

## Essay

# Ghost in the Kitchen: Multiracial Korean Americans (Re)Defining Cultural Authenticity

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**Abstract:** This scholarly essay explores some techniques that multiracial Korean Americans employ to trouble traditional notions of cultural authenticity as markers for racial/ethnic identity construction. I position multiracial individuals as foils to the common assumptions that cultural authenticity requires “native” lived experience, “full bloodedness”, or a particular level of linguistic competency, in favor of cultural competency, analyzing the web community, HalfKorean.com. The site is a U.S.-based community of multiracial Korean Americans, where narrations of food and Korean motherwork play roles in many elements of the site, and in different ways work to reinforce new and adaptable forms of authenticity. Paying particular attention to the ways that cultural knowledge on the individual level becomes a marker for shaping community, I position Korean motherwork and household practices as vehicles of analysis. These embodied cultural practices inform community building practices, becoming critical variables for multiracial Korean Americans to exert cultural knowledge and expertise, authenticating flexible racial/cultural identities, which is an act of embodying what I term “plastic authenticity”. Multiracial bodies are inherently perceived as racially *in*-authentic; however, plastic authenticity is a framework that allows for expressions of identity and memory that resist this notion, grounded in their proximity to Korean women/motherhood.

**Keywords:** multiracial; Korean American; authenticity; motherwork



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## 1. Introduction: Getting Lost in H-Mart

Ever since my mom died, I cry in H-Mart . . . you'll likely find me crying by the *banchan* refrigerators, remembering the taste of my mom's soy-sauce eggs and cold radish soup. Or in the freezer section, holding a stack of dumpling skins, thinking of all the hours that Mom and I spent at the kitchen table folding minced pork and chives into the thin dough. Sobbing near the dry goods, asking myself, “Am I even Korean anymore if there's no one left in my life to call and ask which brand of seaweed we used to buy?” When I was growing up, with a Caucasian father and a Korean mother, my mom was my access point for our Korean heritage.

—Michelle Zauner, *Crying in H-Mart*

Authenticity is a peculiar entity. Its definition reads “of undisputed origin; genuine”. Synonyms are real, legitimate, and valid. Its definition and the parameters of such change depending on who is articulating it, how many people agree on that definition, the relationships that people have to an object or place, and even the period or region in which a particular object or idea exists. In all cases, in a given object, authenticity is assumed to be inherently objective and measurable (Jones 2010). People are also objects of authenticity, boundary objects of sorts, that fluctuate between reading as authentic in the physical state and as symbols of authenticity in the ideological state.

For Michelle Zauner, losing her mother to cancer meant losing her metaphorical tether to Koreanness. Her mother, and the Korean food she consumed with her mother, became the boundary objects between her and her own perceptions of being “authentically Korean”.

Weeping in the Korean grocery chain H-Mart demonstrates just how deeply culture and foodways interact with our perceptions of identity. In particular, Michelle connected this concept of eating, and the process of food preparation with her mother, which directly reflected onto her sense of self. She notes, “I can hardly speak Korean, but in H-Mart I feel like I’m fluent. I fondle the produce and say the words aloud—*chamoe* melon, *danmuji* . . . I remember the snacks Mom told me she ate when she was a kid . . . I wanted to like all the things she did, to embody her completely” (Zauner 2018). Authenticity is so tenuous, and her sense of authentic Koreanness is consciously dependent on her mother and the food associated with her mother. Material objects have power, then. Maternal labor has power beyond child rearing and bodily nourishment. They become ways to position people as authentic even when their biology seeks to position them otherwise.

In an effort to retain the deeply personal and individual nature of identity construction, I consciously frame this exploration of authenticity as a scholarly essay, and not in the form of an empirical study. Rather than orienting the aim of this work to make larger claims about multiracial identity or to validate a hypothesis, I am interested in offering a theoretical lens with which to explore and observe the role of authenticity as it relates to multiraciality in our existing social systems. Through the analysis of one specific site of public engagement and community building, I offer a theoretical discussion of some ways that multiracial Korean Americans create and sustain community and articulate complex identities from the margins of racial constructs. As such, this essay is a focused exploration into the ways that one such community publicly archives a collective ethos that is ultimately Korean in nature, while attending to the realities of the complex racial structures that historically render their “Koreanness” as marginal or inauthentic. Ultimately, this essay seeks to challenge dominant conceptions of cultural authenticity by arguing that multiracial Korean Americans actively and consciously assert racial identities that challenge the historical rigidity of cultural authenticity in favor of a “plastic” form of authenticity embodied by those in the margins—the historically *inauthentic* multiracial body.

Using interviews conducted through the online community HalfKorean.com as the site of analysis, I discuss the ways that narrating one’s experiences with the “Korean household” (and all acts associated with motherwork such as food and household practices/traditions) becomes a viable vehicle to legitimize oneself as “Korean”. I first offer a grounded discussion of the subjective nature of multiraciality and its position within dominant U.S. racial structures. Then, I proceed to examine interviews in the HalfKorean.com community in three capacities: to complicate the notion that linguistic competency is an accurate measure of cultural participation, to articulate how material culture such as foodways are a key site for identifying the inherent “plasticity” in the racial narratives of multiracial Koreans, and how embodied cultural practices related to the home are prescribed through the spectral figure of Korean motherhood.

Traditionally, rendering people as authentic operates on two different levels. Sometimes we refer to people as authentic as a compliment about their personality, because they always “keep it real”. Authenticity implies a form of honesty or truth. This directly influences the second form of authenticity we read onto people. It reads on bodies themselves. Authentic people are “real”. Inauthentic people, then, are unreal. Bodies become boundary objects of reality, i.e., objects that are meant to maintain specific meanings in different spaces, places or times, and through the process of translation create meaningful and coherent messages about the object (Star and Griesemer 2015, p. 177).

If certain bodies are considered authentic, then what do we do with the inauthentic ones? Do we discard these bodies from cultural memory, destined to be erased from the fabric of a moment in time, to be deleted from a cultural memory of a place, of an imagined community of people?<sup>1</sup> Societies have systematically erased certain bodies for being some form of inauthentic, both in the written annals of a given society’s history, but also physically. The mixed-race<sup>2</sup> children born through colonization and war have long been castoff symbols of mixture, of “tainted blood”. Facing historical ostracization, the multiracial body is a *body* that has existed throughout history as the foil to an authentic body,

because to have authentic bodies, one has to recognize *inauthentic* bodies. As a conscious act of Othering, the multiracial-body is, ironically, a symbol of authentic “*inauthenticness*”.<sup>3</sup>

When ambiguous phenotype gives rise to suspicion, how do multiracial Korean Americans articulate their racial identities in order to build community and feel a sense of belonging? By nature of their being, multiracial people complicate the notion of cultural authenticity. They are *bad Koreans*, fixed within the liminal spaces of racial and cultural boundaries. There have to be ways in which multiracial people can assert complex racial identities not shackled to dominant racial constructs. For Michelle Zauner, and for many other multiracial individuals, it is through objects and bodies already rendered authentic that they attach themselves to, such as their mothers and the foodways their mothers expose them to. Authenticity becomes plastic, something bendable, as a means of subverting the structures that imply they are not authentic into the very material conditions that *do* make them authentic.

I intervene into this discourse by exploring the ways that “mixed-race” Korean Americans, despite racial “ambiguity”, consciously assert Korean identities. I assert that multiracial Korean Americans utilize the longstanding and widespread symbolic nature of Korean motherwork (including foodways and household practices) to assert a form of cultural *expertise* to authenticate their complex racial identity. Knowing “real” Koreanness and having lived so intimately with the paragon of symbolic Koreanness (the Korean mother) provides space for these individuals to assert multifaceted identities, but also to authenticate their Koreanness in ways that sidestep traditional modes of defining authenticity (i.e., phenotype, language, being understood in public racial discourse as an immigrant/eternal foreigner).

It is also a form of creating community, as these narratives of the “Korean household” become spaces of bonding among multiracial people, where racial and ethnic configurations may dramatically alter the traditional ways that society codes community. Bonding over stories of their Korean moms, the Korean food they eat and love, Korean household customs such as taking off shoes in the house and eating rice with every meal, people from a range of racial configurations create a new narrative of authenticity, one inevitably tied to the Korean maternal figure, be it a mom/*omma* (엄마), an auntie/*i-mo* (이모), or a grandma/*halmöni* (할머니).<sup>4</sup> They find ways to render to the rigid and unchanging notions of authenticity into plastic—opaque and flexible. The very “rituals, ceremonies, and collective memories” that create the rigid imagined communities which seek to erase the “mixed” bodies are the same techniques being utilized to develop alternative modes of authenticity that are in fact *inclusive* rather than *exclusive* (Featherstone 1996). These micro acts of resistance embody what the framework of plastic authenticity sets out to establish. Bodies that exist to reaffirm the boundaries of Koreanness via “blood quantum”, much like their Korean mothers’ “betrayals” of national/cultural citizenship as diasporic bodies, are uniquely positioned to be the ones to (re)define the parameters of cultural authenticity altogether. We live in an age where people such as Gordon Ramsey have the media platforms to dictate what is and what is not culturally authentic regarding communities that they do not belong to. As a result, it is increasingly more urgent to reassess what authenticity means and what it does in the face of increasingly diverse kinship networks, diaspora, and the globalization and mass commodification of cultural goods. The project of plastic authenticity, then, is about validating those experiences of Otherness as legitimate claims to cultural authenticity.

## 2. Racing Bodies: Articulating Multiraciality

Mothers, mothering, and motherhood are critical agents to explore regarding the Korean American immigration narrative. These figures often are tasked with the (gendered) labor of recreating a sense of racial/ethnic authenticity in their children despite engaging in relationships outside of homogenous Korean ones, and across the Korean diaspora. Regarding ethnic identity and socialization, some common terms used within family science and sociological discourses are “racial socialization” and “ethnic socialization”. Under the umbrella of ethnic socialization is the critical aspect of cultural socialization. Similar to enculturation, cultural socialization includes practices such as exposing

children to important cultural history, music, food, cultural holidays, and language, etc. (Hughes et al. 2006). This ethnic-racial socialization and their relationship to youths' ethnic identity is a common object of study, likely linked to the fact that many socialization practices aim at instilling a sense of pride or community knowledge in children. Diane Hughes et al. note, "aspects of cultural socialization—including an emphasis on ethnic pride and language use, exposing children to positive aspects of their history and heritage, embedding children in cultural settings and events, and having ethnic objects in the home—have been examined most often" (Hughes et al. 2006, p. 761).

These practices, then, become the basis for the processes of identity construction for their multiracial children. Indeed, identifying in broad categories such as Korean, Japanese, or even Asian American have distinct limitations for those "in-between" these monoracial classifications, as these simplistic categories are intended to express commonalities among its members. As a result of the history of these categories, multiracial individuals must exert a conscious effort to at once embody multiple racial identities. Mary Bernstein and Marcie de la Cruz note, as a response to monoracial categorization, that multiracial individuals "add perplexity and ambiguity to preset expectations that people hold for individuals of a particular racial/ethnic background. Multiracial individuals may not 'fit' into extant physical preconceptions of what black, white, Asian, or Latina/o people look like. More importantly, *how one chooses to identify* may determine how he or she is perceived by others" (Bernstein and de la Cruz 2009, p. 736). Thus, there is a distinct possibility to embrace being of multiple racial backgrounds, and publicly marking oneself as multiracial, regardless of the surrounding company, but the individual is tasked with doing so.

For people of multiracial Asian ancestry, due to phenotypic ambiguity on a traditional black/white racial paradigm, this notion of "doing race" and having race "done to them" leads to direct conflicts with notions of "passing". On the other end of the spectrum, it allows for bold contestations of one's racial diversity, embodying a "no passing zone", where one, despite passing for another race, outwardly and consciously identifies their racial complexities (Williams-León 2001, p. 147). If, by nature of being fixed outside of dominant understandings of race, multiracial Asian Americans probe the "limits of our visual vocabulary", it means that the inherent goal of a multiracial "project" is not ultimately to suture them into the *existing* systems of racial classification; rather, to examine the conditions that enable individuals themselves to articulate a racial identity to be read publicly (Nishime 2014).

Likewise, in various social contexts, the pressure to align with a particular racial category is an often-unavoidable issue that many multiracial people face. In particular, one's phenotype often plays a role in the ways they are categorized by others, but also in how multiracial individuals perceive their level of acceptance from a racial group (Khanna 2004). In reference specifically to college students, Heather Gasser notes, "for the student to be accepted by either white students or students of color, the person may have to choose one of her or his racial heritages and deny the other" (Gasser 2008, p. 66). Similarly, there is a major impetus for multiracial individuals to engage with digital spaces because of the ability to have control over the manner in which they are perceived. Gasser further states, "the Internet also provides a type of shield and may allow students who are struggling with issues of racial identity to be more comfortable exploring the ways a multiracial identity can be asserted" (Gasser 2008, p. 67). It is the agency to express, in a (relatively) safe environment, one's personal concepts of race as it applies to them that they can challenge "either/or" constructs and embrace multiple racial identities, making the study of online spaces particularly potent for exploring how a community understands and marks itself publicly.

Alongside the use of the internet as an environment conducive to self-labeling, it marks a space where commonality through shared experience creates a community that transcends specific national or ethnic boundaries. Even if the public experiences with structures of racism for multiracial Koreans with different racial configurations may be drastically different, the community can engage the larger racial structure of "Koreanness"

to foster unity. Likewise, the concept of a singular multiracial Korean “experience” does not act simply as a tag to flag potential viewers/participants. It operates as a tangible sign that defines the community’s autonomy, but more importantly, that a unified, yet diverse group actually “exists” (Warschauer 2000). They become the gatekeepers for defining how and what kinds of experiences denote racial/ethnic authenticity, as will be discussed.

This is not without implication, however. Even if there is unison by nature of shared Korean lineage, this does not necessarily account for the significant racial inequalities faced by those that do not “pass” as white via dominant constructs of race and colorism (Khanna 2004). While common narrative experiences act as a positive force for intragroup recognition and embrace of diversity, this does not necessarily assume that those outside of the community will have such a discerning eye, and may still render the multiracial person as an outsider, or exclusively with another racial category. Jennifer Jones notes, “The level of diversity within multiraciality may also become problematic when we evaluate it in terms of constructing the collective. Representing a vast range of ethnic and racial combinations, multiracials frequently have difficulty ascertaining what is actually shared about their mixed-race experience” (Jones 2011, p. 141). In essence, multiracial identity construction is involved, and not informed merely by the individual’s choice, but by socialization within the family, the perceptions of others (including those within one’s social communities), as well as social institutions and racial classification systems.

Both racialization and self-identification are much more complicated than merely “having a Korean mother”, being able to speak the language, or arbitrarily choosing to identify with one particular racial group. The concept of racial and cultural authenticity is a critical one, not only for understanding identity construction in general but also for understanding the profound ways in which perception and experience shape our concepts of cultural authenticity and cultural capital. For multiracial families, then, these ideas of “realness” in conjunction with an ability to speak the language compound the move for multiracial subjects to assert and be recognized as “legitimate” within an ethnic community. Language, culture, and socialization are put in conflict, and it is the role of the individual to navigate this contentious plane.

### 3. It Is Not Just about Language: The Case of HalfKorean.com

What does it mean, then, to be “authentically” Korean? In many ways, cultural and racial authenticity is defined in terms of one’s “blood quantum” to a given group of people, but there is an inevitable intersection of culture that factors into the equation. Does speaking Korean imply Koreanness? “Looking” Korean? What about transracial Korean adoptees? Where do multiracial people such as comedian Steve Byrne, football MVP Hines Ward, Grammy-nominated R&B singer Amerie, or the thousands and thousands of other multiracial Koreans all around the world fall in the configuration? Additionally, what does this configuration do for their ability to build community and exercise authenticity?

Building and finding community is an important facet of social life for all people, and for multiracial Korean Americans, that sentiment is no different. Many multiracial Koreans seek community in monoracial groups from either side of their heritage, and until relatively recently thanks to the internet, there were no spaces where multiracial Koreans could build community with other multiracial Koreans, outside of the family-oriented relationships built with the kids met through aunts, or *i-mo*. Enter the website HalfKorean.com, with a tagline “An online community for mixed-race Koreans”. Based on the U.S. west coast (primarily in LA and San Francisco), this web portal hosts a number of arms invested in fostering a sense of community based around mixed-Korean heritage. The website boasts yearly meetup events, spanning from 1998 through 2019. The site includes a blog, interviews with prominent multiracial Koreans, links to relevant articles and organizations, a “Mixed Korean Tattoo Project”, where Korean-inspired tattoos are featured, a mission statement and group history, “Mix-Kor” merchandise, and even a social media presence (Sanders 2022). While there are a number of small social media communities organized around multiracial Korean identity, this is the earliest and most

prominent attempt at creating a digital archive of the narratives of prominent multiracial Koreans seen throughout the media landscape.

This analysis pays particular attention to the testimonials and interviews with prominent multiracial Korean Americans to discern the community's methodology of creating a blueprint for shared experiences. Each interview follows a similar pattern and is administered by the site operator and creator, David Lee Sanders, containing sections related to background and identity, the jobs and public personas of the prominent figures being interviewed, and occasionally a "random" section of questions. This practice of interviewing prominent figures in the community with somewhat prescriptive questions is a core feature of the community space, and by far the most active space on the site outside of meetup updates for community members. There are no interviews with active members; rather, the interview section seems to act solely as an archive and celebration of prominent figures in the community, ranging from chefs, to actors, to musicians, and artists. Issues of language, food, and the strategic recalling of narratives of motherhood are employed regularly in ways that I argue foster a sense of community and embody a form of cultural authenticity that is plastic in ways that sidestep dominant expectations of linguistic fluency or phenotypic associations, actively redefining what it means to be "authentically Korean" by demonstrating a commonality of experience.

Regarding language acquisition among the prominent figures interviewed in the HalfKorean.com community, linguistic capability is relatively limited, mostly to the conversational or affective level. The vast majority of those interviewed do not speak Korean or speak very basic conversational Korean, often infantilizing their level of comprehension to that of a child, recalling memories of speaking Korean with mothers in youth, and then growing up to forget it. In an interview with Miss Miami USA 2013, Christina Sthair, she says "I only know the very, very basic like *anyonghasaeyo* (hello) and *kamsahamnida* (thank you) and *baegopayo* (I'm hungry)" (Sanders 2012a). Actress Moon Bloodgood says, "My Korean is very informal and I sound like a child . . . I'm actually just very insecure about my ability to speak Korean because I speak it so informally" (Sanders 2013d). Comedian Steve Byrne notes he was fluent "a bit when I was younger" (Sanders 2010d). Former Olympian Debbie Green notes, "I remember when I was in kindergarten and telling my mom that I was an American and that I was only speaking English" (Sanders 2013a).

In many cases, Korean linguistic capabilities are folded directly into memories of their mothers, recalling similar stories of "speaking it when they were young", and subsequently forgetting it, or even pushing back against their mothers' efforts to speak Korean with them, much like the case of Debbie Green. Actress Denyce Lawton says that she understands the language and can "communicate with my mom mostly" (Sanders 2004). There is also a trend among interviewees that the narrative of language acquisition is sidelined by noting that their Korean is bad because their mothers wanted to learn English, as Priscilla Ahn notes, " . . . my mom didn't teach me that much because she was just trying to get better with her English. Her English is very good now" (Sanders 2016a).

Former football linebacker, Ben Leber notes, " . . . of course, we would get the cuss words in Korean from our mom as she would be yelling at us and she would just switch it over because she would get frustrated trying to find the right word in English and then would just go off on us in Korean. We would know that she was really pissed when she would yell at us in Korean!" (Sanders 2014). Interestingly, this knowledge of "only the cuss words" is not unique to Leber, with many interviewees responding to the question that their linguistic capabilities are limited to affective speech. MMA promoter Scott Coker notes, " . . . I am still able to decipher when I'm getting yelled at, I know all the foul words" (Sanders 2016b). Other interviews that echo this same sentiment include television personality Michael Yo, journalist Yunji de Nies, and entertainer Steve Kim. In the case of speaking Korean, the narratives on the website are often overlapped and reminiscent of each other.

There are clear trends that speaking Korean happens with mothers only and Korean is affective at best and positioned temporally in childhood. In the case of reality TV

personality Moogega Cooper, she positions her language acquisition in a direct line of cause and effect with her mother. Regarding learning Korean, she says, “... I’m learning and trying to make my mom proud” (Sanders 2013c). All of these cases, however, in some ways directly indict their mothers (not necessarily negatively) as the root of their struggles with the Korean language, couching the burden of the acquisition on mothers. Clearly, however, linguistic capability is not the defining factor of Koreanness for these multiracial Korean individuals, and Korean identity is sought out in other ways, many of which are sutured directly into their direct experiences with mothers or Korean women.

Instead, the uniqueness of non-native English-speaking mothers with their children and the *lack* of Korean language fluency becomes an emergent factor of community building, rather than demonstrations of fluency. According to linguistic acquisition studies and childhood developmental milestones, by year three and beyond, children have deeply ingrained colloquial knowledge of language, understandable by adults, and shifts in speech from this point are generally stylistic (Lust 2006, p. 270). The utility of this fact, then, is that these linguistic slippages between English and Korean (in part informed by the Korean mother’s historical role as primary caregiver) have documented effects on language acquisition and fix themselves “permanently” on the subject.<sup>5</sup> It is in this lack of native linguistic capabilities that multiracial Koreans learn to (publicly) mark their Koreanness through different avenues—often through comical and endearing “Konglish” (slang for mixed Korean-English) interactions with a Korean mother, being able to “understand it” but not speak it, and even further, through knowledges of Korean foodways and food naming practices. Flirtation with language that are not *speaking* but simply being *involved* with the Korean language then becomes a way in and of itself to demonstrate authentic Koreanness, not necessarily in a national/citizen-based imagination of cultural identity, but firmly through the Korean mother. Singer-songwriters and sisters, Meg and Dia Frampton note, “Meg cannot speak it but can understand a conversation spoken in Korean very well. It’s kinda eerie. For example, my mom will be talking to someone on the phone for 20 min and then Meg will say, ‘apparently our Aunt is getting new furniture and isn’t sure if she spent too much money’” (Sanders 2011a).

Therefore, there must be alternative avenues outside of native-level language ability for multiracial Korean Americans to assert a cultural identity. These alternative ways to demonstrate a knowledge of, and lived experience of Koreanness constitute a form of cultural authenticity that is plastic and flexible to include non-normative engagements with the Korean language. Aspects such as food and household traditions are largely private and emerge as identity markers that the multiracial child selectively employs in order to exert a racial/ethnic identity that may not always be phenotypically evident or authenticated through native linguistic competency. Among these aspects of the Korean household that become both identity markers and spaces of embodied socialization are the cultural traditions that, while not necessarily solely “Korean” per se, are traditions often dispatched when one speaks on their Koreanness. Generational household habits such as taking off shoes when entering the house, education being something of paramount importance, eating Korean food, having Korean furniture/decorations and eating on the floor become signifiers of a lived experience within the specifically Korean household. This household is also decidedly gendered, with these traditions historically couched under the umbrella of motherwork.

#### 4. Plastic Authenticity: Consuming Subjectivity

In the common absence of linguistic competency, food practices for the multiracial Korean community act as a system of signs that constitute a “language” with which to mark themselves as “Korean”. Thus, food also becomes a primary space to articulate authenticity. Among the various interviews on HalfKorean.com, there were multiple references to food as being signifiers of their Korean heritage. When asked if she eats Korean food, model and actress, Denyce Lawton, exclaims “Yes!!! I love Kimchi ... all kinds (hate the fish sauce). I love kalbi, bulgogi, and japchae” (Sanders 2004). Professional Korean-league basketball

player Daniel Sandrin says, “I love pretty much all Korean food in Korea. Can’t really stomach the ‘Korean’ food in America anymore”, (Sanders 2012b) and journalist, Yunji de Nies states, “I love Korean food. When I get sick, I always get *samgyetang* (삼계탕). That just heals me. I’m very much into Korean food and can eat it every day” (Sanders 2012c). Every single interviewee mentions some knowledge of food, ranging from the widely popular Korean BBQ, *bulgogi* (불고기), and *galbi* (갈비), but in many cases expressing love for more unique Korean foods that are not nearly as common in the American culinary landscape such as *nakji bokkeum* (낙지볶음/stir-fried octopus) or *ojingeo bokkeum* (오징어볶음/stir-fried squid) (Sanders 2010a). Interestingly, Daniel Sandrin even employed knowledge of an imagined regional “authenticity” to native Korean food in his remarks about the food he loves in Korea versus what he cannot “stomach” in America. Further, more “authentic” food implied a more authentic Korean existence.

Food becomes such an integral part of the identity formation process that it even becomes a site of contention when misunderstood by “outsiders”. As director/producer Scotty Curlee states,

What’s interesting is, when I first got married, my wife didn’t understand how important Korean food was as a part of my life. When I would eat Korean food, she would complain about the smell and would light candles and stuff. I used to get really offended by it because I felt that she wasn’t just insulting my food but I took it as her insulting my heritage, culture, and people. Eventually, I learned that she didn’t mean anything by it and now that I’m in my 30’s, I’ve learned not to take things so seriously. (Sanders 2011b)

Thus, Korean food acts as an agent to reify and substantiate a Korean identity and becomes a type of boundary object in and of itself as well. Food gets employed in individual narratives but is simultaneously translated to have different meanings for the multiracial community as a whole, but the element of emotional attachment is strong in every case (Star and Griesemer 2015).

It is important to note that the use of authenticity, specifically regarding food, but also in its application to the identity markers used to connote “authentic Koreanness”, draws from the notion that authenticity is not fixed and inherently embedded in food/cultural habits, but is entirely subjective, depending on an individual/community’s habits of behaving, styling, eating, and preparing food (Oum 2005)—in short, context-specific (Heldke 2003). “Authentic” Korean food and its movement throughout America is dependent on context as well. “Authentic” Korean food in the larger American culinary landscape may have different defining factors than it does for multiracial families. Authentic food for the multiracial subject is often invested in the food that specific mothers, grandmothers, and aunts are cooking. Professional fitness competitor, Natalie Pennington notes, “my mom makes the best kimchi-jigae” (Sanders 2010c). Food as a type of boundary object, then, is a core facet of cultural marking for the multiracial Korean, and when paired with conceptions of race and community acceptance, it is possible to see how complex the process of identity construction is for multiracial Korean American individuals. Assessing whether Pennington’s mother makes the “best” Kimchi stew is far less productive than observing their confidence in articulating an almost matter-of-fact knowledge of what constitutes good Korean food in the first place. It is a performative form of expertise. The nature of an authenticity that is plastic, then, signals that the affirmation is less invested in qualifying her assertion; rather that she has enough embodied knowledge as a multiracial subject to make the assertion in the first place.

The framework for plastic authenticity, then, owes its construction in part to a few contemporary imaginings of authenticity. Folklore scholar Regina Bendix first hinted at the plastic potential of authenticity in her association with language philosopher Uwe Pörksen’s notion of “plastic words”, which are words that have “come to mean so much that they really mean very little while nonetheless signaling importance and power” (Bendix 1992, p. 104). Her assertion for authenticity to be included in that language family is a result of authenticity’s increasingly interconnectedness with sociopolitics, aes-

thetics, and morality. While the concept of interconnectedness is critical to understanding plastic authenticity, my use of plasticity is at its core a similar construct while slightly diverging in application and meaning. The nature of plastic, while malleable, is also full of *potential*, rather than overworked to the point of meaninglessness.

Likewise, in his study on authenticity regarding tourism and staged authenticity, Dean MacCannell recalls Erving Goffman's metaphor of the stage, with a front end where performances occur and the back, where actors/members of a team retire to relax (MacCannell 1973, p. 590). He utilizes this metaphor as a means to describe the way that tourism, and more specifically, the tour group actually occupies a space in-between the front and the back, where one has a sense of an authentic experience by seeing the organization and certain workings of the back, while being shrouded in a veil of superficiality, where the "real" work in the back is clouded from view (MacCannell 1973, p. 595). This metaphor is a useful one for engaging how plastic authenticity operates, as it is constructed in these middle grounds. Plastic authenticity operates somewhere in between subjective authenticity and hegemonic authenticity.

In the case of HalfKorean.com, narratives of Koreanness reinforce a connection to hegemonic authenticity by way of undisputable lived experience, i.e., the Korean mother has experiences raising her children employing specific characteristics associated with a form of Koreanness learned from Korean family structures, and her children internalize and reflect those common characteristics as a series of "facts", or embodied knowledges—but the subject's actual position as multiracial clouds these connections. As plastic authenticity is a framework for the marginalized, their experiences at once connote hegemonic authenticity, while also being intensely subjective. Interestingly, for radio and TV personality and DJ, Kathleen Taylor, knowledge of the "best" Korean food is buttressed by the frequency in which she consumes Korean food, noting, "I can eat kimchi with everything. My mom would serve it with spaghetti. There must be crack in kimchi because it is so addictive" (Sanders 2010b). By describing a relationship between Korean food and American food, as negotiated by her mother, she connects the consumption of a staple in Korean food (kimchi) to the frequency in which she eats it. There is a tug-of-war between subjectivity (recalling intimate food practices) and hegemony here (knowledge of what constitutes authentic food practice in the first place), and plastic authenticity situates this multiracial individual as an active agent in the center of that ideological struggle.

Plastic authenticity is a form of radical subjectivity that engages racial and cultural sincerity (Jackson 2005), in direct opposition to hegemonic authenticity.<sup>6</sup> Situationally, plastic authenticity is the agentic form of what Donna Haraway terms a "situated knowledge", where only those who are rendered *inauthentic* are actually capable of performing and embodying plastic authenticity. Essentially, only those from a position of subjugation can have objective and transformative accounts of the world (Haraway 1988, p. 584).<sup>7</sup> That said, it cannot exist without the machinations of hegemonic authenticity. A governing body—whether that be the Korean media, Korean textbooks, the Korean government itself, or quite ironically, white television personalities and food journalists—that says only certain people, foods, goods, ideologies, etc., produced in this *particular* region, or in this *particular* way, in these *particular* parameters, are "authentic" has the power to define cultural authenticity to the world of outsiders of a given nation/community. However, only those expelled from that "nation/community" can embody a form of authenticity that disrupts the hegemonic authority on the authentic. They do so by refracting the seemingly rigid terms of authenticity such as language and phenotype through a plastic filter, and engaging a radical form of decentering, by enabling new iterations of authenticity to validate and vindicate the experiences of being in the margins. The multiracial/diasporic body<sup>8</sup> is this expelled figure, and their unique relationship to the Korean language and their knowledge of traditional food/household practices grounded in their own encounters with them are some of these refractions.

For the HalfKorean.com community, the repeated documentation of these unique encounters with Koreanness not only validates, but creates a historical archive of these

experiences as core to those in the community. The reality is that the interviewees on HalfKorean.com are not pulling their experiences out of thin air. Repeatedly, the interviewees cite experiences and engagements with a Koreanness that to them is very real, and indeed, very authentic. Their structural roots are in Korean cultural practices historically articulated in Korea and across the diaspora as ostensibly “Korean”, making their unique articulations of authenticity inherently transgressive, since their corporeality fundamentally suggests a kind of inherent *inauthenticity*.

Scholars engaging in the discourse around authenticity, particularly in food studies, have already posited that authenticity exists because the “Other” exists, but the outsider only defines authenticity insofar as they highlight that which is different from *themselves* (Heldke 2005; Long 2004). Hegemonic cultural authenticity is defined within the confines of a culture by those delineating who is deviant within that culture. The multiracial body, then, can never be truly culturally authentic within the framework of hegemonic authenticity, as that body exists solely to position those within the parameters of “correctness” in a given culture as *truly* authentic. They can use the master’s tools, however, and (re)define authenticity through means of accessing that which makes the authentic body “authentic”, yet suturing it into a narrative of Otherness. The multiracial Korean body, employing Koreanness in a body that tugs at the fabric of what Korean is imagined to be, can perform plastic authenticity *because* they are situated as oppositional to those bodies believed to be truly “Korean”. Their declarations of their Koreanness are inherently subjective and subversive, rendering authenticity plastic, but sturdy nonetheless.

### 5. This Is a Korean House! Take Off Your Shoes! Maternal Haunting and Embodied Practice

All of these elements of embodied practice such as household custom and food practice, the recalling of moments passed, and the construction of identity are individual ones, but in many ways informed by and through Korean mothers. While there are no actual interviews with Korean mothers on the HalfKorean.com website, their presence is felt throughout, particularly in the interviews and testimonials section of the site. Pictures of multiracial Koreans with their mothers and stories outlining their Korean identities in connection with their mothers litter the interviews. Very much in line with what sociologist Avery Gordon has discussed as “haunting”, Korean mothers embody a spectral presence in the community, where they are decidedly absent, yet their touch can be felt in the crafting of life experience of Koreanness. Gordon says,

If haunting describes how that which appears to be not there is often a seething presence . . . the ghost is just the sign, or the empirical evidence if you like, that tells you a haunting is taking place. The ghost is not simply a dead or a missing person, but a social figure, and investigating it can lead to that dense site where history and subjectivity make social life . . . The way of the ghost is haunting, and haunting is a very particular way of knowing what has happened or is happening. (Gordon 2008, p. 8)

If Korean mothers are not actually there, the products of their presence are in the construction of the website itself. It is also important to note the reality that Korean mothers are not featured there because *this is not a space for them*, even if their roles in the lives of those in the community are profound. That said, while it is not a space for them, their thumbprints are all over the place. In the interviews, very rarely are mothers ever even mentioned in the actual interview questions themselves—questions favor broad strokes such as “did you experience identity issues growing up?” or “what is your favorite Korean food?” or “was your family accepting of you?”—but the line of questioning and the subsequent trends for multiracial Koreans to narrate their experiences and identity in conjunction with their mothers illustrate the value and importance of Korean mothers in the formation of Korean *identity*.

Interviewees choose to illustrate their constructions of identity in ways that privilege their experiences with their Korean mothers—for instance, the previous example of

Moogega Cooper whose rationale for learning Korean is to literally make her mother proud, or in the case of professional MMA fighter James Moontasri, noting how his mother used to feed him *samgyetang* (삼계탕) with lots of ginger to make him strong (Sanders 2015). One can enunciate a sense of “authentic” Korean identity if the teacher of one’s Koreanness is asserted as an *authentic* Korean woman. There is an underlying current that assumes the position that *authenticity begets authenticity*, regardless of blood or language acquisition. Korean mothers represent a spectral presence, literally feeding the identity of their children and anchoring their raced existence, albeit in the background.

Employing haunting is a way of analyzing the combined effect of experience with social systems that make suturing oneself, one’s “mixed” self, into institutions that have blind spots and are unable to account for one’s corporeal self. For a multiracial person to practice the expected postmodern project of “individualism”, they must find ways to engage with the liminality of racial categories and find the slippages. Being read as “authentic” is not merely about being hip, or having social capital, or having the “right” to speak on or about a community, but about finding oneself in the shadows of social systems that are specifically designed not to accommodate you. In a somewhat poetic turn, however, the painful project of cultural authenticity that positions Korean mothers as ghosts in the identity construction of their multiracial children is not unlike the manner in which they have historically been rendered the spectral victims in the sociopolitical traumas of the postwar Korean diaspora (Cho 2008).

Avery Gordon asserts that “paying attention to the disjuncture between identifying a social structure (or declaring its determinate existence) and its articulation in everyday life” requires intentioned work to understand and fill these liminal spaces (Gordon 2008, p. 19). Building a community that circulates common experiences with Korean motherhood not only works to have people share common experiences but to literally authenticate the experience of operating in a space of racial/cultural liminality. Creating commonality fills the gap that social systems leave open. Korean motherwork, then, essentially becomes a ubiquitous “boundary object” of identity for this community. Susan Leigh Star and James R. Griesemer utilize this term, noting that boundary objects “are objects which are both plastic enough to adapt to local needs and the constraints of the several parties employing them, yet robust enough to maintain a collective identity across sites” (Star and Griesemer 2015, p. 176).

Interestingly, in the same breath that they are transgressive, narrations of Korean motherhood operate to demonstrate that there are certain performances traditionally associated with being Korean. Enunciating familiar tropes of Korean motherhood such as learning how to curse in Korean from an angry Korean mom, or learning household customs, or learning what “real” Korean food is, while gendered and universalist in nature, serve as a way to authenticate the individual’s connection to an imagined, if not mythic homeland. No two narratives of Korean motherhood are the same, but by operating similarly in broad strokes, Korean motherhood becomes structured as a site of expression, and a recognizable trait in building a world that is comprised of people of multiple ethnic and racial combinations. For example, previously mentioned actress Denyce Lawton, who experiences the world being read as a Black woman, can have a translatable experience of Koreanness with comedian Steve Byrne, whose racial configuration is white and Korean, because they can ground their hard work ethic, their knowledge of Korean food and customs, and their mothers’ experiences with U.S. racial structures and anti-Asian racism as sites of commonality. Though they personally will experience the systems of race dramatically differently because of their differing (and gendered) proximities to whiteness, their mothers that are read phenotypically on the surface as monoracially Asian, (assumedly) share similar experiences with U.S. racial politics. Korean mothers operate as this boundary object that links the various nodes of race in dominant social systems. Will Steve Byrne and Denyce Lawton experience “race” differently in the U.S.? Of course—however, their *Koreanness* is undisputable as it is firmly rooted in a phantom that recalls a similar legacy of authentic Koreanness. Again, they become authentic because their mothers are rendered as authentic, even from the background. This plastic and inherited form of authenticity can be used to

express a closeness to Korean culture, while allowing space for the daily realities of having unique relationships to U.S. systems of race and gender.

The experiences and interactions with the Korean mother become coded into tropes and trends that become ubiquitous signifiers of Korean mothers and an integral part of the Korean household. Regarding the HalfKorean.com community, many interviewees narrate their experiences with their mothers in thoughtful and often comical ways. Journalist Yunji de Nies, regarding identity issues growing up, notes,

My mother is that classic Korean mom. When I would start a new school year she would go to the teacher and would say, “Yunji is not challenged enough and make sure she gets extra homework”. It was never enough according to her standards . . . My mother is amazing, but I had a lot of resentment because she was so hard on me. It was like I would get an A- and she would ask why it wasn’t an A. I never sort of understood that drive. But then went I went there and spent more time with my family and saw their education system and how hard they are pushed. What we go through compared to what my cousin’s go through in terms of education are like light and day. They are so challenged and work so hard and are studying constantly. Then I understood a lot more about why my mom was so tough on me, and I appreciated it a little more. (Sanders 2012c)

For Yunji de Nies, then, in a question about identity issues, she directly places that in line with her experiences with a mother hyper-invested in her education, or as she puts it, a “classic Korean mom”. Her experience of struggling with her mother directly correlates to her classic Koreanness. While she rounds out the anecdote in appreciation, she firmly fixes it in relation to her identity, with her mother becoming the object with which she can assert a kind of cultural knowledge about Korean women. Acknowledging that she’s a “classic Korean mom” insinuates that this trait of overzealous educational investment is something endemic to Korean mothers, but also a quality that is widely known enough to assert without context. Her mother haunts this narrative of identity construction by being present and *constructive* without actually being there.

In a comedic turn, TV personality Michael Yo echoes a comical anecdote about growing up and his relationship to his Korean mother through an interview question regarding favorite foods. Regarding his favorite Korean foods, he notes,

I don’t like kimchi (김치), and I never got over the smell of it. You know what I mean? I’m not a big kimchi fan at all. My mom had so much of it in the house refrigerator that it stunk up the house, so they ended up moving to the garage refrigerator and then it smelled up the garage and the car. So when you would get into the car, you would smell the kimchi! It was awful! That kinda turned me off on kimchi. I love rice. My mom would cook rice with every meal. (Sanders 2013b)

Interestingly, while Yo actually expresses a distaste for Korean staples such as kimchi, he firmly rests this in a comical aversion to his mother’s embodied food practices. So, while not even consuming Korean food himself, he is embodying a proximate relationship to Koreanness through his humorous recollection of his Korean mother who *is* actually practicing the Korean tradition of having large amounts of food staples such as kimchi around the house.

In a similar vein, where her mother comes up in a question about her parents’ acceptance of her job as a model, Lisa Fleming recalls, “Well, my Mom is just like ‘You crazy I don’t know you!’ in her Korean accent. haha . . . Then, I just say, ‘Don’t worry Mom, I’m going to buy you a house,’ and then she smiles like ‘Whatever, I’ll believe it when I see it’” (Sanders 2009). Ethnic comedy, and the employment of the mother in a comical nature, is by no means a unique occurrence to Michael Yo, Lisa Fleming, or even a uniquely Korean occurrence. It does, however, communicate an understanding of ethnic caricatures that travel, but narrating the Korean mother in comedy *de facto* conveys *lived* experience with Korean women, which becomes a vital aspect of identity.

Steve Byrne, in his interview with HalfKorean.com, notes, “When you start at open mics, it’s usually a ‘bringer’ show. You have to bring two audience members to pay a cover charge, and you get 5 min of stage time. My parents were my two audience members once a week for about 3 months. They were so very supportive of me and stand up. I owe a lot to them” (Sanders 2010d). In all of the described instances, the child is narrating experiences that would be common experiences for anyone growing up and experiencing puberty, or being in a situation that requires parental support, and while all craft a particular portrait of Korean mothers, paired with broken English and thick accents, they do so in acts of fond memory and care. The respondents employ them with the explicit knowledge that these tropes of Korean motherhood will be widely recognizable (if not also problematic), but also assign these memories as vital to their upbringing and growth as people.

Authenticity and indeed the Korean mother operate under a framework of what Avery Gordon calls “sensuous knowledge”. Sensuous knowledge is a form of materialism that recognizes “the lived reality of ghostly magical invented matters” (Gordon 2008, p. 205). Korean mothers are not ghosts, though. They are very real. Grace M. Cho, in her book *Haunting the Korean Diaspora* (Cho 2008), references, albeit briefly, the interviews on HalfKorean.com, noting that the presence of Korean mothers is both spectral, and informed by a long and contentious history of erasure and invisibility, where Korean women have been central agents in twentieth-century Korean history, yet their traumas are inconspicuously forgotten. Their presence in the narratives of multiracial Koreans, however, while also spectral, is not a product of their erasure. Rather, it is in their very *invisibility* that their presence is so prominent. Their imprints can be seen in the stories and anecdotes, in a kind of profane illumination. They are socializing their children, sure, but their importance is more than just that of being mothers. Their *being* “is telling us something important we had not known; because it is leading us somewhere; elsewhere” (Gordon 2008, p. 205). They perform feats of ethnic socialization on their children in order to prepare their children for the world, as any mother would do, but their presence as symbols of authentic Koreanness operate in a fashion that leads us to a different destination, one where, by nature of their *being*, they offer their power to their children to *be* as well; because *being* implies authenticity.

## 6. Conclusions: Addressing the Ghost in the Kitchen

What are you? You do not look Korean. Do you speak Korean fluently? Have you lived in Korea? Whether it be through the ghostly figure of the Korean mother, embodied food and household practices, or reimagining what it means to be “fluent” in Korean, multiracial Korean Americans are continuously engaged in a conscious effort to mark complex racial identities in a world that has no visual language to accommodate them. While this is first and foremost a project about reimagining cultural authenticity, it is also a project detailing active resistance to a social construction of race that cannot seem to fathom where to place people that do not fall neatly within prescribed categories. This is a project that challenges the loaded “you don’t look Korean” assertions.

Yet, while this scholarly essay seeks to challenge hegemonic structures of cultural authenticity, it is also actively recognizing how powerful and impactful authenticity is, and how subversive and transgressive it can be. In an age where white celebrity chefs such as Jamie Oliver boast Asian fried rice recipes to their millions of viewers using English chili jam as a key ingredient, it is more important than ever to re-examine the ways that proximity to cultural authenticity travels in the culinary and cultural landscape. When white food media personalities become the de facto global authority on identifying cultural authenticity as cultures rapidly globalize and become embedded in a Western cultural paradigm, a project of reclamation such as this one becomes an imminent necessity. A Korean authenticity that fixes its parameters of inclusion solely around linguistic capability, “looking” Korean, or having lived in Korea misses all of the cultural touchstones that make a culture unique. This project attempts to extrapolate and create some distance between embodied cultural

practice and the arbitrary sociological geographies of race, while also minding the critically intimate role race plays in identity construction and community building.

Avery Gordon notes, “to experience a profane illumination is to experience the sensate quality of a knowledge meaningfully affecting you . . . Sensuous knowledge always involves knowing and doing. Everything is in the experience with sensuous knowledge. Everything rests on not being afraid of what is happening to you” (Gordon 2008, p. 205). In the case of the various facets of HalfKorean.com, it is evident that identity construction for multiracial Korean Americans is a complicated process that is involved in the juxtaposition of bodies against dominant racial systems, and unique relationships to language, food, and Korean household customs. There is an undercurrent of a “path to pride”, where identity issues and contentious relationships with race and ethnicity dictate unique struggles for multiracial individuals to face. By performing points of cultural knowledge, however, they (un)consciously enable modes of connection between other multiracial Korean Americans and inadvertently reconfigure what it means to be authentically Korean altogether. Additionally, Korean motherwork operates as a crucial agent in building a sense of authenticity among the multiracial Korean American community. By interpreting authenticity as a plastic space, or bendable, recyclable, and opaque, it is possible to envision the “least” authentic Koreans as unironically and distinctly *authentic*. This affords a great deal of power in identity and community construction.

As noted, authenticity begets authenticity, and by bonding over common narratives of Korean motherwork, multiracial individuals can narrate complex relationships to dominant racial structures, while also complicating them by highlighting their positions in the margins. These *inauthentic* bodies become distinctly authentic by utilizing the very structures that seek to erase them—memory and imagined community. Where memory and imagined community are historically employed in order to assert homogenous or rigidly structured societies, and to render certain bodies as authentic, and “mixed” ones as inauthentic, multiracial Koreans employ these very structures to push back against those conceptions and prove once again that authenticity is not written in stone, but is in fact plastic, opaque, and malleable.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Mike Featherstone discusses local communities in terms of cultural integration, which is the “generation of powerful, emotionally sustaining rituals, ceremonies, and collective memories” (Featherstone 1996, p. 52). Communities are imagined, created by the expectation of shared experience, and not simply by the creation of national boundaries.
- <sup>2</sup> I employ “mixed-race” here rather than the term “multiracial” as the (historically racialized) concept of quantum is subtly important in the construction of the community explored here, where “half” is used to denote “whole”. Mixed-race invokes a particular temporal context, where measurement of a person’s “mixedness” was a critical element in determining how and where they fell in dominant U.S. racial categories. The problematic nature of the term is not lost, however.
- <sup>3</sup> While bell hooks describes the concept of “eating the Other” in terms of sexuality and sexual encounter, this concept of *consumption* holds true for the multiracial body, where these bodies become “resources for pleasure” that are disposable and seen as “constituting an alternative playground where members of dominating races, genders, sexual practices affirm their power-over in intimate relations with the Other” (Hooks 1992, p. 23).
- <sup>4</sup> While this essay examines cases in which multiracial children are creating identity through a biological Korean mother, it should be noted that the “Korean mother” as a symbol within the Korean household is a signifier for a woman-centered, maternal environment in general, i.e., grandmothers, aunts, and other maternal figures in charge of motherwork, cultural practice, and household childrearing would also exist under the symbolic umbrella of Korean motherhood.

- 5 Critical to note is that while this unique relationship to language often occurs between Korean mothers and multiracial children, the nature of language acquisition is not just about (not) learning multiple languages. It is also intimately in conversation with historical notions of assimilation, a distinctly U.S. context, and the socially instructed role for Korean mothers to be heavily invested in their children's success. As evidenced by the "melting pot" assimilationist narrative in the United States, success, affluence, and upward mobility are in part dependent on an ability to achieve close proximity to a certain socioeconomic class (white middle-class status). Patricia Hill Collins, concerning nationalism and U.S. national identity, states, "whites argue for English-only social institutions, and routinely castigate non-standard American English speakers and those whose social institutions do not match an assumed white culture" (Hill Collins 2001, p. 10). Social assimilation and American institutions require English to maintain ideological notions of "nation", thus, there is a history of linguistic suppression in the American context.
- 6 The theoretical framework of "racial sincerity", coined by John Jackson Jr. (Jackson 2005), posits that certain "performances" of race create "sincere" images of a particular group to outsiders, while also working to undermine racial authenticity for insiders in a community.
- 7 In their essay, "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of the Partial Perspective" (Haraway 1988), Donna Haraway recognizes that there is a distinct and recognizable power in the perspective of the subjugated. Likewise, while those who are not in the margins may romanticize this position for its ability to objectively view and renegotiate the world around them (plastic authenticity), it is inaccessible from those outsides of the margins. Like Haraway argues; however, it is still a "partial perspective", and plastic authenticity can only exist if hegemonic authenticity exists. Plastic authenticity is the center of the Venn diagram between the circles of hegemonic cultural authenticity and the view from outside.
- 8 "Diasporic" body in this instance is used to include immigrant, second- and third- generation individuals, and adoptees as well.

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