Jong Bum Kwon
Narrator

Sophia Kim
Interviewer

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SK: Today is Friday, May 6, 1994. My name is Sophia Kim, and I'm speaking with Jong Kwon. Jong is a first generation Korean American. Jong, how old are you?

JK: Twenty-three. I'm actually a one point five generation.

SK: Okay. [Chuckles] How do you . . . how does that define then? What do you mean by one point five?

JK: Let's see . . .

SK: How old were you when you came here?

JK: About five and a half. And one point five refers to people who have immigrated when they're very young.

SK: Mmmm-hmmm.

JK: And pretty much been socialized in the United States.

SK: Okay.

JK: In their childhoods, I mean.

SK: Do you have any memories of Korea?

JK: Actually, I have very few memories. Just . . . usually just kind of sparks once in a while.

SK: Mmmm-hmmm.

JK: Like a couple graphic images. I remember where I lived. I lived in Seoul. And I remember we lived like in a one-bedroom . . . not even a one-bedroom, like a one-room or two-room house. So it would be like one main room and the kitchen. And the kitchen was halfway outside. And everything was cinderblocks. I remember when it used to rain at the . . . all the rain used to come into the house all the time. And then we didn't have any toilet facilities, didn't really have

running water. Like a . . . we had a sink of [unclear]. I remember we had a chamber pot; pooped in one of those.

SK: Did you live with your immediate family only?

JK: Yes. I lived with my mother and my father and I have a younger sister.

SK: And how old is she?

JK: She is nineteen and she's a sophomore at the University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee.

SK: How old was she when she arrived?

JK: She must have been three.

SK: And where did you move to when you came to the United States?

JK: We moved to Beloit, Wisconsin, because to immigrate you either get . . . there's a line, then there's an immigration line and people who have relatives in the United States usually get priority. So my mother's sister married an American soldier from the Korean War and she lived in Beloit, Wisconsin. And so we moved there and my aunt's husband arranged for my father to have a job.

SK: And what were the reasons why your parents chose to come here?

JK: As my parents would say, it's primarily for their children's future, my and my sister's future. Probably for our education, because it's easier to get an education in the United States. The quality of education, in general, would be higher. In Korea, colleges are very expensive and it's very competitive so it's more likely that you would not get into college unless you were the top students. And also there is . . . Korea is very . . . well, Seoul is very crowded. And so there's pretty much a . . . too much labor competition, so it's difficult to get a job. And it's difficult to make a decent standard of living.

SK: How would you describe your financial situation in Korea prior to coming to the United States?

JK: As a child, I probably didn't know better, because pretty much everybody was in the same state. I didn't see any differences. And as a child I think you tend to overlook small things. My mother made all my clothes and . . . but I always knew that I always had something to eat. It wasn't . . . the basic necessities were always filled. Like I said, but it wasn't . . . luxurious living at all. In the United States, I don't think I really noticed until I started school. And I must have been . . . I was about seven years old. I went straight to first grade and I went to a Catholic School in Beloit. And . . .

SK: A private school?

JK: Yes. They insisted I go to Catholic school because my mother and my father are very Catholic. And that . . . they thought that I would get more attention and more supervision, and it was true. A lot of nuns in black running all over the place, watching over me. I think that's when I first realized there was [unclear] and class. And that's when I first realized or developed a sense of embarrassment, I think, and a sense of difference very young.

SK: What were your parents' occupations in Korea?

JK: I think my mother earned money by working in the home, like taking in sewing. And my father was . . . in the United States you would call it a paralegal, I think. He worked for a lawyer. I think it was on the whole a comfortable job, but it didn't promise a future. And he gave up all that to come to the United States.

SK: Did he graduate from college?

JK: No. And I . . . truly, I'm not very sure that he even graduated from high school. If he did graduate from high school, I think he got it through a correspondence school. So his education was through correspondence, I think. He was financially on his own since he was thirteen years old. So he was looking after himself since he was thirteen. I don't think he had time to go to school, or the financial resources.

SK: How old were your parents when they got married?

JK: I believe my mother . . . no, my father was twenty-seven. That would make my mother twenty-three, I think . . .

SK: So for financial reasons he did not go to college?

JK: No. It's . . . at that time, I mean . . . [sighs] it was just very difficult for a lot of people, I think, especially if you didn't have the money. And like I said, it was very . . . it's very expensive, and after the war, or because of the war, my family lost everything. My grandmother used to have a huge farm and owned a lot of land. That was gone.

SK: In Seoul?

JK: Outside of Seoul. And on my father's side, I think my grandfather died . . . my . . . I'm trying to think exactly what happened. But I know he was just very poor, and my grandfather kicked my father out of the house when he was thirteen years old, because he had too many children and since my father was the oldest, he felt that my father should work and take care of himself and if possible send money back. But I don't think that was an unusual circumstance for a lot of people at that time. I think maybe, yes, I guess you have to understand that both my mother's and father's family they were country people, and that they weren't urban people. And they spent most of their lives in the country. And in the country it was very difficult to make that kind of living unless you owned land, things like that. Country bumpkins.

SK: And then once they arrived in the United States, what did they do?

JK: My father worked at a factory. It was called Durst. It's a division of Regal Beloit. They made gearboxes for irrigation systems for Saudi Arabia, I think. And my mother got a job after a while at Carlyle Nursing Home as a nurse's assistant.

SK: Can you describe those early years? What memories do you have of it?

JK: Well, we lived in my aunt's house and I lived . . . well, I shared a room with my cousin. His name is John. And he was . . . in my aunt's family there was my aunt, my uncle Marlon, let's see . . . my cousin Mark, who's the oldest, John, who's the second oldest, and Tina, who is the youngest. I lived with or I roomed with John for about a year and a half. And then we moved out of there and got an apartment on . . . on . . . it was like a duplex, and we lived on top, on the top floor of this huge gray house on top of this hill.

SK: How long did you live with your aunt?

JK: A year and a half, I believe.

SK: Was your cousin John older or younger than you?

JK: He's older.

SK: Older.

JK: Two years older.

SK: And did you get along with him?

JK: Yes. I didn't . . . those memories . . . it's like I really didn't remember having any problems. Not really, anyways. And it's almost kind of like a blur. I was just learning the language, and I guess as I was learning a language, I felt . . . it's like one . . . at one time in my life or some moment in my life, I forgot how to speak Korean and all I can do is speak English. And then, from there, I could not remember. I have a very difficult time remembering what happened prior to . . . for some odd reason.

SK: Do you remember how your parents communicated? Was your aunt a translator? I mean, did she speak English fluently?

JK: She still speaks English okay, she's semi-fluent. My mother and father had a very difficult time. They . . . when my father came here he was thirty-three, that made my mother thirty . . . and [unclear] was very old to immigrate, to learn the language. Language-wise, they still have a very difficult time in communication problems. But it wasn't just that inability to communicate. It was the inability to verbally stand up for herself. It was a big problem. When my father was

working in Korea, I mean he'd wear, you know, suits every day. When he got to the United States, working in a factory, he started out at the absolute bottom. For about a year and a half he swept floors, mopped floors, cleaned toilets. For a thirty-three year old man to do that, it was very difficult on my father who worked between twelve to fourteen hours a day. For . . . since he came here, almost. He never . . . never took a break off.

I worked my senior year in high school. I worked at Durst as a summer help. And it was the first time I saw where my dad worked. And I did what he did when he was thirty-three.

SK: Mmmm-hmmm.

JK: I did the same kind of work. I swept, I mopped, I cleaned, cleaned toilets, things like that. From being what I consider to be educated, it was very difficult for me to do that kind of work. I had almost too much pride and arrogance to do it. But this is something I did, and then I realized that then my father, a thirty-three year old man did the same thing. And for me to understand that was one of the bigger moments in my life, I think.

SK: So you realized that in retrospect. But do you remember sensing, I mean . . .?

JK: I remember when my father started working. He was always tired, and he was always dirty. He was never dirty before. Oh, then he would come in smelling like oil and grime from the factory. And that was the first time in my life, I think, that he showed a lot of anger. It was . . . I don't know if this is true or not, maybe my memory is playing jokes on me, but it was the first time in my life that I knew that my father was unhappy, that he was very angry. And sometimes he took that anger out on his family.

SK: And your mother, what did she do?

JK: My mother worked, and I didn't see my mother very often. My father worked days and my mother worked nights. And when I started school I saw my mother for a couple minutes in the morning. When I came back she had to go to work and my dad came home like seven o'clock or something like that. And I saw my father for a couple hours. So pretty much, for my sister and I, kind of took care of each other and didn't see very much of my folks, because they were always working.

SK: So how long did you live in the duplex?

JK: I'm trying to . . . this is . . . you know, I really don't know about years. It must have been three, four years, but I'm not positive; and very little time with me.

SK: And during that time they worked to make enough money . . .

JK: To . . . yes. They were . . . hmmm. How do I describe this? I think for immigrants, they can't control how much money they earn. What they can do is control how much they spend. So if immigrants want to get ahead, they must save. All my parents did was save everything. And so

what we just had the basic necessities. Remember, those were the days also that you and I could go to the grocery store and for fifty bucks you could get enough food for two weeks. So it wasn't food, wasn't a problem, things like that. But luxury items and things like that was never . . . we never had those kind of items. Everything we had was secondhand, secondhand clothing, secondhand furniture, things like that.

SK: Can you describe your neighborhood?

JK: [Chuckles] I was an odd child and there weren't any children around me, so I pretty much . . . it was just me and my sister, pretty much, in my youth. And for like three years, I think, yes, it was pretty much just me and my sister. I played with my sister, I took care of my sister, watched a lot of television. And I learned how to read and did a lot of reading. And just played by myself, I guess. I rode my bike around and . . . we had this . . . my imagination was hyperactive, so I could . . . I was never bored. I was always doing something. So . . . except I never really had any friends.

SK: And how about school? How was school for you?

JK: First year I didn't . . . didn't know enough . . . very much English. I was still in first grade and . . . I remember just being afraid.

SK: Mmmm-hmmm.

JK: I think. But it just is a weird dichotomy here, because when I was growing up very young, I was . . . I always felt very secure. I felt the sense that everything was going my way. Not going my way but . . . I had this very strong sense, maybe it's very quirky, that I had some sort of guardian angel or something. That things would . . . work in according to some sort of fate, and I was there and everything was going to be okay.

SK: This was in Korea, you mean?

JK: No, this was the United States.

SK: Okay.

JK: And it even went through childhood, all my first seven years, you know . . . but then after that it was . . . I don't know. Like I said, it was . . . that was a time when I started understanding differences, and class differences. And when I started becoming a little embarrassed about what I didn't have. And it . . . I think it affect . . . that kind of awareness so young, I think, affected me throughout my life. And it wasn't so much a racial difference; it was more of a class difference. And I remember . . . I mean, I had friends at school. And everybody, you know, treated me very nicely, and it was okay. *But* there are a couple of instances I remember that just . . . was not too nice, it was embarrassing. It's like when you don't know enough English and you have to use the bathroom, you raise your hand in class, but you don't know how to say what you ask to go to the bathroom. And at the same you are embarrassed, and so you don't know what to do. And

incidents like that were embarrassing. And like playing outside and things like that. And so you realize what kind of clothes other kids were wearing. And what you had, it was just different, and it was embarrassing. But I think, on the whole, I had a pretty decent childhood.

SK: If you couldn't communicate with the other kids, then how did you interact with them?

JK: I don't . . . see, I mean it wasn't just that I . . . because I mean I was learning English throughout that time, so I was just getting better and better, so I knew could un . . . I don't distinctly recall how I interacted, but I knew that I had friends and that they took care of me. And they all treated me very well. Maybe somehow I was kind of exotic for them, this kid who could barely speak English and it was very interesting for them. But interacting with kids at that age, I really don't recall very much.

SK: And do you recall any other immigrants in your school?

JK: No. No, there were no immigrants. We didn't know very much . . . I mean, around my apartment there were no friends . . . I didn't have any friends besides my school. I didn't know that there were any other immigrants, and I didn't meet anybody else like me. So . . .

SK: Can you describe the ethnic population in Beloit at that time or during your adolescence?

JK: [Sighs] I guess I should go to where I have like distinct memories, and that would be like very strong memories would be like junior high school. And there's . . . junior high school, one other Korean family, and two girls. But I wasn't, you know, very good friends. We were friends, but we weren't great friends. And then my friends were . . . I had two friends, Noah [sounds like Hockson] and Fred [sounds like Lind] that were both Filipino. And then my other friends were white, usually white. There wasn't very many Asian people there. I mean, there were . . . well, actually there were a couple Vietnamese kids there, but I wasn't very good friends with them.

SK: Can you describe how you felt when you saw other Asian kids?

JK: You know, I really . . . I really don't know how I felt when I met them. It was . . . it wasn't a . . .

SK: Do you remember feeling like you identified with them or that you didn't want to be with them?

JK: This . . . because like, although that these were Asian friends, but their friends were all white. And there weren't that strong distinction between white and Asian at that time. I just knew that. [Unclear] Filipino, and this person was Chinese, that person was Korean, and it didn't make me especially fond of them, especially, or especially distrust them at that age. I didn't have that . . . a very strong racial awareness. I mean, if there was an awareness, I think it was a class awareness more than anything else. I mean my Filipino friends were . . . their parents were doctors and my Korean friend, her father was a doctor. And it was more on that level than anything else.

I mean it's like . . . sometimes I think people overemphasize the racial ethnic differences as children, and you force those differences on them, when particularly some people might not have that strong awareness you have. And for me, I don't think I did. For me, it was always an individual difference and not that it was Korean. It was more that I was somehow different, not specifically because I was Asian, but because I came from a different class background and I had different interests. And at that time, those were your formative years, you know, physically and intellectually, and you are just trying to fit in. And you don't want to make those racial differences come out, especially in a school in which there weren't very many Asians or people of color. Well, actually, there was a strong African American presence. There were a lot of African Americans there.

But I mean there was no real . . . I didn't really sense difference. I mean, I just wanted to be like everyone else. And so I did what every other boy my age did, you know. Starting in seventh grade, I played sports. And I played softball and then went out for the football team in eighth grade. In ninth grade I played football. And I did track. I played basketball and swam, anything like that.

SK: Can you describe the feelings during that period of time while you . . . when you felt very different from other people?

JK: Different. This is going to sound like some sort of Judy Blume book, but it's . . . I think it's that period of sexual awakening. I think when realizing . . . at that time, you *can't* articulate why. I could not.

SK: How old were you?

JK: Thirteen, fourteen. So that would make me what, ninth grade? Eighth, ninth grade.

SK: Something like that.

JK: Yes. Eighth, ninth grade, initially, you're going through puberty. And there was more of . . . I mean, like becoming physically and sexually mature at that time, when you realized people were dating. And the fact that you weren't dating, it made you aware of something, but you didn't know it was a specifically a racial difference. Because, I mean, the idea of ethnic difference and racial difference is something that needs to be learned, and to be able to articulate it is something an educated person would do, or someone intuitively would do, to have the language to talk about it. But when you're experiencing it, you have no idea what the hell is going on. You just know that you're different. And I knew when I looked in the mirror that I was different, and not specifically then, and that was because I was Korean or Asian, just that I was different. And that was enough and I didn't need to bring in race to make myself more different or to justify my difference or to, you know, say that I'm an oppressed individual and never . . . I never considered myself that oppressed by some sort of, you know, white . . . white, you know, supremacy thing. I never considered it that way when I was growing up.

To go back to the sexual thing . . . I just knew that I wasn't dating. That's basically . . . and that girls didn't find me interesting. Now if they consciously thought of, consciously made decisions on the base that I was Asian, I don't think so. I just don't think that people could articulate . . . not very many people could articulate it, or it was consciously in their mind. Most people, it's much more of an unconscious process.

At the same time, I mean, I always considered myself an individual. I wasn't a part of a group. I mean, it was like . . . I didn't identify with an entire ethnic group. I mean, there is a sort of ideology in the United States that says that you are an individual, and I took that in very early. It was what my father taught me. You have to work hard and be better than anyone else to get ahead. And I just thought, okay, I have to work hard, and be better than else to get ahead. And of course there's the ethnic message there about racial discrimination and things like that. When you're a kid you're thinking, I just have to be working really hard.

I mean, the literature that I was reading made me . . . especially when I was in like . . . especially in high school. Those differences were, I thought for me, more of an intellectual and idiosyncratic difference, and not so much as a racial difference. I guess [unclear] high school, that's when it's like you have an intellectual . . .

SK: Well, I'd like to know, during this period, did you keep your Korean language?

JK: I could still understand what my parents were saying, but like I said before, there was a point in my life in which I just stopped speaking Korean.

SK: Mmmm-hmmm.

JK: A part of that is I think that my mother and my father emphasized that I learn English as fast as possible, and that it was important for me to learn English beyond all else. And it's that part of assimilation . . . assimilation, you know, give, you know, learn the language and study hard. Learn the language, study hard. And that's what I did. And somehow, doing that, I think I sacrificed my ability for Korean. But I know that . . . I mean, the formative years for language development is like four, five, and six, and I was still speaking Korean in those years, so it has to be in my head, but at the same time, I haven't . . . I don't have it right now, although I can understand it, I can't articulate it. I can't speak in Korean. But now that I'm learning Korean now, it comes very easy to me. It's a very intuitive process.

SK: Were the reasons why your parents didn't make you speak Korean because they were not around as much by then?

JK: I mean . . . yes. Less . . . I mean, yes, I think that's another reason. Now my parents weren't around very much, therefore I couldn't communicate with them in Korean all the time. But I know that I did. And at the same time, because I was learning English and they wanted to learn English so bad, I think that they would be both at home trying to speak English sometimes. And then we were kind of teaching each other in a way. And but like I said, again, I mean, their emphasis, or their reasons why they tell me why they came to the United States was from their

children's future and their education. So when we came here the focus was on my and my sister's education. And that was the main, learning English.

SK: Can you describe the way you communicated then, if your parents tried to speak English but did not have the language capabilities?

JK: My whole family . . . like I said, I can understand Korean, especially the way they spoke to me. I mean, it's like you . . . even if I can't understand other Korean people's speaking, I can understand my parent's Korean, because that's what I've been around all my life, and I can understand their intonations, and that was enough. So they would speak in Korean or broken English, and I could understand that. It became more of a problem when I was older, when I became much more independent. English and . . . the issues that we're talking about became more complicated, when at that age, you weren't talking about, you know, big things about, you know, I don't know what was the big things in life, but you're pretty much talking about, you know, what you're going to eat, what you want to do, how do you like this, how do like that. So when you're talking, that's what you talk about when you're a child. What you're interested in, what you're not interested in, and how you're doing in school, and those things that you can communicate in simple Korean language, in simple language, and not a complex language that . . . The issues that I try to communicate with my parents now are much more complex issues, and therefore the language barrier is much more emphasized right now.

SK: Can you describe your relationship with your parents as you were growing up?

JK: [Sighs] With my parents . . . Hmmm. A love/hate relationship like any child, I guess. Like I said, that I didn't see my parents very often when I was very young. But I knew that my . . . both my parents loved me and they wanted to take care of me. At the same time, I think I saw that the pressures of living in the United States was transforming my father and my mother, that they were becoming more angry and distant. And I escaped into myself. And I became . . . I mean, I was . . . you know, spent more time with myself than my parents.

I mean . . . there, growing up, I mean, I know that there were times I know I was very much afraid of my father. And I didn't understand what my father was about. I mean, I didn't understand why he acted the way he acted. I didn't understand, I didn't give him any credit for what he was doing with his life. I just thought like any kid, you know, rebelling. And I'd say, "Look, Dad, [unclear] fuck off." Of course, I didn't say that to my dad, or [unclear] and cause problems. But . . . I don't know. I mean, I guess . . . I mean it gets really complicated. My relationship with my father . . . I mean, my focus on my parents is like pretty much on my father. [Chuckles] It's like somehow he's become this mythical figure in my childhood. And I'm still trying to untangle why I feel the way I feel.

But as I was growing up, I mean, I was in awe and I was afraid of him. I was afraid of what he did and what he could do. I mean, he was . . . he's a very stern individual. He's very disciplined, and he's a workaholic, and he's a perfectionist. And those things . . . and no matter what kind of . . . what color you are, those characteristics in a father are going to drive any kind of kid crazy, and it drove me crazy. I know that there are . . . why he is the way he is, a part of it, that's part of the

Korean culture. I mean, his interactions . . . my interaction with my father was somehow mediated by that Korean culture; the way *he* grew up, what he understood to be his role as a father and as a man in the family. There was very little affection between us. I don't think traditionally Korean parents, Korean fathers show very much affection to their sons. I have had very little affection from my father.

My father [chuckles] well, I don't know, maybe this . . . I don't think this is specific to Korean culture, but he used to love to do, well, reverse psychology on me. And it's like that affected my understanding of my father. Sometimes I couldn't tell what he was trying to tell me because he was trying to say the opposite to make me do the one thing, and I didn't know, I was going, what the hell?

It's . . . I mean this is a relationship I'm still working on, so it's very difficult to articulate what's going on.

SK: How about your relationship with your mother?

JK: You know, somehow [chuckles] my mother was always the softer side of my father. I mean, she calmed my father down and spoke to my father on my behalf. But at the same time she was going through just as many problems as my father was. And at the same time, she didn't know what *I* was going through, because their lives were so separate from mine at the time because they were working all the time and I was in school. I think that caused a lot of problems. In retrospect, I know that a lot of pressures came from that distancing, and that they didn't know why I was doing the things that I was doing, that I wasn't turning out to be the ideal son. Mmmm. I don't know.

SK: As the years went on, did they reduce the hours that they worked?

JK: Somehow my father earned enough money and saved enough money to buy a Laundromat. And that was in what, 1986, something like that. It was a while ago, from what I can remember, about 1986. So my mother, like in 1988, quit her job and worked at the Laundromat, took care of the Laundromat. And my father still worked at the factory. But at that time, I believe, somewhat my mother but still just not as much my father. And at the same time they were . . . that would be like very early in high school or . . . yes, I was in ninth grade or something like it.

SK: Where was this Laundromat?

JK: In Beloit. My years are all messed up; I can't remember exactly when it was happening. But, I mean, every . . . still, you know, went to school. My father went to work before I got up. And I hung out at school, I did things at school until like five or six, came home, ate dinner [unclear]. And then my father was really tired, probably he then took a nap and then went to work at the Laundromat, because he was still working these amazing hours. And I would only see my father two or three hours a day.

SK: Did you ever work at the Laundromat?

JK: Yes, as I got older, I started cleaning there at night. But I was really against cleaning there. I was pretty much selfish about that. I wanted to do what I wanted to get done. And I wanted to, you know, go out and have fun. And I thought that it was a hindrance on my life that I would have to work for my father. I mean, it's not very coherent what I'm trying to tell you, but it's like [sighs] there's that certain image of the ideal Korean kid. He studies extremely hard, he's a brilliant student, and works for his father. And it's like his entire life is around his family.

And I think if you talked to some kids, I mean, ones in our large Korean communities, you see examples of that. Especially Korean merchants, you see their kids are big students, and after they are done with school, they come home and they work for the store, and then they study. But at the same time now, I guess, there are a lot of kids that turn out like me, that rebelled against that entire thing, and didn't want to be like that, and started drinking and smoking. And in Chicago there are a lot of Korean gangs. There are a lot of delinquents. There's a drug problem, alcohol problem, and things like that. And I am . . . I, you know, wasn't the ideal student, that's for sure. I had different priorities.

SK: Where does your sister fit in all of this?

JK: Wow. I . . . I don't know where my sister fit into all this. Only now, only in the last couple years, am I learning what my sister went through. I mean, my sister had her own life, too. We kind of . . . I mean, it wasn't physically a very close-knit family. We all kind of did what we wanted to do. I couldn't tell you what my sister was feeling. And I couldn't tell you what experiences she had. But I know that she had many difficulties, too, had a difficult time fitting in. And only now that I realize how . . . what kind of trouble she had. And I wish I knew more at that time so I could have helped her, but I don't think if I found out at that time that I could have even helped her. Because I didn't even know what the hell was going on in my own life.

SK: Do you think your parents were aware that you . . . that their children were going through these difficulties or . . .?

JK: Yes.

SK: Did they communicate that to you?

JK: Hmmm. I think they were kind of aware, but they didn't know exactly what it was. I mean, their life was surrounded by . . . their experience of their life was their family and their work. They didn't really talk to other parents; they didn't really integrate into the community. So they didn't know what other kids were doing or what other parents were thinking. You know, they had certain . . . I think that they either had . . . they knew something was going on but they had certain expectations, and realized that I just wasn't doing what they were expecting, what they expected me to do. But I mean who can . . . it's like, I don't know, they did what they had to do to survive. And that was enough, I guess.

SK: Can you describe your high school years?

JK: High school years. I mean I had [unclear] eleventh and twelfth grade. Extremely traumatic. Extremely difficult time, my first three years, I think. Ninth grade, all these sexual problems were coming up and . . . boy, problems. I had a very difficult time just fitting in, and that was my big problem. I didn't know where I belonged and how I belonged, but, like I said before, it wasn't . . . I didn't consider it a racial problem. I thought it was a certain defect in me, personally. And there was a certain problem in myself. I tried having . . . I tried very hard to fit in, I mean, I played soccer, played varsity sports, and joined all the clubs and things like that. And it was fine. And I had friends. But at the same time I knew that I was still different from them somehow.

And what happened . . . I think I was very hyper-conscious of myself. Not only did I . . . there were always like two of me. It was like one looking at me from on top while I was interacting, and I was very aware of what was going on and I was being overly self-conscious, I was overly insecure in my life. And I was exasperated by the physical . . . what I considered my physical inadequacies, I guess. And that . . . again, that was like why I didn't think I was an attractive human being and why I . . . there were some sexual problems going on with my life. I was going, hey, you know, why wasn't I dating, things like that. I mean that insecurity kind of spread all throughout my life and so I focused really hard on academics. It was the one core of my life that I knew that I had control over and that I could be a straight 'A' student. I mean, you know, I was, you know, a very good student until like my junior year, at which then I thought it wasn't good that I was a good student, that I needed to be something else that I couldn't do in my academic life.

SK: Can you describe that feeling of . . . a feeling as though it wasn't good to be a good . . . to be an academic achiever?

JK: Because, I mean, it's part of our stereotype of nerd, I think. Not just a nerd, because I didn't think I was so much a nerd, but that it wasn't, it just wasn't cool to study. And well, to be honest, I never studied very much, I still . . . I just did really well in school. Where I think for a lot of kids, you know, high school is very easy for them, and you know, it was very easy for me. And but you have to act like that you didn't care about school, because that was the cool thing to do. So I said, yes, that's cool [unclear] you know. I'll get my 'A's but I don't really have to study or anything like that, that's the entire talk. And I . . . that's when I started drinking and I . . . [sighs] probably my sophomore year, I started drinking . . . and started drinking with the soccer people, things like that. And that was . . . I started smoking like my junior year. I mean, it was all that and then I started . . . started trying to be alternative or something. [Chuckles] You know. Because I was different in the first place, therefore I should exacerbate my differences, make myself more different and just take control of my difference in a way.

SK: Mmmm-hmmm.

JK: And so I grew out my hair my junior year. Started wearing, you know, different clothes. I listened to different, you know, alternative music. And my high school wasn't really your typical like small city high school, it was mostly people that are . . . you can . . . I guess the stereotype

would be, you know, you have your jocks and you have your cheerleaders and they're all preppies. And I kind of went away from that and . . . so I wore like army fatigues and soccer shoes and things like that. Wore just one flannel all the time and grew out, like I said . . . .

[Recording interruption]

[Tape 1 Side B]

SK: You keep referring to this feeling of feeling different. Can you describe that more? I mean, what . . . of course, it was a physical difference, but do you feel like . . . what if any Korean values stayed with you or did you see in yourself?

JK: At that time I didn't . . . I didn't differentiate between Korean values or those values. I mean, those were paramount in my life. And this idea of racial oppression wasn't consciously in my life. It wasn't a conscious part of my life. It was . . . I knew I was different. One way I was different is like intellectually I thought it was like . . . it was all on an individual level. I was an individual. And I guess, I mean, it's a personality thing, too. That I enjoyed literature, I enjoyed reading and writing. And I . . . I think I had, you know, a good imagination and I had a very active imagination. With these things added in, is a personality in which I, I think, no matter what . . . no matter my racial characteristic, I would be different anyways. Because I perceive things differently, and I don't know if that was because of being brought up Korean or not, but I think it probably has that influence, but I think there's something besides that, that I was an individual. And my literature that I read, the things that I wanted to read told me that I was an individual, that I should . . . I mean, this . . . this . . . okay, this gets extremely hokey. But it's like, you read . . . I mean, I was reading, you know, things like *The Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, I was reading Herman Hesse, you know. And these . . . and existential literature and things like that, and things like . . . and the struggle wasn't a racial struggle, it was individual struggle against this feeling of meaninglessness. Well, I didn't really consider it a meaninglessness, I just thought that I was somehow different, and I identified with like those kind of literature and that kind of philosophy. And then I tried to take control of those differences. And then, as I said, I went alternative. I grew out my hair and [unclear] and things like that.

SK: And how did your parents react to it?

JK: You know, I think they thought I was just going through a phase, I think. They didn't . . . try to beat it out of me. As long as I was bringing home 'A's it was fine with them, pretty much. And they never . . . they never found out that I smoked or drank or hung out with these people anyways. I mean, I lied constantly. You know. I was doing things that I told them that I wasn't doing those things. So I mean in things like, the treatment that I had from my friends wasn't because I was Asian, like in my close group of friends in junior and senior year in high school were Filipino friends. Filipino . . . yes, pretty much Filipino. And . . . because physically they're all so different anyways, so I didn't see it as a . . . but because I was Korean I had . . . I'm going to be treated differently. It was more like it was because I was Jong that I was treated differently. [Chuckles] You know, that's what it was. And it was true, I mean, I was treated differently. I

think that was because of who I was, and my personality. I was very insecure personally I think. And I think I was taken advantage of because of that. But I made a decision by my junior year that I wasn't going to take that shit anymore. [Chuckles] So I changed. And that's when I did everything else, started doing everything, different things.

SK: How did that change your identity?

JK: It changed my identity because I took control of my identity. I knew that I was being treated differently and I said, "What the fuck? I am different." I took control of it. I . . . made it mine. And I think that makes . . . it made *all* the difference.

SK: What differences did you see in people's reaction to you or their relationships to you?

JK: I mean, they were still very distant. People were different [unclear]. But I was . . . I wanted that. You know, instead of that was something that was imposed on me, it was something that I imposed on them because I was this and they were that. And that's what I did. And I liked it that way. I had my small group of friends and we listened to the same stuff. And you know, it's like this entire idea of rebelling and being an alternative person was like . . . and people who want to be alternative, they do that to control their identity and say, my sense of alienation is because of me and not them, and that gives you a sense of power of what was going on. And I took control. And I *wanted* that. And so in this you sort of give out a sense of arrogance, and it's a *fake* sense of confidence, it's not really confidence, but it's an arrogance, it's a façade, a show that you develop around you, a very sturdy mask, but that . . . it protects you.

SK: Were you looking for something else?

JK: Looking for . . .?

SK: In your mind at that point, when you're graduating, what were you looking for in your life?

JK: Are you talking my senior . . .?

SK: What did you need to change in order to feel happy or . . .?

JK: [Chuckles] I don't know. I wasn't a very happy individual is mostly why. And, I mean, and that's a personal thing, I know. I don't know if that's so much a racial . . . I ended up graduating from high school. I was extremely arrogant. And I graduated in the top of my class without doing anything ever, and I had amazing academic respect without doing anything, so I was arrogant, and I was on . . . way high on myself. I went through this rebellion period and I still thought I was fucking cool as hell. And . . . but I knew that it didn't make me particularly happy. What I . . . [sighs] I got involved in a very serious relationship with this girl. It was like middle of my senior year. And I think I . . . in one way it was a part of that, of finding something else that I wanted in my life, who I didn't . . . still didn't know or consciously know what I needed to do to make myself happy. And what is . . . what do you need to do to make you happy? I don't know if

I can answer that. But I knew that I was looking for something, and I was like feeling myself out. And I was like, hey. So I went out with this girl and it was like . . .

SK: Was she your first girlfriend?

JK: No. I had a run of bad girlfriends—bad. A lot of high school relationships of . . . but this went nice. First serious, serious girlfriend. And I was very . . . had a very romantic notion of what it would be like, and I think what I did is I latched onto the security of having a relationship. I latched onto the sense that, hey, this is love or something. And I like this feeling and I'm going to keep on doing it. And I blinded myself to everything else. And I think that relationship had a profound effect, I think, on my life. It made me . . . I don't know. It was like . . . I don't know how to describe all this, but . . .

SK: How long were you going out with her?

JK: Two years. And I went to Macalester College. [Sighs] See, and then . . . and I was still going out with her for about a year into Macalester, a year and a half at Macalester.

SK: Is she white?

JK: Mmmm-hmmm. But there weren't very many Asian people in my high school to date, period.

SK: How did your parents feel about it?

JK: Oh, hated her.

SK: They hated her?

JK: Oh, yes. But that wasn't so much because that she was white, it was more because that she thought she wasn't . . . they thought that she wasn't a good person. And . . . I mean, they knew that I wasn't going to marry her. Or they hoped that I wasn't going to marry her. But they just . . . like they knew I was . . . I was too damn young to think . . . even consider being married to anyone, so that wasn't even in their mind. But what was on their mind was like, they didn't like her personally.

SK: Did that create a lot of tension between you and your parents?

JK: Oh, yes. Oh, yes. We've had some big fights. But, you know, what do you tell your parents at that time in your life? Hey Ma, Dad, this is fucking my life, just leave me alone. That's what I told my parents. We had some *big* arguments because of that.

SK: So you went to Macalester College in Saint Paul.

JK: Mmmm-hmmm. Why did I come to Macalester? Because of internationalism and diversity. [Chuckles] Actually, no.

SK: Can you describe your first reactions to Macalester or first couple of years or first year?

JK: I came to Macalester pretty much on accident. I only applied to three schools. Macalester, Carleton [College], and University of [Wisconsin] Madison. Let's see. Carleton was my first choice. But I'd never visited any of these schools. I didn't know anything about these schools. All I knew is that they were supposed to be small liberal arts schools, [unclear] I know and whatever, so I was thinking, and applied to these schools. Carleton was my first school, got put on the waiting list. Macalester accepted me and gave me money. So I mean I didn't . . . I sent in my mail thing saying yes, I'm going to go to Macalester. And then I got accepted to Carleton, but then it was too late to go to Carleton, so it was all accidental.

I got to Macalester and I was like . . . I had long hair, I was just going kind of . . . not really a hippie, but really alternative kind of skater-punk kind of look. And, you know, listened to all the . . . you know, this really harsh metal, you know, music. And I came into Macalester and looked around and I was like, all these fucking people kind of *look* like me! I'm like, what the fuck? You know, I was like, *this* is not what I wanted. And so I [unclear] weaned myself out of that and realized, making myself . . . and I kind of made myself more . . . I became normal in a greater societal sense to be different at Macalester, I think. It was a really odd transformation and it took about a year or so, but I still was very much attached to my hair. But I started dressing a little differently. My roommate was Ethan Hyman [sp?], he was a Jewish American. I don't how . . . if he would even identify himself as Jewish. But the guy was extremely anal. Oh, God. Hmmm. And these are all personal things [chuckles] my personal opinions.

But when I came to Macalester, I was pretty much a loser. I'm being honest here. My first two years at Macalester I was . . . wow. I either withdrew or had an incomplete every semester for the first two years at Macalester. And I was failing horribly. It was . . . it was, it was, it was a bad . . . it was bad academically for the first two years [unclear]. And a lot of that had to do with like . . . I'd never learned how to study in high school.

And I think this is . . . again, this is where the class differences come in. And that . . . the people that I met at Macalester and that lived on my floor came from prep schools or came from middle class families and had the best of everything. I thought I was well read when I came to Macalester. I was completely wrong. These people were so well read it was . . . it frightened me. It intimidated me. Macalester intimidated me. I didn't know what my abilities were, and I became very insecure about my academic abilities. So what I did is I procrastinated, and I did very poorly academically because of that.

SK: Were your parents aware that you were having these kind of problems?

JK: No. I didn't . . . no. No, I didn't tell anything. I was just like, when they called, I said, hey, it was alright. And I just [unclear].

SK: How did you feel being away from your family?

JK: It was great. I didn't feel homesick at all. It was . . . I was still going through that period in which home was home and there's me. The focus was me, more about me. Like because I had this girlfriend back at home, and I went home like every four weeks, and I spent time with her and with my family.

SK: Did your parents notice a change in you after your first year?

JK: Probably, but didn't really discuss it too much. Didn't really talk about it at all. I mean I know . . . I'm pretty sure that they were upset and that they knew that I was . . . ignoring the family, ignoring my parents, ignoring my sister. I know that they hated that. But what could they tell me? Just . . .

SK: Did you know that at the time or later?

JK: Later. I just did what I thought was necessary for me to do to keep on going in life. I don't know. Macalester. [Chuckles] Drank a lot. That's what I did. Drink a lot and skip school. Didn't study. Stay up all night just hanging around and watching TV. I still read a lot, but I didn't do any . . . I never read anything for class, I just read for myself. I mean, I was still pulling 'A's and 'B's in all my classes, but . . . that was just was because Macalester is just a silly institution.

SK: How did you feel about your Asian identity once you came to Macalester?

JK: Didn't have an Asian identity, in general. [Chuckles] I really didn't want any.

SK: At that point would you have described yourself as an American as opposed to a Korean American?

JK: I would have . . . if someone would have said, you know, what nationality were you, I would say I was Korean American. But saying you're Korean American doesn't mean that you identify yourself as being Korean. I mean it's . . . it's obvious that I'm Korean or obviously I'm not, you know, white, anyways. But it didn't mean that I personally identified with that. Like yes, you know, of course, I'm Korean American, obviously, what the hell are you talking about? But it's like . . . but hey, I decided [unclear] so this is me, and those are Asian people and whatnot. And I never hung out with Asian people, I didn't hang out with the Korean people. I never thought it was such a big deal.

And probably my junior year at Macalester that I started doing a total rethinking of my past and really realizing what the hell is going on in my life. And a part of that would be the Korean. To be actually having a racial difference and trying to pull out where that fit in, into my life, and why . . . how certain things in my life came out of that. And it was only, like I said, my junior year that I started making that transformation.

SK: Why your junior year?

JK: Hmmm.

SK: Were there specific events that caused it?

JK: Specific events . . . [Chuckles] I . . . I don't know if there really was one. One, specifically. I think it was just . . . emotionally, intellectually, I was maturing and it made me become more aware of what was going on with myself. At the same time, maybe Macalester had something to do with that, and that everybody was talking about, you know, ethnic identity and people of color and things like that. And it was like, yes. I guess I'm a person of color. Yes, whatever, you know. Yes. But it's like . . . maybe that helped me to bring it into my consciousness, started thinking about certain things. And I really started . . . it was digging into myself, you know, finding out how everything happened.

SK: Can you describe the sort of awareness that you had or realizations that you had?

JK: I mean, I don't know if maybe you can call any of this realization or this, oh, you know, big [unclear] your head. It's like what you start doing is you start rethinking about your past. And you start contextualizing things more. And you become more detailed. And that's what it is. It's like my identity is a product of my memories. What I have did in the last two years is go through my memories and make those more clear and give them more detail, more context. And in doing that I realized that a lot of my development was because of my racial and class differences in my life. And that had a profound effect on my life. It did.

But I'm . . . I don't know. I guess I'm still very hesitant to say that I'm . . . was completely oppressed, that there were specific incidents of me being discriminated against. And I just think that the context of difference and my inability to articulate those differences when I was young caused a lot of my problems. And now that I am able to articulate those differences and contextualize them, I am more aware of my identity and how my identity fits into my life.

SK: And how do you see your identity right now?

JK: I'm a Korean American. That means . . . I don't know. How do you express my identity? My identity is everything that I do. It's . . . I realize . . . and I don't know how to describe my identity. And saying Korean American doesn't say anything. I'm saying I am more aware of who I am and how I interact, and that's how maybe you'll see who I am in the way I do things, not the way I'm going to tell you this me. Maybe I still can't say who I am in some sort of sentence, in a paragraph or you know, I don't even think that's capable . . . that's even possible, that it's . . . I'm aware, that's what it means. I am aware of my life and aware that when I look in the mirror that this is me. And the way I see myself in the mirror isn't completely objective. And it has other things to do with the way I look at myself. The way I look at you, the way I look at other people in this world. I mean, the way I think other people look at me. And [unclear] awareness that life is much more complex.

At the same time, I consider myself very much a human being. That what I had gone through in my life on the whole and in general not very different than what the average person in life will go through. I am not different, intrinsically different than a white person, or an African American person, or a Japanese person, a Chinese, or a Native American, or Hispanic. I am not intrinsically different from them. I think that's my awareness. That these are the things that happened because I was Korean, that I was Asian, because of my differences and my class differences because I was poor for much of my life. But all those things that I did . . . I'm . . . it doesn't express specifically and rigidly a Korean thing. It expresses a human thing.

And that's, I think, maybe what my identity comes from. That underlying everything that goes in my life, I am foremost a human being, and that we all have more things in common, I think, than we have differences, probably. Because . . . because . . . and I was born, a lot of people are poor, a lot of people have their own academic problems that they have to deal with, I had to deal with my sexuality, I had to deal with what every racial ethnic difference that people have. That's a lot of people. Or the idea of worrying about your identity, your sense of masculinity, a lot of people go through that. Everybody goes through that. Dealing with friends, it's a human thing; dealing with your first love, a human thing. And then I'm going to get a job, probably get married, then I'm going to die. These are very human things.

SK: Can you describe the time in your life when you felt the need to have a concrete connection to Korean culture?

JK: Concrete connection. I'm going to Korea in June of this year. And what that trip means to me is not that . . . I don't know if . . . they have this idea that if I go back to Korea that I'm going to become whole is the issue. Because I don't think that's that easy.

SK: Have you ever been to Korea before?

JK: Yes, in January. It makes you understand your past. It makes you rethink your memories and your past. And that's how my trip is going to affect me. When I go to Korea, I'm going to be able to understand a little bit more about my father, because I can see how Korean culture affected my father. And see then take those things and put it back into my past and try to trace an understanding. When I go there I'll understand the sensation when I went in January . . . in Korea in January that everybody around me looked like me. It was a profound thing. But at the same time I was still an individual. Other people might look in the crowd and say they don't see me. But that happens with anybody. It's . . . I'm still an individual, but I am aware that given a different context, how things could be different. And then I can take that and use it for my life to be . . . understand what my life has meant. I mean, I'm not going to go back to Korea and go, God, I'm Korean. Whoo! Whoopee! I'm Korean. This is what it means to be Korean. I don't think it's that easy.

SK: Well, how did you feel when you went to Korea in January?

JK: Extremely sad. And afraid, because I [unclear] been back. When I went . . .

SK: Sad in what way?

JK: Hmmm. I don't know. Sad. I saw the way . . . how people live in Korea. And I saw that there is still a lot of poverty. There a lot people who didn't work . . . work living good life. It made me sad. That one big thing that came out of that, was a sense of family. That in the United States I only had maybe a family and my aunt and uncle and three cousins. I've never had a sense of family. And going to Korea gave me that sense of family. I had so many fam . . . so much family in Korea that I haven't seen in so long, then realize that they actually cared for me. And that unconditionally they cared for me, because I was of their blood and even if they hadn't seen me in like seventeen years. And that is what I took out of that. I had a network of people that I was responsible to, but at the same time, in exchange for that, they cared for me, cared for my well-being. And that's what they haven't had a long time. That was the most profound experience.

SK: Did you go back by yourself?

JK: I went with my mother.

SK: And was that the first time she had been back since you immigrated?

JK: No. No. She went when I was in ninth grade. That would have been in 1988 . . . no, not 1988. Wow, 1986, 1985, something like that.

SK: But this was your first time.

JK: Yes, this was my first time. You know, I'm an anthropology major and I'm supposed to be like big thing on culture you know, how culture affects every person and wholeheartedly of that. But as much as why there is culture is because of we're all human beings for some stupid reason that we all have the same wants and desires for . . . not the exact same, but we have the same capabilities for those desires and needs. And that's what it is. While I'm in Korea I assume you . . . when I go to Korea it's going to be one of the biggest challenges in my life. To be there by myself, but I'll have my family, but to be in this huge city and to live that way is a profound challenge [unclear].

SK: Why are you going?

JK: [Prof.] On a pragmatic level, to learn the language, and to reacquaint myself with Korean culture. On another level, certainly, remember again my . . . hopefully remember what went on in my childhood before I came here. Or somehow find something about that, about my past, really think about my past. I mean, I'm not going there because I want to live there or that I want to find my Korean identity.

SK: You do want to or it's not the reason why?

JK: It's not . . . that's not my purpose to go to Korea to find a Korean identity.

SK: It's to learn the language?

JK: To learn a language and to remember. And to . . .

SK: What . . . what will that language acquisition do for you?

JK: I have the primary reason for learning the language is so that I can communicate with my parents. Biggest . . . one of the biggest sorrows of my life is that my inability to communicate well with my father. Because it will make him very happy . . . I can express to him English but I wish to and he can express to me in English what he wished to . . . we talk in broken language. That's my most important thing. Well, then there's also practical uses for having another language. I mean, I'll be academically . . . it will . . . would be important. But I don't think there is such a thing as a Korean identity. This Korean identity when I go back will be Korean and Korean individual. Because of my experience in the United States, I'm always going to be Korean American. I'm going to be mixed somehow, always going to be mixed. And I can't escape that. That's who I am.

SK: And how do your parents feel about you returning to Korea?

JK: Hmmm. [Sighs] They're worried about me. [Chuckles] I mean, and that it is such a huge city. And they're worried about how people are going to treat me because I don't know the language very well. And I know they're worried about the political situation in Korea, that maybe something terrible would happen when I was there. They want me to study. When I go to Korea they want me to study very hard and learn the language very well. And that . . . go to graduate school after that, prepare myself for graduate school. For them, there's another phase of my life building up to graduate school and to a professional degree or a doctorate or something.

SK: When you were there in January how did you see yourself in relation to the other Koreans? Did you feel like a foreigner?

JK: On one level, yes, because I knew that I interact with somebody personally that they would know that, they would have noticed it right away. But if I didn't talk, I was . . . I think that if . . . mmmm. That's the thing about being in that culture. Being Korean. Community. That you fit in physically. That [unclear] really they can't call you not a part, that much apart. Now I'm . . . [sighs] other than that, I don't know. Start remembering things and learn the language, met my relatives. Things like that. And realized, yes, Korea does play a part in my life. Probably a very big part of my life, my identity, but like I said I'm not just a Korean person. And it just doesn't mean that I don't have any race pride or anything either, so . . . [chuckles]

SK: Do you see it as a very important thing to keep your language? I mean . . . if you have children, will you . . . would you want them to learn Korean? Do you see that as an important thing?

JK: [Sighs] I really couldn't tell you right now. For me it's very important because I lived in Korea. I don't know how important that would be for my children. [Unclear] that [unclear] especially if I don't marry a Korean woman, I mean, what are the contexts of things to happen? I . . .

SK: To communicate with you . . . their grandfather or grandmother?

JK: Perhaps. I don't know. I think . . . I want them to take pride in who they are, and not go through all the shit that I went through. And they're going to go through shit anyways. [Chuckles] You know what I mean, so I think because I went through some things and if they . . . if I marry a Korean woman, they are Korean physically, I will talk to them and explain to them what they're going through and what I went through and what it means to have a part of your identity be Korean, maybe physically different, and I'll try to express that to them. And I hope that they will make . . . take that, in their path and they . . . they feel that they want to [unclear] I'll be more than glad to support them. But if they don't feel . . . being . . . I don't know if I should . . . I don't know. I really . . . I mean, I really can't tell you right now exactly . . . all this means. I . . . I think it can mean just on a practical level that I would love them to love Korean just to be multilingual, and that will have a lot of practical uses. But . . .

SK: Okay. Well, thank you very much, Jong.

JK: Yes. [Chuckles] And as I said . . .

SK: Do you have anything else to add?

JK: Well, I know that this is really kind of . . . I don't know how to say . . . it's not a very cohesive statement that I made and probably a lot of it turn out contradictory but . . . I think that's . . . a lot of it has to do with what I've said, and my life is full of contradictions and that myth and identity [unclear] life [unclear] and my inability to tell you what I'm going to do with my kids is probably a lot of that. I don't know exactly what will happen.

SK: Okay. Thanks, Jong.

JK: Yes.

[End of interview]

Transcription by Marilyn Olson-Treml
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