

## Appa, Everybody's Favorite [Korean] TV Dad?

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In 2016, Canada's broadcasting service CBC premiered a new comedy series called *Kim's Convenience* inspired by the play of the same title written by Ins Choi. This sitcom, co-authored by Ins Choi and Kevin White, focuses on the experiences between Korean immigrant parents, their Canadian-born son and daughter, and the multicultural community they serve through their convenience store. The show, shown internationally through Netflix, prominently features Mr. Kim, or Appa, the seemingly conservative store owner who speaks his mind without a filter and often ends up in hot water. He antagonizes his family, friends, and customers while dispensing his brand of advice, and pronouncing his unique views and malapropisms. Though the program ended after its fifth season in 2021, the show continues to be lauded by critics, and in several reviews Appa has been proclaimed as Canada's "favorite dad" (Wong "Business" E1).

The emergence of *Kim's Convenience* is not without precedence. In 2015, United States network television launched two sitcom programs focusing on Asian North Americans: *Fresh Off the Boat* and *Dr. Ken*. The former is based on Eddie Huang's memoir and follows his childhood "as his [Taiwanese] family navigates the cultural challenges of settling into a city that is predominantly white" (Ngyuen 1). The latter focused on Ken Jeong and his experiences as an unorthodox medical doctor before he became a comedian. These two-family sitcoms focusing on Asian American families were the first to appear since Margaret Cho's *All-American Girl* in 1994, which was a milestone for featuring an almost all Asian cast on primetime television. Prior to Cho's work, the television landscape was filled with Asians as servants, nerds, sidekicks, threatening immigrants, geishas, and dragon ladies (Hamamoto; Tajima).

Given the general under-representation and misrepresentation of minorities on Canadian and North American television overall, the popularity of a show with Asian leads is noteworthy and deserves some attention. Furthermore, since mass

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media has a tremendous impact on public opinion, which in turn affects policy decisions, it is imperative to critically evaluate current depictions of minorities in all formats (Mastro and Kopacz 305). Quite bluntly, negative images of minorities teach viewers “they are threatening, deviant, and irrelevant to nation-building” (Mahtani 99). Positive images of minorities, on the other hand, would suggest they were good citizens, who are loyal to and productive for the country. The ascendancy of an Asian as the leading character provides an opportunity to explore how this program addresses stereotypes and, on a broader scale, shapes and reflects the racial discourse in popular culture.

### Ins Choi

Choi’s knowledge of Koreans in retail comes from his family’s experience working in convenience stores. When the Choi family first arrived at Toronto, they worked in and lived above a convenience store owned by a relative. Many of Choi’s childhood memories involved observing his father and uncle work in the store and helping when he could. His was not a unique experience; many of Choi’s friends grew up working in convenience stores alongside their parents (“Who’s Hot”).

Choi wrote *Kim’s Convenience*, the play and the television show, to honor the Korean immigrant experience, including the personal sacrifices and the hard work entailed in running a small store. The Kim family journey, as seen through the eyes of the first generation, is an ongoing process. They arrived with great hopes for their children’s success but are burdened by the different cultural values and language of the host country. The heavy workload of owning a small business is exhausting and straining, and their traditional practices do not always fit their new circumstances. However, their story is not one of disjoint and loss, but of innovation. Each week, Appa and Umma (the mother) further develop a new cultural identity to meet work and family challenges. This evolving sense of self applies home and host cultures and sensibilities to fit the unfamiliar environment and its ordeals. This focus has allowed Choi to feature Asians prominently and to create characters that are “well-rounded” and “who have depth” (“Who’s Hot”; Westernman).

In this way *Kim’s Convenience* intentionally promotes cultural diversity without whitewashing the minority characters or relegating the immigrant experience to the periphery. In addition, the program features interactions between the Kims and their diverse customers thereby highlighting issues of race, gender,

and sexuality. It is understandable why CBC picked up this series to help reflect the country's "multicultural and multiracial nature" as mandated by the Government of Canada (CRTTC).

The enthusiastic response to *Kim's Convenience*, as noted in Facebook and Twitter feeds, and the fact it won multiple awards for outstanding performance, best direction, and best comedy series, suggests growth and change in the entertainment media ("Kim's Convenience 2016-2021 Awards"). This show demonstrates that both CBC and Canadian viewers (and beyond) can and do accept an Asian experience as the main focus of a series. Perhaps the greatest testimony of progress is how Appa's character, with his heavy accent and his strong Korean nationalist beliefs, resonates with non-Korean fans: "You were the Korean father I never knew I had/wanted..." writes one admirer (Tks); "You'll always be Appa to me," posts Luis Armando; and "You're really Canada's Dad now" gushes Suresh Singaratnam.

The few scholarly examinations of the series largely agree that *Kim's Convenience* constitutes a breakthrough in popular media. Nagy and Bánhegyi, for example, note how the program rejects a simplistic model of assimilation and suggest Appa and Umma show signs of a new transnational cultural outlook (54). Sherry Yu similarly argues that the show exemplifies an immigrant settlement experience that defies homogeneity. The Kims, states Yu, become Korean Canadians "in their own ways" that is dependent on "their own diasporic experience, life values, gender roles, language capacity, and views on sexuality" (14). Colleen Kim Daniher finds *Kim's Convenience* rich with opportunities to scrutinize topics such as the model minority myth and Black-Korean relations, which mainstream media generally avoids (21). Though no study suggests the television series is above criticism, they do agree the show is promising because of its discussions on immigration, identity, and interracial relations.

This work agrees that *Kim's Convenience* "carries symbolic and substantial significance" (Yu 14) but argues the show falls short of its great potential. Despite Choi, a Korean-Canadian, piloting the program and presenting Asian characters with more depth, the show fails to directly confront larger social problems that directly affect Asian North Americans. More specifically, the very way *Kim's Convenience* successfully connects mainstream audiences to Appa seems to undermine the series' ability to address, interrogate, and disavow racism and other inequalities. In other words, the more the show banks on "universal" accessibility, the less able it is to critique celebrations of racial difference and notions of inclusion

and belonging. This work offers a textual analysis of *Kim's Convenience* - specifically scenes from the first season - to demonstrate the possibilities and limitations of depicting Korean and Asian immigrant characters who are both unique and yet universally acceptable as ways to challenge mainstream media stereotypes.

This paper takes cues from Herman Gray's work, *Watching Race: Television and the Struggle for Blackness*, that highlights three discursive practices with which to analyze television representations of minorities. Though Gray focuses solely on the image of African Americans, his strategy is useful when considering how Asians have been portrayed in popular media beyond mere inclusion.

The three practices discussed in the work include (1) Assimilationist, (2) Pluralist, and (3) Multiculturalist. Briefly, programs that feature Black characters but make no mention of race fall into the assimilationist category. The focus of these productions is to integrate individual Black characters into the white world without any discussion of African American culture, traditions, or concerns. In the pluralist discourse Black characters are shown in a separate-but-equal world where they parallel the white society. Though there is some celebration of racial and cultural differences, overall, the characters "maintain a commitment to universal acceptance into the transparent 'normative' middle class" (Gray 87). Another characteristic of these first two categories is that the Black characters' values and beliefs are deemed "acceptable" and "normative" only when they comply to the white system of power. The multiculturalist discourse, the third practice, takes a much different approach by centering the African American culture in the show and allowing for a multiplicity of Black experiences to be depicted. The characters are not defined by the white gaze and break from stereotypes and tropes to demonstrate individual personal positions.

Applying Gray's work, I argue that *Kim's Convenience* and the character Appa have great potential to, and at moments, do reflect a multiculturalist outlook, but ultimately, they largely fit within the pluralist discourse. Though Mr. Kim's character is, at times, quirky while "dispensing folk wisdom in...broken English" (Ouzounian E9), his overall concerns and aspirations do not pose a threat to Canadian cultural unity and are in-line with most non-Korean Canadians. Appa is Canada's favorite dad (Wong, "Big Lessons" E1) precisely because he upholds values such as heterosexuality, individualism, and upward mobility. As a person of color, I would prefer the show demonstrate a multiculturalist sensibility as laid out by Gray but given the demands of popular culture and audience appeal, a pluralist

approach may be the best viewers can hope for. The sitcom can be commended for challenging certain stereotypes of Asians, but if one is looking for complexity in the Asian North American experience, this program does not - and perhaps cannot - present the range of diversity that exists within the community. Worst, the sitcom seems to reaffirm societal hegemonic values.

### *Kim's Convenience*

The first season of *Kim's Convenience* is an appropriate starting point for an analysis because the premise and narrative structure of the show and the characters are revealed to the audience. This paper explores several episodes but pays special attention to the premiere ("Gay Discount") where the audience is introduced to Mr. Kim, the diversity of the customer-community, and the tensions that can arise with identity-conscious encounters.

In this episode, Appa is approached by two young men, Kevin (white) and Roger (Black), who ask if their poster which highlights their band performing during Pride week could be placed in the storefront window. Appa looks at the poster and immediately rejects it saying that it is a messy image. He then continues by saying he does not have a problem with "the gay," but is against the parade because of the traffic, garbage, and noise. He then asks the two men, "Why can't you be quiet, respectful gay, like Anderson Cooper, Neil Patrick Harris? They is all of the gay, but they don't yelling to me they is the gay" ("Gay Discount"). Appa ends his rant by acknowledging that some people do not like Koreans, but "We don't make big parade yelling at people: We Is Korean! We Is Korean!" ("Gay Discount").

Appa's refusal to accept the poster is immediately interpreted by Roger as a homophobic response and a hate crime; he proceeds to leave the store ostensibly to report Mr. Kim to the local authorities. Appa stops him with the explanation that he is not "homopebek [sic]" and if he were, why would he give a 15% store discount to gay people during the festival week? Once Kevin and Roger verify there is a "gay" discount, they seem mollified and the scene closes with Appa returning the poster to them with the admonishment, "You can do better" ("Gay Discount").

Co-writer Ins Choi admits that this was a "gutsy first scene" because it reveals the friction that can accompany merchant-customer relations when there are differences in identity (A. Lee). Most audiences, informed by the media, are prepared for contentious contact between merchants and customers, particularly if

they are Korean and Black respectively. Viewers may recall the New York City boycotts of Korean-owned grocery stores in 1990 by African Americans, and the burning of Korean stores during the Rodney King uprising in 1992. They may also remember the 1991 fatal shooting of 15-year-old African American girl, Latasha Harlins, by a Korean store owner for allegedly shoplifting. The news justifiably paid a lot of attention to this tragedy because of the senseless loss of life and the incredibly light sentence given to the shooter. However, according to research, the media tends to overemphasize negative encounters between the two groups (J. Lee 78), which in turn shapes the stereotype of a combative Asian shopkeeper.

The Korean store owner cliché presents the merchant as hard-working and family-oriented, but a recent immigrant who holds a strong affinity for their home country, is ignorant of cultural norms in the host country, speaks little to no English, does not smile (K. Park 492), and often miscommunicates with customers. According to Gottschlich, this stereotype is also accompanied by negative character traits such as being self-interested, deceitful, and untrustworthy (284). Furthermore, merchants' single-minded goal of profit purportedly makes them antagonistic or indifferent to shoppers' needs. This image of an Asian merchant verbally insulting and rudely confronting primarily Black customers has been popularly vilified in Spike Lee's *Do The Right Thing* (1989), Joel Schumacher's *Falling Down* (1993), the Hughes Brothers' *Menace II Society* (1993) and on the *MadTV* comedy series which aired from 2008-2015 on Fox Broadcasting Company.

The television audience of *Kim's Convenience* is initially led to assume Appa is the stereotyped Korean merchant. Mr. Kim greets Kevin and Roger civilly, but without warmth. Furthermore, the binaries often assumed to separate merchant from customer are immediately presented: Korean/non-Korean, immigrant/native-born, and accented English/accent-neutral English. Viewers could anticipate conflict based on any or all these differences. But when Mr. Kim reads the poster aloud and asks incredulously, "Your group is called...Gay Town Boys?" ("Gay Discount") his demeanor and tone of voice immediately suggests that the point of contention will be the differences in their sexuality: heterosexual/LGBTQ.

Though Appa denies being prejudiced against gay people, his words fall flat. His rejection of the poster and his criticism of the parade convince Roger, and probably the audience, that Mr. Kim is homophobic. It is at this point that writers Choi and White suddenly change the narrative and undermine the stereotype of a narrow-minded Korean merchant. By offering a 15% discount to gay people, Appa gives substance to his earlier denial of bigotry. Furthermore, Mr. Kim's actions

encourage Roger, and the audience, to interpret his rejection of the sign as simply a matter of personal taste, not anti-gay politics.

By ending the scene peacefully with a financial truce, Choi and White probably startled many viewers and helped counter the notion of an uncaring Korean store owner. However, this interaction surprisingly addresses other kinds of stereotypes. First, the scene moves away from the anticipated Black-Korean conflict. This is not to say that the broader conflict between these groups has been resolved; tensions between Black communities and Korean store owners in Canada and the United States have not subsided and true reconciliation has not yet been achieved. Yet continued focus on the negative interaction between them keeps alive the unproductive discourse of demonization and pathology, specifically the belief that Korean immigrants are racist and prone to use violence and Black shoppers are shoplifters and looters.

Second, the writers successfully expand the representation of cultural diversity beyond racial inclusion by introducing issues of sexuality. More specifically, Choi and White connect race/ethnicity with sexuality. Though Kevin and Roger do not mention race, their visual presence as white and Black gay men, belie the idea that individuals are either racialized or sexualized, but never both. This is also a particularly hopeful scene because Black gay men are, in comparison to their white counterparts, far less represented on television (GLAAD Media Institute 24). Roger's presence challenges the typical representation of gay men as being white and well-to-do (C. Han 52-3).

Third, during the disagreement Mr. Kim displays some flexibility and openness, not resistance or complete defensiveness. By rewriting the expected interracial conflict between merchant and customer, Choi and White flip the narrative and offer a more nuanced interpretation of a Korean Canadian immigrant and the complexity of negotiating cultural diversity while running a small business. Though he seems more concerned about his business than supporting the Queer customer-community, as Mr. Kim explains himself his motivations appear less anti-gay. In fact, when Appa professes to "have no problem with the gay" he is at odds with certain dominant practices and attitudes about gender and sexuality. By positively acknowledging the existence of LGBTQ individuals and their right to (quietly) protest, Appa resists society's expectations that everyone must function within the masculine and feminine binary. In addition, by giving the 15% discount, Appa even works against the "political persistence of homophobia" in Canada by

welcoming Queer patrons to his store and by encouraging potential customers to “out” themselves in the marketplace (Smith 66).

It is important to note that Appa’s stance is also in opposition to certain Asian traditions. Though mainstream audiences would not be aware of this schism, Asian viewers would be. Appa’s resistance to the gender binary significantly contrasts to traditional and contemporary South Korean notions of sex roles. The combination of conservative religious interests, homophobic political groups, and the legacy of Confucian values have created an environment in that country that pathologizes non-normative identities and criminalizes gay men in the military (J. Han 6). News and academic sources note the frequency with which mainstream South Korean politicians openly voice homophobic views and protestors physically attack Queer festivals (“Pride and Protest” 38). It also appears that many residents do not actively counter the anti-gay rhetoric and violence; recent polls show that most South Korean citizens oppose homosexuality and same-sex marriage (Rich 609).

Appa also appears genuinely curious, rather than indifferent, about his customers and starts asking questions. He asks his friend, Mr. Chin, about the differences between transgender and transsexual members though neither one of them have any answers. When he meets Therese, a drag queen, Appa hesitantly asks “You is what kind? Trans? Gender?” Though he is inquiring because he is unsure whether to give the 15% discount, he is trying to learn. This process of self-education even leads Mr. Kim to boast having a heightened sensitivity to the LGBTQ community. Appa announces that he can now visually identify who is gay. With this new “gaydar” Appa firmly defends the community and his store by ferreting out customers trying to “pass” as gay for the 15% discount (“Gay Discount”).

Appa is also presented as flexible and responsive to customers and to the transforming culture, albeit with some confusion and grumbling. His encounter with Kevin and Roger appears to affect him; Appa becomes more aware of the changes in his customer base and in the neighborhood. For example, when conversing with fellow merchant Mr. Chin, Appa acknowledges a change in the local demographics: “Remember when we start? No gay in sight. Where they all come from? Immigration? Refugee?” (“Gay Discount”). Though he was resistant to the LGBTQ community’s “noisy” celebration, Mr. Kim does concede that the parade and “they” (meaning gay people) are “good for business” because they generate more traffic to the store.



## Immigrant Adaptation

Appa's openness to homosexuality signifies more than accommodating customers or being at odds with the dominant Canadian and South Korean cultures. This flexibility suggests he is occupying an unusual social position and developing an identity that is unique to the immigrant experience. Contrary to popular beliefs (or hopes), Appa is not assimilating in the traditional sense; he is not wholesale exchanging his Korean culture for the dominant culture. Mr. Kim is not clinging tightly to his heritage culture either. Rather, Choi and White present Appa as experiencing a more nuanced process of immigrant adaptation. In this way, the writers have created a more realistic portrayal of an Asian-North American immigrant.

In "real" life, Appa's identity could be described as one of hybridity as postulated by Gloria Anzaldua. Mr. Kim, by virtue of transplanting into Canada, is developing an identity where two or more cultures "edge each other" (Anzaldua "Preface"). For many immigrants, the result is not a comfortable combination of cultural traits and values, but a "clash." Counterintuitively, this collision does not paralyze individuals. Rather, it leaves them potentially more flexible in their responses because they are no longer able to "hold concepts or ideas in rigid boundaries" (Anzaldua 78-9). Appa gives us a glimpse into that evolving identity as he reassesses his values and goals with each new challenge.

This "clash" of values, or new-found flexibility, is demonstrated in one episode where Appa reassesses the Korean cultural tradition of "subeesu" (service), giving goods (in this case groceries) gratis to the new associate pastor Nina Gomez ("Service"). Though it is seen as an important part of supporting the religious ministry, as the monetary value of the gifts grows enormously larger, Appa becomes increasingly upset with the custom. Luckily, the pastor is also uncomfortable with the "subeesu" tradition. Appa is greatly relieved when both parties agree that paying for groceries is better.

This "clash" also occurs when Appa is encouraged to sign a petition to rebuild a nearby park playground. The white woman who is carrying the petition gives Mr. Kim a red pen to use ("Janet's New Job"). Appa nervously explains that in Korea you write down the names of dead people in red ink. The petition woman immediately expresses surprise at this remark and pronounces Koreans to be "superstitious." Appa scoffs at this observation, and Umma confusedly explains that they are Christian. His anxiety causes him to accidentally break the red pen.

After it is replaced with a blue pen, Appa happily signs the petition with no further incident.

In another episode, a cultural “clash” occurs when a customer continues to say ginseng instead of using the Korean word *insam*. Appa sharply corrects him and then references the Japanese invasion of Korea in 1910 to demonstrate how colonialism renamed *insam* (“Rude Kid”). In fact, Mr. Kim is quite consumed with Korean history and memory. It is based, however, on anti-Japanese, pro-Korean nationalism of the pre-World War II years. Because Japan colonized Korea, he cares little for Japanese products. When given the chance, Appa has Japanese-made cars, that are illegally parked in front of his store, towed away even though many non-Japanese people own those cars, as his daughter explains (“Ddong Chim”).

This cultural “clash” continues to present itself throughout different episodes. Within this first season, Appa accepts that his daughter attends art school instead of a prestigious traditional university, she socializes primarily with non-Koreans, and she will choose her own romantic partners. In addition, Mr. Kim abstains from regularly attending the Korean Presbyterian church, to staff the store, and prefers to socialize with non-Korean merchants in the neighborhood. Through awkward and entertaining situations, Appa’s seems to randomly apply Korean and non-Korean values that best fit his needs and the situation.

Perhaps this is in part why *Kim’s Convenience* is so popular: Mr. Kim and his heritage culture are portrayed as being flexible and malleable enough to fit mainstream society. Mr. Kim does not support militant ethnic separation, nor does he embody a besieged immigrant who protests the majority. Appa is also not the overly successful “model minority” allegedly limiting everyone else’s access to educational and economic opportunities (Maddux et al. 87). Though the Kims do live comfortably, the family is certainly not the idealized model minority type. The family has reached middle-class but will probably not go beyond their relatively modest lives. Their children have not gone to prestigious colleges, nor are they professionals in Fortune 500 companies. Instead, Jung, the eldest child, served time in juvenile detention and did not even complete high school. The younger child, Janet, is pursuing a career as a photographer.

The lack of a true model minority type helps situate the Kim family, and Appa specifically, well within the boundaries of Canadian citizenship. Mr. Kim is not an overachieving nerdy professional who excels in math and science, but a middle-aged, pudgy, convenience store owner. He sports tee shirts and casual clothing with reading glasses on a chain. He speaks with an accent but communicates in English

to everyone including his wife. Though not native-born, Appa seems like a regular Canadian. It is these qualities that prompt Twitter fans to gush about Mr. Kim as “really Canada’s dad” (Singaratnam).

Though Appa does touch on sensitive topics, his twisted logic and blustery approach encourages audiences to feel sorry for him. For example, Appa’s hatred of Japan, which is a real and serious issue that threatens international relations in East Asia, is portrayed as a quirk of Mr. Kim’s that has little to do with current daily life of Koreans in Canada. As a result, mainstream viewers can laugh at references to this tragedy with no guilt precisely because it has nothing to do with them. Furthermore, talking about Japan avoids discussing the real elephant in the room: Canada’s troubled racialized past based on indigenous colonization, discriminatory immigration policies, and police brutality (Anderson; Coulthard; Mullings et al.).

Through this risk-free view, Appa mimics an earlier flawed comic character: Archie Bunker. Bunker, from the sitcom *All in the Family*, was known for his conservative, super-patriotic views, and malapropisms. Rather than alienating audiences for using ethnic slurs, Bunker achieved the status of being a “loveable bigot,” by articulating messages of confusion and misunderstanding about the then rapidly changing society of the 1970s (Vidmar and Rokeach 1974). Appa exhibits similar qualities of confusion in the millennia in terms of gay rights and what the younger generation wants. As a result, audiences are either laughing at him or with him.

In contrast to *All in the Family* which did confront issues of race and gender head-on, *Kim’s Convenience*, generally avoids discussions of oppression in meaningful ways. Though many scenes suggest that the show is antiracist and anti-homophobic, overall, this sitcom is relatively silent about racism, social class, joblessness, homelessness, sexism, or the structural relevance of those factors. Instead, the show tends to valorize hard work, heterosexuality, patriarchy, the family unit, and individualism. As a result, the program does not show how “life is,” but how viewers would like “life to be” (Walton-Roberts and Pratt 76).

It is within this context that the show ceases any progression towards a multiculturalist sensibility and lands squarely within the pluralist mode. While *Kim’s Convenience* is a celebration of Korean immigrants and demonstrates racial and sexual diversity within the Ontario landscape, the sitcom does not force audience members to consider the politics of representing those identities and the social realities of minoritized groups. The multilayered forms of domination,

institutional methods of discrimination and violence, and a general discussion of power, belonging, and exclusion in Canada and North America are left untouched. Undoubtedly the direct focus on Asian characters does increase the representation of minority actors in mainstream programming, the societal stratification based on race, gender, sexuality, and class and how they structure peoples' lives (on and off camera) remains to be grappled with. This relative silence is particularly disconcerting because the program does encourage viewers to consider racial and sexual stereotypes and opens the door for more complex discussions.

### Gay Discount

In the opening scene of season one, for instance, the conversation between Mr. Kim, Kevin and Roger holds great potential for a fertile discussion of homophobia and racism. When the two gay men first approach Mr. Kim, for example, we do not know whether Appa is straight or not. Most viewers have been primed to see Asian men as being passive, effeminate, and lacking sexual prowess through Western popular culture. Historically and traditionally Asian men have been portrayed as being lesser than white men. The racial emasculation of Asian/Asian American men is a result of the historic laws dictating citizenship, naturalization, immigration, anti-miscegenation, and labor practices which barred them from attaining the rights possessed by white men; rights including the ability to vote, purchase land, change jobs, travel abroad, and marry freely (Hamamoto; M. Park). As Park explains: "Asian American men are attributed with the inability to exude masculinity and are categorized as socially 'undesirable'..." (371). When positioned next to white hegemonic masculinity, Asian men are depicted as the "feminized other."

However, in this scene Mr. Kim is positioned next to Black and white gay males, so his sexuality and masculinity are assessed next to another out-group. This was a chance to discuss mainstream assumptions about sexual and gender identities and for the three of them to commiserate based on being "othered." Instead, Appa asks, in a scolding fashion, why they must publicly shout about being gay and parade loudly in the street. In fact, by criticizing and moralizing against their methods of protest and celebration, Mr. Kim assumes the mantle of heterosexuality. From the comfortable and privileged – though tenuous – position as a heterosexual, Appa remains silent about his sexuality and worse, implicitly defends it as an act of civility. By decrying the "noise" of the Pride parade, Appa helps maintain the dominant sexual hierarchy as the more discreet social norm.

Another lost opportunity is when Appa refers to Anderson Cooper and Patrick Neil Harris as “quiet respectful” gays. With this reference Mr. Kim shows a limited knowledge of and a preference for a gay struggle based on a middle-to-upper class existence, and the social status and legitimacy accorded to that group. Appa does not, for example, see racial or class differences in the struggle. Though Roger is Black, and ostensibly a working-class gay man, what and who he represents is lost in the discussion about “messy” posters and “noise.” Roger’s very presence challenges the popular belief that gay people are wealthy, well-educated, white, and male: the myth of gay affluence (Schwartz 10). Appa’s reference to and preference for Cooper and Harris reinvigorates that myth. This is not to say that Cooper and Harris have not suffered from homophobia, but as wealthy people the risks of being identified as gay are far less politically, socially, and economically threatening for them than for working-class gay men. Mr. Kim does not recognize the racial and class differences between Cooper-Harris and Kevin-Roger; instead, he sees the former’s relative “silence” as being the “proper” norm in comparison to the “rowdiness” of the working-to-middle-class parade, and as being worthy of admiration and respect.

Appa’s allusion to Cooper and Harris as his reference point about “the gays” is also a moment where the fundamental diversity of the LGBTQ community could have been explored. Mr. Kim confusedly groups gay, lesbian, transgender, and queer under “the gay” title. He expresses this confusion to fellow immigrant, Mr. Chin, only to receive a response of equal bewilderment. Even when he meets Therese, a drag queen, and concludes they are eligible for the “gay discount,” the writers miss an opportunity to discuss gender, sexuality, identity, and expression. Though many people assume drag queens are “gay men who perform in women’s clothing,” Greaf argues they lie on a much larger spectrum of sexual and gender identity. Some drag queens, for example, self-identify as transsexuals (Greaf 656). The dialogue between Mr. Kim and Therese quickly moves away from the question of “who” they are to discussing “why” they dress like a woman. In response to “Why you do like this?” Therese explains “It feels like me. Feels like home [...]”; the conversation is touching and empathetic, but the moment of deeper discovery evaporates quickly (“Gay Discount”).

Other opportunities for meaningful explorations seem to vanish, ironically, during the very conversations about racial and sexual identities. When Appa, Kevin, and Roger discuss issues of discrimination and stigma, the interaction works to define away racism and homophobia. Though Appa does allude to bigotry when

he states not everyone likes Korean people, his remarks underscore that only “some people” are against them (“Gay Discount”). By insinuating it is only a group of people who hold biased views, the nature and extent of prejudice in society is misunderstood. According to Appa racism is committed on an individual basis. Furthermore, the show implies that bigotry can be combatted through one-on-one contact, as evidenced by Mr. Kim’s conversations with the Pride parade members and with Therese, the drag queen. By portraying prejudice within this framework, the larger institutional operations of racism are completely denied. The federal government’s active disenfranchisement of indigenous people and its systemic efforts to bar Black Americans and Asian immigrants from entering the country, for example, are forgotten.

Institutionalized discrimination against LGBTQ communities is similarly dismissed in this opening encounter. According to Appa, such bigotry is not widespread, does not harm all, and does not affect everyone’s financial success. To Appa, the ability of two gay celebrities to accumulate wealth and fame serves as proof that systemic homophobia does not exist; it is only a “small group of people” who stigmatize LGBTQ communities. As a result, the larger issues of civil rights, employment, housing and health discrimination are rendered invisible. Furthermore, within this vein, Appa is suggesting that members of the Pride parade should be using their time and energy in a more productive (economic) manner and not protesting or celebrating.

Last, but not least, Appa is making the argument that race and queer identities are simply a variety of social categories that a small group directs their intolerance towards thereby limiting the range – only a small group of people – and the impact: the violent history both of those groups have experienced. What is lost, for example, is how Asians overall were discriminated at the state level, and not just by individual employers, teachers, and landlords. On both sides of the 49<sup>th</sup> parallel, federal laws barred Chinese from entering the United States and Canada, summarily denied Asians from citizenship, voting, and owning land, and justified incarcerating people of Japanese descent in World War II camps. Because Koreans were either assumed to be Japanese, or were recognized as subjects of Japan, many anti-Japanese laws pertained to them as well. Early twentieth century immigration laws, for example, prevented Koreans from freely entering North America and it was not until 1962 when Canada (1965 for the United States) abolished national origins as the determining criteria for admission, were Koreans finally granted visas (Kim et al. 4-6).

Appa's denial of the historical and ongoing processes of discrimination unwittingly legitimizes inequalities by making some unexpected connections between race and sexuality. Though Mr. Kim acknowledges that he, Kevin, and Roger represent minority groups, Appa argues against parades and yelling to address social problems. Instead, he advocates "quiet, respectful" methods for change and points to Cooper, Harris, and non-protesting Koreans as proof of success. Through this equation, Appa implies several things: the "system" (as it is presently structured) works; using "quiet respectful" practices (i.e., using the "system") brings success while protesting does not; Cooper, Harris and Korean immigrants achieved their success by being quiet and respectful; and successful gay celebrities, such as Cooper and Harris, are like peaceful heterosexual Koreans who work well with the "system." Through this comparison, Appa unwittingly perpetuates whiteness, heterosexuality, and the myth of meritocracy as the norm. By upholding the "system," Mr. Kim blames the "victim" for their failure to achieve upward mobility, legitimizes inequality, and renders racial, sexual and class privilege invisible.

Mr. Kim further underscores these beliefs later in another rather "gutsy" scene where the issue of Blackness and commercial transactions in inner city stores is addressed. While minding the store, Appa teaches Janet how to spot shoplifters by playing a game called "Steal or No Steal" ("Hapkido"). At first this lesson seems to be based on racially profiling customers. When a Black customer walks into the store, Appa asks her whether he will steal.

Appa. What you think, steal or no steal?

Janet. You saw him take something?

Appa. No, because he is a no steal because he's a black guy brown shoes.

Janet. He's not going to steal because he's a black guy with brown shoes on.

Appa. Black guy brown shoes is a no steal – is a cancel out combo ("Hapkido" 0:08-1:01).

Appa continues explaining his system by pointing out that a white guy with white shoes will steal, but a "Brown" woman wearing a blue jacket would not. He then ends the lesson with the observation that should a lesbian person enter the store and they are whistling, they will steal.

It turns out that Appa's system is not based on profiling, but on a logic that appears serendipitous. This is significant because it immediately resists common generalizations about groups of people as wrongdoers. Instead, Appa haphazardly

identifies thieves based on apparel, shoe color or on the sounds they make in combination with their race, gender, and sexuality.

While Appa's reasoning is nonsensical, the scene does lead audiences to see a connection between individuals, personal expression, and breaking the law. The queer woman who chooses to whistle will steal. The Black man who chooses to wear brown shoes will not shoplift. The white man who dons white shoes is a thief. In each of these cases, the individual signals something about their propensity to steal (or not) through displays of personal taste, materialist values, and how they vocalize. By focusing on the individual, the audience is encouraged to pass moral judgement and blame a specific single person for wrongdoings.

There are benefits to this view. By keeping the focus on individuals, the show further diminishes societal criminal stereotypes that malign entire communities and subgroups. A pernicious stereotype, for example, indicts African Americans, and Black men in particular, as having a greater tendency to commit offenses, in spite of countering data (Alter et al. 1653). As years of research have demonstrated, this stereotype has been used to deny Black people access to basic needs, among other entitlements, and has resulted in unfair treatment in the legal system ("Report of The Sentencing Project").

By focusing on the individual, the show hides large-scale realities that purportedly have a strong impact on crime rates. Factors such as income inequality, employment and educational discrimination, and political disenfranchisement are often noted to have positive relationships to robbery rates, for example (Fajnzylber et al. 1347-9). Though the scholarly debate on this relationship is ongoing, there is persuasive evidence that these variables can create conditions that induce crime.

Appa's blindness to structural inequality underscores the factors that greatly constrain the program from portraying more realistic Asian characters within a multiculturalist framework. Yet, it may be what precisely makes Appa so popular with mainstream audiences worldwide. Appa's steadfast belief in the individual, in "bootstrapping" to success, and the supposedly fairness of the system, aligns with many mainstream core values. Arguably, Canadian audiences (and beyond) revere Appa not because of his foreignness which could be perceived as a threat, but how he fits with the dominant society. Appa is presented as the right type of immigrant who upholds the law, is not unassimilable but he has kept his right to his cultural and quirky authority. As peculiar as Appa's beliefs may seem to audiences, they do not fundamentally challenge Canadian hegemonic values. In fact, Appa is portrayed as the ideal immigrant citizen by embodying a non-threatening form of "cultural



pluralism," which the federal government considers to be the "very essence of Canadian identity" (Canada Parliament House of Commons 8580).

## Conclusion

*Kim's Convenience* is noteworthy because it strives to reposition Asian North Americans and Korean Canadians specifically away from older racist constructions. This situation comedy rejects the notion of an Asian as a sidekick or as a minor character to whites, and lodges itself in the lives and experiences of Appa and the Kim family. Furthermore, understanding the show requires making sense of some of the Korean cultural sensibilities, which have been absent from network television.

*Kim's Convenience* is not the first program to offer such contradictory messages. *Little Mosque on the Prairie*, another Canadian television sitcom (2007-2012), represents an earlier CBC attempt to challenge Orientalist stereotypes and demonstrate Canadian multiculturalism in programming. This sitcom focused on a rural mosque in fictional Mercy, Saskatchewan, and the ways the worshippers negotiate living with the skeptical white residents. Scholars commend the show for countering certain racial tropes. Alia Dakroury, for example, finds that the sitcom "opened up a public space for Muslim Canadians to express their traditions, rituals, culture, and religion on primetime Canadian television" (Dakroury qtd in Kassam 607). Most Muslim viewers, however, would agree with Shelina Kassam's argument that the program falls short of presenting the "diverse realities of Muslims" (Dakroury qtd in Kassam 607).

*Kim's Convenience* suffers from the same drawbacks. Unfortunately, aside from the quirkiness of Appa, the sitcom mostly presents the Kim family as being similar to non-Korean Canadians. The world of Appa, though separate from the white world, parallels it through a simplified representation of Korean-Canadian perspectives and experiences. Though the program and its themes do interrupt the white middle-class gaze and focuses on cultural differences, overall, the program avoids dealing with the structural realities of racism, sexism, or classism. In fact, the program reiterates a notion of Canadian multiculturalism that supposedly demonstrates a level of racial enlightenment, but ultimately reaffirms whiteness and values such as heterosexuality, individualism, and middle-class affluence.

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