

RE-IMAGINING ETHNIC ENCLAVES: CONTESTED IDENTITIES AND TRANSNATIONALISM IN LOS ANGELES' KOREATOWN

KRISTY H.A. KANG

SOL PRICE SCHOOL OF PUBLIC POLICY, UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA

INTRODUCTION:

Living in increasingly dense urban environments that are rapidly shifting, we often lose sight of the human element of urbanization. It is the people who move through and inhabit cities that shape its cultural history and comprise the often ephemeral and under-represented narratives of city spaces. How can new digital platforms create the opportunity for developing innovative ways to envision our sense of place? This paper presents the interactive online cultural history *The Seoul of Los Angeles: Contested Identities and Transnationalism in Immigrant Space*. Engaging issues in contemporary media studies including global/local relations, transnational ethnicity and identity, and new media and urban studies, this project looks at the sociocultural networks shaping immigrant communities and how local neighborhoods negotiate a sense of place within an increasingly globalized culture.

Currently, Los Angeles has the largest population of Koreans in the United States living outside of Korea. Nicknamed the “L.A. district of Seoul City”, this work examines Los Angeles’ Koreatown as a case study for re-imagining immigrant enclaves as homogenous entities. In one of the most ethnically identified neighborhoods in Los Angeles, Koreatown, a community with clear spatial boundaries, with a long history whose immigrants originated from a country as powerfully nationalistic and ethnically homogenous as Korea, even in Koreatown it is impossible to define the community along any singular ethnic or cultural lens. Though the majority of businesses are owned by struggling first generation Korean immigrants or, in some cases, financed by Korean transnational capital, the everyday space of this community is largely inhabited by a mix of immigrants. This complex network of national affiliations, each with its own distinct cultural history, converge in the urban space of Koreatown. This convergence results in a contestation of dominant conceptions of ethnic enclaves being understood as homogenous. This makes us re-imagine what we think we understand about immigrant enclaves – they are increasingly becoming polycentric and multidimensional globally.

Combining design, documentary and interactive media with research on changes in multiethnic communities constituting rapidly developing urban neighborhoods in global cities, this research generates experimental approaches to mapping community histories. Mapping is not conceived as static, but rather a dynamic system that changes according to the shifts in culture and community that characterize any geographic place. How can this system be visualized in order to read a space with newly informed imaginations? This work creates platforms that connect people more deeply to each other’s histories embedded in the geographies of place. It uses technology to make invisible or unspoken stories visible and rise to the surface to become part of the fabric of globalized urban living. The outcome of this is to help disturb histories of forgetting, to help disturb the negation of unrepresented stories in diasporic space.

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MAIN TEXT:



Figure 1. A still from the documentary film "Layers of US" about Brazilian Koreans in Los Angeles (Miriam Kim, 1999)

“When I first arrived in Los Angeles, I thought it was Korea. There was no way to tell it was the United States because on the streets there were signs in Korean. There were a lot of Koreans too.”¹ This was an observation made in 1999 by a young Korean man who had been raised in Brazil and had moved to Los Angeles with his family. His parents were among a group of Koreans who moved to Brazil starting in 1962 as a result of the South Korean government passing of an Overseas Emigration Law encouraging emigration as a means of alleviating unemployment and controlling population during the post-war period.² Many of these Korean emigrants developed businesses in the garment industry and some later moved to Los Angeles, attracted by the possibility of improved economic opportunities in its garment industry as well as by the growing community of Koreans residing in the city.

The impression on the young Korean-Brazilian man that Los Angeles was understood as Korea is striking on two registers. The first is that it reflects the degree to which Los Angeles and its Korean community have become representative of Korean culture itself, even in the consciousness of second generation Koreans who had never visited Korea. The second is that it suggests the spatial practice of Korean cultural identity in urban development is mobile and transnational, not necessarily confined within defined national borders but rather, transcending them. Emphasizing this point, in 2012, Koreatown in Los Angeles was described as “functionally a distant district of Seoul—in capital as well as in culture, in both commerce and cuisine.”³ With its explosion of spas, restaurants and nightclubs, most visitors understand Koreatown as an extension of Seoul culture, but what most people may not know is that the majority of inhabitants who comprise its residential and working class population are not Korean, but Latino. Though the majority of businesses are owned by struggling first generation Korean immigrants or, in some cases, financed by Korean transnational capital, the everyday space of this community is largely inhabited by a mix of immigrants from countries around the globe, including Korea, China, the Philippines, Vietnam, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Mexico, El Salvador, Guatemala, Nicaragua, and Peru.⁴ Before the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act abolished the national origins quota system that had structured American immigration policy since the 1920s, most of the Asians in the United States were from Japan, mainland China, and the Philippines. Since then, immigration from Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Vietnam, India and other parts of Asia have significantly increased. These newer Asian immigrants, combined with the Latin American immigrants who make up the fastest growing minority group in Los Angeles, comprise the residents of Koreatown.⁵ This complex

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network of national affiliations, each with its own distinct cultural history, converges in the urban space of Koreatown. This convergence results in a contestation of dominant conceptions of ethnic enclaves in urban theory being understood as ethnically homogenous.

Using Koreatown in Los Angeles as a case study, the interactive online cultural history *The Seoul of Los Angeles: Contested Identities and Transnationalism in Immigrant Space* examines how immigrant communities shape a sense of place and cultural identity and how these local ethnic communities in large urban cities reconfigure our understanding of transnational identity.⁶ Though transnationalism is usually framed more broadly in terms of the mobility of cultural and economic commodities between nations globally, I argue that transnationalism can be framed more locally by examining the sociocultural flows within ethnic enclaves in large urban cities like Los Angeles. Framing transnationalism locally allows for a place-based examination that magnifies and centralizes the narratives of underrepresented ethnic groups that inhabit local communities. In other words, transnationalism and its effects need to be experienced through a local and not solely global lens in ethnic enclaves like Koreatown. A focus on place-based identity formation provides what geographer Tim Cresswell calls “the ontological grounding for subaltern strategies of ‘localization’.”⁷ The Koreatown Immigrant Workers Alliance (KIWA) is one such example of a grassroots community organization resisting the forces of transnational capital to represent the rights of multi-ethnic workers and residents of Koreatown. Rather than rallying around ethnicity or race as a unifying rubric for the organization, KIWA focused instead on class as a rubric around which solidarity could be created among its multi-ethnic members. Founded by Danny Park and a group of progressive Korean activists as a response to the 1992 Los Angeles riots (known as “Sa-I-Gu” in the Korean community), KIWA is a grassroots, non-profit organization that serves the working-class residential community of Koreatown. As such, most of its members and constituents are Latino and Korean. Formerly called the Korean Immigrant Workers Advocates, KIWA changed its name to Koreatown Immigrant Workers Alliance to more accurately reflect the demographics of the community it serves. KIWA is one of the few organizations that has effectively struggled to create inter-ethnic solidarity around larger issues affecting all residents of Koreatown. By revealing the inter-relationships of such local transnationalisms, this project shows how immigrant ethnic enclaves can no longer be understood as homogenous and fixed but rather, are unstable and constructed out of a network of complex, multiple affiliations to race, histories and nations. This serves to destabilize notions of place and space as static, showing instead, that they are never finished and in a constant state of negotiation and process.

This sense of place that is unfinished and in a constant state of becoming is what Michel de Certeau describes as the space of practice. De Certeau characterizes place not in terms of geographic locality but in social activity. Place is made and re-made through the daily iterative social practices of people who inhabit their everyday spaces. Reimagining place as a space of practice allows for “the creative production of identity rather than an a-priori label of identity.”⁸ Though De Certeau offers a useful alternative to the essentialist notion of place as being rooted, his concept of place remains relatively abstract and does not address the politics of social activity nor the influence of race, ethnicity or class in shaping a sense of place. Doreen Massey, on the other hand, argues for the importance of a global sense of place even within the local. Like de Certeau, her conception of place is unbounded but she adds the importance of thinking of the politics of mobility, linking the social activity of place-making to the mobility of global exchange and forces of capital. Koreatown combines the social activity that constitutes place-making and its global influences. This project brings into the foreground the tension between retaining a sense of national rootedness and homogenous identity in the consciousness of Korean immigrants and the inevitable push towards a more heterogeneous identity formation within multi-ethnic enclaves.

In framing the relationship between place and transnationalism, the work of Arjun Appadurai and Aihwa Ong intervene in discussions on globalization by addressing the human subject within its system and propose transnationalism and cultural mobility as a way to think of place as unbounded and identity as deterritorialized. According to Ong, the term “transnational” became popularized in

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the 1970s because global companies were rethinking their strategies, shifting from the “vertical integration model of the multinational firm to the horizontal dispersal of the transnational corporation.”⁹ Ong uses mobility as a means to gauge immigrant relationships to nation and as a way to de-stabilize a fixed construct of national identity. She presents the flexible geographical and social movements of Hong Kong business people as an example of the “flexible subject” who embody the split between a state-imposed identity and personal identity.

This identity, however, is not a simple binary, of being either a national or a nomad. Rather, it’s a negotiation among different geographical and social positions that include family structures, the state, and capital. This negotiation is embodied in the movement of the nomadic or flexible subject whose formation of identity is characterized more by instability and flux. Ong celebrates the value of flexibility and instability in the construction of identity stating, “...while mobility and flexibility have long been part of the repertoire of human behavior, under transnationality the new links between flexibility and the logics of displacement, on the one hand, and capital accumulation, on the other, have given new valence to such strategies of maneuvering and positioning. Flexibility, migration, and relocations, instead of being coerced or resisted, have become practices to strive for rather than stability.”¹⁰ Similarly, Korean transnational capital has created increasingly mobile middle class Korean immigrants who cultivate flexible affiliations to nation, traversing in-between nations. Significantly, the period in the 1970s when the term transnationalism was popularized coincides with the period when the large South Korean conglomerates, known as “chaebol,” began to form and whose current investment of transnational capital is transforming the urban development of Los Angeles’s Koreatown.

Though the concept of flexible citizenship as an aspect of transnational identity is useful in formulating a deterritorialized sense of place and identity, it is limited in that its focus remains an extroverted conception of transnationalism that focuses attention on more privileged communities. What Ong does not address are the introverted, local effects of transnational capital on the development of urban spaces like Koreatown and the subsequent effects on a different class of people who maintain little or uneven access to the benefits transnational capital may provide. Both Appadurai and Ong, in privileging unbounded, outward mobility in their conception of transnational identity formation, neglect to adequately examine the very real social consequences of transnational capital accumulation on disenfranchised ethnic and working class communities in places like Koreatown. The majority of its community is made up of populations who may not always benefit from an idealized concept of increased mobility and flexibility. This group comprises a significant component of the residential working class in Koreatown who struggle with the very real possibility of forced mobility, of displacement due to transnational real-estate investment and the subsequent change in housing affordability in their neighborhood. Those whose sense of place is a constant negotiation between stability and instability within very specific economic and social boundaries understand mobility and flexibility on a different register. Koreatown reconfigures our understanding of transnationalism to include not only extroverted global networks, but also the internal networks expressed through complex interactions within local ethnic communities.

If one of the outcomes of transnationalism is a deterritorialized sense of national identity, then Los Angeles is its urban manifestation—celebrated by geographers as the ultimate, postmodern, polynucleated configuration of multiple national identities. As Edward Soja describes it, “Everywhere seems also to be in Los Angeles. ...And from every quarter’s teeming shores have poured a pool of cultures so diverse that contemporary Los Angeles represents the world in connected urban microcosms, reproducing *in situ* the customary colors and confrontations of a hundred different homelands.”¹¹ The developmental history of Los Angeles by historians and geographers, and their characterization of the city as a constellation of segregated and homogenous ethnic communities, is succinctly summarized by David E. James in his discussion of Los Angeles culture and community formation. James outlines the origins of ethnic enclave formation starting from the observation made in 1894 by Charles A. Stoddard that “Southern California is made up of groups who often live in

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isolated communities, continuing their own customs, language, and religious habits and associations.”¹² Stoddard was quoted by Carey McWilliams to support his characterization made in 1946 of Los Angeles’s composition of “social and ethnic islands, economically interrelated but culturally disparate.”¹³

Following this rubric, urban theorists, the most influential among them being Soja, have assumed that these distinct though isolated communities are culturally and ethnically homogenous. This conception of Los Angeles’s ethnic communities as being segregated from each other is further emphasized, as James points out, if you consider the more recent formation of “little” Asian cities such as Tokyo or Saigon, which have “fashioned themselves between the cultural patterns of their originals and those of their new environment, forging a new local life for often globally distant identities.”¹⁴ Although I would include Koreatown in this pattern of replicating its cultural signifiers especially through the restaurants, spas and other products of Korean cultural consumption that dominate its urban landscape, I would argue that Koreatown as an ethnic enclave makes a radical departure from the assumed homogeneity and segregation of ethnic community formation in Los Angeles posited by urban theorists up to this point. Despite being one of the most ethnically identified neighborhoods in Los Angeles, Koreatown is incredibly heterogeneous in its ethnic makeup.

What distinguishes Koreatown is the heterogeneity *within* its ethnic enclave, its contested identities or the tensions not only ethnically but along the lines of class, nationalities, and generations that make it impossible to characterize as simply homogenous. Moreover, Koreatown is largely understood as transnational in that its cultural and economic flows move between the U.S. and South Korea. However, Koreatown’s network of nationalisms is incredibly diverse, consisting not only of Korean, but others including Mexican, El Salvadoran, Guatemalan, Filipino and Bangladeshi. These sub-communities within Koreatown interact daily with each other, constituting the spatial practices that create the economic and cultural backbone of the community.

Koreatown makes us re-imagine ethnic enclaves by radically breaking from previous assumptions that ethnic communities have a stable homogeneity within them. Together, these characteristics combine to make Koreatown a place in which the configuration of transnationalism is extended to include relationships *in-between* differing *local* community nationalisms, and thereby, reconfiguring transnational to be understood on a local rather than entirely global register.

A Platform for Community Storytelling:

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Figure 2. Screen shot from the interactive online cultural history “The Seoul of Los Angeles: Contested Identities and Transnationalism in Immigrant Space” (Kristy H.A. Kang, 2013)

Using a combination of original interviews, film clips, archival photographs, mapping techniques and written material, *The Seoul of Los Angeles: Contested Identities and Transnationalism in Immigrant Space* is presented as a scholarly website and digital archive conceived as a platform for community storytelling. It utilizes a combination of open-source web tools to present a unique interface design that reflects the multiple and uneven nature of urban development and transnational identity. It uses the archive or database as a way to address the complex relationships that comprise Koreatown’s socio-cultural history and is organized around four topics: “Early Pioneers,” which describes the establishment of Korean settlement in Los Angeles in the early 1900s and before 1965; “Re-mapping Immigrant Spaces: Koreatown after 1965,” which describes the development of contemporary Koreatown in the period following the 1965 immigration act—a period that saw the arrival of a significantly increased number of newer Asian immigrants, among them Korean, to Los Angeles; “Sa-I-Gu: The 1992 Los Angeles Riots,” which looks at the struggle for ethnic coalition building surrounding the riots and how the tensions among the various ethnic communities comprising Koreatown’s population magnified the heterogeneity within the community; and “Transnational Identities,” which looks at how Koreatown reconfigures our understanding of ethnic enclaves and transnationalism in local communities.

In order to explain how the archive and database are useful as structuring devices for exploring the complex relationships comprising Koreatown’s socio-cultural history, I must first provide some definitions. I will start first with the archive. Archives are traditionally thought of as collections of historical material housed in cultural institutions and often representative of official, state-sanctioned accounts of historical memory. As such, they are presumed to be fixed both spatially within the places they are housed, and epistemologically within dominant historical narratives. With the introduction of digital media and the resulting transformation of archival information, documents that were once rarified and not easily viewed are now available, through digital reproduction, to a much wider public using technologies like the Internet. Furthermore, the creation of archives is no longer limited to institutional practice. Open-source, social networking tools have allowed the general public to

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become active participants and creators of shared knowledge production. Such developments have introduced new considerations in terms of online archives that include the relationship between database structures in which archives are organized, and their relationship to narrative as a means of constructing meaning. These developments have resulted in a reconsideration of the archive and of knowledge production as mutable, open-ended constructs that are no longer representative of any singular view but are inclusive of multiple and sometimes contradictory perspectives.

In her discussion on the relationship between database and narrative, media theorist Marsha Kinder defines database narrative as “narratives whose structure exposes the dual processes of selection and combination that lie at the heart of all stories and are crucial to language: certain characters, images, sounds, events and settings are selected from series of categories and combined to generate specific tales.”¹⁵ Kinder points out another characteristic of digital archives that is tied to its mutability—the aspect of *open-endedness* and incompleteness that creates new possibilities through the recombination of modular items in a database into a variety of aesthetic forms including narrative. The open-ended structure of database narrative resists any totalizing construction of meaning. Rather, they “diffuse the force of master narratives, which can no longer be seen as merely *natural* or, even more simply, *the truth*, because users are reminded that alternative versions of the story and new combinations of the components are always possible. Instead of master narratives, what emerges is a more open narrative field full of possibilities, which is in turn fueled by an underlying database that continues to grow.”¹⁶ The digital archive as database narrative makes us reconsider historical artifacts, not as fixed constructs representative only of official accounts of history, but as open systems that generate meaning through storytelling. Furthermore, as open systems, they invite the possibility of public intervention and interaction in the construction of cultural history.

Combining the structuring frameworks of the archive and database narrative, *The Seoul of Los Angeles: Contested Identities and Transnationalism in Immigrant Space* is designed as a platform for community storytelling that reconfigures the digital archive as a place for collective knowledge creation and transfer—a space that is inclusive of the conflicting and contested narratives that together form the complex and uneven development of transnational identities in ethnic enclaves. The project is designed to be a resource for exploring urban history through the embodied narratives of community members, scholars, artists and activists who, together, challenge the conception of ethnic enclaves as being fixed, homogenous constructs.

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⁶ Visit the following URL to view *The Seoul of Los Angeles* online cultural history: <http://seoulomla.com/>
Please note that the website is best viewed using the Google Chrome web browser.

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