends?” Yet this cultural flow is not a unilateral process, as I myself would ask members about Korean gay movies I had seen, questions of homoeroticism in popular music, and new television shows that featured a gay character. However, regardless of how inter-culturally adept we were prior to my membership, my presence acted as that cultural reference, the person they could talk to about these questions they had. Through our relationship, both the members and I experienced the variability of gayness and the fluidity of our own identities and dividuality; the focus

became not our cultural biases but our cultural knowledge, and for me my supposed “global” knowledge.

In this way a new position was carved out within the confines of the club and the lives of these members for me. What began as a cultural exchange in gay cultures transitioned into my interpellation as someone simultaneously both inside the club and to some extent Korean cultural knowledge and outside Korean structures (such as family obligations). As such, members would come to me with personal problems they had with school, their relationships, other members in the club, or the club as a whole. They would gossip with me and expect me to gossip as well; I would need to respond with honest and “informed” answers. By being simultaneously inside and outside, the cultural “halfie,” I provided a new perspective of which they may have been aware but which they could never explore because they had had no one to interact with. My presence, my position, provided them the power to explore new avenues of thought, not because my views were radically new or different—“global cultural flow” has nearly eliminated the notion of bounded, uninformed cultural systems—but rather because I was that physical point of reference at which this conversation could take place.

To put it otherwise, my participation and the manner in which I participated caused the members to realize their own differences and also similarities. We called attention to our own dividuality, repositioning and resituating our selves vis-à-vis one another. For instance, my indifferent relationship with my own family—I never called them and hardly emailed them while in South Korea—was perplexing to the members because of the importance family played in their lives. This is when I began to question the members as to the role family plays in their lives. As most of the members are closeted, it seemed difficult to me for them to juggle both a non-normative sexuality and an at times hyper-heteronormative family and filial duty. The as-

sumptions we had made about each other, that I as an American lived an out-and-proud gay life with a supportive family and they as closeted South Koreans lived under a heavy burden of marrying and procreating to carry on the family line, were not entirely accurate. I had my own family troubles and my own problems coping with my sexuality and experiencing it, much in the way many of the members have done, but there were some members that claimed to have happy and normal lives, being both gay and sons.

We anthropologists are not self-contained individuals, but dispersed individuals with narratives that represent our multiple identities and expressions of experience. New questions thus emerge: How do our informants change in our presence? How does this resituate our initial observations and theoretical hunches? What tacit implications can be deduced from not only our observations but also our interactions (à la Kondo)? When we ask these questions, the result is a correlative recontextualization, where the anthropologist and the informants can be seen as texts in motion and their interaction as propelling them in different directions from whence they started. For gay anthropologists, the advantage of exploring these questions is that we recognize that the space of encounter is shared with our informants, which further de-essentializes a gay identity and illustrates that both sides of that proverbial fence are not predetermined but in a state of flux. The form this takes throughout this thesis is at times subtle—a description of the confusion on my face, questions for clarification, and even laughter—while at other times I replicate my subjectivity much in the same way I do in this chapter—I argue with friends, I judge friends, and I develop feelings for friends. Chapter Five will revisit my blatant subjectivity, but it is safe to say that throughout this thesis the reader will hardly ever be confused with where I stand vis-à-vis my friends, their stories, and the discourses that surround us.



## Coda

When we were leaving the karaoke room, Jun said that the following day some of the members would be having lunch together, and he wasn't sure if he was going but that I should go and meet them. I had thought that if Jun was there then I could be properly introduced to the other members, but Friday morning he texted me that he was sick and would not be there but that I should still go and gave me number of the club president. The fear and anxiety from the previous night returned and the fantasy of my sexuality was turning into a reality. Do I embrace it and meet them, or do I cower in the corner and shield myself from judgment and pain? I decided to jump right into the water and, after a rather confusing walk around campus trying to find the cafeteria as I had only been on the central campus a handful of times (our graduate school is in a building about a half mile walk to the east of the center of campus), I made it to the steps of the student union and saw a member standing there waiting. He also spoke English and looked to be older, introducing himself and ushering me inside to the table of about eight members. They all looked at me, smiled and collectively said hello as I replied in kind. I sat next down to this member who spoke English and across from a boy who would later be introduced to me as Kibum—young, bright-eyed, dark complexion, and full of energy. I thought to myself that he was cute and that the other members at the table looked nothing like Jun, but they also looked nothing like each other. There was an effeminate member, Taemin, who I would later learn had had a sexual fling with Changmin when Changmin first joined (“He is so thin that when I was fucking him I could hear my pelvis hit his bone”), sitting to the left of the new member who ushered me inside, and a quiet member with a rather boyish face, Jonghyun, who I later learned was Taemin's boyfriend, was sitting across from him. There were some other members, but these were the ones that left an impression in my mind because they were the ones who engaged in conversation with me.

I was so nervous that I lost my appetite, opting only for some bread and juice as opposed to an actual meal. Everyone else seemed so comfortable around each other that I felt as if I were invading their sovereignty, their intimacy—would it always feel like this? Eventually they began talking to me, first Kibum with his energy and smiles asked me simple questions about living in America, moving to Korea, my major and all those preliminary questions one must ask before the more meaty questions can be posed. Taemin was the first to ask a more personal question, and all the others at the table turned their gaze towards me, some I vividly remember with striking curiosity on their face, though I could not recall their name for the life of me: “When did you know?” With all eyes on me and a rather shocking surge of curiosity from the members, I wondered just who these members were and why something, at least to me, as banal as when I knew I was gay garnered so much attention. “Middle school, we had physical education class and had to change in front of other boys,” I replied. They seemed shocked that I knew so early on, but then I began to realize that their curiosity and attention was not on simply me being gay but that I was American and gay, and on top of that, I could talk to them in Korean. For some of them, they had never even met a foreigner, let alone had a conversation with one in Korean. I did not fit into one of their boxes; I defied categorical assignment because I myself was, at the time, coming to terms with my own sexuality and how best to approach these members. I wasn’t an anthropologist or academic, I was a scared, lost, confused gay boy in search of support and friendship. I was one of them, whether they always knew it or not.

## 2. HISTORIES OF SECRETS: THE BIG GAY ELEPHANT IN THE ROOM

*If human interaction is conditioned by the ability to speak, it is shaped by the ability to keep silent.* Georg Simmel (1908 [2009]: 340)

I sat back in the hard wooden chair at our lunch table, completely dumbfounded by what Yoochun had just told me. My mouth was open a bit, I could surmise that much, but I managed only to stare blankly at my younger Korean friend's face, his eyes downcast only slightly. His hands were gently clasped and placed firmly in his lap as he continued his story this particular Saturday afternoon in the summer of 2011. "She said she went to the temple to beg for forgiveness after she did it, both times, from the Buddha," Yoochun explained. His mother apparently had been pregnant twice after his older sister and before Yoochun was born. Both fetuses were girls. She aborted both when she found out. Among all the words thrown at each other, this was what she had ended with after Yoochun had told his mother that he was gay at the age of 18. Though Yoochun did not say it directly, it was quite clear that she intended to use this as a method to guilt her *only* son into being straight, into being "normal." Not even his father knew she had aborted two female fetuses; only Yoochun knew. And only his mother knew Yoochun was gay, besides his gay friends, that is. As I sat there, listening to this story, I had to wonder just what would possess a mother to tell her own son such an intimate detail as a way to implicitly ask, "How dare you betray this family after I killed two daughters to bring you life?" I cried for the first time since I had left Korea in the summer of 2010, the first time ever while talking to my gay friends.

"You know he came out to his mom, right?" Changmin asked. We were sitting in a café at school one spring day in 2009 after lunch, talking aimlessly before he had class and I had to get back to my desk in the admissions office. "Really?" I asked back, utterly shocked that Yoochun had actually told someone, let alone his mother, that he was gay. Out of all the guys I met

at Come Together, he was the shyest and I imagined the least likely to ever come out to his parents. By that time Yoochun and I were close enough that we would text each other and talk when we saw each other at lunch or on the weekend. But as I sat in the café, an Iced Americano in front of me, I was surprised that Yoochun never mentioned he was planning on coming out nor did he tell me afterwards. When I finally saw Yoochun a few days later I knew immediately that his coming out did not go well, the somber expression on his face, slower than usual stride, and lackluster “*annyōng* (hey)” all clear indications his mother had not taken the news well. “I didn’t plan it,” Yoochun admitted as we took our seats across from each other at the lunch table on campus, “It just happened.” This explained why he had never discussed it before hand, because he had no inclination he would tell his mother.

Now that they had come out, did Yoochun and Changmin all of a sudden feel empowered (be it socially or economically), in an Altman-esque manner, destined to take proverbial arms against a dictatorial patriarchal regime bent on making their lives a living hell? Were these two now bound together as eternal brothers in a fight against the injustice levied against them and their “kind” as *koemul* (monsters)? Did these two now feel some form of connection, perhaps spiritually, with gay men at a pride rally in Atlanta, New York City, Tokyo, and Toronto? Conceptualizing coming out as a form of liberation assumes, as Denis Altman (2001) posits, that birds of a feather flock together—cross-cultural gays and lesbians have more in common than a group of Koreans. This is rather problematic, as others have also noted (e.g., Rofel 1999, Sinnott 2004, Puri 2008), because not only does this claim posit essentialized “global” and “local” categories, but also the general argument of a global gay paradigm ignores the historical context and development of homosexuality in Korea. “Coming out” in Korea is understood as telling someone that he or she is gay, but my friends and the members of Come Together use the English

phrase (“coming out”) when they talk about it. However, this chapter and Chapter Three will illustrate that coming out clearly means something else, on the level of practice, than the American meaning.

Yet what I find striking about the historical context and development of homosexuality in South Korea is the way its secrecy mirrors Yoochun’s “coming out” narrative. Silence prevails in much of the historical backdrop of homosexuality, whereby non-normative sexualities (in our case homosexuality) are either hidden or simply not claimed by anyone. The difference between an act and an identity comes center stage yet again, but Yoochun’s narrative nuances this distinction. The traditional liberal narrative assumes that once act and identity merge (i.e., men having sex with men identifying as gay), the newly christened individual debuts as an out-and-proud homosexual (see Altman 2001, Herdt 1997). While Yoochun came out to his mother, the entire matter was (and continues to be) treated as a secret (*pimil*); his mother told no one and Yoochun is also to return the favor in kind, with both his secret and his mother’s. The silence Yoochun embodied prior to coming out still lingers, only now the silence is thicker with the blood and tears of family obligation, a notion I shall take up in the next two chapters.

Yoochun is not the only friend of mine who has come out, as both Changmin and Donghae told their mothers that they are gay. Similar to Yoochun’s narrative, those told by Changmin and Donghae replicate the notion of secrecy and secret telling. The telling and keeping of secrets works at two levels: 1) there are the secrets individual friends keep from their families but share with each other that pertain to their own sexualities, and 2) histories and practices are contingent on secrets—language, for instance, is used in such a way to hide in plain sight, and online communities provide the added benefit of anonymity. I will therefore tell our personal stories about being gay in South Korea by first providing a brief history of homosexual-

ity and Come Together since the 1990s to juxtapose with the current incarnations of both—the rhetoric and practice has changed, but the power of the secret still seems to remain. Following these histories I will illustrate the consumption of “gay” through online communities, including the language used to describe the different types of guys that are “consumed”. Before revisiting the concept of “coming out” at the end, I will take a step back and observe the inequalities embedded in both the histories and consumption of “gay” by focusing on the uneven relationship between older members and younger members and also different generations of gays and lesbians. My goal is to move away from thinking of a single Korean gay and lesbian community and instead envision multiple pockets of overlapping, contrasting, and contested queers.

### **Contextual Obligations**

It was a Saturday in December 2009 as I walked from my one-room apartment to the front gate of Yonsei University, passing by the College of Medicine, my place of work, on the way. I distinctly remember the rather harsh chill in the air as I hugged my body close with my leather jacket; even noontime seemed unforgiving to the cold weather. In the distance I saw Kibum, waving his arm in the air with a smile plastered on his face. He had yet to be elected president of Come Together, which would happen the following January, and so he was simply a member with “concerns” when we sat down to a hot cup of coffee in one of the many Starbucks sprinkled downtown. We had come from lunch in Myeongdong, Kibum having visited the extremely busy posh shopping district (and tourist attraction) only once before; having lived in Seoul nearly a year he hardly found the time to go elsewhere than his usual places around campus. I suggested Myeongdong for food, but also for the experience of something busy and noisy, similar to nights in Shinchon but different given the diversity in patrons and shops.

Over coffee he began to open up regarding the upcoming presidential elections for Come Together and the direction he saw the club heading. Kibum admitted that there is strong “politics of popularity” involved in Come Together and felt that some members were not keenly fond of him because he felt the club was heading in the wrong direction. He stated that rather than see the club push forward as a social networking “party club” that always “goes to the same Chinese restaurant and bar in Shinchon,” he wanted to transform Come Together into a “gay culture (*itchok munhwa*)” activity and activism group. In essence, he wanted to return Come Together to where it all began for the club, return it to a safe-haven for gays and lesbians while simultaneously using its (then) fifteen year history and staying power as an anchor to help change perception of gays and lesbians, if only at the university level. His resolution was to have our mutually good friend Siwon win the election so that way Kibum could influence Siwon “behind the scenes.”

If Kibum wished to return Come Together to the way it was before, then what was it about the past incarnation of the group that appealed so much to Kibum? A history of Come Together is inevitably a history of homosexuality in South Korea as the club was the first university group created for the explicit purpose of serving as a student activist organization for gays and lesbians (Seo 2001). However, little has been written on homosexuality, homoeroticism, or same-sex love/sex in Korea in any academic discipline, let alone anthropology. Dong-Jin Seo (2001), Youngshik Bong (2009), and Huso Yi (1997-2001) provide helpful chronologies and analyses of homosexuality as a category in South Korea, and given that I shall only elucidate a few key points that foreground a more significant discussion of neoliberalism in Chapter Three. In all three accounts, each author takes an approach similar to John D’Emilio’s (1993) argument in that they argue that with the rise of late capitalism in Korea, coupled with the democratization

of the country in 1987, the ability for Korean men (and women to a certain extent) to appropriate a homosexual identity became possible as capitalism and democracy equated to individual, progressive freedom.

In the early 1990s, several gay and lesbian organizations were created in Korea and attached themselves to discourses of gay rights (Seo 2001). As Yi (2003) astutely notes, the generation before, particularly those referred to as the 3-6-8 (currently in their 30s, born in the 60s, and went to college in the 80s), yearned for democracy and so their vehicle of change was built on “liberation (*haebang*)” while those in the early to mid 1990s advocated for “diversity and difference” (see S. Kim 2007, Lee 2006, Lee 2007). In the 1990s, though, the introduction of AIDS into the Korean biomedical paradigm changed the face of non-normative sexualities as the first comprehensive public discourse of homosexuality unveiled a rather unwelcomed (yet some may argue inevitable) connection between AIDS and homosexuality (Shin 2009: 46). To respond to this connection, the first “official” gay and lesbian human rights organization, *Chodonghwoi*, was established in 1993 to combat the rhetoric of the AIDS “crisis,” along with challenging laws that criminalized “homosexuality and safe sex education for lesbians and gay men” (Shin 2009: 46). Yet the politics from within the organization, primarily between lesbians and gay men, caused the dismantling of *Chodonghwoi* into two separate organizations: *Chingusai*, a human rights organization claiming to be “a friendship group based on a dignified relationship between homosexual [men]” (Seo 2001: 72), and *KiriKiri*, the lesbian counterpart organization (Shin 2009: 46).

As these two human rights organizations took hold, the establishment of university student organizations dedicated to the issues gays and lesbians faced gained popularity. Come Together was the first such organization, founded in 1995, and stood as the first student organiza-



tion that sought after the “diversity and difference” Yi (2003) proclaimed. The initial members of Come Together were ridiculed and often physically assaulted because the club was a way for them to publically declare, amidst the silence of the time, their secret sexuality and affirm that they, too, were of equal standing with everyone else (Yi 2003). In the fall of 1995, Yi (2003), one of the founders of Come Together, had organized the first “Sexual Politics Festival” on the Yonsei University campus only to have a group of Christians encircle their kiosks with large red crosses and publicly pray for their salvation. The resulting student council meeting, held to address this tension, ended with one of the Christian student group leaders performing a public exorcism on one of the leaders of Come Together. Yonsei University, a Christian university, was caught in the middle of this movement, battleground for the birth of “the first social movement through which homosexuals could effect changes in their lives” (Seo 2001: 71).

However, Come Together, and the later incarnations of Seoul National University and Korea University, has called into question the effectiveness of these organizations all together.<sup>14</sup> As Seo (2001: 74), one of the founders of Come Together, notes, “the university homosexual groups that formed in the wake of Yonsei University’s Come Together and Seoul National’s *Maum003* and the human rights organizations which these inspired, such as *Chingusai* and *Kiri-Kiri*, have been unable to achieve any tangible, practical results.” Seo (2001) illustrates and is critical of the fact that many of these groups and organizations directly borrow rhetoric from American organizations that promote gay rights and acceptance. The emergence of these groups mirrors the introduction to Korea foundational academic pieces on sexuality in college classrooms, including Jeffery Weeks’ (1994[1986]) seminal work *Sexuality* and Michel Foucault’s

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<sup>14</sup> Let me note that Seoul National University is ranked and considered the best university in Korea, Yonsei University and Korea University ranked in the number two and three spots, respectively. Therefore, we should also keep in mind that there is a certain form of cultural and symbolic capital already present in any group that emerges from these universities.

(1990[1976]) collection *The History of Sexuality* (Shin 2009: 46). Seo (2001: 74) suggests that these organizations are merely “groping around in the dark” for something tangible to hang their identities on.

La Young Shin (2009: 47) states that Seo does not simply consider the appropriation explained above as “westernization,” but rather “considering historical contexts, he says, it is not always appropriate to apply the Western terms of gay, transgender and bisexual to the people who have same-sex intimate relations in Korea.” Yet Seo states that “the [Western] terms of homosexuality helped to *recognize* and *name* same-sex practices in Korea, which have existed but so vague and *wanted to be named* as identity” (Seo quoted in Shin 2009: 47, my emphasis). As problematic as Seo finds this supposed “westernization,” he comes eerily close to saying that homosexuality as an identity exists in every culture but we must examine how such homosexual behavior is acknowledged in the self. However, I argue that though there are transnational intersections and influences, the Korean usage of these categories—and by extension the Korean language that explains, describes, hails, and claims these categories—does not easily map onto the Western categories.<sup>15</sup> Perhaps the greatest semantic complication is that while Korean does have a word for “sexuality (*sŏngjŏk ch’wihyang*),” from all my interviews and experiences it is impossible to say if there is a linguistic difference between an act and identity—if having sex with men is different then “sexuality.”<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup>Megan Sinnott (2004) also notes the import of words such as “lesbian,” “gay” and even “transgender” into Thailand and how there was not only difficulty but contestation with which term accurately describes which identity (be it *tom* or *kathoey*). Lisa Rofel (2007: 87) makes a similar claim in China whereby “the emergence of gay identities and practices...is tied, in certain critical respects, to transnational networks of lesbians and gay men.” This is not to say that all practices are homogenous or that there is not some influence from transnational (albeit Western) practices and identities. Instead, we must not blanket a culture or practice with such constraining terminology and ideology—let the quirks, messiness, contradictions and tension be just that.

<sup>16</sup>There are a few ways to say “sexuality” in Korean, and often “sexuality” is synonymous with “sexual orientation,” at least in everyday usage. This is not to say that men (and women) will not intentionally use vague language to avoid such concrete identity markers. When Donghae came out to his mother he said that he “liked men, not women.”

There are terms that more readily, and less vaguely, identify or interpellate one as a “homosexual.” *Dongsǒngaeja* is the first such word, meaning “homosexual” but usually used in formal and academic settings (*dongsǒngae* refers to homosexuality; the *ja* refers to the person). When Taesub came out to his mother, he called himself *dongsǒngaeja*, because it is commonly understood as “homosexual” even if it is not the most common expression used. The more common term used, especially among gays and lesbians, is *iban*, combining two Chinese characters to mean “difference” (Shin 2009: 7).<sup>17</sup> I should note with regards to the use of *iban* that the same word already existed in Korean, though it uses two different Chinese characters (while still spelled the same in Korean) and means “estrangement, desertion, alienation, defection (from a person), disaffection” (Naver English Dictionary 2011). In this regard, *iban* is usually contrasted to *ilban*, which means “general, usual, average, ordinary, common” (ibid). Though the Chinese characters are different, I cannot help but wonder about the connection between the gay and lesbian use of *iban* and the general public’s use of the word. For Korean gays and lesbians, they do posit a contrast between *iban* and *ilban*, where *iban* means “homosexual” and *ilban* implies “heterosexuality” (Shin 2009).

In similar fashion, the most commonly used word I came across with my friends and members of Come Together is *itchok*, which literally translates to “this way.” This word is usually used while giving directions, such as “the bank is this way,” yet it is also used to refer to “we” or “this” in reference to right next to you (“this is my brother”). My friends, members of Come Together, and I used it to refer to gays and lesbians because they are “this way” or rather “our way.” The benefit of this word, which I found out several times first hand, is that other clubs, groups, and even organizations will use this word to refer to their group so we could easily

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<sup>17</sup> Shin (2009: 7) notes that gay and lesbian activists in the mid 1990s coined this term to refer to themselves in the “‘Western’ sense,” which assume references the western/ American rhetoric borrowed by Korean activists during this time and an attempt to adopt an equivalent to “gay” or even “queer.”

talk about our “gay friends (*itchok chi'in'gu*)” or even test the waters and ask if someone we are interested in is “this way” (if they know what we mean, then we can assume that he or she is), without anyone knowing what exactly we are talking about. *Itchok* provides the freedom to talk about gays and lesbians by allowing users to hide in plain sight.

Perhaps I digress into semantics, but the genealogy of the language of “gay” in Korea illustrates the transformation of “gay” as a political category to “this way” as a secret direction or orientation of being. While all the members of Come Together have identified as *iban*, the historical meaning of this words built on the backs of the queers that came before them in Come Together, is lost to all but Kibum. He wants to return Come Together to a period when the group’s emphasis was activism and awareness, when the imagined dichotomy of *iban* was political and not just secretive. Kibum wanted to bring members to queer film festivals in Seoul, have a more active role in the Pride Parade and Festival, and simply do things with members that were more “cultural” and moved away from eating and drinking, such as museums, movies, and festivals. Kibum wanted to redefine Come Together. He spoke with much passion, his face lighting up as he used his hands to accentuate points he was making, and agreed with me that at times one needs to take small steps as a prelude to more drastic changes; though the small steps would make the impact of the change less drastic as such change would take place over a prolonged period of time. Both Kibum and I noted that at the heart of this change, or at the center of his contention with Come Together, is a lack of camaraderie and community outside of eating and drinking together. I told him that this would be the most difficult challenge for him, especially after he won the Come Together presidential election in January 2010: Changing the dynamics of how people approach and perceive Come Together, and essentially the other members, may be important but in no way easy.

### Consuming the “Gay” in Secret

As more attention was drawn to the organizations outlined above, primarily by those identifying as gay or lesbian, more avenues arose that connected these gays and lesbians together, primarily through online communities. Yet given the influx of neoliberal policies and conservative family rhetoric beginning in 1997 (as I shall elaborate more thoroughly in Chapter Three), whatever public visibility existed for these organizations and groups disappeared as more gays and lesbians congregated online. Beginning in the 2000s, the use of these online communities increased as it afforded gays and lesbians anonymity and the ability to congregate and “be gay” without ever revealing their real name—they gathered in secret unbeknownst to others, especially their parents. Shin (2009) discusses the advent of Internet communities dedicated to lesbian and gay activities, such as discussions of being gay and meeting men and women online to later meet offline. I contend that the most popular manner in which gay Korean men meet other gay Korean men for sex is online through any number of websites and online communities dedicated to “chatting” and “meeting.” Today, some of these sites still provides users with some sense of anonymity to protect their secret, though if one wants to join the most popular communities (or most online communities in Korea) one must provide their legal name and Korean resident identification number, which must be validated by the Seoul Credit Rating and Information (SCI) Inc. (Choi 2003: 175).<sup>18</sup> This system is a technology of *biopower*, whereby the state (as these websites must verify the information with a government database) exerts regulation over populations by 1) recording them and categorizing them, and 2) creating the construct of “population” based on the recording information. While I did raise this issue with all my friends, none seemed

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<sup>18</sup> Part of this policy, at least for the gay and lesbian websites, is to “protect” those under the age of 18 (see Shin 2009), though those under the age of 18 can easily borrow their older friends’ information to bypass the system as I did.

bothered by the mandatory registration procedure.<sup>19</sup> They have all, in a sense, been made docile by these regimes of knowledge, so much so that the force of relations are made invisible to them but utterly visible to me (Foucault 1977). They are embodying the norms of a patriarchal structure that could potentially “out” them in order to engage in non-normative sexual behavior.

Changmin introduced me to the major online communities for “meeting” and “chatting,” namely Ivan City (pronounced in Korean *iban shit'i*, a play on the word *iban* which implies gay) and a few Daum and Naver “cafes,” or dedicated communities that one must petition to join. Ivan City, Changmin lamented, is purely used for meeting people for sex (at least that is how he has always used it and how he introduced it to me), while the Daum and Naver cafes were more specialized for certain tastes, types, and intentions. The warning Changmin bestowed upon me when he gave me his ID and password still lingers: “The guys on Ivan City mostly want sex, and the guys on Daum can go either way. But all of them are fucked up.” His meaning, based on experience, I might add, is that the users on these communities may say one thing at one moment but in person actually be entirely different—not necessarily unique to Korean online communities, but it does perturb Changmin nonetheless. Yoochun made a similar, yet not as brash, comment; he referred to the sites as “addictive, even though I know I should stop [going on them].”

In the foreground to the advent of online communities, even the sexing of the Internet, is what Cho (2003) argues to be the commodification of South Korean gays and lesbians and the creation of dedicated spaces for the hyper-consumption of gay and lesbian lifestyles, such as bars, dance clubs, drag shows, and bathhouses. While much of the human rights rhetoric seemed to dissipate, or simply go underground, a deluge of gay bars, clubs, hotels, restaurants, and bath-

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<sup>19</sup> Jaz Heejeong Choi (2003: 176) provides statistics that indicate users of Cyworld, the largest social networking site in Korea, are aware of this opaque line between anonymity and actual identification but are not concerned and prefer to think of the “independent and liberating potential of the Internet.” My friends never spoke of their fears or worries regarding confidentiality.

houses emerged. Entire streets and districts were established as dedicated hotspots for (mostly) gays and lesbians, and the catalyst for this rather dramatic change in scenery and even consumption ideology was the influx of neoliberal economic policies that ushered in with it a new perspective of the self (Cho 2003). Similar to D'Emilio's (1993) argument, Cho (2003) contends that the money that gay men were making was used in the new gay consumer market, constructing new forms of identity—though he is quick not to separate them from the family's identity (see Cho 2009).

A significant portion of Kibum's distaste for Come Together revolves around the emphasis on consuming sex, both in the physical locations mentioned in the introduction and online. The shift from an activist group to one used for what Kibum feels to be superficial socialization has diminished the "gay and lesbian cause" that used to lie at the helm of Come Together to mere party favors. Cho (2003) notices this shift on a wider scale among many gay and lesbian organizations in Korea, and attributes the simultaneous reduction in rights rhetoric and the influx of gay consumption spaces to the 1997 Asian Crisis and the neoliberal restructuring of Korea. In this context, homosexuality was blamed for the economic and social problems Korea was suffering as it was a "foreign disease" and not indigenous to Korea, similar rhetoric to the Asian Crisis and IMF restructuring (Song 2006). Shin (2009: 54) comprehensively outlines the public discourse of homosexuality since 1997, with particular attention to adolescents, and states that it has only been recently that homosexuality entered into existence in the legal system. Yet as Shin (2009) also notes, legality hardly outweighed the juridico-political rhetoric blatantly plastered in newspapers, magazines, television, and in conferences that sought to blame homosexuals *for* something. On September 29<sup>th</sup>, 2010, a self-proclaimed union of mothers took out a full-page ad in the South Korean newspaper *Chosun Journal*, declaring that "If my son becomes gay and dies

from AIDS after watching *Life is Beautiful*, SBS must take responsibility” (VITALSIGN 2010). Much of the blame shifts to public displays of homosexuality, yet the secret, underground expressions and spaces are either so well hidden that the general public is unaware (which is not as hard to believe as one may think), or public discourse has an out of sight, out of mind policy.

While some members of Come Together frequent the gay bars, clubs and bathhouses, most of the members I knew, and all of my friends, avoid these spaces; there is a difference between expressing one’s secret online and expressing one’s secret in physical space, the secret in this case insinuating sex. These physical and virtual spaces are both historically situated and predicated on invisibility—the general public is blissfully unaware of these spaces, or simply chooses to ignore them. Every time I mentioned to Changmin that he should go to Itaewon or Jongro to meet guys, after what usually began as a lengthy diatribe of his annoyance with the boys he meets online, he says that it seemed too much like “whoring” (his English use, not mine). The idea of physically putting oneself in a space where one is expected to make a conscious effort to meet a guy, talk to him, and find a way to insinuate sex is too revealing for Changmin, and for most of my friends. “How is that different than meeting a guy online?” I inquired, a rather large grin plastered on my face. “Less effort,” he responded, his own grin evident. Yet his disgust for these physical gay consumption spaces suggests that even though Changmin has “come out,” he still prefers to keep his personal life a secret in many ways.

One might wonder is part of the distaste for bars, clubs and bathhouses stems from the economic background of my friends; D’Emilio (1993) might contend that they, college students, simply do not have the money to spend on such “gay luxuries.” Yet all of my friends, and really the majority of the members in Come Together, come from rather economically stable families. Yonsei University is not only one of the best schools in Korea; it is also one of the most expen-



sive. Thus not only would it take a good amount of wealth to prepare entrance to this school—all of my friends, except for Changmin, told of how they would spend countless hours at private institutes for English and math—but wealth is also needed to pay one's tuition, room and board (especially for those not from Seoul). For instance, Changmin's mother is an interior designer and his father is an architect and they pay for all of Changmin's expenses: tuition, food, apartment, clothes, and all the other luxuries he wants. However, many of the members of Come Together also work as a way to accumulate spending money—Yoochun, Donghae, and Jaejoong all tutor middle school and high school students in a variety of subjects. Therefore, it is unclear if economic status or even just the accumulation of wealth really does affect my friends' distaste of bars, clubs and bathhouses, as there are those members who, like Changmin, depend on their well-off parents to support them and do frequent bars and clubs, just as there are those who work part-time and use that money to go to bars and clubs.

Come Together as physical space then becomes an interesting exception to this rule, though I would venture that not all gays and lesbians (or simply those that engage in homosexual acts) at Yonsei University are members of Come Together. Yet as an exception, Come Together provides members that physical space, offline (though it has a big presence online as well), to congregate and discuss their secrets without fear of judgment. I would be amiss not to include a caveat from Changmin who says that even if Come Together is supposed to be a safe haven for homosexuals and their secrets, and for many it is, it would be a farce to assume that members do not pass judgment. Changmin recalled early on in our friendship that when he first joined he developed feelings for three separate members and told the then Come Together president. While Changmin did eventually have a sexual relationship with two of them, the president at the time told all three about Changmin's feelings (and other members as well) without Changmin's ap-

proval or knowing. When Changmin did find out he was humiliated, only twenty at the time and still, in his words, “new to this whole thing.” He stopped going to the Come Together gatherings for about a year; he started attending meetings and gatherings around the time I joined. Even if Come Together deals in secret sharing and keeping, for some that may simply mean keeping secrets within the group as Changmin feels that the current members of Come Together are particularly apt in “whoring and gossiping.”

### *Categories of Consumption*

The advent of categories and “ideal types (*isanghyǒng*)” of gay men mirrored the rise of gay consumption and consumption spaces (Cho 2003)—new categories emerged to further interpellate gays and lesbians that may not have existed before. The different Daum and Naver online communities became more popular because gay men began identifying their varied tastes (bear types, older men, younger men, certain types of sexual play, etc.). Yet certain “standards” or normative expectations existed. Over lunch at a seafood buffet New Years Day 2010, Changmin and I discussed a 20-year-old gay Korean friend of mine who was currently in a relationship with a 75 year old married man and father of two who lived in Canada. Neither family knew of the relationship, though the boyfriend kept telling my friend that he was going to get a divorce because he wanted to live with my friend. I had my own reservations about the relationship, but Changmin could not stop laughing when I told him, partly because he thought I was joking, but partly because it was all he could do from making himself sick (or so he said). He disagreed with the relationship, claiming that the older man is “stealing [my friend’s] youth” and should be the responsible one.

I had offered the possibility that perhaps my young friend has a fetish for older men, whereby he is sexually attracted and stimulated by those older than he is as opposed to Changmin's assumption that the older man is taking advantage of my younger friend. I also mentioned Kibum's preference for older men, to which Changmin said, "*Ajösssi* (unmarried man, usually older) is not *halaböji* (grandfather)." The possibility of this fetish, let alone any other deviation from what he deems "normal" or "standard," is outside of Changmin's purview. He is well aware of different fetishes but finds them difficult to comprehend. Even when I broadened the discussion to simply "types," Changmin was more ready to identify and understand different types, such as the young pretty boy, the muscular athletic guy, the standard guy, and so on, but he was still set in his own "type." As he preferred younger "boyish boys," he found it hard to understand the attraction to other types. He noted, though, that most gay guys were attracted to similar types, and so other types, such as bears and older men, were often relegated to a minority population.

This was also part of Kibum's critique of Come Together, in addition to Jaejoong's annoyance with gay online communities and the "gay community" in Korea. Though each of my friends noted the seeming obsession with [consuming] sex among gay Koreans, to the point where it is a "science" Jaejoong notes, most of them relied on these online communities to find guys and sex. The love-hate relationship that my friends have with the consumption of sex, and the online communities that give access to this new form of consumption, may seem paradoxical but in reality their use of these online spaces illustrates their simultaneous need and disgust of them. When needed, many of my friends and the members of Come Together find the online communities useful; young college students in the prime of their sexual desires are perhaps only so vigilant in their apprehension to these online communities. Yet they are all still aware of the

drawbacks: sex, not necessarily a relationship, is found on these online communities. Yoochun called them “addictive,” but he was at least aware that although he yearned for a boyfriend and a long-term relationship, his use of these online communities to find sex would do little for his overarching goal of a boyfriend. When I returned to Korea in August 2011, Changmin noted that he had not had sex in months, and hardly ever went online to “chat” with other gay guys. He said he “became tired of the same thing,” by which he meant having sex with a different guy each week. His desire for a boyfriend was sporadic; sometimes when I asked him he wanted one, other times he found it too troublesome. But he, like Yoochun, was well aware that these online communities did little to fill that potential relationship void. Jaejoong was the only friend who hardly used the online communities; he had had one sex partner (his ex-boyfriend), and that was the first time and the last time (since August 2011) he had had sex.

Yet as Jaejoong laments, he also has little self-confidence when it comes to finding guys, be it online or offline.<sup>20</sup> Yet when I began discussing this topic of types with Kibum and Donghae, both also mentioned their lack of confidence with sex and finding guys, though with both I was dumbfounded why either would worry about their appearance. When I talked with them, though, I realized that they did not fit within the “standard” types of guys: young pretty boys, standard looking guys, and tall, masculine boys. Changmin was kind enough to draw me a diagram on a Starbucks napkin, most likely thrown away with our coffee, but in essence there are three types of gay men: masculine tops, boyish bottoms, and feminine bottoms. Tops are usually taller (and older than the bottoms), Changmin stressed, while bottoms were shorter, shyer, and let the top make all the decisions. Tops and bottoms represent distinct personalities in addition to sexual positions, identities that are shared in the initial online communication. Changmin also

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<sup>20</sup> Though Jaejoong would like a boyfriend, and the topic of sex always seemed a bit strange with him (primarily because of his “inexperience,” as Changmin puts it), he always finds himself “too busy with school” to find time for anything else.

noted that those who claim to be “all” or versatile (both top and bottom) are usually just a bottom in disguise. This attitude of definitive identities predicated on sexual positions is precisely what disrupts Jaejoong, Donghae, and Kibum’s confidence. Donghae identifies as a bottom but he is also 6 foot 3; he wants a boyfriend and wants sex (though as of August 2011 he had experienced neither) but thinks no one would want to meet him because of his height and position. In reality Donghae also conforms to certain “standards” as he also prefers tall, masculine tops; he cannot escape his own contempt with the very “standards” he embodies.

### **Hierarchies**

In a sense, “being gay” in Korea entails the keeping and strategic disclosure of what are understood as secrets. Even the history of homosexuality in Korea envisions a cloak of invisibility thrown over groups of people precisely because the secrets they keep relate to their non-normative sexualities. The presentation of people, and in particular my friends and the members of Come Together, as “gay” organizes them into specific power-laden categories, as I have illustrated above. Yet embedded in these veiled or “marginal” groups are rather visible inequalities, nested normativities that hierarchize members. Jaejoong, Donghae, and Kibum’s apprehension and fear is ultimately one of being a minority within their own minority group; the homonormativity that runs rampant within the various gay and lesbian groups in Korea scares participation from others.<sup>21</sup> The “standards” that no one in particular set are what invariably constrict those who find themselves outside those standards; Kibum prefers older men but is often looked down upon by other members of Come Together for it.

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<sup>21</sup> As a side note, the 20-year-old Korean friend I mentioned earlier was also a student at Yonsei University and had heard of Come Together, but when I invited him to join he was extremely apprehensive, both to being judged by other gay men and also that his *secret* may finally escape.

Yet this inequality and unequal footing for members of Come Together speak to a larger, complicated interaction that for me began in Come Together but extended far outward to every aspect of [my] life in Korea. There are many types of relationships in Korea, between parents and children, between older brothers and younger brothers (and sisters), between teachers and students, and finally between seniors (*sŏnbae*) and juniors (*hubae*). This last relationship is replicated in many different places (and languages), for even in American academia we refer to junior scholars and senior scholars as such. The relationship of *sŏnbae-hubae* may or may not imply age but always mark rank, particularly seniors in a club or academic major versus juniors. Therefore, members in Come Together could be ranked as either *sŏnbae* or *hubae*; those in the club longer are called *sŏnbae* while new members (*shinipsaeng*) and those in the club for less time than any given *sŏnbae* are referred to by their name. For instance, as Kibum and Yoochun joined Come Together after Changmin and Jaejoong, both must refer to Changmin and Jaejoong as *sŏnbae*, while Changmin and Jaejoong simply refer to them by their names (Kibum and Yoochun). *Sŏnbae* extends past graduation, though, to former members of the club; when Jaejoong graduated he retained the title *sŏnbae* for all remaining members and any new members that might join.

Come Together is no exception in its use of these titles, as all of Korea uses them. When I witnessed the use of these titles, even though I was well aware of their meaning and contexts, I found it somewhat strange, nearly paradoxical, that Come Together would use them. For a group of gay men and lesbians that embody non-normative sexualities, it was shocking to me with all of my American cultural baggage that they still managed to engage in rather normative, even heteronormative, behavior. It was quite telling when I asked Changmin about this contradiction I saw and he shrugged it off as “normal” and “just the way things are;” for him, and for most of

my friends and Come Together members, this relationship is all too doxic, invisible to the human eye: “*it goes without saying because it comes without saying*” (Bourdieu 1977: 167, author’s emphasis).<sup>22</sup> Kibum mentioned over sushi one Tuesday night in April 2010 that he would rather call other Come Together members by their name and not by *sōnbae* or *hyōng* (older brother). Yet he also lamented that there is inherent difficulty with attempting to change it, just as there is a real problem with him simply calling members by their names.

Throwing away the *sōnbae-hubae* relationship is not necessarily the intention of any of my friends or the members of Come Together; even Kibum noted the limitations of such an act. Yoochun, for instance, felt quite similar to Kibum, especially because he was usually the youngest in any social setting with other members of Come Together and hated being treated as such. Both Yoochun and Kibum, though, found a way around such language, at least temporarily, when they talk to me. Neither of them, nor any of my friends (except Jaejoong) and the majority of members, call me *sōnbae* or *hyōng*, primarily by my urging them not to—some initially did, but most never even tried. I provide them an escape, a momentary deviancy from the normative language and relationship that embodied most of their interactions. Some found this to be positive, some did not care, but in any case my presence allowed movement outside the structure and norms. I am a disruption of the binary between a liberal, progressive identity and a conservative, filial identity. Though my friends and the members of Come Together continuously disrupt this binary by simultaneously embodying the norm of *sōnbae-hubae* while identifying as gay, or as Changmin states, “fucking your *sōnbae*,” I also disrupt this binary by providing them a loop-hole

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<sup>22</sup> Yet within doxa, Pierre Bourdieu (1977: 195) argues, lies the all-too strong possibility of symbolic violence: “because the absence of any juridical guarantee, or any coercive force, one of the few ways of ‘holding’ someone is to *keep up* a lasting asymmetrical relationship such as indebtedness; and because the only recognized, legitimate form of possession is that achieved by dispossessing oneself—i.e., obligation, gratitude, prestige, or personal loyalty.” I am not claiming that gay men and lesbians are inherently oppressed within this doxic regime and should fight for liberation.

in the norm itself: Although our relationships are predicated on Korean language, my American identity and own refusal of the *sōnbae-hubae* relationship bypasses this norm (and others).<sup>23</sup>

### *Generational Contestations*

One way in which my friends and even the members of Come Together challenge the *sōnbae-hubae* relationship, at least in theory, is their surprising dissatisfaction with the older generation of gays and lesbians. On the topic of organizations like *Chingusai* and gay and lesbian activists, Changmin was quite verbal in his distaste for them as he claimed they were “misguided” and “not legitimate.” When I pushed further as to what he meant by this, he said quite candidly, “They try to copy America” (see Seo 2001).<sup>24</sup> He went on to also claim that they do not know what gay people in Korea want or need, though Changmin was unable to specify himself what it way gays and lesbians needed or wanted (outside of sex, that is). As Changmin and I had this conversation early on in our friendship (the spring of 2009), I have pondered the possibility of a generational divide that separates the members of Come Together (college students mostly in their early 20s to mid 20s) from older gays and lesbians.

One instance of this divide is with “contract marriages,” or a legal marriage between a lesbian and a gay man to keep their sexualities secret from their families in Korea (Cho 2009).

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<sup>23</sup> During one of my first events as a new member of Come Together in March 2009, we hosted our annual *haengsa*, or “event,” where the current members organize a mixer of sorts with the graduated *sōnbae*. The evening is complete with trivia, a drag performance, dinner and drinks. That particular evening, while sitting at a table with three other new members (Kibum and Siwon among them) and three graduated *sōnbae*, the new members were obedient as ever, speaking only when spoken to, while I sat in silence, ignored the entire evening (a moment I will most definitely lament about again). My own boiling rage aside, I noticed that besides talking down to the new members, the graduated *sōnbae* asked questions that almost implied that they were sexually promiscuous, such as (and I paraphrase here) “how many guys have you hooked up with since joining the club?” “which members are your type (implying sexual type, as I discussed earlier)?” and “which one of us do you find attractive?” While we could relegate this to simple chit-chat and the beauties of making conversation, the nervousness, at times disdain, and even fear on these three new members’ faces were evidence enough for me that not only was the situation uncomfortable (for everyone except the graduated *sōnbae*), but politics were most definitely at play, and the new members could do nothing but accept it.

<sup>24</sup> Changmin also noted that these organizations are partially funded by the Korean government, and he finds it problematic that they supposedly fight for gay and lesbian rights while the government is footing the bill.



As Changmin, Yoochun and Donghae had all come out to their parents, all three found little use in the method; Kibum, who plans to come out to his family in the near future, also commented that contract marriages are problematic. In fact, Cho (2009) contends that while the partners' intention of the marriage is to subvert the norms of family obligation by embodying them in an entirely new way, they are still faced with many of the same "obstacles" or issues that heterosexual couples face, predominately with the husband's family and their push for children. Jaejoong was my only friend who thought a contract marriage could be a good solution for him, because he had no desire to come out. But while Cho (2009) focused on gays and lesbians in their thirties, I began to wonder if perhaps the disconnect that my four friends had with contract marriages echoed the sentiments Changmin shared with me earlier regarding the activist organizations.

Similar to the shift from "liberation" to "diversity and difference" that Yi (2003) posits among the early university organizations in the 1990s, I suggest that two similar shifts have taken place that mirror the neoliberal history of Korea. The gays and lesbians of the early to mid-1990s grew up during the initial transition to democracy, and so the rhetoric of liberation and emancipation from those dictatorial chains that bind was still fresh in the grass, trees, sidewalks, and buildings of the same universities that housed many of the student protestors (see Lee 2007, S. Kim 2007). The 1997 Asian Crisis brought with it new economic and social policy (which will be addressed more fully in Chapter Three), and those informants that Cho (2009) includes experienced both the pre-crisis state and the crisis state; they watched as new rhetoric on family values and homosexuality emerged. Rights discourse all but disappeared, or went underground, because the overarching national discourse blamed non-normative families (divorce) and non-normative sexualities (homosexuality) for the demise of the state (see Seo 2001, Song 2006).

Yet the homosexuals that are visible, especially those who *choose* to be visible, are the older generations that are part of the human rights groups Seo (2001) discusses and hardly ever the younger generation of gays and lesbians. Susan Talburt (2004) addresses the way dominant narratives of the adult queer community in the United States have a direct effect on the rhetoric that is presented to queer youth. The problem, she foresees, is that such a guiding force presents queer youth with only one narrative and thus one intelligibility to their queer identities: “My concern is that narratives of empowerment, haunted by their opposite of isolation, pain, and risk, may impose certain subject positions and forms of intelligibility on queer youth and exclude those who do not conform to their logic” (Talburt 2004: 32). The same no doubt holds true for Korea, but it also *should* resonate with our ethnographic treatment of gays and lesbians as to avoid homogenizing gays and lesbians across (at times) diverse generations.

### **Coming Out, Part I**

It was coming of age day, meaning Changmin was twenty, and his mother had traveled to Seoul from his hometown of Jeonju, a few hours outside the capital. They had made it through the entire meal at VIPS before both sat, coffee in front of them, when Changmin felt the sudden urge to tell her. “I have something to tell you,” he said to her and he recalled that there was a feeling of utter clarity at that moment, not fear, because he knew his mother well, and knew that though she may be initially shocked and possibly saddened, she would eventually accept him. Yoochun did not have that feeling, and his mother’s reaction indicated that she was not only shocked but also immensely displeased at this sexual revelation. “I wasn’t on planning on telling her, but it just happened.” Yoochun and Donghae made similar comments in their “coming out” stories. None

of them had planned their “coming out;” it was not intended to break apart their family or disrupt their lives, “it just happened.”

Changmin’s mother started to cry, not because she was upset with him or with herself, but because she knew her son would lead a significantly more difficult life. “She said I had to work harder and be the best at what I did because of who I am.” All he could do was sit there and watch his mother cry until she stopped. When Donghae came out to his mother, they were in the car parked outside the seminary where he was receiving his Master of Divination when he felt the need to tell her. She cried, and was immensely confused at what this meant, but Donghae explained that his mother (and later his father) cared more about their son than they did about his sexuality. The topic of sexuality is never discussed among Donghae and his parents, compared to Changmin whose mother will often ask of his relationships and his father who has been known to make innocent jokes that call attention to his sexuality (among his parents, that is). Donghae said that he told his mother “because she is important and so I should tell her first.”

I will revisit this notion of intimacy and obligation in Chapter Four, but what is interesting to note is that Changmin, Donghae and Yoochun all expressed that they did not plan their “coming out,” yet all three have different justifications for “coming out.” Yoochun’s mother noticed that he seemed more depressed than usual leading up to the eventual revelation of his secret, which Yoochun simply brushed off as the pressures of being a freshman at Yonsei University. Yet his stress only increased and his mother noticed. He figured it would be better to tell her than to continue lying about his visible stress and depression. Changmin, on the other hand, thought that it was about time he told his mother his secret, though even he is at a loss for words to pinpoint the exact reason. In essence, though each may have justifications in hindsight, all three “coming out” narratives illustrate that there was no foresight in their decision because the

decision was almost instantaneous. Though all three do admit that they had thought about coming out, all my friends and members of Come Together that I have spoken with have “thought” about it, but only these three have actually “done” it.

Coming out in Korea is a rare occurrence and public perception of homosexuality can easily be characterized as negative and at times directly detrimental (see Lim and Johnson 2001). Cho’s (2009) discussion of the rise in “contract marriages” illustrates that more and more gays and lesbians in their thirties are undertaking this option as perhaps the only option available to them given the rather stringent constraints discourses of family have placed on them within this neoliberal Korea. If, as Altman (2001) and even D’Emilio (1993) suggest, an increase in the rhetoric of individual freedom and the spread of some ubiquitous (American) gay identity yield not only a rise in the claiming of a gay identity but a solidarity that intrinsically opposes traditional forms of family and living, then why are the vast majority of Korean gays and lesbians still in the closet? This may seem particularly puzzling given that the Korean government frames the younger generation, the focus of my ethnography, as the generation of the future, connected to the world and the beacon of globalization. Yet such questions posit a rather common, but ill-placed, binary opposition between a progressive, individual identity and a traditional, constraining family (or nation/ culture). Need there be conflict? And furthermore, need there be only one, western notion of the “closet”? I say no, because the implicit question one may ask, “Why wouldn’t you come out?” is reversed in Korea: “Why would you?” The size of the closet and its meanings differ, even among my friends. Yoochun, Changmin and Donghae are thought of as exceptions by all of my friends and all members of the club, and even then they expose their secret in a very limited sense as each mother they “come out” to tells either no one (in Yoochun’s

case) or the father; not even Changmin's younger brother knows. The relationship each shares with their mothers is unique, as I will illustrate in Chapter Three.

For Altman (2001: 88), coming out is seen as a rejection of traditional family and an embrace of modern, global cultures. Granted, coming out as an identity does interpellate the self *into* a rather modern category as the Korean for "coming out" is an adoption of the English phrase, but both David Valentine (2007) and Judith Butler ([1991] 2010) question whether the identity is as stable as the category makes it appear, not to mention that the category is not uniformly the same cross-culturally. Altman's assumption that all forms of homosexuality move towards a global paradigm erases the complexity of human interaction and cultural manifestations. In the next chapter, I explore this complexity further by investigating the importance of family in the lives of my Korean friends and how their families help shape their understanding of their sexualities.

### 3. FILIAL CITIZENSHIP: MAKING NATIONAL KIN OUT OF QUEERS

*The house is an empire within an empire, but one which always remains subordinate because, even when it exhibits all the properties and all the relations which define the archetypal world, it remains an inverted reflection, a world in reverse.*

Pierre Bourdieu (1972: 153)

“So you want to be a woman?” Yoochun’s mother asked him, the two of them sitting in the living room after he had told her that he is gay. Yoochun recalled how her question illustrates that she knows very little about homosexuality as she conflates homosexuality with transgenderism, as she also asked if gay and transgender were the same thing. Even after he explained the difference Yoochun lamented that she had found it nearly impossible to grasp the difference. For her, ontologically, the two are the same thing because both reject normative male behavior and identity. Yoochun finds these to be two distinctly different categories of identification, and even tells of how when his mother asked him that question he was a bit perturbed by her categorization of him as transgendered. If homosexuality is a “marker of modernity” and a “measure of globalization” (Altman 2001: 100), then how can we conceptualize Yoochun’s mother’s misappropriation, even misdiagnosis, of her son as transgender? “She just doesn’t know any better,” Yoochun admitted, a notion Changmin also has mentioned several times. Changmin and Yoochun imply that their parents are of a different generation, one that sees and experiences the world, and Korea, in a different way than either son. Both men do subscribe to a particularly modern category of “gay” because both recognize that coming out as gay introduces an identity that they believe to be problematic within the Korean family paradigm. Yet recognizing that their gayness does set them apart from a heterosexual family paradigm while simultaneously embodying a deeply felt guilt and shame illustrates complexity to Korean gayness that Denis Altman (2001) neglects.

Yoochun's mother's misrecognition of her son's sexuality indicates the foreignness of homosexuality in popular discourse (be it the news, popular culture, or even literature) in South Korea. However, that foreignness is precisely a mechanism of modernity in Korea given that non-normative "sexualities" (which in this case include non-normative gender practices given her slippage with transgender) are demarcated as foreign-born and not indigenous to Korea. Homosexuality is invisible within a rather production-oriented family paradigm, one embedded within a neoliberal shift in South Korea in the late 1990s. Yoochun's mother's admission of her double abortion illustrates quite vividly how disruptive she finds her son's homosexuality, but she does not find it debilitating or chronic; it can be "cured." Indulging her son with her tale of abortion is an attempt to fold him back into the family, guilt him into being straight. His mother is demanding filial piety by presenting her most filial sacrifice; for the sake of the family she must produce a son, and when presented with the alternative she destroyed that option and began again.

The same neoliberal contextualizations that frame the genealogy of homosexuality in South Korea and shape Yoochun's decision to "come out" also encompass the rather intricate and situated reaction by Yoochun's mother. The complicated tango that he and his mother dance is housed within a kinship system predicated on the metaphor of blood as not only a "biogenetic substance," as David Schneider (1980) terms it, but also a "code of conduct." Yet there is an inseparability of substance and conduct that casts blood as not one or the other, but a combination "substance-code" in McKim Marriott's (1976) words. While at times "conduct alters substance" (Carsten 2001: 35), substance also influences conduct. There is a long history of blood-relations (i.e., the symbolic framework of blood) within Korean history, one that Gi-Wook Shin (2006) discusses at length and to which I defer

The complicated relationships between my friends and their families, coupled with Yoo-chun's mother's response to his "coming out," indicates that there is a reason to keep the secret of their sexuality hidden: blood. I, alongside other Korean studies scholars, argue that Korean kinship is predicated on the metaphor of blood, where one is a member of a family and a nation because one shares the blood of the father and mother. Personhood is determined not only by having the same blood but also by having the potential to share that blood with one's children—to be a social person, at least discursively, Koreans must reproduce. In one sense, this chapter is an exploration of the metaphor of blood in both filial and national discourses in South Korea—how is flesh made into filial sons and loyal citizens? Yet this chapter also attempts to complicate these discourses of nation and family by illustrating that some of my friends have "come out" to their mothers, but the relationship between sons and their mothers both reinforces and subverts this filial and national paradigm of personhood—these mothers know their sons are gay but choose to keep it secret for their sake and their sons' sake instead of casting them into the realm of the undeserving and non-persons.

Therefore, I will first begin this chapter by discussing the 1997 Asian debt crisis and its effects on the Korean family to provide a context to family and nation. This historical and political context serves as a prelude to a discussion of the discursive formation of national subjects, as I provide Changmin's experience of being crafted into a Korean while a student at the Korean Minjok Leadership Academy. In particular, this section will introduce the metaphor of blood as a substance that disciplines bodies and makes national citizens. I then provide a transition by sharing my encounter with this metaphor over lunch one afternoon in August 2011 with Changmin as a way to introduce the framework of blood of the family. The remainder of the chapter interrogates discourses and experiences of the family and motherhood and examines the making



of kin and ultimately selves. While Koreans may be made national subjects, they are first and foremost made family members. In actuality, the separation between these two identities, or subjectivities, is inseparable—Koreans are made filial citizens, yearning to belong to the nation, culture and family simultaneously as their dividuality is endlessly producing positions and situations in which one acts and reacts. As I shall illustrate, while my friends show a kind of complacency with the filial and national structures, at the same time these structures are also working against them, potentially casting them as non-people.

### **A Neoliberal Morning**

On the heels of democracy in 1987, South Korea moved out of the state shrouded in unforgiving development and into the light of a new liberal, and democratic, morning, or so is often advertised. As Jessook Song (2009a) states, “a harmonious relationship” was the goal and rhetoric promulgated by the state, a relationship between business, employees, and the state (all in a sense as abstract bodies), which then would eliminate the *need* for mass demonstrations that had facilitated democracy in the 1970s and 1980s (see S. Kim 2007). However, similar to Hagen Koo’s (1993) characterization of a contentious modernization, the seeds of a catastrophic economic meltdown were sown during this period of intended social harmony. A financial crisis struck South Korea in late 1997 after a number of large *chaebols*, or family-owned conglomerates, filed for bankruptcy, followed by national banks (see Kim and Park 2006). As a result, South Korea was seemingly left with no other choice than to borrow from the International Monetary Fund (IMF), \$57 billion in total, rather than go bankrupt. The question many had asked in the years following the initial economic downturn was what caused such a catastrophe. Some argue that the problem lay with something inherent in the Korean economy, that state-led development at

such a rapid pace was to blame for Korea's inevitable demise (Hahm and Mishkin 2000). The alternative answer, however, is that the liberation process of the 1990s eliminated all governmental mechanisms within the Korean model that would have prevented the deregulated rise in foreign short-term investments and capital inflows (Crotty and Lee 2005, Kim and Park 2006).<sup>25</sup>

The South Korean president at the time, Kim Dae Jung, had no other choice but to bend to IMF stipulations with the bailout package, including a number of structural reforms aimed at destroying Korea's traditional model of economics and politics (Crotty and Lee 2005). This neoliberalization of economic and political policy by the Kim Dae Jung government turned an already wounded nation into what the IMF had hoped would be the utopic neoliberal state. There were three main goals, or policy agendas, for this reform: the creation of a flexible labor force, the deregulation of the market and banks into an entirely free-market system, and the integration of the Korean economy into the global economy (Crotty and Lee 2005). A large area of intersection targeted the monopolistic *chaebols'* influence in the domestic economy, and so not only did the government curb the credit flow from banks to *chaebols* and effectively allow the stock market to dictate ownership of companies and not owning families, but also in order to reestablish stable foreign investment, the government needed to "erode the domestic power" of the larger *chaebols* by "taming" the "militant unions" in Korea (Crotty and Lee 2005: 4).

Did the bailout work? Was South Korea saved? While the nation no doubt recovered from the brink of bankruptcy, a more accurate question to posit is at what cost did the economy stabilize. James Crotty and Kang-Kook Lee (2005) are quite critical of the wave of neoliberal policies and structural reforms the government undertook since 1997, and rightly so as unemployment dramatically rose from 2.5% before the crisis to 7.5% between 1998 through 2000

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<sup>25</sup> Once economic instability hit Thailand earlier in 1997, foreign short-term investors began withdrawing their capital from all over the region, including South Korea, thus initiating the 1997 IMF crisis.

(Song 2009b: xiv). Yet the real impact of these neoliberal restructuring policies is often misleading in many of these statistics, as some scholars have argued (Kim and Park 2006, Song 2009b), for even the unemployment rate during this 1997-2001 period fails to incorporate those unemployed individuals who simply gave up finding a job, nearly 500,000 individuals from a 2001 estimate (Kim and Park 2006: 442). The strongest impact is at the personal level, as we can begin to discern with unemployment, and the shift from a regular work force to a flexible labor regime in which employers prefer to hire when needed rather than keep regular employees (Kim and Park 2006: 442).<sup>26</sup> This led to an overall change in business culture, from the Fordist patriarchy that long defined Korean firms and business to one more individualistic, as camaraderie was replaced with competition (Kim and Park 2006: 450).

#### *Discourses of a [Neoliberal] Family*

The transition in 1987 to democracy led to a slow liberalization in the family. Further emphasis on the nuclear family as an ideological entity arose in Korea as challenging and almost failing Confucian virtues such as filial piety, self-sacrifice, and familial solidarity. As Chang Kyung-Sup (1997) notes, though, this Neo-Confucian or even liberal claim of the nuclear family being detrimental to the tradition of family in Korea is misguided, as there is nothing new in the socio-demographic existence of the nuclear family. Rather, such heated rhetoric easily deflects any political pressure for a “progressive welfarism” (Chang 1997: 23). During the development period, there was no emphasis on social welfare, as it was believed to be the charge of the family to care for its own members, and so extended families, encompassing multiple generations of individuals, would live in one house. Prior to marriage, sons and daughters would live at home

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<sup>26</sup> Irregular workers, such as day laborers or temporary workers became more prominent, amounting to 51.6% of Korea’s total work force in 2002 (Kim and Park 2006: 444).

with their parents, regardless of their economic independence (Song 2009a). In addition, aging parents would often live with the eldest son or child and thus theoretically provide extra support to the wife/ mother with the children. Many of these practices are still common in Korea today (Song 2009a), but the emergence of a possible alternative, where the family exists only in its nuclear form, emerged to challenge this family welfare system. However, the state still rallied around the traditional family as needed to protect the welfare of the nation's people and the family's members (Chang 1997). This rhetoric, though, foreshadowed a larger change in the family to be overtaken by the neoliberal policies that would soon follow, and the social ethos that would be disseminated.

In an effort to offset the sudden shock of these neoliberal policies, the Kim Dae Jung government introduced a series of productive welfare policies aimed at recreating stability and trust in the South Korean people. Wages were dropping, unemployment was up, and the assurance that one would not be downsized for a temporary worker was no longer present, and so the government moved forward with establishing a "Korean Productive Welfare State" (Ahn 2009). The underlying rhetoric in the development of a productive welfare state was simple yet telling: families no longer could provide the support needed for its members due to these new neoliberal policies, and so the state must carry some of this burden. Yet as Ahn Byung Yung (2009), Song (2009b), and Han Chonghee et al. (2010) all admit, historic and 'good-intentioned' these welfare policies may be, but far-reaching and universally effective they are not.<sup>27</sup>

Social welfare is now an institutional staple as families can no longer care for their members (Song 2009b), but "productive welfare" in abstraction begs perhaps an obvious question: productive for whom? Song (2006, 2009b) illustrates that while the Kim Dae Jung government,

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<sup>27</sup> On the surface, and in statistics, a number of "effects" of neoliberalism can be calculated: divorce rates surged, birth rates significantly decreased, age of one's first marriage increased, and suicide rates drastically increased for all age cohorts but especially for those 65 and older (Cho 2005).

under the umbrella of productive welfare, implemented policies that aimed at lowering the number of homeless individuals, not all of the homeless were targeted for aid. Rather, only “deserving” individuals were rehabilitated in order to be brought back into society; those left out were usually women and lower class individuals, thought of as not able to contribute to the progress of the state or deserving their current status (Song 2006).<sup>28</sup> A surge of discourse placing blame for the breakdown of the family in the hands of irresponsible mothers and wives swept over South Korean films, novels, editorials, public forums, and newspapers in which men were envisioned as breadwinners and able to return to or create nuclear families (Song 2006: 40). Those that are seen as threatening this idyllic state are outside welfare support, invoking Aihwa Ong’s (2006) argument as to the “exceptions to neoliberalism” in which the protection of the people as a whole, as a nation, takes priority, framing the dual responsibility of protecting the welfare of the deserving and excluding those who would provide further detriment to the national family. Neoliberalism is not simply an economic or political discourse, but a social discourse that seeps into the way individuals view not only the world and social relations but also their own social construction.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Song (2009b: 59-60) also illustrates how homeless women, especially homeless mothers, are seen as invisible by quoting Ms. Pang from the Team for Women in Need of the Social Welfare Division: “I don’t know anything about homeless women. It is not my responsibility. But, do you really think that there are homeless women? I can’t imagine...there being any homeless women. How can women with children run away from home and leave their children? Mothers cannot be that irresponsible. Women who do that could only be insane. And in the case of single women, they can live by prostituting. So why would they have to live on the streets?”

<sup>29</sup> Young In Kwon and Kevin Roy (2007) illustrate the same binary opposition in their study of fatherhood in South Korea. While the fathers in the study note that the traditional conception of the father in Korea is one of a detached provider, a more contemporary perspective of their role places them closer to their family than with their work, at least emotionally. This transition to a ‘family first’ policy in the minds of these fathers, though not entirely inclusive of fatherhood in general, began prior to the IMF crisis in 1997 with the liberalization of the nation in 1987. However, the paradox the authors illustrate is that though these (often middle-class) fathers want to spend more time with their children, they are bound to their jobs in order to compete and keep their jobs, thus providing the proper financial support for their families.

## **Narrating a Nation**

Changmin is a Korean history buff, not in the sense that he follows the academic writings of the history departments at Seoul National University or Yonsei University, but that many of the historical texts and writings used by historians (both academic and public) he has read. He says that many of these texts he had to read as a student, but he also found the history itself and the texts, from a literary perspective, fascinating. I recall many a time he lectured me on traditional Korean history (usually meaning from before Japanese colonialism in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century), instructing me to read this traditional text that mapped the formation of the kingdoms of Korea and that text that discussed the precepts of Confucianism in Korea. Even though he knew I was earning my masters in Korean Studies, he still thought he should enlighten me as to the long, complicated, and rich history of Korea. He was not the first, nor was he the last, to sit me down and “explain Korea” to me; a few (short-lived) dates tried to do it as well.

On the one hand, Changmin is no exception with his love of history, and his pride in Korea’s history—most educated Koreans with whom I have come in contact, not to mention several South Korean scholars of Korean Studies with which I have had the pleasure to work, have immense pride in the history of Korea as they believe it to represent a shared history among a collective people with shared ancestry. This represents the character of nationalism, whereby members of an imagined community feel “a deep, horizontal comradeship” that forms the nation (Anderson 1983: 7). Yet similar to Lisa Rofel’s (2007: 94) understanding of a “desiring China,” the belonging of citizenship is not only political, but a process where “culture becomes a relevant category of affinity.” Rofel (2007: 94-95) refers to this process as cultural citizenship, or the “process of self-making and being made, of active modes of affinity as well as techniques of normalization” that creates subjects and demarcates those deemed worthy to be included and

those that are excluded (see Ong 1999, 2006). The intimacy of the nation, though, is also translated to the intimacy within a family, between members, between friends, and between lovers.

And so on the other hand, though it *should* come as no surprise that Changmin, simply by virtue of being Korean (not to mention a well-educated student at one of the top universities in Korea), finds pride in his nation and her history, I still find it perplexing that he does. He went through a phase while I lived in Korea where he would play the computer game Civilization and begin each game and his founding civilization in Korea as the epicenter of culture and nation building. For so long I struggled with what I saw as a paradox: how can he be so prideful and nationalistic about a nation, heritage, and history that would blame him, his parents, and his “choice” to be gay for all that may be wrong in the world and threaten the very foundation of *Taehan Minguk* (Great Korea)? How can he cherish such a patriarchy that would exclude him in the very nation and heritage that he so passionately embraces? The repugnance that Saba Mahmood (2007: 37) acknowledges in her own reflexive feelings about the mosque movement and women’s subordinate status in Egypt stayed with me for years, and even now after living in Korea, moving back to the United States and then visiting again Changmin and the rest of my friends, I still find myself grasping for answers in places that hold only further questions. Even through the countless conversations I have had with Changmin, and most of my other friends, I have only received the typical “because we are Korean” answers.

For all of my claims of cultural relativism and my position as a cultural “halfie,” I am still reminded by my own ethnography that my knowledge is not only highly situated but also only partial (à la Haraway 1988). In that partialness, though, emerged the desire, a need almost, to discover an alternative narrative, one that does not present Changmin’s love and pride in national history as paradoxical vis-à-vis his sexuality, but also one that does not necessarily find his sexu-

ality an epiphenomenal effect of history as John D’Emilio (1993) might suggest—other discourses and developments may elucidate it. My search for alternative narratives has framed this entire project, and the answers lie at least in part in the more recent history of neoliberalism in South Korea and the way it concatenates family, sexuality and nation.

### *Making National Bodies*

A shift in consciousness took place among households and in discourse in the post-crisis years, where education became the key that would deliver the nation and its people from constant economic and social struggle (Abelmann et al. 2009, Abelmann 2003, Cho 2005). Changmin has suggested several times that his education as a high school student was what provided him the appreciation of Korean culture and history, but he also talked about his high school life as set apart, crucial in shaping him but almost removed from the world and his timeline—a liminal space. I include a discussion of Changmin’s schooling for several reasons, but chief among them is that so many of the points of reference for Changmin during our conversations occurred while in high school. To understand Changmin and his love and respect of national history and culture coupled with his embracement of his homosexuality, we must understand his high school years as they did much to craft him into the *Korean* he is today while also shaping his own comprehension of his sexuality.

From 10<sup>th</sup> grade to 12<sup>th</sup> grade, Changmin attended the Korean Minjok Leadership Academy (KMLA), the premier and arguably most selective (boarding) high school in South Korea. It is located roughly 70 miles from Seoul in the mountains of Gangwon-do, near the rural town of Hoengseong, housing between 450 and 500 students with a student ratio of about 8 to 1. The school was established in 1996, and according to Changmin the goal of the school is to “*make*



global Koreans to return to Korea and run Korea.” In order to do this, the school enforces an English-only policy and a very selective admissions process, seeking the top 1 to 5% tier nationwide, followed by examinations and several comprehensive interviews (Korean Minjok Leadership Academy 2002).

Shin (2006: 214) argues that “although the Korean government has been appropriating globalization, it has also been keen on preserving and even promoting Korea’s native culture and values” as it is cast in the light of ethnic nationalism. Where neoliberalism may seem to be the bringer of tradition’s destruction, at least according to the IMF’s bailout assertions, KMLA is the exception to the rule of neoliberalism that in a sense proves the rule. The fact that they educate students, craft bodies, in the hopes of making them national subjects on a global stage indicates a conscious recognition of the supposed dangers of globalization and neoliberal reform. On their website, KMLA states that they seek “bright, inquisitive, energetic, self-motivated students who are *respectful of Korean culture and tradition* and ready to embrace new challenges” (Korean Minjok Leadership Academy 2002, my emphasis). Discursively, there is constant repetition on the KMLA website as to training students to straddle tradition and modernity, embracing their Korean-ness and ethnicity (their *minjok*<sup>30</sup>) while being adept in how to pass as a global citizen. Yet in conversations with Changmin, he alluded to the belief that KMLA perceives its students, and Korea, as already global and thus must be crafted into Koreans—they must be “respectful of Korean culture and tradition.”

Michel Foucault (1977) contends that institutions, or what he terms disciplinary regimes (or apparatuses), are responsible for the crafting of docile, social bodies. To make a body docile one must discipline the body in rather specific and at times rigid ways, controlling time, space,

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<sup>30</sup> It is hard to distinguish between race, ethnicity and nation in South Korea as the word *minjok* can refer to all three of them (Shin 2006: 4).

and movement to the point that thought becomes an unconscious practice of physical docility (Foucault 1977: 161). Disciplining bodies requires continuous surveillance as a mechanism of regulation, yet when a body does become docile then the body self-regulates, as the possibility of surveillance is always present. A significant method to craft the bodies of the KMLA students is through routines, ritual and procedure. Students at KMLA must wake up early in the morning and run, in addition to mastering a traditional Korean sport—Changmin chose *kōmdo*, a Korean version of kendo or sword fighting. Changmin also described how there were many rituals that were practiced on a daily basis, such as *honjōng*, a ritual where students collectively reflect on the day’s activities and give thanks to their parents.<sup>31</sup> Public schools in Korea do not implement this procedure, and from my friends at least few practice *honjōng*. KMLA may be crafting global citizens, but they are equipping them with the ethnicity, tradition, and culture needed to forever *remain* Korean. That which makes them Korean is their blood: “It can be claimed that Koreans *remain* Korean because they share the same blood” (Shin 2006: 218, my emphasis).<sup>32</sup>

When Changmin was a senior at KMLA, he traveled with his class to the United States to visit different colleges and cities—the entire time he and his classmates wore *hanbok*, or traditional Korean clothing. For Changmin and the rest of his classmates, this was no different than any other day at school because KMLA requires all students to wear a modern form of the *hanbok* while on campus or representing the school (such as the trip to the United States). “People stared,” Changmin recalled, as they walked through New York City. They symbolized, at that moment, the perfect form of neoliberal reform, global cultural flows, “traditional” Korean cul-

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<sup>31</sup> Dorinne Kondo (1990) proves to be an interesting comparison to KMLA as she discusses ethics schools in Japan as hyper-intensive, disciplining regimes that employ many of the same activities of KMLA—waking up early, regular exercise, and daily affirmation and gratitude to parents.

<sup>32</sup> From all my conversations with Changmin, it does not seem as though KMLA indoctrinates its students with the rhetoric of blood. However, as textbooks of Korean history no doubt contain discussions of ethnicity and the lineage of the Korean people, one could assume that if the students are learning Korean history, especially in Korean, then they are also implicitly learning about their single bloodline.

ture, and the metaphor of blood; the students were connected to one another, and in that moment of recognition that others looked upon them with curiosity as to their attire in the city that never sleeps, they felt more Korean than they ever did before. The affect was collectively experienced, perhaps differently, but nonetheless contingent on their shared cultural citizenship (Rofel 2007).

KMLA, like most schools in South Korea, underscores the importance of collectivity, building camaraderie among the top tiered students in the nation. The school stands as a response to globalization, crafting students that may already be global (Changmin went to middle school in California) into Korean citizens. Shin (2006: 2) illustrates that 93 percent of his respondents reported “Our nation has a single bloodline” and 83 percent “felt that Koreans living abroad, whether they had emigrated and attained citizenship elsewhere or were born outside Korea and were considered legal citizens of a foreign country, still belong to the *han* race because of shared ancestry.” Changmin has stated several times that he is Korean because of his blood, that he is connected to his family by virtue of this substance. The rhetoric of inherent Korean-ness is but discourse that crafts selves; one may be born Korean, but this Korean-ness is a discursive mechanism that produces docility and citizenship, not a natural fact. In other words, when KMLA acknowledges that their students are born Korean (because of their shared blood), such acknowledgment is discursively used to actually make their students Korean citizens.

Blood grounds behavior or “code of conduct,” as Schneider (1980) terms it, but the “biogenetic substance” cannot be separated from the “code of conduct.”<sup>33</sup> As Janet Carsten (2001: 48) illustrates, the combination of the two may in fact produce any given metaphor of substance, whereby substance “easily accommodates a remarkable range of indigenous meanings, including bodily matter, essence, and content in opposition to form, as well as differences in degrees of mutability and fluidity.” This understanding of substance nicely complements my discussion of

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<sup>33</sup> Schneider (1980) posits that there is a difference between blood and code, or biogenetic substance and conduct.

KMLA and the production of national citizens, for as Foucault (1978: 147) notes, blood is “a reality with a symbolic function.”

It thus should come as no surprise to me that Changmin finds pride in *his* nation and *his* culture—they are what make him a citizen, a member of an imagined community (Anderson 1983) and of a culture (Rofel 007). However, Changmin recognizes that his time spent abroad has greatly influenced his understanding of self, not to the extent of wanting to live in the United States or be like “you American gays.” Changmin is more individualistic than most of my other friends in the sense that he would prefer to stay home alone reading, writing, watching television (mostly American shows), playing games, and having sex than going out to bars with friends and socializing—he noted once that he sees more of me than any of his other friends combined. Did the constant socialization and surveillance of KMLA produce a patriotic Korean, but one who willfully sequesters himself away from such constant socialization? This is conceivably where his time abroad shaped him most: Changmin likes being alone, but recognizes the importance of being social. But then again, perhaps Changmin’s preference for seclusion is a result of having to curb his sexual desires around his roommate and the other students of KMLA, and rather than share his sexuality he has learned to keep it to himself, or at least share it strategically. For if Changmin must pass on national histories and cultures through his blood, failing to do so, or “coming out” as someone who *refuses* to do so, could mark Changmin a traitor with treasonous desires.

### **Interlude—Transitions**

Changmin was late, as usual, and I had to push back all my other appointments for the day in order to have lunch with him. I had only seen him a few times this trip in August 2011, even if he

did pick me up from the airport, and I at least wanted to buy him lunch for everything that he had done for me—I made him wait at the airport as my plane was delayed and then made him wait another hour in the cell phone store while my new phone was processed. When he arrived he looked more tired than usual, exhausted even, and he simply said he was having trouble sleeping for the past couple weeks. “Where do you want to eat?” I asked him. “I assumed you wanted to eat at On the Border because you had me meet you here,” he replied, alluding to the Coffee Bean that was a few steps away from On the Border where I was sitting drinking my blended coffee drink—Seoul in August is a combination of monsoon season, mosquito season, and the hottest temperatures of the year.

I recognized one of the male servers when we sat down: Dandy. When my American friends and I would come here I used to call him my dandy boy, now all that seemed so far away and so insignificant. We decided to do what most Koreans, including myself, would do if they went to a Western restaurant: buy two different things and share it. I remember thinking to myself, several times on this trip in fact, that I flew halfway around the world to eat bastardized Tex Mex when I should be going to all my favorite places to eat my favorite Korean foods. But in my defense, or so I tell myself, all of these places others have chosen and I have had no control over their selection.

Changmin and I began talking, first about his “coming out” story, and then more generally about family. I asked him if he ever wanted to have a family, knowing full and well what his answer would be; I call this purposeful questioning. When I first met him he told me that if he wanted to have children he could—he could marry a woman and do it, but he had no desire to do so. His answer this time was no different, but he was a bit more explanatory in his answer as he said outside of marrying a woman and having children that way, it would be impossible. I did

not even have to probe further for him to bring this back to his own family, as he claimed that he and his brother are “real children with shared blood” to his parents. He could never have that.

We began arguing, in a manner quite suited to us as we have been down this road before as he has time and time again proven to be a worthy intellectual adversary, which at times annoys me given his rather conservative perspective. I decided to catch him off guard by using his own logic, and so I proposed a hyperbolic example whereby I was adopted by Korean parents in Korea from birth and raised as their child, speaking fluent Korean and attending school in Korea. Would this not make me Korean? “No,” he replied, “because you could leave at any time because they aren’t your real parents.” How, I asked, could I leave if I “knew nothing other than them, Korea, and this culture?” Changmin began to explain how I would be ostracized from school, constantly picked on, and never treated fairly. “How is that any different than anybody else? People are treated unfairly all the time,” I replied with much passion. “True, but they can never escape that. You could. You could leave at any time you wanted.” I was not “really” part of the family, he said, because I did not share their blood. Yet would this still hold true if I were ethnically Korean, or if there were any adopted Korean in a Korean family?

“Let me give you an example,” he began. “My younger brother and I share nothing in common.” His brother is the athlete, the extrovert, and usually the more popular of the two, while Changmin, in no way scrawny, prefers reading, writing, being alone, and watching television. The two brothers are on opposite ends of the spectrum, sharing nothing but family. “I still care about him because he is my brother and he is my brother because we share the same blood. If we weren’t blood related, I wouldn’t care.” Need I even interpret as his words speak for themselves? I have already discussed the metaphor of blood with relation to making one Korean, but this story illustrates how the metaphor of addresses immediate kin relations.

Needless to say I disagreed with Changmin, yet our discussion of adoption alludes to an interesting theme in public discourse that further nuances blood. Adoption in South Korea is laden with metaphors of “pure blood,” as Eleana Kim (2010) illustrates, where historically there had been more transnational adoption of Korean children than domestic adoption partly because these children could never be of the same blood as his or her parents.<sup>34</sup> Blood is complicated further in Kim’s (2010) ethnography because this substance has two interlocking layers that contrast but are simultaneously contingent on one another. On the one hand, parents pass down family genealogies through blood; substance is coded with the heritage of the family—past, present, future. On the other hand, Koreans pass down history through blood; substance is coded with the culture of the nation—past, present, future. Beginning in the 1990s South Korea began welcoming back, and to a certain extent actively recruiting the return of, overseas adopted “Koreans,” as if they were always part of the nation of Korea, the family of the *han* (Kim 2010). Interestingly, the duality of blood, as both nationalist making and kin making, demonstrates that blood flows between often what has been conceived as two separate spheres of public and private. The fluidity of blood, in this sense, unties the seemingly neatly demarcated public and private spheres as a “false division” (see Eng 2010).

Foucault (1978: 148) posits that with the rise of the middle class in Europe, particularly during the late 18<sup>th</sup> into the 19<sup>th</sup> century, societies transitioned from “a symbolics of blood to an analytics of sexuality.” This does not mean that there was no overlap, for “blood was sometimes called on to lend its entire historical weight toward revitalizing the type of political power that

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<sup>34</sup> Having “mixed blood” or impure blood has consequences, as Kim (2010) demonstrates, because as blood and patrilineality define Korean kinship, adoption is met with “the dual stigma of illegitimacy and infertility” (Wegar cited in Kim 2010: 29). This stigma translates to a historically higher adoption rate of Korean children overseas than domestically because “legitimate kinship” predicated on (Neo-) Confucianism values sameness over difference, where “only blood can substantiate family relations” as only blood kin can perform the necessary ancestral rites and carry on lineages of the family (Kim 2010: 29).

was exercised through the devices of sexuality” (Foucault 1978: 149). But perhaps it is more complex than a transition from “sanguinity” to “sexuality,” Ann Stoler (1995) suggests, as the periodic and strategically positioned overlap Foucault allows is larger and more prevalent than even he imagined. The current public discourse in South Korea highlights the “substance-code” combination (Marriott 1976), in which “substance” symbolizes the biogenetic material of blood and “code” represents normative sexuality. The “substance-code” as a combination in Korea, though, is discursively used to craft bodies, to make them docile, by the disciplinary regimes implemented by the state, including the home. It also represents a technology of biopower, a method to regulate and engender subjectivity and citizenship among the “Korean” bodies. Biopower, though, also prescribes certain material, productive manifestations—blood not only determines one’s kin in Korea, but it also usually determines one’s claim to property.<sup>35</sup> However, as a mechanism of both filial personhood and national subject, blood as substance and as metaphor can only be transmitted in certain, prescribed ways: reproduction. In that potential of blood, the potential that one has to transmit the blood of a family and of a nation into new life, is the discursive personhood and subjectivity of the family and nation.

Herein lies our subject: for if one can only pass on one’s filial legacy and national culture through heterosexual sex, contained within the “biogenetic substance” that is physically transmitted, and it is in that *potential* that one’s personhood is located, then how can Changmin, or any of my friends, ever hope to find an alternative? Is there even an alternative to seek, and if there is, how desirable is that path? We could certainly cast the previous chapter and “coming out” in a new light given this discourse of blood, for if personhood is primarily obtained in the potential of reproduction, then why would one come out? And now that Changmin, Donghae, and Yoochun

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<sup>35</sup> Similarly, business, jobs, and ownership is also predicated on blood kin as some of the largest conglomerates (*chaebol*) in South Korea are family-owned, pass down to usually the eldest blood son (see Kang 2002).



have all “come out,” why wouldn’t they keep it secret from others, and similarly, why would their mothers tell anyone else? Their secret is that their blood can no longer flow, that history, culture, property and genealogy stops with them. They are, in a sense, masquerading as people when in fact they are non-persons.

### **A Family Thing**

The repugnance I felt towards Changmin’s situation only intensified with Yoochun’s “coming out” narrative. At first I thought my reaction was in response to Yoochun’s mother’s abortions, but I realized later that night after he told me in August 2011 that I was not entirely surprised that she would have gone to what some may term extreme measures to obtain her son—Korean women have been known to have abortions when they found out the fetuses were female (Cho 2002). Women use their children as a form of cultural and social capital, and successful men garner more capital than successful women (see Abelmann 2002, Kim 1992, Lett 1996). It was not the actual abortions, but Yoochun’s mother’s admission of the abortions only to her son in this stressful circumstance that disgusted me and saddened me to tears. I realize now that I cried not because I was not able to empathize with Yoochun, because I have no experience that could create such empathy; I cried because I was friends with him when he came out and to now know to what extent coming out had been detrimental to him upset me. I could do nothing for him, then or now. She had forced him to collude in her secret the very moment he thought he was shedding secrets.

Yoochun shared with his mother his most personal secret and in turn she shared with Yoochun her most personal secret; neither tells anyone else each other’s secret and it is nonverbally understood that their secrets are in a sense “safe.” Yet the secret Yoochun shared, his ho-

mosexuality, is discussed not as secret telling but as coming out; Yoochun refers to it as his “coming out story” and according to most metanarratives coming out usually references the coming out to one’s parents as symbolic of demarcating a public sexual identity (Herdt 1997, Talburt 2004). Why then is Yoochun’s coming out treated as a secret, very much a private matter, especially given his mother’s sharing of her own secret? Yoochun mentioned how he is relieved his mother never told his father, but when he spoke of this arrangement he posited it more as his mother refusing to tell his father, as if Yoochun’s shame in being gay extends to his mother. The irony, Yoochun noted, is that his father is significantly more open-minded than his mother because his father travels more, works outside of Korea, and is more interested in other cultures than his mother who is more concerned with the appearance of the family. Donghae had made a similar comment regarding his father, that he was more liberal and his mom was more traditional. Donghae’s father is “trying to get different world perspectives,” and though he may have never imagined his only son to be gay, Donghae noted that he understood Donghae’s sexuality (non-verbally, of course) better than his mother.

Yoochun’s mother’s steadfast dedication to her family represents a common theme in the literature of family in South Korea, namely that while men are responsible for economic capital, working outside the home, women are responsible for accumulating social capital in an informal economy (Abelmann 2002, Kim 1992, Lett 1996). Shelia Miyoshi Jager (1996: 38) keenly posits that “significant events in Korean history are not mere isolated happenings; they are embodied as family tradition, passed down through the generations to be acted out and replayed over and over again until they can be redeemed and given closure by a future generation.” Much of this filial rhetoric is housed within Neo-Confucianism, which also yields a strong patriarchy in Korea, and also a strong preference for sons as opposed to daughters (Cho 2002, Das Gupta et al.

2003), though this is changing (Chung and Das Gupta 2007). The preference for a son, as Yoochun can certainly attest to, emerges from a Neo-Confucian tradition whereby kinship is both patriarchal and patrilocal—the eldest son sustains the family’s history and lineage through his offspring. Daughters then marry into their husband’s family and live with them, playing wife to her husband, mother to her children, and daughter-in-law to her husband’s mother. Her children—having complete control over their education and upbringing as her husband is busy working—are her bargaining chip, her claim to power in the family (Kim 1992, Cho 1998). Yoochun’s mother’s need for a son, for Yoochun, was both an act of filial piety as a way for her husband’s family to continue onwards and a self-interested move to hold on to her own power within the family.

### *Mothers and Sons*

Why did Yoochun, Changmin and Donghae all “come out” to their mothers? Similarly, why have mothers been characterized as more conservative than fathers and yet my three friends still only came out to their mothers? Kondo (1990: 148) elucidates the relationship between Japanese mothers and their children, arguing that because women are not receiving love and affection from their husbands or in-laws, they develop a strong, emotional bond with their children from even before they are born. In Korea, as men are in the public world working, usually working past midnight, married women remain home to care for the house and the children.<sup>36</sup> Korean wives must also appease their in-laws while tending to the home. Their outlet, their emotional line to this world, is their children, and though this may be changing, this no doubt characterizes the generation of mothers I am describing here (see Abelman 2003). Given the preference for

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<sup>36</sup> This no doubt posits a strong generalization when I should note that though this may be the ideal, this more readily describes middle-class families, though working class families also may engage in such practice (see Abelman 2003, Cho 2002).

sons over daughters in Korea, especially when my friends were all conceived, mothers not only have an emotional bond to their sons but a strategic relationship as well. If sons garner more social and cultural capital than daughters—sons provide them leverage with their in-laws—then mothers will no doubt keep their sons close.

However, children can also damage the mother as the mother is ultimately responsible for the children's education and well-being (see Abelmann 2003). If the child performs poorly at school, fails to gain admission to university, fails to get a good job, cannot find anyone to marry, or, god forbid, fails to produce children to repeat the cycle all over again, the mother is ultimately the one to blame—or at least she is socially thought of as the cause of such misfortune. The discourse of bad mothers and bad wives far extends the scope of this project, but let me provide some brief examples. Of the more than 161,000 overseas adoptions of Korean children between 1958 and 2008, more than 100,000 of them resulted from being the child of a single mother (Kim 2010: 25). Reminiscent of the neoliberal rhetoric of bad mothers and wives as the cause of family breakdown (Song 2006), similar rhetoric has been used for decades in Korea—the discourse of the “devoted wife” amidst the “divided nation” has contributed to the narratives of nationality, nationalism and nation-building in South Korea (Jager 2003).

The solution or reaction to bad mothers and wives, Song (2006) illustrates, is a dissolution of their participation in the family and the nation. Song (2006) reinforces this point by beginning her account with the Korean film *Happy End* where the out-of-work husband of a successful education institute owner during the economic crisis, Pora, kills his wife because he discovers she had drugged their baby with a sleeping pill in order to meet her lover. He is justified, Song (2006) laments, because she was an independent, sexually liberated woman who failed as a devoted wife and mother. The image of the single mother, then, also indicates a failure on *her*

part, and even as Korea began encouraging domestic adoption, primacy and rewards were given to married couples as opposed to the single birth mothers of the children—they are “less *deserving* of provisions that might make it economically feasible for them to keep and raise their children” (Kim 2010: 37, my emphasis).

Yoochun’s mother’s decision to have two abortions in order to obtain her son can be explained within this filial paradigm. But so too can Yoochun’s mother’s dual decision to tell Yoochun her secret and to treat his coming out as a secret be explained with this filial system and neoliberal context. If unfit mothers were blamed for economic instability and social decay, then why would she tell anyone about her son’s non-normative sexuality? Her secret has the best chance of working on him *if* she keeps his sexuality secret. She admitted to Yoochun that her son’s sexuality is her fault, her punishment for “the two babies that I [Yoochun’s mother] abandoned.” Again, the rhetoric of the unfit mother, the “undeserving,” reemerges as Yoochun’s mother blames herself—Changmin’s parents also shift “blame,” but very casually, onto his mother for taking him with her clothes shopping, trips for her interior design business, and staying at home and cooking (see Murray 2010). Yoochun’s mother attempts to attract, or coerce, Yoochun back into a heteronormative position by sharing her *secret* and by not receiving his (as it gives her more leverage) because she believes that homosexuality is not an innate, ubiquitous, or forever-held identity but rather a temporary moment in which one strays into deviancy only to return docile. In fact, her first inclination was to take Yoochun to a psychologist “to get help.”

Yoochun’s mother attempts to *guilt* Yoochun into being straight, for as Kondo (1990: 148) suggests, “by reminding the child of all she has done for her/him, or simply by suffering in silence, she teaches the child to internalize her desires and to act accordingly.” In other words, such “martyrdom...is the mother’s best disciplinary weapon” as the child is dependent on the

mother—she gave the child life, fed the child, cared for the child, provided an education for the child—and therefore the child feels guilty (Kondo 1990: 148-149). The words I injected into Yoochun’s Mother’s mouth in Chapter Two now congeal around our topic: “How dare you betray this family after I killed two daughters to bring you life?”

Personhood, or filial citizenship, in Korea is earned through the potential to reproduce, the chance of passing one’s blood to his offspring by way of continuing the family genealogy and the nation’s history. In his blood is the potential of personhood, the “substance-code” that regulates both family and nation, and if such blood cannot be passed on, how is one then considered a person? As the only son, Yoochun presents a dilemma to his mother—how will her husband’s family name, his property and genealogy, be remembered and used if not by Yoochun’s own offspring? And more relevant to her position: how will she be treated in the family and the social world if Yoochun is not able to deliver on his filial obligation (*hyodohada*)? I asked Changmin if he were an only son, would his parents have reacted differently to his “coming out.” He nodded his head before saying, “definitely.” As each of my friends presents as an unproductive member of the family, as none will produce offspring (or at least so they say), they find alternative ways to remain docile, to remain a social person. Changmin’s pride in his nation’s history and culture, his tutelage at KMLA, represents not only his ability to be taught but also his attempt to rectify what he perceived as “lacking.” Taesub also apologized to his mother for “lacking,” to which his mother, tears in her eyes, said “as if I don’t lack things myself.” Donghae said that he had to compensate for his “feelings towards men” by working even harder, studying harder, being a better Christian, and gaining entrance into one of the best universities in the nation—he had to be a better son so his sexuality would not be the only identification he embodied.

## Coming Out, Part II

For most of the summer in 2009, after Yoochun came out a few months before, I had not seen or heard from Yoochun. It was the first meeting of Come Together in September and as we all gathered around the table at our usual Chinese restaurant, I saw Yoochun in the corner with some of his things. I pushed past some of my friends to grab the seat next to Yoochun as he greeted me with his infectious smile and his typical “*annyǒng* (hey).” As the other members talked and ate, I discussed with Yoochun how his summer was and why he had seemed to drop into some nameless abyss. He explained that his mother became even stricter than she was before, constantly questioning where he was going, who he was seeing, demanding what he would be doing and why. She was always overly concerned with his actions and whereabouts, Yoochun said, but over the summer it had intensified to the point that Yoochun found it easier to stay home than to venture out. When I traveled back to Korea in the summer of 2011 and the two of us were talking over lunch (when he told me the details of his coming out story), I asked him how things were at home. Yoochun expressed doubt that his mother would ever fully “understand” his homosexuality because she would periodically ask him if he has a girlfriend. Yoochun assumed she thinks of homosexuality as a phase in his life, or at the very least something to be “fixed” once he gets married.

Yoochun still lives at home, as does the vast majority of the members of Come Together and other gay men I know. He still has a curfew, he said, and is often reluctant to eat dinner outside of his house because his mother hates eating alone. Though he does have a boyfriend, his mother knows nothing of it nor that he is (or ever was) in Come Together. His mother, though, still has a tight hold over his life and his free time; she is not as probing as she used to be in 2009 but as Yoochun gestures, her presence is always there for him. Foucault ([1975] 1995) would

posit that regardless of Yoochun's expressed sexuality, his docility is made visible through his mother's repeated questioning of his whereabouts, actions, and friends. The fact that he spends a significant portion of his time at home, with his mother present, produced a panoptical institution, a disciplinary regime that crafts Yoochun's docile body. Also important to note is that Yoochun's mother's regulation of Yoochun's time and body increased after he came out to her. She recognized his stray from docility, his foray into deviancy, and reverted to a stricter regime of regulation. Yet most telling is the moment when Yoochun's docility is unveiled as he admits that even when his mother is not as strict he still feels as if her presence is there, as if she is wondering what her son is doing, and so he feels compelled to self-regulate his own actions in response to that inner motherly gaze.

Crucial to this discussion is a reminder that when Yoochun "came out" he did so only to his mother who has yet to tell anyone, not even his father. The common discursive metanarrative of coming out, as discussed earlier, assumes movement from a private place to a public space that characterizes coming out as a form of ritual. Gilbert Herdt (1997: 126) discusses the manner in which "coming out" can be conceived as "another form of ritual that intensifies change in a young person's sexual identity development and social being" because "it gives public expression to desires long felt to be basic to the person's sexual nature but formerly hidden." Two processes emerge, Herdt (1997: 126) notes: "passing" as heterosexual, which he terms a "secretive act," and then coming out. The implication Herdt is making aligns with Altman's (2001) discussion of homosexuality: the global gay identity is not only progressive but publically expressed.

However, this conceptualization moves in the exact opposite direction to Yoochun's narrative, where coming out was not meant to be a public declaration of his homosexuality but an intimate affair between him and his mother. The fact that he regrets ever telling his mother and



his mother's treatment of this as a secret illustrates not only that coming out is not as ubiquitously liberating as Altman or even Herdt might assume, but also that the renewed docility of the homosexual body after "coming out" is not as paradoxical as Altman might argue. In addition, even though Yoochun may be "out" to other gays and lesbians, particularly in the club Come Together, none of these members conceive of this as necessarily "out" because in fact the admission of their homosexuality to each other and no one else only heightens their sense secrecy. "Coming out" is thus defined in relation to one's family in Korea, an intimate affair to be shared with one's family as it aids in defining one's family. It can result in enhancing the 'private' nature of "coming out" rather than transitioning the subject into a 'public' realm—it is really not coming *out*.

As Foucault ([1978] 1990: 95) observes, "where there is power, there is resistance, and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power." For Altman (2001), coming out is decidedly resistant to tradition, the "local," and patriarchy as it publically declares one's non-normative sexuality and dismantles their discursive docility; they forsake the docile for a deviance that is publicly claimed and re-worked. Yet Foucault's argument is precisely that even if we believe our forms of resistance to be an attempt to break free of power we are in fact calling attention to power or operating on its terms; Lila Abu-Lughod (1990) refers to resistance as a "diagnostic of power" because resistance visibly elucidates the relations of power. More to the point, unlike Altman's (2001) or Herdt's (1997) characterizations of coming out as a form of resistance, Yoochun saw it as an affirmation of his identity as both gay *and* a son. Coming out in Korea is a family thing, and though Yoochun at times sees conflict in the roles of son and gay man, that conflict continues to shape Yoochun's dividuality as he enacts roles in multiple subjectivities. He does not see himself as resisting the bonds

of heteronormative kinship; his role as obedient/ filial son is no less important in defining him than it was before, to his mother and in his own eyes. If anything, its intensified regulation foregrounds the relations of power between discourses of family, the category of homosexuality, and the countless other discursive fields in constant collision with one another.

Judith Butler ([1991] 2010: 564) asks, “can sexuality even remain sexuality once it submits to a criterion of transparency and disclosure, or does it perhaps cease to be sexuality precisely when the semblance of full explicitness is achieved?” In this sense, secrecy might be understood as not a denial of one’s sexuality but as strategic to one’s identity and the politics laden in identities. As Butler ([1991] 2010) suggests, both secrets and declarations can be wielded strategically. Identities are tactics that we use in certain situations and the use of particular identities illustrates not only their fluidity but their multiplicity.

The question thus becomes whether Yoochun also uses his sexuality, asserting himself as “gay,” strategically. I contend that he does, but that he is not necessarily always consciously aware he is doing it, as Butler ([1991] 2010) notes we are not always aware of our performativity of any category. However, as sexuality is not a totalizing force for Yoochun then we must also consider his interpellation as son, or friend, or brother, or even boyfriend; each carries with it a particular force relation as each is its own constellation of discursive meanings. Yet what is fundamental in this form of identity politics (particularly in Korea), is that none of these identities, subjectivities, or discourses should be conceived of as separate from one another; they all intersect in the self. This is the notion of the *dividual*, the person as a network of relations where each discourse, subjectivity, or identity occupies a node within the network of the self; by the same token the self represents a node in each of these discourses (see Strathern 1988).

Since October 2011, Yoochun has been serving his mandatory two-year period of military duty (as all men in Korea must serve for at least two years). When the new school semester commenced in August 2011, Yoochun did not attend given his upcoming enlistment, and instead spent a significant portion at home. The months leading up to his enlistment were difficult for Yoochun—boredom struck in the worst possible way as his boyfriend was busy with school, as were his friends, and so he had to find sexual and emotional release in the bed of a one-night stand, though his boyfriend knows nothing of the affair. He told me while at home waiting for his military service to start that he was both dreading the next two years but also pleased to have two years where he does not need to think about school, the tension with his mother, and his seemingly uninterested boyfriend. He planned to use the time to grapple with his family, friends and sexuality in the highly disciplined space and time of the army where he is made into a Korean man. Yet even now, months into his service, he finds the space hard to live in, giving him very little room to breath or “be himself,” the way he would with me or with his other gay friends. Secrets are kept and told in different contexts because their impact can be significantly different. The active practice of secret-keeping and secret-telling is immensely important for Yoochun—it fostered the intimate relationship between him and his mother, along with him and the other members of Come Together (myself included)—and yet with a different set of circumstances he is sequestered from these relationships. He has no one with whom he can share his secret, no one to whom he can “come out.”

#### 4. QUEERING INTIMACY: FAMILY, FUCKING, AND FEELINGS

*No one has yet determined what the body can do.* Benedict Spinoza (1959: 87)

The oscillation between discussions of (homo)sexuality and kinship has afforded me, thus far, a vantage point to (re)interpret personhood and self-making projects in Korea. The legal, or “proper,” prescription of personhood is predicated on blood—one is a person in Korea if he not only shares the same blood as one’s kinfolk but also passes on that blood to one’s offspring (see Chapter Three). This understanding of personhood, though, does not discount the intimate relationship between those who share this blood. In the previous chapter I alluded to underlying intimacies that held mothers and children together—sons come out to their mothers partly because of this intimacy. However, normative intimacy between a mother and a son coupled with non-normative intimacy between two gay men presents a rather “sticky” situation whereby “intimacy” becomes both a “good” thing and a “bad” thing.

It is from this point of normative emotionality that Sara Ahmed begins her intellectual journey of both *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (2004) and *The Promise of Happiness* (2010) as a way to understand how and why subjects continuously orient themselves, or are oriented towards, objects that illicit particular emotions. Objects (including physical objects, other people, ideas, and discourses), Ahmed (2004: 45) argues, are not imbued with emotion but accumulate emotional, or affective, value through circulation—the circulation of an object over time may accumulate the reputation of ‘good’ and thus presents itself as simply a ‘happy object’ or ‘bad’ and imply an ‘unhappy object’ when its good/bad-ness and happy/unhappy-ness are contingent on its circulation history. Similar to the Marxist model of capital, there is never an end to circulation—wealth will forever be invested back into the system to produce more capital which will in turn produce more wealth to invest—and so the goal of individuals is never to obtain an ulti-

mate state of happiness but rather to circulate the affect to accumulate more (Ahmed 2004: 45). However, the circulation of happy objects and the build-up of affective value lead us to believe that we will, one day, obtain some form of happiness—this is what we are promised—when in truth we are always working towards this unobtainable, idealistic goal, always *becoming* happy, but never quite reaching it (Ahmed 2010). We follow rather than find happiness, Ahmed (2010: 32) suggests, but in that journey to happiness, in the promise itself of a future state of happiness, we fill that need to be happy and are, in a sense, “happy.”

As Ahmed (2004: 87) suggests, the borders of objects and subjects exist because they are threatened, and must be threatened, in order to differentiate between normative and non-normative—queer unhappiness must exist for straight happiness to exist (Ahmed 2010). This illustrates the foundation to her entire project, namely that emotions, and in this case happiness, are not only contingent on their circulation, and therefore historically, socially and culturally constructed, but they are done so whereby happiness is normative and by claiming happiness in any of its manifestations, such as the ‘family,’ we are orienting ourselves towards a normative, at times violent, regime of power (à la Butler). Queers are then unhappiness-causing objects: “it is because the world is unhappy with queer love that queers become unhappy, because queer love is an unhappiness-cause for the others whom they love, who share their place of residence” (Ahmed 2010: 98). Therefore, Ahmed (2010: 98) suggests, queers are portrayed as “lacking what causes happiness, and as causing unhappiness in their lack.” However, unhappiness for queers is strategic and needed as it calls attention to the normative veil of happiness—we can be happily queer yet unhappy with our struggle (Ahmed 2010: 118). Queer becomes not a freedom from “discomfort” or the heteronormative: “queer feelings are ‘affected’ by the repetition of the scripts they fail to reproduce, and this ‘affect’ is also a sign of what queer can do, of how it can

work by *working on* the (hetero)normative” (Ahmed 2004: 155). Stated alternatively, in order to illustrate the normativity of happiness and other emotions as regimes of inequality we must embrace our unhappiness, our discomfort, and our failure at being normative.

I approach the happiness of my friends in a similar fashion, whereby filial obligation is not simply an obstacle that my friends must overcome to achieve “real” happiness. Instead, family relations are an important ingredient in the kind of life and lifestyle that my friends want. Yet it is significantly more complicated as my focus in this chapter is the tensions and uncertainties of experiences, feelings, and orientations as my friends continue to move towards “happiness.”

Ahmed’s work is beneficial in understanding happiness and normative emotions, but the stories I include in this chapter illustrate a tension in feelings—loving a man but also loving one’s parents. I therefore value the term “affect” as its ability to convey these tensions, or (emotional) intensities and changes that imply immediacy in experiences, does not necessarily oppose Ahmed’s (2004, 2010) discussion of emotions but rather seeps into the crevasses that form between bodies—people, discourses, ideologies, objects (see Stewart 2007: 128). Affects as intensities can be equated to bodily states—a racing pulse, a furrowed brow, perspiration, heavy breathing, blurred vision—but any given affect “bears an intense and thoroughly immanent neutrality” (Gregg and Seigworth 2010: 10). Emotions, according to Brian Massumi (2002), are what give these bodily states, these intensities, positions and meaning.<sup>37</sup> Affects are then intersubjective, pulled in many different directions by one’s dividuality. My friends form relationships with each aspect of their dividuality, and as both affects and emotions are relationally defined (Stewart 2007, Ahmed 2004), I am apt to discuss further the complexities of dividuality.

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<sup>37</sup> Massumi (2002: 27-28) postulates that affects are intensities while “an emotion is a subjective content, the socio-linguistic fixing of the quality of an experience which is from that point onward defined as personal. Emotion is qualified intensity...it is intensity owned and recognized.” In other words, emotions categories affects, hierarchize them, and of course normativize them.

And from relationality springs this chapter, for I attempt to construct the intimacies between my friends and their families and my friends and their lovers to illustrate that these two seemingly oppositional forms of intimacy coincide through different affective encounters. Queering intimacy implies that, within the stories themselves, my friends experience confusion, hesitancy, and conflict with normative and non-normative emotions coming together. The experiences they have with their parents compared to the experiences they have with their lovers present as two sets of intimacies—one of kinships and one of relationships. Yet to queer intimacy I must illustrate how my friends signal a tension between the intimacies of kinships and relationships without necessarily presenting them as oppositional or even separate. For my friends, what happens in one form of intimacy affects the other form, as both are part of my friends' dividuality. Relationships influence interactions with parents, and vice versa. This chapter presents a mixture of brief vignettes that attempt to capture the emotionality of my friends' experiences with parents or lovers and analyses that aim to highlight the tensions between kinships and relationships.

## **Kinships**

### *Changmin*

Changmin and I were walking through the streets of Samcheong-dong, a posh dining and arts district to the immediate east of Gyeongbokgung, the royal palace of South Korea. We had found ourselves on this street many times, but this particular night in 2009 was our first foray into this district. Apparently, Changmin noted, it used to be the bohemian hub of Korea, where unknown artists congregated to “suffer together.” Now it is overrun with couples on dates, overly expensive restaurants, and countless cafes that close down as quickly as they open up.

Changmin and I always managed to be out in the busiest districts in Seoul during their peak date hours—completely unintentionally—and our topics, as if to metaphorically give the finger to all the straight couples around us, always managed to center on sex. That particular night was no exception, but he also shared with me part of his narrative that he found insignificant but that I found profoundly emotional.

Changmin knew from an early age he was different, that his preference was for men and not women. He might have occasionally feared what his parents would say when they found out, but for the most part he knew his parents well enough and knew they would accept him regardless of his sexuality. Though his mother cried when he told her on coming of age day when he was twenty, she said to him that he is her son and that nothing will change that. She cried, he recalled, because she knew he would have to always try harder, always be better than others because his sexuality would always be the thing that holds him back. “She doesn’t blame me,” he said, “she blames society. You know, they just aren’t ready, and I don’t think they ever will be.” Even though his parents accept his sexuality and do not expect him to marry or have children, he still *feels bad*: “I feel guilty I can’t give them grandchildren.” As we sat in one of the many nameless cafes, my warm latte between my hands, I could feel the tension, not between us, but between Changmin and everyone else in the room, in Seoul, in Korea. Changmin paused, placing his own latte down and looked directly into my eyes, a flash of pain evident in his eyes as he said something about which I still ruminate today: “Do you have any idea what it’s like to feel this guilty? You’d think I had killed someone or something.” Even today I am still haunted by that flicker of pain in Changmin’s eyes, which provoked my realization that each of these gay men I knew and talked to, like me, were someone’s son and that the role of son was immensely important to how they understood, and even experienced, their sexuality.



*Taesub*

When Taesub “came out” to his stepmother she too began to cry, saying “Is it me? Because I didn’t provide you with what you needed? And made you become isolated and lonely? I am always thinking: ‘What am I lacking?’” Taesub, tears rolling down his own face while sitting across from her in their second kitchen, replied, “This is who I am.” Through the tears his mother manages: “I know this is something you are born with. Whatever happens, you’re our child...even if heaven and earth collapse, that won’t change.” She cried for the very same reason Changmin’s mother cried and for the same reason Taesub’s father cried: “How is he going to live in this world?” His mother, hugging his father after telling him about Taesub, both sobbing alone in their room, says, “Let’s not fight him, curse him, or say he can’t. He already wants to kill himself, isn’t that enough?”

Initially Taesub distanced himself from his stepmother, because as is often thrown around among the family, she is not his “real,” blood mother. In her own words, she always asks herself: “What am I lacking?” Through most of Taesub’s life she goes out of her way, at times at the expense of her own blood daughter who she also brought into this marriage, to bridge the seemingly never-ending gap between Taesub and herself. Yet it is in this moment of utter vulnerability, when Taesub spills his dirty little secret, when the gap between them seems to simply disappear. She becomes his confidant, the mother he always needed but was reluctant to allow in for fear of the memory of his birth mother vanishing. The intimacy these two share both mirrors that between Changmin and his mother but also diverges from it. While both mothers regularly inquire as to their love lives (though Changmin’s is more abstract than Taesub’s relationship with Kyungsoo), Taesub and his mother are drawn together not through blood but by the absence, the lacking, of shared blood.

*Kibum*

When Kibum moved to Seoul for college he noted how lonely he felt, leaving his entire family back in Pusan. For the first time he had to rely solely on himself. He began telling me the story of his family while over dinner one Tuesday night in 2010 at our usual sushi buffet in Shinchon. “It was hard (*himdŭlŏssŏ*),” he lamented, “because we are a pretty close family.” Kibum also lived with his grandmother, much less common today in Korea than just twenty years ago, and so the closeness he spoke of, the *intimacy* between the family members, is predicated on the remnants of tradition and the fact that he and his younger sister always had at least one adult around at all times. I told Kibum that I had grown up in a very similar household, when at our peak we had two parents, four children, and one great grandmother living with us. “We had our fights and our falling outs, but having my great grandmother there seemed to always give us kids a sense of belonging, a sense of family,” I told him. He nodded his head in response, his goofy grin plastered on his face as if to say ‘I totally get it.’

Neither of us could pinpoint the intimacy exactly, because for me I had become so jaded by that point in my life as I saw my own family break apart, and for Kibum it was such a rare occurrence at that point in Korea to have such a living situation that he could not even figure out what it was he felt. The combination of a changing family system amidst (neo)liberal economic, political and social reform with a rather common discourse from his parent’s era provides Kibum not with a vocabulary that captures his interaction with his family but two different vocabularies that posit two different realities: modern and traditional. This intimacy, though, is what precludes him from telling his family that he is gay. “My grandmother is sick, and I don’t want to upset her,” he said to me, sadness in his eyes, not necessarily because he cannot be truthful with his grandmother (and parents), with whom he says he is close, but because he feels bad that his

grandmother is sick. The only thing he can do, he said with a bit more hope in his face and less sadness written on it, is study hard in the major they want (economics) and pretend just a little longer until she finally passes away. “It’s hard,” he said for a second time, “but I’ll do it.”

### *Vampires*

Why do Changmin’s mother, Taesub’s mother, and Yoochun’s mother profess their devotion to each child even though each no doubt disrupts the happy home, the normative family system whereby the child marries, produces offspring, and carries on the legacy and property of the family name? In Chapter Three I argued that children are forms of capital to Korean parents—especially mothers who often rely on their children for both social and familial bargaining and leverage—who can either reflect positively or negatively on parents. Parenthood, particularly motherhood, is a marker of personhood. And so the popular Korean narrative goes that parents devote their utmost time, effort, and capital to their children (traditionally male children) because when the child marries and the parents grow old, the children are charged with repaying their parents with care—children are *hyodohada* (filial) to their parents because their parents *hyodohaessõ* (were filial) to their parents. Why do young brides tolerate their belligerent mother-in-law? Because she will one day have a daughter-in-law she can torment herself. Interaction is cyclical: present interaction is determined by not only past interaction but future interaction as well. Parents care for children now because they know when they grow too old to care for themselves, their grown children will care for them.

This explanation seems too easy, too structuralist to the extent that one can never escape this circular system and circular logic—it continues for infinity. What this does illustrate, though, is the circulation of the family as an object—“something that affects us, something we

are directed toward”—and the circulation of objects through the family (Ahmed 2010: 45). The transaction of my care and love for you now in exchange for your care and love in the future is an intimate affair soaked in affective value; the circulation of objects is also the circulation of affect and the longer the object circulates the more affective value the object garners (Ahmed 2004: 45). Therefore, as the discourse of the family circulates throughout Korea, the affective value of the family exponentially increases because the family is what Ahmed (2010) would call a happiness-causing object. Yet if “the point of the family is to keep family the point,” as Ahmed (2010: 46) states, then parenting is charged with orienting children in the proper direction, especially towards the family: “the family becomes a happy object if we share this orientation” (Ahmed 2010: 48). Parents are therefore not *just* obligated to care for children, just like children are not *just* obligated to grow up and care for their parents. Rather, parents and children are oriented towards specific happy objects—in this case, family as the point of family and the continuance of the family as such—so that they believe, and affectively feel, that what they are doing, the direction they are going, is the “right” direction because it leads to happiness.

In each of the above stories my friends are emotionally defined in relation to the happy object of family, and the rhetoric of their orientation is embedded in both their language and their experience. Though only Changmin names it directly, each has immense guilt towards their family for something in particular. For Changmin, his guilt originates in his perceived inability to provide his parents with grandchildren—he cannot fulfill his filial obligations to reproduce the family, but we only infer this in his words. However, children are not his happy objects, his parent’s grandchildren are because they are his parent’s happy objects; grandchildren, for Changmin, have more affective value than children. Changmin’s happiness, in this instance, is thus derived from his parents’ happiness, but ironically Changmin’s mother has told him that she

“just” wants him to be happy, and so we spiral into a tug of war between parent and child where both supposedly derive their happiness from each other’s happiness. Changmin’s guilt thus signals his recognition that he cannot provide the happy objects to his parents because he “lacks” that ability (his mother presumably experiencing a similar conflict).

Taesub alludes to this very notion, for he claims, much like his stepmother, that he “lacks” something and that is why he has turned out the way he is, and though he does not say it directly he lacks the very thing Changmin does: the perceived ability to reproduce the family and its orientations (see Chapter Three). Though Kibum does not mention guilt or lacking, it can be inferred that his sadness that surrounds his family, his grandmother in particular, stems from his own lacking as an only son. If Kibum were not gay then he would simply be sad that his grandmother is sick, but given his non-normative sexuality he must pretend to be normative—even in his choice of college major, as he would choose art or philosophy—in order to circumnavigate the same guilt both Changmin and Taesub feel. In other words, it is the threat of guilt, the threat of shame, that normalizes Kibum’s current movements. But by declaring that after his grandmother passes he will come out to his parents he feels guilty both for a future act and for thinking of such an act dependent on his grandmother’s death.

Guilt accumulates into shame, not necessarily for each friend, but shame that can be brought onto one’s family through one’s “lacking.” This no doubt represents Taesub’s relationship with his family, for he continues to admit to his boyfriend Kyungsoo that he feels guilty that he could bring shame upon his family as a result of his own “lacking.” As Ahmed (2004: 106) argues, “If we feel shame, *we feel shame because we have failed to approximate ‘an ideal’ that has been given to us through the practices of love,*” where if we love another person then we want that person to be happy, and ergo our duty in loving that person is to be happy for that per-

son (Ahmed 2010: 92). Shame, then, is an affirmation of love and one's commitment to the ideals one feels shamed for failing to attain (Ahmed 2004: 106). But does feeling guilty, or feeling ashamed, also absolve one of the guilt or shame? Does it make one "feel better"?

All three imply that they lack something and all three feel guilty for that gap in the quality of their selves. However, all three also mention the result of such guilt and shame: death. Taesub's mother says to his father that Taesbu is willing to kill himself to spare his family any further shame. Kibum can only stop pretending to be normative once his grandmother dies—her death allows him to live *queerly*. Yet it is Changmin's statement, that he feels so guilty that he likens it to murder, that illustrates the true implication of death. Ahmed (2004: 156) beautifully, yet painfully, writes that queer loss goes unrecognized and that since queers begin as "non-life—with the death implied by being seen as non-reproductive—then queers are perhaps even already dead and cannot die." In Chapter Three I argued that personhood in Korea is constructed by the ability to pass one's blood, one's substance, to one's offspring as a way to reproduce both the family and the nation. If one is unable, or unwilling, to do so one exists as a non-person, a "non-life." My friends feel like vampires, for though they yearn for blood to keep them alive—they have sucked their parents' blood into them to give them life, and desire the continual flow of that blood into their non-existent offspring—they are already dead because the blood stops with them, sustains only their non-life while also drawing attention to their deadness. These three stories illustrate failure and lacking on the subjects' part—failure to be oriented towards the proper objects in the proper way—and thus their death is not only inevitable but already fact. What affects me most, though, is the violence in which each of my friends presents such death. Taesub is willing to kill himself because he is a failure. Kibum is only able to exist—though he will inevitably "die" as a social and filial being—after his grandmother dies. Changmin says that his

guilt is so great he likens it to murder, yet whose murder? Though he may never admit it, I believe he is speaking of his own metaphorical death to his family line.

## **Relationships**

### *Changmin*

Changmin has had a string of rather interesting boyfriends and relationships. He met his first boyfriend online when he was 19 and a second year student at Yonsei: “I met him online and took him home.” They both had figured that because they met and had sex that they were dating—the thought of casual sex had yet to be a conscious option to them. It was the first time Changmin ever kissed a boy, had sex, or had a boyfriend: “You know the sex wasn’t all that good because we didn’t know what we were doing.” They dated for three months before his boyfriend went to the army—Changmin, in turn, joined Come Together. While a member, Changmin developed feelings for three members and shared with the then-president regarding his feelings. Though Changmin slept with two of them (Taemin), the president told each of the members, causing embarrassment for Changmin and prompting his lack of participation until I joined. This experience with Come Together jaded Changmin and it was then that things changed for him —sex became “just sex.”

The longest relationship Changmin had lasted nearly two years with “baker boy;” he worked in a bakery and was roughly the same age as Changmin. While Changmin had initially thought of himself as “versatile,” baker boy was a strict bottom with “the thinnest legs, nicest ass, and seriously, a really big dick that never went to good use.” Baker boy eventually moved in with Changmin—when he entered Yonsei he moved into a one-room apartment by himself that his parents pay for. He never told his mother that baker boy, was living with him “just in case.”

When I asked Changmin if he loved baker boy he would always say “yeah, I did... maybe still do.” I remember that whenever we would talk about baker boy, Changmin seemed more invested in the conversation, more emotional (*kangjŏngjŏkin*) than usual—was this his first love? “So why did you break up?” I asked him, more than once. “He lacked ambition (*yoksim*).” He was lazy, never wanted to work harder, and had no direction in his life—he just didn’t know what he wanted to do with his life. Changmin would try to push him, but it was no use: “He just wouldn’t move, and I started to resent him.” Changmin eventually broke up with baker boy. For a while they would meet occasionally, even while I knew Changmin (they had only broken up a few months prior), and at times Changmin would take him home for the night. “The sex was always good, but we both became too emotional (*kangjŏngjŏkin*).” Changmin eventually stopped meeting baker boy, and when they started seeing each other again, only on birthdays, they would act strictly as friends: no sex.

“So, who have you fucked lately?” I would ask him most times when we would meet, because I knew Changmin enjoyed sex and was never opposed to having it whenever he wanted. He always managed to find something wrong with the guy he sleeps with: too needy, not needy enough, too tall, not tall enough, and the list continues (for pages). “Why do you do it, then?” I would constantly ask him. “The feeling, it’s addictive.” Sure, the actual sexual encounter, the intercourse, the fucking, is fun, pleasurable, and even thrilling. The “feeling” he speaks of, though, is the falling asleep, holding the guy in his arms, and for one night, having someone beside him. Changmin is a self-described “loner;” perhaps living with a roommate for three years at KMLA and always part of a group had turned Changmin off large crowds and instead allowed him more time alone than most. Yet it took a toll on him, I could see it, feel it, and knew it first hand—loneliness is difficult. Changmin wanted the sex, no question, but he wanted the intimacy



more, and when morning came and the guy left, he felt empty, lacking, and wanted to recapture that feeling, if only for a night. It was addictive. “Then why not just get a boyfriend? Why not stay with one of them?” This is where his story becomes complicated. “The talented bottoms are whores, not interested in relationships. The virgins get too attached.” So why does he sleep with guys on the first “date?” “Why not? I need to know if there is hope.” If the sex is not good, then how can a relationship blossom? He knows he is too picky when it comes to guys, but he does not care. He had already experienced what it is like being a virgin, having sex, and then becoming attached to that guy—his first relationship was built on that. He wanted an in between—a guy who was talented at sex, but not a whore, and who was not too needy, but still wanted some emotional attachment. He wanted a better version of baker boy, but he knew that did not exist—there is always give and take, but he is just not willing to give as much as he is willing to take.

So Changmin is resolved to sex. He would always tell me about the guys he would sleep with—one guy in particular caused him to miss taking me to the airport when I left Korea for the first time, leaving just Donghae and I. He told me of another guy he did not sleep with but talked to for a while, who wanted to sleep with him. But then he found out something a bit “disturbing:” this guy had to have reconstructive surgery on his anus because he had been penetrated so many times by guys. Changmin stopped talking to him. There was the virgin in Pusan he met online through a gaming community who was mildly obsessed with Changmin, sending him on a regular basis nude pictures of himself on his phone and telling Changmin how he wanted to go to Seoul so he could lose his virginity to Changmin. The 34-year-old at the gay salsa club he wanted to sleep with and then the 28-year-old he actually did sleep with; the member of the World of Warcraft group he wanted to date versus the one who tried to get Changmin to “play” with him

while the other members were asleep in the hotel room; his “regular top” who used to be a member of Come Together versus the “surprise top” who said he could bottom but ended up only being able to top (“It hurt like hell”)—each he remembers, some more than others. Even though he claims “sex is just sex,” for Changmin, sex is never *just* sex—he can fuck them and they can leave, but something stays, lingers inside him, that he wants to bottle up and keep; but true intimacy he believes is impossible for him.

### *Yoochun*

Yoochun likes masculine men, taller than him, sometimes with a slight attitude, and also would prefer they be a bottom because even though he does (reluctantly) bottom, he does not like it. “It’s impossible to find that,” he lamented, several times, because those men with those features are almost never bottoms. He told me that he once met a guy who he found to be masculine and versatile: “After he did me, he let me do him.” I smiled, knowing Yoochun finally experienced what he had been hoping for. “And how was it?” I asked. “Amazing! It felt so good and was hot!” He blushed, I simply laughed. They only met that once, and if we panned out on Yoochun’s sex life, he was merely one in a long string of one-night stands. Yoochun wanted a boyfriend, but the guys he liked either did not like him or wanted nothing more than sex. “Then why do you keep meeting guys like that?” I asked, perplexed why he would put himself in situations that he already knew would end in the typical fuck-and-go. He smiled, “because I like sex.” At the expense of his emotional self he gave into his physical need for sex. He did not always have anal sex because, like he said, he would prefer to be the top—but everything else was fair game, and he enjoyed every minute of it.

When he first joined Come Together he developed a rather serious crush on Jun. They had said all of two words to each other, never spending time alone together, and Jun probably knew very little of Yoochun. Everyone else knew of the crush, as did Yoochun's crush, but what was to come of it? Yoochun was "in love," as he terms it, with a guy he only knew physically, not personally. Hell, I knew his crush better than he did—he was the one who interviewed me when I joined the club. He was a year older than me, a law student, and had an older boyfriend he lived with because he bought him nice things—yes, he is one of "those" guys, I would tell Yoochun. "I don't care," Yoochun would say, shaking his head as if he had been blinded to who this guy actually was because he simply fulfilled the checklist of physical attributes he wanted in a man. It took Yoochun some time to "get over" this guy, but he finally did.

Yoochun went through a string of interesting relationships/ sexual encounters: the guys with girlfriends (or boyfriends) he would spend the night with, the white American who wanted to "hang out" at his apartment at 10pm, the two-week boyfriend who just "wasn't my type." Then Yoochun met his boyfriend whom he dated for a few months before Yoochun entered the army in October 2011. He, too, is not Yoochun's "type" and moved immensely slower in the "relationship" than Yoochun would have liked. Several times he spoke of "being bored" with him, but emotionally they had clicked. It took them weeks to share their first kiss, and then two months to finally have sex: "he is addicted to me." Yoochun said that he had talked to him about why he was moving so slowly and his boyfriend replied that he wanted it to mean something, he wanted it to be more than just sex. When they started having sex Yoochun felt better, he felt like he loved his boyfriend. But as the new semester started (in September 2011) and Yoochun stayed home because he would be off to the army soon enough, his boyfriend became increasingly busy, leaving Yoochun to his own devices. Yoochun became bored again and his boyfriend

did not seem to care. So Yoochun fucked another guy. It was that simple. When Yoochun told me I became enraged: “Why not just break up with him? Why the fuck did you go fuck some guy?” At the time I thought that he was young, and I should have known that this would have eventually happened—Yoochun likes sex, and attention, and needs both. This was only intensified as he had nothing to do but stay at home with his mother before joining the army—he had too much time on his hands, which meant too much time to think. They are still together, but Yoochun still wonders if he is in love with his boyfriend or in love with the idea of having a boyfriend. As of January 2012, he still doesn’t know.

### *Kibum*

Kibum always managed to mention sex and his love life when I least expected it. With Changmin it is a staple of our conversation. Yet Kibum and I always seemed to talk about Come Together, “gay life,” or just the most random things. When he does mention his sex life, or if I ask him if he is seeing anyone, he tends to present two somewhat diametric subjects. On the one hand he will discuss how he *feels*—if he likes the guy, if he thinks the guy is a right fit, and if he enjoys spending time with the guy. Yet on the other hand he will spring into an unexpected discussion of the sex with whatever guy we happen to be talking about. Kibum has stated numerous times that he does not necessarily like one-night stands or sex for the sake of sex—“I have needs,” he will say, but that does not mean he is fucking up a storm. So it always comes as a surprise when he provides, at times, very detailed accounts of his sex life. Where with other friends, namely Yoochun and Changmin, I am the one asking the questions, Kibum just throws them at me and expects me to catch them, though he gives me very little time to process it. He once discussed with me his then current boyfriend and how it is impossible for Kibum to bottom with

him because “his thing (*mulgŭn*) is so big that it hurts when he tries to stick it in me.” I consider Kibum my younger brother, paying for lunch, dinner, and coffee whenever we would go out because I was the one with the job, and yet in the middle of conversation he transitions to what I can only describe as typical *me*, or the random, unprovoked conversations about sex that I seem to always have with my friends. These transitions are of course not without context, though once he did manage to slip in the fact that his penis was quite large in the middle of dinner conversation at my house.

However sexually random Kibum’s mind may be, what he continues to stress to me is that he wants a boyfriend who accepts him despite his faults and imperfections. It is not that Kibum is hideous-looking or obsessive, but he has had his encounters with guys who only want sex and Kibum is not like that. He prefers older men (*ajŏssi*), and though looks are not important to him, personality is and he is very particular on the personality of any guy he may potentially date. He described to me a sexual fling he had with one of his classmates in Pusan, one even he explains as being far more emotional than either of them would have liked to admit. Kibum knew he was gay, but his classmate found it hard to claim such an identity, even though the two of them would always have sex with each other and never have sex with any other person. They were friends, yes, but they lived in a precarious state of in-betweenness—between friendship, sex friends (*saeksŭpa*), and boyfriends—that often acted as tension for their relationship. They cared for each other, and after some prodding Kibum eventually admitted that he might have loved (*saranghaesŏ*) his classmate more than just a friend. Yet when Kibum moved to Seoul to attend Yonsei, he knew quite well that their relationship, in all its forms, was over: “I knew we would never talk again, because it only existed then in Pusan.” Since I met Kibum he has had two boy-

friends, both significantly older than him. Yet Kibum finds both relationships taking an emotional toll on him: “I feel tired” when he meets them, “but I want the sex and the emotion.”

### *Fuck/Love*

On several occasions, one of the first questions I was asked after joining Come Together was simply, “When did you know?” Everyone was always shocked when I said middle school: “Really? That young?” Of course I denied it to myself for years after, but it was in middle school that my world began to look different: I “looked” more at men than women. I decided to turn the question on each of my friends, asking not just “when did you know?” but also “how did you know?” The answers surprised me because each gave nearly the same answer: sometime between late middle school and early high school. How did they know? “It was an emotional (*kangjŏngjŏkin*) feeling I had.” Why did I find this so strange? Because “how did I know?” I knew in middle school gym class: changing in front of other boys sent a physical shockwave through my body, something I was entirely unfamiliar with being all of 12 years old, the Internet in its infancy, and no one in my “circle of attachment” (Kondo 1990) approachable. This is what I shared with my friends, and each just shrugged and said “I felt something emotional first—the physical came later.”

There is an interesting oscillation that takes place in each of the above montages and in the revelation between so-called bodily impulses and emotional residue that foreground the intimacy between my friends and their lovers. While each claim that the end goal is someone who can satisfy them emotionally, each is also quick to add that they must be satisfied sexually as well. Furthermore, each seemed somewhat reluctant to label their relationships and their emotions as “love (*sarang*).” Given the deluge (or superfluous amount) of Korean popular songs

with the word “love (*sarang*)” in the title, or even in the lyrics itself, my friends are bombarded with images of romantic love in virtually any public space they walk into.<sup>38</sup> And though each discussed how they first knew they were gay because of some emotional attachment they felt towards other men, they were hard-pressed to identify what that was. When I beseeched each for elaboration, all they were able to provide me were bodily reactions or productions: increased heartbeat, hazy vision, wandering mind, increased energy. Are these not all physical reactions, parallel to my sexual arousal in the boys’ locker room in middle school? Love stood as the plug to fill the gap—they felt “something” when they realized they were gay and with their boyfriends and the boys they have sex with, and “love” seemed to be the only emotion they were able to articulate—but their hesitancy speaks volumes.

My friends were able to describe their bodily reactions, their affects, yet the only possible emotional reference was “love.” Though each was somewhat reluctant to use this word, they still used it and never deviated from it. Why was it uneasy to use? Because love is a normative orientation to a normative object, and though the affects may be the same between a gay man desiring another man and a straight man desiring a woman, because the objects are different the emotion must be claimed as different. In other words, men can love women but they cannot love other men, even if they physically, or affectively, desire them. For my friends, these queer feelings are not passing feelings, for if they were then, as Ahmed (2004: 163) notes, they may be acceptable as they exist only as a moment in “the story of heterosexual coupling,” to which one is converted back to the side of reproduction.<sup>39</sup> Rather, this “queer love” is something they cannot

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<sup>38</sup> In addition, television dramas with heterosexual love as the plotline, variety programs that imitate marriage, and the multitude of activities and advertisements that draw attention to heterosexual love and intimacy are common in Korea.

<sup>39</sup> This may also explain why Yoochun’s mother, as discussed in Chapter Three, believed her son to be only temporarily inflicted with a state of deviancy. If he recanted such claims to sexuality—or just stopped having sex with men—and began a relationship with a woman, the temporary homosexual encounters would be ignored and even unproblematic.

necessarily escape, and in this inescapable emotion lies both their hesitancy. If my friends are charged with making their parents happy by producing happy objects that would make them happy (i.e., grandchildren), and queer love is unhappiness-causing to the extent that it supposes unhappiness on the part of those doing the loving, then my friends' reluctance in admitting that what they feel is love is understandable. Though they hide their queer love to avoid attention and being the cause of unhappiness, my friends still want to avoid such totalizing emotional categories, at least in conversation with me. Yet perhaps this reluctance is also tied to their guilt, for they feel a normative emotion in a non-normative situation—this is not proper love, not the good kind of love that Korean media promotes through their heterosexual dramas, movies, music, and advertisements. I think that Yoochun has told his boyfriend that he loves him, but when he talks to me he seems less sure that it is love—maybe because I stand witness to his epic, non-normative failure and “catch” him in the act, thus producing guilt (Ahmed 2004: 105)

Regardless, there is no resolution to these sets of tensions between their somewhat cavalier attitudes towards sex, their readiness to disclose their emotional investment in their lovers, and their inability, or perhaps reluctance, to implicate “love” as the proper explanation to their intimacy. On the one hand, each of these notions—sex, emotionality, love—all become objects that they judge as either proper or improper to their own situations. Each gladly orients themselves towards sex and emotionality, at times the source of their happiness when they have it and at other times the source of their unhappiness when they don't, but they are apprehensive towards claiming love as a happy object. If it is not love, then what is it? Queer love is less prescribed—and unhappiness-causing, Ahmed (2010) argues—and so it is harder to articulate and express for my friends. Yet on the other hand, sex, emotionality and love are inseparable from each other for my friends, no matter how hard they attempt to try. Changmin claims that sex is



“just” sex, but the emotional toll each sexual encounter has on him—he yearns for more sex because only in those moments of sexual intimacy does he feel “good” or even happy—is unmistakable. Sex is as emotional for him as it is for Yoochun and Kibum, but where Changmin hates to admit such emotionality, Yoochun and Kibum are eager. My friends work to discursively separate these three, and so treating each notion as a separate object may be useful. Yet contrary to their own attempts of separation, these seemingly separate objects are invariably thrown together, colliding at speeds that perhaps they are unaware of (or intentionally ignore).

## **Residual Intimacy**

### *Relationality*

Dividuality is an understanding of a relationally-defined self, but this relationality also extends to emotions, in that emotions are defined and felt within the relationships among multiple bodies. If emotions and affects are relational, then my friends comprehend their emotions vis-à-vis their understanding of their parents’ emotions and their lovers’ emotions.<sup>40</sup> While each story and each friend may engage with emotions and affects differently, if I take a step back to read all six stories together something very striking emerges. Each story presents an ideal object—be it an ideal boyfriend, an ideal scenario, an ideal state of being—which my friends move toward. This object, though, is in the future, not yet in their grasps and always one step ahead of them. Kibum

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<sup>40</sup> This dovetails nicely into the circulation of normative emotions and objects, for as Ahmed (2004: 92-94) keenly notes, the circulation of any sign is ultimately a repetition of said sign to the point that it goes unnoticed in our use of the sign. Judith Butler’s (1993) notion of the performativity of gender, where we enact gender roles without actually knowing that we are doing it, informs such performativity of emotion: we feel “disgust,” for instance, without consciously being aware as to all of the normativity and power relations that are embedded in such a feeling. In this sense, the fact that Changmin feels *something*, though apprehensive to even admit it, perhaps indicates his unawareness with the *something* to begin with—he has repeated such a normative emotion to the extent that it goes unnoticed. The same with his guilt, for even though he knows what makes him feel guilty—his inability to produce grandchildren for his parents—he does not necessarily realize that guilt is a normative feeling that he is trained to feel in a situation where he may be perceived as a failed self (Ahmed 2004: 105).

talks about how in the future, after his grandmother passes away, he will come out—he relies on that event in the future for both his ability to endure the charade he is now living and the guilt he feels that such an event will transpire. Taesub and Changmin both feel guilty for their inability to perpetuate the family, but such reproduction is not something that is presently relevant but always in the distance: they *will not* produce grandchildren. Even in Yoochun’s relationships he is always concerned with the next step, the next move and how he stays with his boyfriend because he might *eventually* love him—he never seems to dwell on the now but rather on the future. Changmin presents the most interesting example as he is always thinking of his next fuck, his next fulfillment of his needs, to the extent that his current guy is always the future incarnation of his past promise to meet another guy for sex.

My friends continue to move towards this promise, towards this happy object, yet they are never able to attain it. As Ahmed (2010: 32) states, “happiness becomes a question of following rather than finding”; we can never “find” happiness—for Changmin, Yoochun and Kibum this happiness is the ideal boyfriend—because it does not really exist, but we can “follow” it and in that following, that journey towards happiness (contained within the promise that we will, one day, be happy) we are happy. This futural orientation defines and crafts how my friends “feel” their present, and as feeling is predicated on relationships with other bodies, this futural orientation also crafts my friends’ relationships with those other bodies.

Emotions are messy; there is no predicting to what extent an emotion can affect a person and what bodily reactions one may have once “stricken” with an affect—“No one has yet determined what the body can do” (Spinoza 1959: 87). While there may be overlap in the emotions that manifest during these narrative experiences—guilt manifests itself quite similarly as a feeling of lacking in most of the stories—there is just as much divergence. Yet this is the point, be-

cause an affective connection is not simply a predictable encounter but “a surging, a rubbing, a connection of some kind that has an impact” (Stewart 2007: 128) that can ultimately be conflicting, contested, stirring, and confusing. By presenting affective connections and responses as multifarious and tense, I am also commenting on the dividuality of my friends. In juxtaposing kinships with relationships, I am in essence illustrating the tension that emerges when the two come in contact, as discourses and experiences. As both interactions construct the dividual of, let’s say, Yoochun, then what affects Yoochun within one relationship affects the other relationship as well. In other words, when Yoochun came out to his mother, seemingly favoring his sexuality over his family, his relationship with his mother became strained. When his mother, in turn, regulated his time and movement more strictly, his ability to meet guys for sex or meet his friends from Come Together decreased. Consequently, while his guilt may have subsided somewhat while he stayed at home and pretended to be in a relationship with a girl for the sake of his mother, his confusion surrounding his own relationship with his boyfriend suffered.

Let me provide one final example—Donghae’s narrative discussed over a two-day road trip in August 2011—to illustrate the affective interaction between these two tropes of kinships and relationships.

### *Donghae*

I took advantage of the hours we had to drive until we arrived at our destination to ask Donghae about his family and “coming out.” I actually knew his entire “coming out” narrative as it had unfolded, for he had spoken with me beforehand about the “tension” he felt with his mother, the “sadness” he felt when he thought about what he was doing (attending seminary to become a priest) because he thought he was lying to his parents. He debated telling his mother, quitting

seminary, and joining the army—he dreaded all three, but he felt that the time he spent in seminary was a waste because he felt like a “fraud,” studying to be a Christian priest when he neither had no desire to be one nor subscribed to their thoughts on (his) homosexuality. He called me the morning after he “came out” at work: it happened in his mother’s car, and though she cried when he told her, he thought he had rushed the entire situation. “I need to resolve this, talk to her more,” he told me later that day when he called again.

I asked Donghae why he told his parents and he replied, “I love my parents, and this is being more honest.” When I asked him what he meant, how this is “being more honest” he thought for a moment, both hands on the wheel his eyes out in front of him at the road before us, the lush green mountains all around, and both of us with our thoughts. “Honesty is a different meaning of love,” he finally said. I had asked him if he feared exile, disownment, or any type of repercussions from his family before he told them, but he shook his head, “I was scared of everything in telling them, but I knew they would accept me.” It was not about understanding his sexuality but because he was their son, “I was accepted when I was born.” He continued on after I passed him some water to drink and then placed it back in the cup holder between us, Kylie Minogue playing lowly through the car speakers: “After I confess [sic] I can believe more that I really love them.” Almost expecting my next question, Donghae quickly added, “They are really loving me. Our relationship is more firm now.” The intimacy that he as the only child shared with his parents strengthened when he “came out,” though he also recognizes that he is “lucky” that his parents accepted him.

In addition, I asked Donghae to recall the first time he “knew” he was gay. He first prefaced by saying “calling yourself is a decision,” implying that the following story, and for most of his life, he had the inclination, the desire for men, but to hurl the label “gay” at him at such an

age would be ahistorical—he did not “call himself gay” until he was in college. Regardless, he said, there is a story that sticks with him in his mind as the earliest inclination of his desires and feelings. He was thirteen, in his final year of middle school, and had a classmate he was inseparable with: Mr. Kim (his pseudonym, not mine). One afternoon they were at Donghae’s house, and when it came time for Mr. Kim to leave, Donghae offered to take him on his bike. Mr. Kim climbed on the back of Donghae’s bike and held him from behind. Donghae had done this many times before, but there was something particularly moving about this time. “I realized while I was riding, and he was holding me, that I was satisfied.” I paused in my own thoughts, turned to him after putting down my pen and notebook, “Did you say satisfied?” He nodded: “Yeah, there was a satisfaction of him holding me.”

From this story we moved on to his self-pleasuring habits: 3 times a day, Mr. Kim in his thoughts, a wave of guilt following. Let me contextualize this “guilt” with another story of his. When he was in high school Donghae was part of a Christian club. In high school, he began thinking more seriously about possibly being gay, and used the Internet to help sort out of his unresolved and even confusing feelings and inclinations. He stumbled upon a particular website for gay high school students, thinking this would be as good of a place as any to begin. As he was looking through the pages of posts and the pictures members were posting of themselves to introduce themselves to the community, he was shocked to find one of the members of the Christian club at his high school on this website. “I was frustrated that he could be Christian and gay,” Donghae said, still driving and gripping the wheel tighter as if reliving that frustration he felt as a young, confused teenager. After a long pause, I finally spoke up: “You are frustrated with yourself, too, huh?” He nodded. “I was lying, but so was he!” He rationalized, at the time, that he was “better than that guy (*nom*)” because he “didn’t tell anyone.” He did not post anything on

the website, did not socialize with other gay people online, and all but shut down when he saw the other student in the club. “Did you ever think of talking to him, Donghae?” I asked, immensely curious at this point. “No, because it would make it real.” Donghae figured that talking about it made it real, and he was not ready for that. He said that he could not find help from anyone and could not tell anyone—how true those words rang in my own mind, my own experiences shouting down on me as if I were reliving them all over again with Donghae.

### *Affective Personhood*

Donghae’s story illustrates a common tension among most of my friends, and subtly arises in each of the stories: there is a conscious belief (or fear) that when one is gay one cannot also be other things, as if the “totalizing I” that Butler ([1991] 2010) describes is a conscious totalization. Donghae found it impossible to believe, while growing up, that someone could be gay and a Christian, but even as he says, claiming to be gay is a choice for him—one has to choose to use the identity ‘gay’ the same way one has to choose to use the identity ‘Christian,’ and for him these two identities conflicted. Taesub as well found difficulty in claiming that he was ‘gay,’ a word he hardly ever used, and being a son—one always suffered, and since he started dating Kyungsoo it was usually his relationship with his family. So the question I am left with in light of Donghae’s story is this: is the identity of ‘son’ also a choice? Though none of my friends would agree, as they would no doubt concur that one cannot choose one’s family, there have been some anthropologists (in different contexts) who have indicated otherwise (e.g., Weston 1991). Yet perhaps the choice is not an initially conscious one that one can make. When my friends began to realize that they desired men, they all felt guilty—Donghae’s guilt buried so deep as to penetrate his masturbatory practices. The guilt was a way to mask their desire while

reinforcing their role as son. Over time, each of my friends learned how to be both gay *and* a son, as if one form of identity did not forsake the other. The choice was then not to be a son, but to *be* a son. All of the affective value of families and sexualities that circulated over time culminated into one immovable object that made them both happy and unhappy.

Yet what “makes them happy” (if we want to call it that) is appeasing both their family and their sexuality/ desire. Donghae used the word love: he loves his parents. As Ahmed (2010: 92) states, “If to love another is to want that person’s happiness, then love might be experienced as the duty to be happy for another.” If Donghae loves his parents, as he admits, then he would do what he can to make them happy. And if as Ahmed (2010) also suggests, happiness of the family is the reproduction of the family—to keep family the point of the family—then “being” straight, or at least concealing one’s sexuality, is how one can at least minimize the family’s unhappiness. Why come out then? By telling their parents that they are gay—and by extension will not be reproducing the family, or producing grandchildren for them—Donghae, Taesub, Yoochun, and Changmin are all unhappiness-causing objects for their families. Yet Donghae explains it beautifully, that the reason he came out was because he loves and respects his parents. His love does not orient him away from his sexuality, as it did when he was younger, but it fucks up the whole system of objects and subjects and orientations and even blood: his love for his mother, whatever normative or non-normative rules and desires that may be attached to it, compels him to be “honest” with her. He knows that it will upset her, just like Taesub and Changmin knew it would upset their mothers, but he told her anyway because that’s what a son does when he loves his mother.

I suggested earlier in this chapter that my friends feel like vampires, that because personhood is predicated on shared blood and the ability to perpetuate one’s bloodline, my friends are

discursively dead, non-persons that only feed on blood rather than share blood. The stories I shared indicate the tension my friends have with their families, the guilt that swells inside of them because they conceivably lack the ability to pass on their blood—they cannot produce grandchildren for their parents. But what I have also been illustrating with the stories of love and sex, along with Donghae's story above, is that there is conflict between discourses of personhood and experiences of it. In Chapter Three I discussed Yoochun's mother's attempts to bring her son back into normativity, and ultimately personhood, by sharing her own story of death. Yoochun is discursively a non-person, and yet his mother did not accept that—partly because it would have reflected on her own personhood, but also because she could not imagine her son as *not* her son.

My friends may still feel like vampires given the rhetorical marriage of blood and personhood, but perhaps *affective personhood*—a sense of self and belonging that transcends the physical and even discursive boundaries of national and cultural paradigms of personhood—connects mother and son, or son and parents, in such a way that by *not* telling of one's sexuality one feels even more guilty. Donghae alluded to the idea that when you love someone you keep nothing secret from that person, and so he told his mother that he is gay because he wanted her to know everything about him (though, of course, sparing her some details). She is his mother and should know everything about her son, he thinks, and this sharing of secrets is what solidifies that affective correspondence between the two. My friends are attempting to construct their good son-ness, or filial piety, by using whatever tools they have available to them, but ironically all they have is their bad son-ness, or unhappiness-causing, non-normative sexuality. On the backs of non-normativity they build a system of normativity. But more importantly, they simply



create an idea of loyalty, dedication, and familial love, as if to say, “I like boys, yes, but I’m still a good son.”

Each of my friends still believes that they are lacking something, that there is part of their self that they lack and that it has to do with their sexuality. They cannot fill this hole by being straight—Taesub’s father asked his son, tears in both of their eyes and Taesub on his knees, if he could change and all Taesub could do was apologize, implying that he is not *unwilling* but *unable* to change. The fact that Taesub’s father, along with Changmin’s mother and even, to a certain extent, Donghae’s mother, accept their sons regardless of their sexualities illustrate that their parents believe them to be both gay *and* their sons. However, each of my friends also alludes to their attempt—some more enthusiastic than others—to “fill” that lacking. Donghae explains that he studied harder, tried to be a better Christian, and was even more filial to his parents than before as a way to offset his sexuality. He does not necessarily find it to be a problem, but he knows others find his non-normativity to be a cause of unhappiness—he is preemptive in his strike so that the threat that others will interpellate him as a causer of unhappiness never will “materialize as a clear and present danger” (Massumi 2010: 55). Taesub assumes a similar scenario and thus studied hard, kept to himself, and was the model son for his father and stepmother, partly to avert attention away from him but also in part to embody a son that seems happy regardless of his sexuality: “If queers have to . . . approximate signs of happiness in order to be recognized, then they might have to minimize signs of queerness” (Ahmed 2010: 94). Though Taesub was quite unhappy growing up, feeling utterly alone desiring men, he did not want others to know that—he did not want to become an “affect alien” and be the cause of unhappiness for his family (Ahmed 2010). None of my friends do.

Yet now that some of my friends have come out, how do they attempt to fill these gaps? Changmin's mother was quite clear that Changmin would have to work harder because he is gay, not because she thinks he is lacking but because she knows everyone else will think that; Taesub's mother had the same sentiment. And so, even after making the decision to come out or not, some of my friends try to work harder to fill that gap. Jaejoong is one of the smartest people I know—he is currently working on his Ph.D. in Korean linguistics at Yonsei University. Not all attempts to rectify their lacking are entirely academic, nationalistic, or even public. Yoochun, Changmin and Kibum are all quite smart, but none of them excel at school. However, their embrace of their sexuality and their desires perhaps provides them with a way of dealing with the perceived lacking: “We fill our bodies with what they lack, open up to the stream of the world, reach out to others” (Leder 1990: 75).

Emotions are normative, argues Ahmed (2004), and so when my friends yearn for that emotional connection, be it conscious or not, they are not necessarily yearning to be normative—none are talking marriage, adoption, and transforming into Stepford fags—but they want to use this emotion to illustrate that they are not *failed* people or non-people. They can be emotional with other men, and while many might construe it to be a non-normative expression of a fucked up, inside-out affect alien, they see themselves as human, as people, as persons. These emotions, whatever we may call them and whatever affect they may entail, give life to their dead bodies. In a sense, it is impossible to tell if the pain I saw in Changmin's eyes when he spoke of his guilt for not being able to produce grandchildren for his parents was a result of his guilt—I hurt because I am guilty of being the cause of unhappiness for my family—or if the pain is because he is expected to feel guilty—I hurt because everyone expects me to be guilty and so I am guilty. Happiness may be normative, but what if we queer happiness? Or what if we queer all emotions

and intimacies? Can queers not circulate traditionally normative objects—objects that have been circulated and have garnered normative affective value—with seemingly new affective value? To a certain extent this is what my friends have done and continue to do. They are queering happiness and the affective value of these happy objects by redefining what can and cannot be sources of happiness for themselves and even for their families. Not coming out, for Jaejoong and the vast majority of gays and lesbians in Korea, is what queers can do to make their families happy, and by extension they are *supposed* to be happy. Some of my friends do come out, but they do so not for selfish reasons but for the sake of their families. Obligation demands heterosexuality and family reproduction. But intimacy seems to be asking for something else, something that does not trump obligation but recontextualizes it. We can speak of legal persons and discursive persons—Koreans and family members made by blood. But we cannot, no, we should not, neglect the very real, the very affective encounters that construct selves at an intimate level that do not sidestep blood and nation but reinterpret it, queer it, to fit the needs of the individual.

## 5. THE PROMISE OF GAYNESS: A JOURNEY IN BECOMING

*Voyage in place: that is the name of all intensities, even if they also develop in extension. To think is to voyage...* Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari (1987: 482)

This project has contributed to a critique of Denis Altman's (2001) global gay paradigm in that I have argued that there is no essential gayness or global gay identity within a country or even a cultural generation (in this case, college students in South Korea). Gayness is understood and negotiated in conversation with other identities and norms in specific cultural contexts—providing the possibility of transnational flows of cultural influence—but never really pinpointing what then constitutes Korean gayness. There is a construction of gayness that takes place, especially within *Come Together*, but what is it that they construct? What constitutes this particular gayness? There is no single answer to these questions because the questions themselves are misleading and ill-conceived, for I find little virtue and ethnographic integrity in asking what gayness *is* and would rather ask what it *does*.

One important thing gayness does in South Korea is that it converses between sexuality and family. Similar to both Janet Carsten's (2004) and Sylvia Yanagisako and Jane Collier's (2004) arguments that kinship and gender are mutually constructive categories and should be explored as such, sexuality and kinship are also mutually constructive categories, as Kath Weston (1993, 1998) notes. Gayness in Korea should be understood alongside the family and theories of kinship as the way in which my friends talk about their sexualities is with reference to their families. For my friends, family is as important as their sexualities, and so becoming gay—the promise of gayness—is learning not only how to live with both forms of identification but how to do so without diminishing the importance of either one. Tension between the two does not necessarily denote equality or balance. In particular, I have proposed that personhood is predicated on shared blood and the potential to share one's blood with one's offspring, but my friends fail to

replicate this system, homosexuality implying a social death given this form of personhood. Yet another form of affective personhood arises where my friends negotiate their good-son-ness and sexuality as a way to be simultaneously happy and unhappy, thus drawing further attention to the importance of addressing kinship and sexuality together as parts of the dividual assemblage. I have attempted, throughout this entire project, to present discourses of gayness and family in South Korea not as a method of constructing any singular or comprehensive understanding of what homosexuality and family are, even within the limited context of my peers in school. Instead, I have sought to narrate how my friends have interacted with it, intersected it, shaped it, and constructed their own practices and lives in conversation with norms. In other words, my focus is the becoming and doing, not the being. Analytically, both kinship and gayness are forms of doing.

### **Dividual Assemblages**

I have begun this project with the interplay of (homo)sexuality and kinship, arguing for the interpretation of non-normative sexualities vis-à-vis families of origins. The rationale for such a focus stems from the experience of my friends—their families are instrumental in how they navigate their multiple subjectivities, being a form of identity itself. However, as South Korea no doubt continues on the path of neoliberal progress—no matter how culturally situated it may be (see Ong 1999)—the discursive threat of the erosion of all things “Korean” at the hand of regional and global integration seems deafening. I therefore have approached this project both from experience and theory, for while the interpenetration of kinship and (homo)sexuality is crucial to consider (especially in South Korea), discourses of global sexualities and binaries of mod-

ern/ progressive versus traditional/conservative still seem pervasive in both the anthropological literature but also in Korean studies (c.f., Mahmood 2005, Shin 2006, Song 2009a, Rofel 2007).

My intention in the introduction of this project was to dispel this binary as fact and instead suggest the multiplicity of subjectivities as explained by Marilyn Strathern's (1988) *dividual*, whereby relationships between people and discourses construct nodes within a larger network. This was both my starting point in this project and the culminating argument, that my friends—and arguably all selves in Korea, or even as a more general theoretical tool akin to Dorinne Kondo's (1990) work—are subjects to multiple bodies, be they discursive, historical, ideological, political, economical, social, or simply just other human bodies. The *dividual* is very much like an assemblage (*à la* Deleuze and Guattari 1987), where parts are not simply added to the assemblage but are used in specific ways, albeit strategically based on the situation or context, to transform and reassemble into different patterns. Parts may fall off or be added, as relationships are continuously created and severed, but rather than layered on top for one to peel off and uncover some essential self, the parts of the *dividual* assemblage are always in motion, always dialogical and recursive with the other parts in order to shape those parts, as a way to illustrate that there is no authentic or true self (see Boellstorff 2005, Butler 2010). In approaching sexualities and kinships—along with any form of subjectivity or identity—we can observe that relationships are not destructive (Altman 2001) or even hybrid (Sinnott 2004), but continuously moving, constantly reassembled interactions that may be tense but are indeed productive (Foucault 1978, Boellstorff 2007a). As I am concerned with the way the self is made by and through discourses and narratives, and find more value in beginning what will no doubt be an on-going body of research with a very thick and intimate perspective, I have included the stories of only

five friends (six if I include Taesub) to provide a more vivid and humanistic tone to my ethnography.

The remainder of the chapters has been dedicated to elucidating aspects of the individual and the relatedness of homosexuality and kinship in Korea. In Chapter Two I have explored the developments or history of homosexuality as an identity category in South Korea alongside a history of Come Together, the primary context for this ethnography. I began the chapter with Yoochun's "coming out" story in order to illustrate the primacy of secret telling and secret keeping for my friends, Come Together, and the history of homosexuality in Korea. Those who identify as gay hardly ever express such an identity outwards—particularly to their parents or to those not already identified as gay—and therefore will often gather and practice their sexualities behind closed doors (club doors, bar doors, bedroom doors). The importance of consuming sex online and the advent of "gay spaces" dedicated to meeting other gay men is contingent on the influx of neoliberal policies as a result of the 1997 financial crisis in Asia (Cho 2003). Yet what this chapter has reinforced is the multiplicity of experiences with gayness—though shared themes most definitely arise among my friends (especially around secrets)—and that there is tension between generations (college-aged gays compared to those in their 30s and then those who are activists). Ultimately, I have shown that even within non-normative sexualities lie inequality and uneven hierarchies that still haunt the organization of gays and lesbians as they (i.e., Come Together) attempt to move forward not as a radically *queer* organization, but as a group of Koreans who are also gay.

This transitions into Chapter Three and my discussion of discourses of family and nation amidst neoliberal restructuring and rhetoric (see Song 2009). My intention in this chapter was to provide the complementary component to my project's argument regarding the interplay of sexu-

ality and kinship while simultaneously illustrating the complexity of family and nation as not only discursive bodies but lived experiences. I have continued Yoochun's "coming out" story as an illustration of one mother's most filial act (two abortions of female fetuses) alongside her son's greatest family betrayal (his desire to sleep with men). However, I have nuanced this picture further by introducing the idea of one's loyalty to the Korean nation, whereby one's claim of homosexuality (or gayness) is a treasonous desire, met quite figuratively with "death." As personhood in Korea, at least discursively, is defined by the both the blood one shares (with one's parents) and the ability to pass that blood on to one's offspring (through heterosexual reproduction with one's legal spouse), my friends all present as discursive non-persons. What is perhaps most shocking is that many of my friends, Changmin especially, find immense value in this blood-based system that essentially cast them as non-persons. This is again contextualized with specific historical transitions—a shift in neoliberal policies—and rhetoric that placed blame for family struggles and breakdowns in the hands of bad wives and mothers (see Song 2006). Therefore, while "coming out" is seen as a family thing—it presents quite differently than the Western counterpart from which it adopts its English usage—the relationship between my friends and their mothers (indicative of a larger discourse of mothers and sons) indicates an intimacy where mothers bypass their sons' discursive non-personhood and embrace them as their sons, as people.

The spaces between relationships, or even the glue, screws, and nails that hold the parts of the assemblages together, are the intimacies experienced between my friends and both their parents and their lovers. If mothers are willing to stray into discursive non-normativity for the sake of their non-normative children, then there must be something beyond the symbolics of blood that holds them together. Similarly, if my friends are utterly concerned with their families and their happiness, then there must be something holding them to non-normativity. Changmin



notes that he could marry a woman and have children if he wanted to, in order to make his parents happy, but he has no desire to do so—he would rather continue sleeping with men *and* be a filial son. Chapter Four is therefore dedicated to the exploration of intimacies by using Sara Ahmed's (2004, 2010) discussions of the circulation of (happy) objects to garner affective value. In essence, the relationships of my friends hinge on the circulation of those relationships within the discursive and experiential fields in order to judge them as happiness-causing or unhappiness-causing. Two objects may make one happy, but the complexity of that happiness—the happiness Changmin receives from having sex with men may threaten the happiness of his family, and vice versa—further illustrates the complexity of the dividual assemblage. The parts that circulate in these economies of affect are not always harmonious with one another, and so any given assemblage can easily be a tense dividuality indeed. But that's the point. I am not interested in mitigation or compromise where all parties are happy—happiness is not a forever-held state but something one works towards, moves towards, and orients towards (Ahmed 2010).

### **Transnationally Queer**

We could easily expand Ahmed's (2004, 2010) discussion to transnational processes and cultural flows, especially given the influence of neoliberalism in Korea and its push to regionalize and globalize. What would a transnational circulation of affect then look like? And more importantly, how conscious are Koreans, or simply my friends, of such a circulation? As I have made clear, my intention is not to posit the possibility of global sexualities. Quite the opposite. Nonetheless, my interest in transnational interconnectedness no doubt comes throughout in small pockets, perhaps most notably in Chapter One where I have taken seriously my own role and influence in *Come Together* and among my friends. My inclusion in this ethnography has been

extremely personal and theoretically rich, as I have provided the possibility, the link to the transnational circulation of subjects and objects. My in-between, or “halfie” (Abu-Lughod 1990), position has afforded me both a vantage point to analyze gayness in Korea and also an intimate connection with the lives of my informants. Yet I have also provided my friends and the members of Come Together a reference point to a different form or discourse of gayness, one they certainly had access to online and through media—Arjun Appadurai’s (1996) mediascapes and technoscapes are quite salient in this regard—but perhaps never experientially. Yet as I have alluded to in Chapter One, I was not necessarily concerned with the implications or even manifestations of those interactions as a discussion of transnationalism. Instead it has served as a methodological tool for me to provide even thicker and more vivid ethnography and as part of my insistence that sexualities be understood in the context of a number of immediate (non-sexual) relationships.

There have been a number of recent scholars of Asia who have focused on similar topics within the transnational flows of culture (c.f., Sinnott 2004, Boellstorff 2007a, Rofel 2007, Manalansan 2003, Peletz 2007). Many of them have been included in what Megan Sinnott (2010) calls Asian ‘queer’ studies, where authors are concerned with the instability of normative and non-normative gender/sexuality categories. There are no doubt rather political implications with the use of “queer” in cross-cultural contexts, as Sinnott (2010) and Ara Wilson (2006) discuss, but just as political are the use of “Asia” and even “East Asia” (Wilson 2006). As important as the work on queer Asian theories that move away from hegemonic Western perspectives is, I would be amiss if I did not also mention the inherent biases with any form of Asian regionalism for the simple fact that there is a rather thick air of animosity between several countries in the region. Boellstorff (2007a), thankfully, does a superb job at contextualizing the history of

Southeast Asia before discussing any queer topics, while others have not been as careful (c.f., Sinnott 2010, Welker and Kam 2006). The history of the South Korean nation is overrun with instances of Chinese imperialism, Japanese colonialism, and the shadow government of the United States, and so while there has been an active engagement with neoliberal and global processes and discourses, there have been as much, if not more, defensive maneuvers to safeguard the nation and its people from once again falling into the precarious state of subservience (Shin 2006).

My project has followed the goals of recent literature on Asian ‘queer’ studies, insofar as it considers a set of understandings or even theories of sexuality that stem not from hegemonic Western or even American-driven discourses and institutions but instead develop within the cultural and historical logics of Korea (Welker and Kam 2006). While I am not concerned with the “incorporation of queer politics” into my study of “‘queers,’ or ‘queer culture’” (Sinnott 2010), I do deconstruct the production of both normative (i.e., kinship/family) and non-normative (i.e., homosexuality) categories in Korea and the manner in which those categories are political and power-laden yet productive and useful tools of analysis (See Butler [1991] 2010, Valentine 2007). However unstable such a regional category may be for any given national history, there is still great productivity with regional analyses. As Wilson (2006) writes,

Significantly, these analyses highlight power relations *within* Asia, stressing internal hierarchies and inequalities alongside those of the greater world system. This critical sense of region invites more attention from Queer Studies as a resource to provincialise, while recognizing, the forces of the West. The view of dynamic, power-inflected histories in Asia allows for an analysis of queer possibilities *within* the global south that can decentre the attribution of sexual modernity to a white US and European model.

To discuss either “queer” or “Asia”—and truly, to use any category with a rather contentious and at times violent genealogy—is to reimagine the contexts and situatedness of those words, but that

should not preclude our use of them, of their goals, as long as we recontextualize them in such a way that proves their use and not necessarily their abuse (see Boellstorff 2007a).

Perhaps the greatest use I see of either queer theory or Asian ‘queer’ studies is that it allows us to incorporate a number of immediate relationships, contexts, situations, and subjectivities that are not necessarily ‘sexual’ in order to “elucidate the contradictory and complex ways normative orders are produced, challenged, and reasserted in historical and social contexts” (Sinnott 2010). What I call for is further interaction between neoliberal studies, sexuality studies, and queer studies where we use other forms of identity and discourses as a way to talk about sexuality: how are different nations and cultures connected in ways that inadvertently connect sexualities without necessarily making sexuality the point of interaction? In other words, queer theory allows us to destabilize normative and non-normative categories, but it also allows us to chart the changes in both non-normative behavior and identities and also normative claims—neither is a static entity as both are in constant motion. This project has only scratched the surface of an even larger body of unexamined experiences and processes, especially in Korea. While I have attempted to illustrate transnational connections and influences in constructions of kinship and gayness in South Korea, I am still left with one final question: what does gayness in Korea do, transnationally? I leave this question to my next project.

### **Queering Becoming**

We might think of gayness then as a moving target—something that members orient towards in hopes of achieving it. The promise of gayness, much like the promise of happiness (Ahmed 2010), provides the members of Come Together a goal to work towards, a beacon that shows them the way to *be* gay without ever reaching that ideal because that *something* does not actually

exist. I have illustrated that doing gayness in Korea is first and foremost doing it in secret, while I also elucidated that doing it takes place in the between spaces of their filial and national obligations. The affective residue and tension in kinships and relationships also indicates that the doing of gayness in a relationship and in one's family is also in tension with discourses of homosexuality and family in Korea. The point, though, is that gayness does not take one form as the complexity between sons and their mothers, boys and their lovers, and members and their gay friends must be integrated into the dividual self, but that integration is an ongoing, learned process—a process of becoming. As such, there is neither a start to becoming nor an end to it, only a between-ness, a plateau “proceeding from the middle, through the middle, coming and going rather than starting and finishing” (Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 25). Yet the gay-becoming journey on which members embark is one that also indicates belonging, that each member is not gay-becoming alone but with the other members, and with me. We are becoming together, and “in becoming is belonging” (Massumi 2002: 76).

Belonging-becoming, or the promise of gayness—each story in this project moves us closer to a sense of belonging for it is that movement that embodies our becoming. And yet, we also all share another belonging-becoming, that of a son. The promise of gayness is as much a filial *compromise* as it is a sexual one, for *Come Together* indirectly teaches us not only how to act around other gay men but also how to act around our families: we are all in similar situations and use each other and our collective voyage (our collective becoming) to help navigate through other discourses and relationships. This is the importance of *Come Together*, for members cannot talk to just anyone about their sexualities and the issues that arise when they attempt to juggle their love of men and their love for their families (among the many balls in the air). Becoming gay also entails becoming a son. But it is impossible to chart exactly what one becomes be-

cause while there may be ideals, as I discussed in Chapter Four, my friends and the members of Come Together are always one step behind that object. They are promised gayness, and that promise is never broken because the mentality of the promise, and of my friends, is that they are in arms length to the goal. They are always in arm's length, though.

If gayness involves orientation and movement towards it, then the promise of gayness is a journey, one not easily made. They stand before an ocean on the deck of their rowboat, gazing out towards the horizon and do not think, "piece of cake," but rather, "I should have rented a bigger boat." The fact that the ocean is uncharted, or "smooth," does not preclude difficulties: "Voyaging smoothly is a becoming, and a difficult, uncertain becoming at that" (Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 482). Mistakes are made; it's inevitable. The mistakes I made while a member of Come Together illustrate my own turbulent journey to gayness, but mistakes are part of learning and part of becoming. Voyaging is not about unobtrusive, wide-open spaces of unterritorialized land. Obstacles and struggles are always present, especially for us queers: "It is thus possible to give an account of being happily queer that does not conceal signs of struggle" (Ahmed 2010: 118). For Sara Ahmed (2010), struggling indicates that queers are happy being unhappy because unhappiness is the indication—to both the queers and the world encircling us—that happiness is a normative category and we are rightfully fucking with it.

So let's queer the voyage. These members are not the first nor will they be the last to be promised gayness, happiness, or unhappiness. They are arriving in the middle of an ongoing voyage of becoming—there is no ceremonious declaration of beginning or ending but just a doing. What came before them—the histories, contexts, and normative emotions—weigh heavily on their shoulders as they paddle their way across the ocean in their rowboat. But they never reach the other side because there is no other side, only islands to stop at along the way. They

are not traveling alone, for in the rowboats next to them, and all around them, are their friends and family—they are becoming together. The entirety of their dividual network encircles each and every one of them, much like it does me as I am right next to Changmin, Donghae, Yoochun, Kibum, and Jaejoong—paddling my ass off if only to keep up.

## EPILOGUE—ROMANCES OF KOREA: ON ETHNOGRAPHIC LONGING

*The tree was not only stripped by the cold season, it seemed weary from age, enfeebled, dry. I was thankful, very thankful that I had seen it. So the more things remain the same, the more they change after all—plus c'est la même chose, plus ça change. Nothing endures, not a tree, not love, not even a death by violence.*

John Knowles (1959: 6)

How do we learn to do and write ethnography? The classes we took as graduate students, the field methods books we read, and the writing exercises we did all formed that typical foundation to our knowledge of methods and methodologies—we must be taught how to conduct research just as we must be taught how to write about our research. Part of the process of learning, of course, is by example, beginning with Malinowski and never fully reading to completion the plethora of ethnographies that are in circulation and added to on a regular basis. Yet what if we admit that in addition to reading our anthropology and even other monographs from other disciplines, we also read literature, biographies, non-fiction, and contemporary fiction? I can hear the chorus of graduate students in the background: “who the hell has time for that?” A valid question, having asked it countless times myself. But I still recall my Shakespeare, Faulkner, and Bronte. Do we fear academic humiliation for admitting we read non-academic works, and god forbid, they are written by non-academics? I am not the first, nor will I be the last, to suggest that as important as reading Geertz, Abu-Lughod, and Rosaldo are, just as pivotal to our writing and methodological nuances is to immerse ourselves into all types of writing, especially fiction. Am I not able to learn and incorporate style and rhetoric from Neil Gaiman to the same extent, if not more so, than James Clifford and Ruth Benedict?

Ruth Behar (1999: 476) believes that ethnography “comes from tremendous longing...it is a form of thinking, writing, and being-in-the-world, born of unrequited love, because there were other things we wanted to do in life, other things we wanted to be.” I myself dreamed to be



a writer, much like Behar herself, and feel that my choice to compose ethnography is a way to fulfill that dream with much more conviction and purpose than if I only wrote fiction. In other words, I approach my ethnography, as I did with this project, as fiction, a story I want to tell for not simply the story's sake but for those real people with whom I became friends, shared experiences with, and loved the way one wishes they could love the characters of a novel. And to effectively achieve a story worth telling, "ethnography must be done with grace, with precision, with an eye for the telling detail, an ear for the insight that comes unexpectedly, with a tremendous respect for language, with a compassion for homesickness, and yes, with a love of beauty—especially, of beauty in places where it usually is not looked for" (Behar 1999: 477).

We also long for things we cannot have back, things that we once had but are now lost. The "tremendous longing" Behar (1999: 476) describes also originates from our ethnographic refusal to let go, to experience loss but to use our ethnography as a form of alchemy to transmute words into experience, into affect. We are never fully successful, but the pieces we create, the ethnography that we write, at least makes an attempt. Not everyone writes like this or has a sense of longing in their ethnographies—few still agree that ethnography is a place for such discussions or inclusions. The presentation of this project is intentional as my goal runs parallel to Kamala Visweswaran's (1994: 15), indicating my ethnography's own textuality "in order to better understand the politics of representation, how different narrative strategies may be authorized at specific moments in history by complex negotiations of community, identity, and accountability." This epilogue, though, will reflect on my ethnographic longing, similar to Renato Rosaldo's (1989) "Grief and a Headhunter's Rage" where his own overwhelming grief of the tragic death of his wife, Michelle Rosaldo, was what facilitated the affective connection between him and his informants. Yet his piece served, much like my essay will, as a realization that what we long

for—in his case his wife and for me the fiction I wrote of Korea while living there—is unobtainable but worth longing for and writing about: “Call it sentimental, call it Victorian and nineteenth century, but I say that anthropology that doesn’t break your heart just isn’t worth doing anymore” (Behar 1996: 177).

Writing fiction is therapeutic for me. I wrote a 350-page novel alongside my honors thesis at Emory University and more than 200 pages of short stories alongside my masters thesis at Yonsei University. In all honesty, I began writing so that when I laid myself down in bed to fall asleep, I had something other than all of the hustle and bustle of that day to think about as I floated off to sleep. Blending fiction and ethnography together becomes natural for me because, as Visweswaran (1994: 1) argues, “ethnography, like fiction, constructs existing or possible worlds, all the while retaining the idea of an alternative ‘made’ world.” We are in the business of creating worlds while living in the world. My world had blended so intimately with the world of my friends to the extent that separation was impossible. I was experiencing the same emotions and affects of my informants because I had joined Come Together for the same reasons they did—how the hell was I supposed to turn away from all that and compose an ethnography high atop my desk? This ethnography is, in short, both the cause and effect, question and answer, problem and solution, mania and therapy. And only in treating both the stories I am told and the stories that I tell as narratives am I able to compose an ethnography that positions me—anthropologist, ethnographer, writer, author, narrator, actor, friend, brother—alongside my friends, the members of Come Together, and the nation of Korea, never above or removed from it. There are differences, no doubt, but there are also similarities. Theory doesn’t tell us that, stories do.

## **Fictions of Korea**

I write, and when I write of Korea—the streets of Seoul, Yonsei University, the food, my living accommodations, and all my friends—I write affectively. My memory of all things “Korea” come flooding back as I write, all of the experiences, emotions, interactions, and affects, but I can feel these memories slowly fading: “All memories are subject not only to simple, gradual erosion over time, but also to conscious or unconscious repression, distortion, mistakes, and even to a limited extent, outright lies” (Visweswaran 1994: 68). Writing thus becomes the only conceivable method for me to regain those fading memories, reconstruct the images, sounds, smells, and feelings of Korea that I lived while undergoing the most powerful change in my (granted short) life. To live there, build a life with friends, family, a job, and support, only to pick all that up and leave may seem ordinary to some, but it is anything but to those who must experience it.

I moved to Seoul fresh out of undergrad, the smell of the Emory library stacks still in my mind from spending countless hours there doing research, studying Japanese, and finding a corner to just read. I had lived in Japan for a year while a junior at Emory, but I lived under the watchful and caring eye of a Japanese family who treated me as one of their own. I had traveled to Korea while studying in Japan for winter break, a Korean friend I met at Emory picking me up and arranging a place to stay. I remember before going, having been a Korean popular culture junkie, that there was a fantasy of Korea I had created in my mind, a fiction of what I thought Korea was and did. In all honesty, visiting Korea fulfilled that fantasy, making that fiction not just an imagined fairytale I told myself to get to sleep at night, but a lived experience. Walking through the streets of Myeongdong with a sea of people surrounding me I felt invisible, of course being rather visible being a non-Asian foreigner. Yet the feeling of being surrounded, the affect of having no singular body but an amorphous mob-like body, overpowered me to the point of

mental freedom—I have no idea what enlightenment is like, but I wonder if it is anything close to that momentary experience. The CD stores, the cafes, the bars, the restaurants, and all of the hundreds of specialty shops made Seoul no different than any other large city, no different than Osaka where I had been studying. What marked it as distinct, as fantastical, was my habitus at the time, my carefree, fun-loving attitude that yearned to visit Korea, the land of all my favorite pop stars and television dramas. I visited all the major landmarks that appeared in the dramas I watched, like many Japanese tourists would do, and found myself colliding with the melodramas I was consuming. There was the fantasy I had constructed in my head before ever visiting Korea, one discursively shaped by the music, television shows, movies, news articles, and Koreans I knew—not to mention the four months living in Japan before actually visiting Korea, which only added to this fantasy—and then there was the fiction I wrote while in Korea, a lived fiction based on the fantasy I imagined and the experiences I encountered.

However, there is a difference between visiting Korea, even for a month at a time, and living in Korea. When I moved to Korea, I had two suitcases, a messenger bag, and the ability to say perhaps three words in Korean. I knew only one person, a Korean friend who was kind enough to pick me up at the airport and drive me to my living accommodations—I was back in the dorms, at least for a semester. I was older than everyone else, no longer an undergrad studying abroad, so as soon as I could I moved out and into my one room apartment where I would live the next two and a half years. Yes, I was a student, but I was not studying abroad, I was not there only for a year, and I honestly had no earthly idea when I would go back to the United States—I was there for the long haul.

Slowly but surely I pieced together a world, a reality, a lifestyle that I felt best reflected who I was, or at least who I wanted to be. I was sexually conservative in America, not fully un-

derstanding what it meant to be “gay,” at least for me—all the trappings of the metanarrative of homosexuality were unappealing to me and I avoided telling anyone if only because I did not want to be thought of as anyone other than me. Yet in Korea, for no other reason than it symbolized that proverbial new beginning, I decided to embrace my sexuality and identify as “gay,” though I still had little idea what that might entail. For a year and a half I struggled in Korea for a way to *be* gay and not afraid to be different. When I joined Come Together, that fear began to fade away, though it still lingers even today, as I do not think I will ever be comfortable enough in my own body to parade myself around as the epitome of “gay.” All of the affective residue I spoke of in the introductory story of joining Come Together is what held me so tightly to this image I had of Korea, a fiction I was constructing and living in as the principle character, narrator, and author—I was writing my own *Vagina Monologues* without the other two and without the vaginas. So began another transition, from awkward closeted gay American to a cultural halfie without even knowing that I was serving a purpose to my friends and the members of Come Together the way they were serving my purpose of finally being enculturated into a group of gay men.

### **Romances of Korea**

I had left Korea with the thought that it was time to transition to a new stage in my life, nuance my dividuality one again with more graduate school and a different environment. I do not regret leaving Korea, as I had a job I hated and felt as if my life was going nowhere in particular, not because of Korea but because at that stage in my life my options were limited if I stayed. I could continue my editorial job, spending eight hours a day editing god-awful medical research articles written in terrible English and overrun with plagiarism, or I could take an English teacher posi-

tion—like the vast majority of young Americans, Europeans, Canadians and Australians living in Korea—and become a Korean stereotype. Both pay well, but both are only so fulfilling, and neither seemed appealing enough, despite the monetary gain, to sacrifice more time.

But the fact that I knew I had to leave Korea did not make it in any way easy—I was leaving close friends, whom I considered family, a rather liberal lifestyle (both sexually and monetarily), and a stress level of near zero. The connections I made, the intimacies I had built, were in no way superficial and so leaving that behind, losing that to the nation that has already taken so much (though has given quite a bit in return), felt as if who I was, the dividuality I had cultivated into the self I and others call “Tim,” was being ripped from my body: “please check all meaningful and life-changing identities at the gate.” The longing that Behar (1999) so keenly proposes as the *gusto* of ethnography was born in this moment, crossing the threshold of the gate, sitting in between a Korean college student on his way back to school after a summer holiday home and an older Korean mother going to visit some friends for a few months in Atlanta, and taking off into the clear morning sky as the only tears I would shed for Korea came showering down my face.

It was not until I returned to Seoul a year later, in the summer of 2011, that I saw this fiction for what it was: an out-of-reach, pie-in-the-sky romance of a lifestyle I could never get back, that is, if I ever had it to begin with. There was an overwhelming pressure leading up to the plane ride that would carry me back to the Land of the Morning Calm: Would my friends and I still click? Would they be as willing to talk to me in the manner they did when I lived there? Would I be able to orient myself back to life in Korea, whatever that may entail? When I stepped off the plane and saw Changmin standing there, waiting for me, some of the anxiety dis-

appeared. Torn from the pages of my diary, written the first day I was in Korea at 4:47 in the morning:

As we were walking through the airport in search of a place I could turn my phone into a prepaid one, he mentioned how he ‘wasn’t getting any’ and that it had been over a month, which for him is quite a long time. Not even in the country for an hour and we were talking sex. It was at that moment that all of our experiences from our conversations and such came flooding back full-force in such a way to put my anxious heart at ease. I was worried if we’d still get along, if after all this time the closeness and trust we shared would continue even now. In that moment, the thing we never physically shared, our sex lives, still existed in the intimate discourse that continued to shape our friendship. Conversation after that, save the waves of exhaustion that seemed inevitable, was easy.

Yet in the days that followed, as I roamed the city I once called home and went to the places I thought I knew so well, I realized that things had changed and I was a stranger in my own house. But by the end of the first week, averting death a number of times from the rain and ending up with a scraped knee and sprained ankle instead, I made it to my favorite café in all of Korea, the one that began my obsession with coffee boys and caffeinated beverages, and with the sun shining for the first time all week I finally felt at home. One of the waitresses that I got to know when I lived just around the corner had stopped in and recognized me, both of our faces lighting up as we only briefly talked—recognition solidifies memories and produces the affect of belonging I so desperately wanted. As I wrote in my diary only moments after meeting the waitress, “When I think of the romances of Korea, or *roma*, this is it. Coffee boys, coffee, and writing. Some things will never change.”

The fantasies of Korea and the self may never be obtainable, but the romances of Korea built into this fiction that I continue to write are found in moments of ordinary affect: “They’re things that happen... they happen in impulses, sensations, expectations, daydreams, encounters, and habits of relating, in strategies and their failures, in forms of persuasion, contagion, and

compulsion, in modes of attention, attachment, and agency, and in publics and social worlds of all kinds that catch people up in something that feels like *something*” (Stewart 2007: 2). Not every moment produces the same affective response, as the hodge-podge of intricate interactions, relations, and discourses that construct each moment (our dividuality) is in a constant state of flux and motion. Had I visited this café the second day I was in Korea, or if it had not rained for four days straight prior, or I had not sprained my ankle, been confined inside my friend’s tiny apartment, met my ex-boyfriend the second night I was there, or was at the café to meet Donghae a few hours later for our road trip down south, the overwhelming sense of belonging, the romances I had so desperately wanted to encounter again, would have never happened in that moment. The longing had become so great by that point, catharsis seemed to be the only thing left to experience.

Affect may be force, but it cannot be forced. Once I realized that I could experience those romances of Korea, I tried desperately to reclaim a sexuality seemingly lost to the congestion and idolatry of graduate school and a setting (i.e., America) that I felt lost in to express my sexuality (both physically through sex and emotionally through friendship). That which I did not force, friendship, seemed to congeal in the summer of 2011; still strong, albeit different, but the intimacies I shared with Changmin, Donghae, Yoochun, Kibum and Jaejoong, all of whom I met again while in Korea, were still there and still held us together. But my quest for sexual exploration (or exploitation) was both a breakaway success and a colossal failure, depending on the perspective. Without revealing too much and testing the limits of full disclosure, I was lost in America as to how to find gay men, masked by the same fear I experienced when I was first learning how to find gay men in Korea. To have to experience that vulnerability all over again was not a task I was keen on, so I tried to avoid it at all costs. But when I returned to Korea, I



knew exactly where to look online, the protocols and rules required, and all the details of this seeming sexual transaction. This trip was as much about research, I tell myself, as it was about “how Stella got her groove back.”

But it wasn't the same. The experiences I remember of the dates I would go on, the butterflies I would feel on our first date, and the guys I met disappeared. Instead they were replaced by self-centered actors, neurotic cheapskates, kleptomaniacs, disgusting bars, and cheap motels for but a couple hours of sexual thrills. If there is anything that these experiences share it is a longing, one Changmin spoke of when he described his constant parade of boys in and out of his bedroom: you never quite quench your thirst, either the experience is unfulfilling and you want to try again in order to rectify that, or the experience was so amazing that you want to recapture that once more. Either way, it makes for a perpetual cycle of sexual encounters that amount to nothing more than notches on a bedpost. And for those that took place out of a longing for that romance I once knew while living in Korea, the bodily forces, affective residue I was hoping would return, seemed empty—only the sexual tension that built up found release, but the romance was gone.

The lifestyle I led had vanished, crystalized only in the fictions I narrated as it had already been written, already been lived. I felt as though I was transported to Haruki Murakami's (1989: 79) worm universe where “there is nothing unusual about a dairy cow seeking a pair of pliers. A cow is bound to get her pliers sometime.” I was having dreams of unfulfilling experiences, and the flights-of-fancy I so richly deserved were caught in the pliers of the dairy cow out to find some peach trees. Was I destined to feel this way the entire time I was in Korea, torn between the affective residue of the romances of Korea and the sexual longing for a meaningful relationship, or at least encounter? Longing led to frustration, frustration led to depression, and

depression simply led to more frustration—I was frustrated that I could not obtain this fantasy, these affects, while also frustrated that I could not simply forget them and move forward to new fictions and new affects.

This was the struggle I experienced when I returned to Korea, making conducting research all the more difficult and tiresome—how could I have meaningful conversations with my friends when I could barely drag myself out of bed in the morning because the thought of rejection and longing seemed too great to bear? I must have been absent the day we reviewed depression and identity crisis in *Qualitative Methods*, or glossed over it in the several ethnographic methods books I have sitting on my bookshelf. Putting those internal struggles into words while in Korea was impossible, and my diary reads as if a page from a schizophrenic’s journal. It took weeks, after returning to Atlanta, for me to gain enough courage to open my notes and my diary, to face it all again, and I realized then that I needed to write about it to come to terms with it. I needed to write the fiction in order to let it go once and for all, to create my emotional and affective record of those moments in my life and then walk away from it. Much in the way Rosaldo used “Grief and the Headhunter’s Rage” to both come to terms with his wife’s death and his ethnographic longing for something more than what he was receiving from his research, I have used this project, and this essay in particular, to face the ethnographic longing I have for *my* Korea in order to construct a fiction of Korea that lingers less in the fantastical and more in the ethnographic and even romantic. While romances can be momentarily felt, fantasies will forever stay in the realm of the worm universe, where the dairy cow has lost her pliers and is enlisting my help to find them.

### **On Crying and Smiling**

I am still affected by my friends and those romances and the fiction. I will never be able to conclude this fiction because I started it in the middle and left it just the same: “It has neither beginning nor end, but always a middle (*milieu*) from which it grows and which it overflows”

(Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 21). Whenever I talk to Yoochun online in his free moments at his desk as a policeman fulfilling his mandatory military service, I feel the longing temporarily subside. I smile. In those brief, yet immensely affective moments, that hole I walk around with, that I have attempted to fill over the years since moving back from Korea, patches up. There will always be a hole until the day I move back to Korea and live there once again, but the moments spent with Yoochun online transport me back to a time and place when that fiction I was living was real—I was remembering the romances and reliving them, if only briefly.

Just recently Donghae sent me a New Year’s card, telling of his life in the army, his first time having sex, and his plan for when he is discharged later in 2012. He said he plans on going to graduate school to study Buddhism. While reading the card I cried, not out of sadness or depression, but out of sheer joy that I had heard from Donghae (and he was doing well) and that I can see a very likely future where he and I will not only meet again but be as close and intimate as we once more. The affective response of crying surprised me, but it has happened on numerous occasions, as has the sudden onset of a smile. While reading through the stories contained in this project I often smiled, not just because I was reading of an experience that brought back memories of happiness and joy, but because reading those stories while also listening to a particular song transformed the mere thought of ‘this is a good and pleasurable experience’ to a bodily response: smiling. Similarly, my inability to cry for a number of years and then the few and far between instances of crying has skyrocketed since writing this ethnography because reliving

those romances, be they positive or negative, coupled with the situation in which I read them—a car ride from Texas, a busy coffee shop during the peak hours of Christmas shopping, at home with the window open and Barbara Streisand playing in the background—produces the unexpected response of crying.

After I returned from my brief trip to Korea in 2011, and after I summoned the courage to read through my field notes and diary and began processing the information I had collected, I began to see myself settle into a new lifestyle in America. I was, and still am, somewhat fearful of the implications of my sexuality—particularly in finding potential sex and romance—but I have become more “at home” in this American body. I have started to venture out into this big gay world, meeting more men for different purposes, and have opened myself up to the possibility that I can *do* “gay” here in America without lamenting the lost fictions and romances of my Korean lifestyle. But again, this came as a result of my trip back to Korea in 2011 and my realization that I was longing for something I could never obtain. I am still affected by my friends and the fiction of Korea; my dividuality is still intimately tied to their dividuality, and vice versa. Yet I have nuanced my dividuality, or rather I have learned that my dividual network is infinite—as is my body’s capacity to affect and be affected—and so embarking on a new journey into this big gay world is not shutting the book on one fiction and beginning another. No, it is not that simple nor that depressing. Instead, I am adding another node to my dividual network, another layer to my dividuality, that is born out of my interactions and intimacies with my friends and the fiction and romances of Korea.

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