

UC Berkeley

UC Berkeley Electronic Theses and Dissertations

Title

Itinerant Belonging: Korean Transnational Migration to and from Mexico

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/1947t9p8>

Author

Lim, Rachel Haejin

Publication Date

2021

Peer reviewed|Thesis/dissertation

Itinerant Belonging:
Korean Transnational Migration to and from Mexico

By

Rachel Haejin Lim

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the

requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

Ethnic Studies

in the

Graduate Division

of the

University of California, Berkeley

Committee in charge:

Professor Lok Siu, Chair
Professor Carolyn Chen
Professor Raúl Coronado
Professor Elena Schneider

Summer 2021

Abstract

Itinerant Belonging:
Korean Transnational Migration to and from Mexico

By

Rachel Haejin Lim

Doctor of Philosophy in Ethnic Studies

University of California, Berkeley

Professor Lok Siu, Chair

Itinerant Belonging analyzes migration, race, and globalization in relation to the small but diverse community of Koreans in Mexico City: temporary workers brought to manufacturing enclaves fueled by growing South Korean investment; re-migrants from South America drawn northward; and the descendants of Korean contract laborers who came to work on Yucatán peninsula henequen haciendas in the early 20th century. Based on 18 months of ethnographic fieldwork, 60 semi-structured interviews, and archival research conducted in Mexico, South Korea, and the United States, I argue that migrant identity formation is mediated by multicentered global fields that exceed the homeland-settlement country binary. While nearly invisible on the global stage, Koreans in Mexico must constantly respond to shifts in U.S. trade policy, changing economic relations between Mexico and China, and fluctuations in anti-Asian sentiment. To manage these risks and uncertainties, they build transnational social infrastructures that produce lived experiences of the global in their local contexts, transforming Mexico into a nodal point for transpacific and hemispheric Korean migratory networks and a switchboard location between the Global North and the Global South.

Chapter One contextualizes the spike in Korean migration to Mexico, which increased nearly tenfold between 1997 and 2002, within global political economic shifts: the passage of the 1994 North American Free Trade Agreement, the 1997 Asian financial crisis, and the Argentine Great Depression (1998-2002). I use migrants' *imin iyagi* (migration stories) to place dynamics of mobility and home at the juncture of broader global crises, arguing that temporary migrants are important mediators between macro-economic processes and the lived experiences of globalization.

Chapter Two examines the racialized, gendered, and sexualized geographies of Koreanness in Mexico City in two sites: the ethnic enclave of Pequeño Seúl (Little Seoul) in Zona Rosa and the vast informal markets of Tepito. Relying on discourse analysis of an archive of Spanish-language and Korean-language newspapers, I explore how two high-profile incidents perpetuated the perception that Korean migrants are a particularly criminalized and deviant population.

Chapter Three examines the mobility of Mexicans of Korean descent—a mixed-race, Spanish-speaking group—as they travel to South Korea to study or work. I emphasize the stratifications of diaspora as the South Korean state becomes increasingly invested in managing the diaspora abroad, as well as the alternative articulations of subjectivity and belonging that emerge from the unique social position of Korean descendants.

Chapter Four utilizes the case study of Together Korean Presbyterian Church, a member of a church denomination headquartered in Philadelphia, PA, as a hemispheric social infrastructure. I position churches as a network of networks, in which repeated social contact produces intertwined meanings and practices of religion and ethnicity.

Chapter Five turns to a discussion of two disasters that bookended the research and writing of this dissertation: the September 2017 earthquakes, occurring just as I arrived in Mexico for long-term fieldwork, and the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic (2020-2021). Treating disasters as moments in which the coordinates of belonging are renegotiated, I examine the possibilities of a pan-ethnic Asian Mexican subjectivity in the post-pandemic era as well as relationally grounded migrant solidarities.

Table of Contents

Introduction.....	1
Itinerant Belonging	
 Chapter One.....	22
Koreans to and from Mexico: Multiple Migrations and Multiple Homes	
 Chapter Two.....	41
From Yellow Peril to Yellow Fever: Racialized and Gendered Geographies of Koreanness in Mexico City	
 Chapter Three.....	60
A Korean Renacimiento: Korean Descendants in Mexico and the Making of a Global Diaspora	
 Chapter Four.....	80
Transcendent Networks of Transnational Migration: The Hemispheric Church and Global Self-Making	
 Chapter Five.....	100
Crisis and Belonging: Risk, Resistance, and the Contestations of Nation	
 Conclusion.....	117
Becoming Korean and Mexican in a Global World	
 Bibliography.....	121

Acknowledgements

I am so deeply grateful to the countless people who have walked with me during this journey.

Thank you to my dissertation committee. From day one, Lok Siu believed in me, encouraged me to trust my instincts, and guided me through the ups and downs of graduate school. Carolyn Chen gave me the best advice on ethnography, organization, and life. Raúl Coronado helped me see the broader significance of this project. Elena Schneider opened my eyes to the fascinating history of Latin America and the Caribbean and showed me what it meant to think like a historian. Evelyn Nakano Glenn, my qualifying exam chair, stepped in when I needed her most. I am grateful to you all.

My undergraduate advisors at the University of Virginia encouraged me to follow my dreams. Thank you to Matt Hedstrom, who introduced me to joys of academic writing and research, and Sylvia Chong, who introduced me to the liberatory possibilities of Asian American studies. At UC Berkeley, I am grateful to Beth Piatote for her enthusiastic support of my writing and Sonia Katyal for her ongoing mentorship and care.

I am grateful for the camaraderie of Ethnic Studies graduate students, especially Darren Arquero, Tito Callejas, Claire Chun, Fernanda Cunha, Sierra Edd, Marco Flores, Marcelo Garzo, Gregoria Grigsby-Olson, Katie Keliiaa, Ina Kelleher, Lisa Ng, Fantasia Painter, Alan Pelaez Lopez, David Pham, Ngoc-Mai Phan, Melanie Plasencia, Jenn Rose Smith, Kristen Sun, and Sarah Whitt. Special thanks to the members of the Asian American & Asian Diaspora Studies graduate student working group, who read early drafts of my work: Jennifer Duque, Evyn Lê Espiritu Gandhi, Amy Yu-Hui Lin, Ramya Janandharan, Mihiri Tillakaratne, Daniel Woo, Jeffrey Yamashita and especially Will Gow. Thank you to Hannah Waits and Candace Lukasik for many conversations about life and global Christianities, and Maria Faini, John Mundell and Desirée Valadares for the CRG solidarity.

The UC Berkeley Center for Korean Studies provided crucial material and intellectual support. I cannot overstate my appreciation for Laura Nelson, who led the Korean Studies seminar and shaped the direction of my engagement with Korea. Thank you also to Jeehyun Choi, Claire Chun, Andrew Cheng, Bridget Martin, Lisa Min, Joohyun Park, Rachel Min Park, and Kristen Sun for your engagement with my work over the years.

Calvin Cheung-Miaw, Will Gow, Karen Hanna, Huan He, Christina Juhasz-Wood, Evyn Lê Espiritu Gandhi, and Vivian Yan-Gonzalez provided supportive feedback on chapter drafts and encouraged the dissertation's progress. Thank you for the intellectual community.

The following individuals deserve special mention. Rachel Min Park read nearly every word of this dissertation. You are a generous and brilliant friend. Chris Waldo made grad school fun. Trung Nguyen is the best conference partner and connector of all people. I am grateful to have grown together with Andrew Cheng in the most important ways. Evyn Lê Espiritu Gandhi has been my cherished friend and interlocutor since the very beginning.

In Mexico, Federico Besserer directed this field research and went above and beyond to welcome me into the community at la Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana Iztapalapa. My deepest gratitude to Federico and the intrepid members of the transnational studies seminar: Joselin Barja, Monica Cinco, Mao Fukuma, Daniela Oliver, Anabel Robles, and Nancy Wence. Andrea Santiago deserves special mention for all the rides to and from Iztapalapa and Federico's house. I am also grateful to the members of El Círculo Mexicano de Estudios Coreanos, especially Sergio Gallardo García and Dinorah Contreras for the conversations and las chelas. Fieldwork would not have been as fun without los Escamoles: Salvador Andrade, Max Carey, Ryan Cohen, Albert López, Alex Sarabia, Destry Sibley, and Marco Verdoni. Thank you to the Fulbright-García Robles fellowship for bringing us together. For Roberto Andonie, un abrazote for the friendship and hospitality.

Thank you to the numerous individuals in Mexico, the United States, and South Korea who shared your stories with me and welcomed me into your lives. I cannot name you here, but I am forever in your debt. I am grateful that I can name Diann Rowland: prima, thank you for everything.

Oak Life Church provided spiritual nourishment and healing—special shout-out to the Berkeley Life Group. Hugs to the Neighborhood Kids for a lifetime of friendship. Thank you to McKenna Jacquet-Freese, Sarah Joo, and Hannah Kim for your sisterhood. All of my love to Steven Toy for the partnership and care, and to the Toy family for the meals, the rides, and the support.

Jennifer and Matthew Jun, my imo and imoboo, first introduced me to Latin America and the Caribbean, and they have showered me with love whenever I came to stay at the many places where they have lived. I never would have started this project if not for you and Elise, Emily, and Joshua. My deepest gratitude to my entire extended family, all of whom have supported me in so many ways, big and small. I love you all. I am so grateful that my sisters, Rebecca and Hannah, are my best friends and my greatest cheerleaders; thank you to Sooj, Yooj, and Kurt. My parents, Young and Tae Wook Lim, are my greatest blessing. Thank you for the patience, prayers, and unconditional love that have guided me every step of the way. This dissertation is dedicated to you.

Introduction: Itinerant Belonging

Itinerary, noun.

1. A line or course of travel; a route.
2. A record or journey of travel; an account of a journey.
3. A sketch of a proposed route; a plan or scheme of travel.

- *Oxford English Dictionary*

When Isaac stepped off the plane at Incheon International Airport in South Korea in January 2008, he thought immediately of his great-grandfather, who had been one of the 1,033 Koreans who had arrived in Mexico in 1905 to work on the henequén haciendas of the Yucatán peninsula. His great-grandfather had left from this same city, then called Jemulpo, to endure a grueling two-month voyage across the Pacific Ocean. Now, 103 years later, his great-grandson was overcome with conflicting feelings of homecoming and alienation. Standing there at the gate, impatient passengers pushing past him, surrounded by a language he didn't understand, Isaac felt that he was in a portal between time and space. Tears brimming, he gripped a piece of paper upon which he had written the names of his Korean ancestors in clumsy *han'gŭl* (the Korean alphabet and writing system).¹ "My great-grandfather left Incheon, and now his blood and body had been returned," he explained.

A few weeks later, Yiseul arrived at the same Incheon airport. It was her first time back since her family had left Korea when she was five years old; they had migrated first to Buenos Aires, Argentina, then to Puebla, Mexico, and finally to Mexico City. At 20 years old, she had been accepted to a university in the city of Daegu, where her mother's extended family lived. Her worried mother had written her clear instructions on navigating customs and immigration, how to find the right express bus to Daegu, and she had a stack of U.S. dollars to make the currency exchange easier. But stepping off the plane, everything felt wrong. "I thought I would feel relieved to be back. I would even dream about it every night, how it would be like to be back. But as soon as I landed, I felt afraid."

Ten years later, in March 2018 when I interviewed them, both Isaac and Yiseul were living in Mexico City, but with contrasting memories of their time in the homeland. For Isaac, his six months studying abroad in South Korea were tinged with nostalgia—"months that were some of the happiest of my life." He spoke fondly of his Korean teachers, his exploration of the Korean cinema scene, the joy of ambling through the neighborhoods of Seoul for hours on end. In contrast, Yiseul's memories were far more ambivalent. She dropped out of university after one year, unhappy with her major and the coursework. She described the difficulty of integrating into Korean society and the overwhelming sense of isolation that came from her distinct experiences living in Latin America. "The most important thing I learned was that I am not Korean anymore," she explained.

Isaac and Yiseul, both Koreans in Mexico, "returned" to South Korea in search of adventure, educational credentials, and a desire to (re)connect with Korean culture, language, and kin. In pursuit of these aims, both had received academic scholarships from the Overseas Korean Foundation, the diaspora arm of the South Korean Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Yet walking down the street, Isaac and Yiseul would hardly recognize themselves in the other. Like other Mexicans of Korean descent, Isaac is mixed-race, speaks only Spanish, and carries Mexican citizenship. While he is proud of his Korean heritage, he traces his family roots to the

Yucatán peninsula and is a self-proclaimed *chilango*.² By contrast, Yiseul feels much less comfortable in Mexico City. Like many other recent Korean migrants, she and her family are re-migrants, and her father constantly talks about moving again. Yiseul, a South Korean citizen who feels like she speaks neither Korean nor Spanish perfectly, was also thinking of moving—this time to Canada, to continue her studies and to find a place that might feel more like home. Though these two cohorts of Korean migrants—the descendants of those who came at the turn of nineteenth century and those who came at the turn of the twentieth—share an ethnicity, their experiences do not necessarily intersect. Phenotypically, linguistically, and culturally distinct, Koreans in Mexico challenge essentialized formations of diaspora that rely on a coherent ethnic identity. Instead, this dissertation argues that Koreans in Mexico—those who arrived at the twilight of the Asian “coolie” labor trade and those arriving in the context of late global capitalism—emblemize how different moments of global political economy shape the itineraries of belonging. The entanglements of these two migrant cohorts reveal how belonging is remade not only in the local context of Mexico, but in relation to transpacific and hemispheric circuits of exchange.

Itinerant Belonging: Korean Transnational Migration to and from Mexico draws from the experiences of Koreans in Mexico, tracing the transnational social fields produced through their multiple migrations. Through the ethnographic study of a particularly mobile group of Korean migrants currently residing in Mexico but connected to many other social locations across the Pacific and the Americas, my dissertation addresses the relationship between human mobility and belonging: How do migrants end up in a place, and how are migration patterns linked to shifting global political economic conditions? Under transient conditions, how do migrants claim belonging and the right to mobility and residence? How do migrants envision “home(land),” especially a home where they have never lived? These questions get to the heart of urgent questions of contemporary global migration—not only how states and societies should respond to the rapid increase in transit, transient, and temporary migrations and the ongoing dilemmas of migrant incorporation, but how we can understand newly articulated forms of migrant subjectivity that emerge from different temporalities of mobility and residence.

The case study of Koreans in Mexico illuminates what I call *itinerant belonging*, an emerging pattern of migration that tracks multiple mobilities alongside shifting contours of migrant identity formation—from South America to Mexico, from Mexico “back” to South Korea, from Mexico to the United States. By analyzing how the itineraries of Korean migration connect seemingly discontinuous sites in Asia and the Americas, I trace how migrant identity formation is mediated by “multicentered” global fields that exceed the homeland-settlement country binary (see Shams 2020). Koreans in Mexico maneuver a rapidly changing world order marked by increasingly punitive immigration policies in the Global North, tightening economic bonds between Latin America and Asia, and global fluctuations in anti-Asian sentiment. In response, they build and maintain transnational infrastructures of belonging—boarding houses, religious communities, business practices, and diasporic organizations. In so doing, I argue, they build alternate socialities and spaces that shape how meanings of the global are instantiated in the new millennium.

The itinerant belonging of Koreans in Mexico asks us to consider not only what happens when migrants cross a border, but how boundary-making practices emerge at specific historical junctures. Koreans in Mexico, a mixed-race and linguistically diverse community, challenge South Korean state-propagated ideas of Koreanness based on ethnic purity as well as dominant notions of *lo mexicano* that have often excluded Mexicans of African and Asian descent. Indeed,

who claims Mexicanness or Koreanness and why—and its relation to who is perceived as a migrant (or a descendant of migrants) and why—is a central preoccupation of this dissertation. The individual and collective negotiations of Koreans in Mexico help us understand where “community” begins and ends, who is included and excluded, and who gets to decide.

This dissertation’s central conceit—“itinerant belonging”—is drawn from religious studies scholar Thomas Tweed’s (2008) meditations on the relationship between theory and religion. Tweed turns to the itinerary in order to think through the relationship between “the shifting position of the theorist, while also acknowledging the movements and relations I found among transnational migrants” (8). Citing the Oxford English Dictionary definition for “itinerary,” Tweed goes on to explain:

Theories are embodied travels (“a line or course of travel; a route”), positioned representations (“a record or journal of travel, an account of a journey”), and proposed routes (“a sketch of a proposed route; a plan or scheme of travel”). Theories are simultaneously proposals for a journey, representations of a journey, and the journey itself. (9)

These three meanings of “itinerary” strike me as a particularly useful way to approach the various mobilities of Koreans in Mexico, who often imagine themselves not as settlers to a final destination, but perpetual travelers in the middle of their journey. Inhabiting the temporality of mobility even as they live in Mexico for five, ten, twenty years—or even the rest of their lives—they also engage in the work of re-narrativizing and re-conceptualizing migration, re-iterating previous experiences in relation to their plans for the future. Therefore, to paraphrase Tweed, their itineraries are simultaneously cultural representations of past migrations, aspirations for future migrations, and the embodied experience of migration itself.

Martin F. Manalansan IV (2002), who has also described the mobility of Filipino gay men between Manila and New York City as “queer itineraries,” connects migration to the “politics and poetics of belonging” (251). Similarly, my project interrogates migration as an unfolding process of belonging, not only in relation to a location of residence but to a globally distributed imaginary of places, people, and memories. Migrant itineraries traverse the distant simultaneity (to borrow a metaphor from physics) of residence, homeland, and other diasporic nodes—all of which are themselves constantly changing and evolving. In this dissertation, I use the analytic device of “itinerant belonging” to think through the vexed positionality of Koreans in Mexico, whose multiple loyalties are forged through ambulatory attachments to current residences, potential destinations, and homes left behind. Rather than a singular place of rootedness, itinerant belonging indexes the possibility that one might call multiple places home, as well as the constant maneuvering of affinity, distance, and alienation that a such an array of attachments demand. By foregrounding the itineraries of belonging—the embodiments, the representations, and the shifting futures of who belongs—my research shows how Korean migrants and their descendants come in and out of multiple frames of reference.

Without losing attention to the importance of what geographer Marco Antonsich (2010) calls “place-belongingness”—attachments to a place that feels like home—this dissertation also emphasizes the politics of belonging that differentially include or exclude. The project of belonging, as Nira Yuval-Davis (2006) points out, involves not only individual desires but the power of states and societies to hierarchically sort populations—what John Crowley calls “the dirty work of boundary maintenance.”³ In the case of Koreans in Mexico, the global itineraries of

race powerfully shape who is included or excluded in the national imaginary of Mexico as well as the global imaginary of diasporic Koreanness. That is, transnationally circulating ideas of Asian racial difference contribute to the placement of Koreans outside the boundaries of the Mexican nation, even as many Mexicans of Korean descent—especially those who are mixed-race and Spanish-speaking—struggle to have their Koreanness recognized in the context of a global Korean diaspora. By tracing these intertwined processes at different scalar locations of the global city, the national imaginary, and the diasporic encounter, this dissertation clarifies how assemblages of racial meanings constitute themselves at distinctive junctures of time and place.

Situating Koreans in Mexico

For most of the twentieth century, Mexico did not attract significant Korean migration. In 1997, only 2,168 Korean nationals resided in Mexico, according to the South Korean Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Yet the last years of the twentieth century witnessed an expansion of the Korean population in Mexico, which grew to a peak of 20,000 by 2002 before falling again. In 2017, when I began my extended fieldwork, 11,673 Korean nationals lived in Mexico, in addition to an estimated 15,000 Mexicans of Korean descent. The sudden growth of Korean migration at the turn of the century can be tied to broader shifts in global political economy. The signing of NAFTA in 1994 incentivized South Korean automotive, light electronics, and textile companies to relocate operations to Mexico. Since then, Mexico City has become an important global hub for over 1,700 Korean companies, attracting a class of transient mobile professionals as well as entrepreneurs in the ethnic and small-business markets. In a nod to the growing importance of the economic relationship between Mexico and South Korea, the two countries signed a mutual accord in the mid-1990s that eliminated tourist visa agreements, facilitating Korean movement in and out of the country. Simultaneously, global economic downturn in the late 1990s led to the restructuring of the South Korean economy, leading to an overall spike in out-migration from the peninsula (see Song 2010). The related economic crises in Argentina (1998-2002) and Brazil (1999), the two Latin American countries with the largest number of Koreans, led to further migration from South America to Mexico.

In Mexico today, it is possible to identify three groups that constitute a heterogeneous “Korean community.” The first group, like Isaac, are the descendants of the roughly 1,000 Koreans who left together on one boat, the *Ilford*, before being separated to over thirty different haciendas throughout the Yucatán peninsula in 1905. Part of a broader wave of transpacific contract labor migrations, this was the first and only instance of Korean migration to Latin America and the Caribbean before the Japanese annexation of the Korean peninsula in 1910. Leaving a homeland characterized by political and economic instability, these migrants labored under harsh conditions on four-year contracts cutting spiny henequén, the Yucatán peninsula’s primary cash crop that was processed into a durable fiber. Upon completion of their contracts, many Korean migrants relocated to the nearby city of Mérida as well as locations further afield throughout Mexico: in the first half of the twentieth century, they formed communities in Campeche, Mexico City, Veracruz, and across the U.S.-Mexico border in Tijuana-San Diego (J. K. Lee 2006). Some left Mexico altogether: about 300 re-migrated to Cuba in 1921 (Ruiz and Lim Kim 2000) and still others went from Mexico and Cuba to the United States. Still, the epicenter of this community continues to be Yucatán, especially Mérida and its outlying towns and villages, where it is not uncommon to locate families of descendants bearing Korean last names. For the most part, this group is mixed-race and has largely assimilated into Mexican society; they speak primarily Spanish and carry Mexican citizenship.

The second group consists of Korean re-migrants from elsewhere in Latin America and the Caribbean. These migrants often speak both Spanish and Korean. Starting in the late 1970s, South Korean migrants began to move to South American countries such as Brazil, Argentina, and Paraguay (Mera 1998). Korean migrants to South America are distinguished by their establishment in the apparel industry.⁴ For example, one estimate for Argentina claimed that Koreans “occupy slightly less than half of the entire clothing industry” (K. Park 2014, 24). In Mexico, re-migrants likewise work primarily in the textile or garment industries, operating small-scale factories, wholesale merchandising, or selling directly to customers in the informal economy in cities across Mexico, including Mexico City, Guadalajara, Puebla, and León. Others work in the ethnic economy, operating Korean grocery stores, restaurants, and other businesses aimed primarily at co-ethnic customers.

The final group constitutes recent arrivals from South Korea—transient white-collar professionals on limited-term job contracts, *chujawŏn* (sojourning employees) sponsored by South Korean companies, or factory managers for multinational corporations. This last group of migrants rarely stay in Mexico for more than three years and are frequently offered perks such as company-sponsored housing or tuition for expensive international schools that limit their integration into mainstream Mexican society. Such migrants have had an especially profound impact in northern border states such as Nuevo León, where the opening of a KIA Motors plant in 2016 brought thousands of Korean workers to the city and established a growing ethnic enclave in the neighborhood of Pesquería in the city of Monterrey (see Hernández Rodríguez 2020). Scholars have also analyzed how significant South Korean foreign direct investment (FDI) has increased Korean labor migration to rural sites of infrastructural or resource development, as in the case of an oil refinery modernization project in the state of Tamaulipas (Castillo Gómez 2009) or a copper mine in the state of Baja California Sur (Gallardo García 2018).

There are no detailed statistical portraits of Koreans in Mexico. However, a survey of 160 Korean migrants in Mexico City, conducted in 2005 by Hyong-ju Kim, offers a socioeconomic overview that presents recent Korean migrants to Mexico as an entrepreneurial, middle-income to upper-income community. According to Kim’s results, the vast majority—about 96 percent—have some college education, with 60 percent holding a bachelor’s degree. 53 percent are involved in small business, and another 14 percent in industry; only 7 percent claimed to be in “professional” or white-collar professions. Categorized according to the income brackets produced annually by the Mexican Association of Marketing Research and Public Opinion Agencies (*Asociación Mexicana de Agencias de Investigación de Mercado y Opinión Pública*), 11.3 percent of Koreans were lower-middle-class, making less than 10,000 pesos; 41.4 percent were middle-class, making between 10,000 and 30,000 pesos; 33.3 percent were upper-middle-class, making between 30,000 and 100,000 pesos a month; and 10 percent were upper-class, making over 100,000 pesos a month.

Unfortunately, there are no updated surveys of Koreans in Mexico City, and I did not collect quantitative data on income or expenditures. But my qualitative interview data, as well as my broader observations, largely conform to the impressions left by Kim’s data—of an entrepreneurial, middle-income community.⁵ Because the majority of my interview data was collected in Mexico City and Mérida, I interviewed more descendants and re-migrants than the members of the third group, who tend to be concentrated in northern, industrial cities like Monterrey. I also suspect that my key field sites—Korean ethnic associations and well-established Protestant churches—made it easier for me to find re-migrants who were perhaps

more embedded in local institutions than transient white-collar professionals.

In national contexts such as the United States or Canada, scholars often taken for granted that immigrants are here to stay—that the first generation will become the second, and that the second will eventually become the third. But recent Korean migrants to Mexico are less likely to think of themselves as becoming Mexican. 64 percent of Kim’s respondents indicated that they intended to re-migrate again, a pattern I observed among my own interlocutors. Of course, as Karen Velásquez (2018) has pointed out, sojourning Koreans to Mexico often become permanent immigrants, whether by choice or by need. Still, even those migrants who intend to stay in Mexico remain connected to a broader geographical landscape: siblings in South Korea, children living in the United States or Canada, or friends in Argentina. That is, Koreans in Mexico are finely attuned to what Anna Tsing (2000) calls “the global situation”—how “places are made through their connection with each other, not their isolation” (330). Located between the Global North and the Global South, Mexico is what I call a “switchboard location” in Korean migratory networks—a nodal point in relational circuits that connect individuals from one place to another or establish the possibilities of migrating elsewhere.

Itinerant Ethnography

The word “itinerant” also calls to the fore the methodological and theoretical challenges of conducting research on people and communities on the move, especially across vast geographical scales. By focusing on migrants’ global itineraries, this study approaches the scalar discontinuities and social imaginaries of my respondents and explores the multiplicities of social, cultural, and political formations that inform and complicate their sense of belonging. For this dissertation, I rely on 18 months of ethnographic fieldwork, 60 semi-structured interviews, and archival research conducted in Mexico, South Korea, and the United States. The majority of my data was gathered between September 2017 and August 2018. For 11 months, with the support of the Fulbright – García Robles research fellowship, I conducted semi-structured interviews and ethnographic fieldwork in Mexico City and the city of Mérida and its surrounding areas. During this time, I took brief observational trips to cities such as Guadalajara and Monterrey with significance Korean communities, though I did not conduct any interviews in these locations. This research built on three months of pilot fieldwork I had conducted during the summers of 2015 and 2017 in Mexico and was followed by three follow-up visits to Mexico in October 2018, February-March 2019, and October 2019.

My interest in serial migration means that this research is by necessity multi-sited (Marcus 1995)—an itinerant ethnography that shares similarities with anthropologists such as Eleana Kim’s (2010) “roving methodology” approach to dispersed networks of Korean adult adoptees, Andrea Louie’s (2004) “mobile ethnography” to study Chinese youth diaspora, and Ghassan Hage’s (2005) treatment of Lebanese diaspora as a “single geographically discontinuous site.” I therefore supplemented interviews conducted in Mexico with interviews with Koreans who had lived in Mexico for at least two years, but now reside in either South Korea or the United States. Their perspectives helped me understand the specificities of what it meant to be emplaced in Mexico, as well as the ways in which migrants’ experiences living in Mexico shaped future experiences of re-migration.

Furthermore, a six-week period in Los Angeles helped me understand how Korean re-migrants bring their connections from Latin America to Southern California. In the bustling Fashion District, they mobilize deep connections with the textile industry in Latin America to enter Los Angeles’ just-in-time fashion markets. They also coordinate the shipment of small-

scale goods—commonly called *fayuca*—from South Korea to Mexico and beyond. Observing these connections—and the travel of people and goods—illuminated how migrants braid together hemispheric and transpacific networks of exchange. Much as in Mexico, my interviews in Southern California also revealed how the stratifications of citizenship and class shape who gets to move again, and where. South Korean citizenship allows some re-migrants to take advantage of a visa-waiver program to enter the United States, whereas Koreans with Mexican citizenship face higher barriers to entry. Access to capital allows some Koreans to qualify for EB-5 visas, which require a substantial investment of at least 900,000 USD as of 2019; others struggle with under-the-table work or living under the constant stress of deportation.

In Mexico City, participation-observation focused on Together Korean Presbyterian Church, a church that belongs to the Korean Presbyterian Church Abroad (KPCA) denomination, and two ethnic associations, the Korean-language Korean Association of Mexico and the Spanish-language Association of Korean Descendants of Mexico City (*Asociación Descendientes Coreanos de la Ciudad de México*). At Together Korean Presbyterian Church, I attended weekly Sunday services, weekly Bible study meetings, church retreats, and other volunteer activities. The ethnic associations met more sporadically, but I attended holiday celebrations, business meetings, elections, and other events about once or twice a month. During this time, I also resided in two Korean boarding houses in the ethnic enclave of Pequeño Seúl (“Little Seoul”) in Mexico City, where the proliferation of Korean restaurants, churches, video stores, and hair salons and the high density of Korean residents visibly map “Korean community” onto the urban landscape. Pequeño Seúl has become an increasingly popular destination for Mexican youth seeking “authentic” forms of cosmopolitan cultural consumption—a demand fueled by the growing global interest in Korean music, television dramas, and fashion. Living among businessmen, guest workers, students, and other transient migrants in Pequeño Seúl allowed me to observe and record everyday interactions and experiences and interact with my informants in a broad range of settings across the course of their daily lives, and I took part in countless informal conversations in person and online, through platforms such as Facebook, WhatsApp, and KakaoTalk.

By making friends with other Koreans, primarily young people in their twenties and thirties, I was granted access to more intimate conversations about people’s hopes, dreams, fears, and challenges living in Mexico. In particular, I relied on two key informants: Mrs. Park, a woman in her sixties who operated the first boarding house where I lived; and Yena, a woman in her early thirties who became a good friend of mine after we met at Together Presbyterian Church during my first weeks in Mexico. The generosity of Mrs. Park and Yena allowed me to access a broader network of Korean friends, mostly women, who shared insights into migrant life that I otherwise would not have been granted. I also visited the stores of Korean merchants who work in Tepito, Mexico City’s vast informal market, on a regular basis, often accompanying Mrs. Park as she shopped for groceries and other goods. I also shadowed the owners of two stores, each a husband-wife pair that I met through a Bible study group at Together Presbyterian Church, for one day each in order to understand the labor and working environment and the everyday interactions between Korean merchants and their primarily Mexican clientele.

In Mérida, where I have spent a total of four months, I conducted participant-observation at the Commemorative Museum of Korean Immigration (*Museo Conmemorativo de la Inmigración Coreana*) and at two Korean-language schools, where I volunteered as a Korean language instructor. In August 2018, I also worked as a volunteer for a heritage camp for Korean descendants sponsored by the Overseas Korean Foundation in order to observe how ideas about

Koreanness were transmitted to descendants. I spent a significant amount of time in Mérida conducting archival research and oral history interviews with older members of the descendant community. Unfortunately, this research does not appear in this dissertation—although it is my hope that this work will form the basis of a subsequent major research project.

I conducted 60 semi-structured interviews with self-identified Koreans who live or have lived in Mexico for at least two years. The interviews ranged from 30 minutes to three hours in length, though on average each interview is about 90 minutes long. Interviews were conducted in English, Spanish, or Korean—or some combination of the three languages, depending on the interviewee's preference. The majority of the interviews were conducted in person, although I did conduct four interviews with Korean re-migrants in the United States via Skype or phone call. In total, I interviewed 32 Korean migrants, 16 Korean descendants, and 12 Koreans who have re-migrated from Mexico but now live in either the United States or Canada. I used pseudonyms for the names of my interviewees, except for individuals who are identified in their roles as public figures. In an effort to preserve anonymity, I have also changed small details—occupations, family relationships, places, or other potentially identifying information—when such details did not impact the argument or the individual's broader narrative story.

I recruited interview participants using three methods. First, I attended meetings of the two ethnic associations and several Korean churches in Mexico City, introducing myself as a graduate student conducting research on Korean migration to Mexico. Second, I went to local Korean businesses, including restaurants, grocery stores, and hair salons, talking to managers about my study and distributing a recruitment flyer written in Korean. Finally, I posted announcements online, seeking interview participants on Facebook pages for Koreans in Mexico and Mexicans of Korean descent and on Korean-language forums for Koreans living in Mexico. While I found that many Korean descendants were eager to talk to me, recruiting recent Korean migrant interviewees was very challenging. Indeed, shopkeepers, managers, and workers at local Korean businesses were often openly hostile, perhaps because they did not know me or because they were very busy. My greatest success came from using church networks and, after conducting an interview, asking interviewees to pass my contact information to their friends.

During the process of recruiting interviewees, writing field notes, and transcribing and translating interviews, I often reflected on the feminist and women-of-color critiques that have troubled the practice and writing of ethnographic research, particularly those articulated by scholars studying their “own” communities (see Ifekwunigwe 2003; Kusow 2003; Simpson 2017). While demands for reflexivity of researcher positionality are by now well-rehearsed, this research project similarly echoes the limitations of the insider/outsider dichotomy for migration research. I am a second-generation Korean American woman who first came to know Koreans in Mexico through my maternal aunt and uncle, who lived in Managua, Nicaragua for ten years and then subsequently in Mérida, an introduction that no doubt eased my access into the community. Living among Koreans in Mexico was an experience both familiar and strange. Recent migrants and Mexicans of Korean descent alike often assumed that I was either a recent arrival from South Korea or a re-migrant from elsewhere; once I established that I had been born and raised in the United States, my interlocutors were often curious about when my family had immigrated abroad, how I learned Korean, and why I was interested in the experiences of Koreans in Mexico—questions that tested my own location within a global diaspora and established my proximity or distance from Korean belonging.

Rather than an “outside” researcher, my interlocutors often treated me more like a friend of a friend or, as one interviewee described me, “an international exchange student like my [her]

daughter doing a class project.” Indeed, the process of conducting ethnographic research—relying on word-of-mouth information and informal chains of sociality and reciprocity—in some ways echoes the kinds of networks that Korean migrants utilize throughout the diaspora. For example, because I traveled relatively frequently between the United States and Mexico, I was often asked for favors, both small and large. I agreed to some, such as a request to pick up a *hanbok*, or traditional Korean dress, for a daughter’s wedding or to buy a set of test preparation books. I declined others, such as a request by one interviewee to deposit a large sum of Mexican pesos into my United States bank account and wire the money to South Korea.

My ability to speak proficient but accented Korean and Spanish allowed me to move somewhat comfortably across social groups marked by linguistic difference. Sometimes my linguistic clumsiness was a disadvantage, such as when I improperly used Korean honorifics during an interview with a community elder or missed a verbal cue in Spanish that might otherwise have led to a more fruitful discussion. Other times, it proved to be an advantage, as interlocutors went out of their way to explain the difference between complex terms such as *hyŏnjae-in* (local), *wŏnju-min* (native) and *kŏju-min* (resident), all of which circulate within the Korean community to make in-group distinctions.

Over the course of living in Mexico, beholden to the generosity of interlocutors, friends, and strangers, I was reminded that social status is always situational, as my own role constantly shifted in relation to perceptions of my own positionality—my age, nationality, gender, and level of education. I found that gender strongly shaped not only my interviews but the everyday conversations in which I took part. Among recent Korean migrant interviewees, I interviewed 23 women and only 9 men. Men were often hesitant to talk to me or to meet me alone, with one man openly citing rules of conduct around gender propriety; in other cases, potential male interviewees demanded that I meet them in a bar or a hotel room, requests that I declined. Furthermore, my physical similarity to my respondents meant that, for all intents and purposes, I experienced day-to-day what it means to be perceived as a “foreign” Asian woman in Mexico City, including the quotidian experiences of gendered street harassment, casual discrimination, and social exclusion that my interviewees frequently described. The fluctuations of proximity, power, and difference that intimately shaped my access means that this project is not a transparent representation of the “reality” of the Korean experience but rather, a partial diffraction of the embodied experience of one ethnographer’s itinerary.

Finally, studying Korean diaspora in Mexico from my own positionality as a Korean American woman trained in the U.S. academy raises complicated questions about how to analyze diaspora without either homogenizing difference or failing to notice mutually constitutive forms of domination and resistance. While mindful of the long shadow of U.S. racial formations, my approach emphasizes an inter-relational understanding of multiple waves of migration as well as the power of transnational relations *between* diasporic nodes, which powerfully shapes the experiences of diasporic peoples outside hegemonic centers of power. As later chapters will show, Koreans in Mexico rely on resources provided by Protestant churches headquartered in the United States or participate in commodity supply chains that cross multiple national borders throughout the Americas. By foregrounding solidarities as well as uneven power relations across the Korean diaspora in the Americas, I suggest that itinerant belonging is both a global diasporic project and set of locally sited struggles—marking the imperative to listen across the diversity of the diasporic experience.

Global Migrations and Racial Formations

In 2017, approximately 258 million people, or 3.5% of the world's population, lived outside the country of their birth, according to the United Nations (2017). International human migration is often framed as one of the great challenges of globalization, from the European refugee crises to former President Donald Trump's campaign promise to build a border wall between the United States and Mexico. But rather than treating migration and migrants as a "problem" to be solved, my approach instead emphasizes the ways in which migrants, and the cultural connections that they bring, produce the social experiences of the global. In so doing, I draw from the many powerful insights gleaned from the "transnational turn" in migration studies, which has challenged scholars to contextualize migrants in a broader geographical field that includes places of origin in addition to places of settlement, and the ongoing connections between them. In the past three decades, the transnational intervention has challenged older models of immigrant assimilation, which assumed that as migrants became incorporated into new places of settlement, they would inevitably sever ties with the homeland in the process. In their seminal work *Nations Unbound*, Linda Basch, Nina Glick Schiller and Cristina Blanc (1993) argue that the new imperatives of global capitalism have led to the "deterritorialization" of nations, demanding attention to "transmigrants," who "forge and sustain multi-stranded social relations that link together their societies of origin and settlement" (8). Indeed, transnational approaches complicate "methodological nationalism" (Wimmer and Glick-Schiller 2003), a tendency to rely on discretely bounded nation-state units as the natural scale of investigation, as well as "wordlist" approaches that treat the globe as one bounded system (Khagram and Levitt 2008).

In the past twenty years, a dizzying proliferation of terms to describe migrations patterns beyond the homeland-settlement binary have emerged: serial migration (Ossman 2013; Siu 2012; Parreñas et al. 2019), return migration (Tsuda 2003; Pido 2017; Jo 2018), transit migration (Düvell 2012; Frank-Vitale 2020; Vogt 2018), stepwise migration (Paul 2017; Jaeeun Kim 2019), transient migration (Beaverstock and Boardwell 2000) and temporary migration (Cho et al. 2018; Robertson 2014; Mares 2016). Despite this growing scholarly attention, the methodological and theoretical challenges of studying non-permanent migration mean that most transnational studies scholarship remains functionally binational, focusing on the relationships forged between two nation-states. Such studies usually adopt a "gravity model" of migration that assumes that migrants, driven by the exigencies of global inequality, will leave behind "developing" nations for the opportunities offered by the "developed" world—the United States, Canada, and Europe.

Because Koreans in Mexico defy many of these assumptions, they offer a privileged vantage point from which to analyze not only the multistranded ties that bring together Mexico and the Korean peninsula—two sites that are rarely thought together—but the transpacific and hemispheric social fields that exceed the homeland-settlement country binary. Indeed, temporary patterns of mobility are increasingly becoming the rule rather than the exception for Korean migrants, including those leaving South Korea as well as re-migrants from the diaspora. Faced with uncertain economic prospects at home and encouraged by a developmentalist government to seek economic, cultural, and social capital abroad, South Korean migrants are increasingly embarking on multi-step, temporary migrations in search of new opportunities. "Working holiday" migrants in Canada (Chun and Han 2015), English-language learners in Singapore (Kang 2012), factory managers in China (Jaesok Kim 2013), and retirees in the Philippines (D. Kim 2016) are some of the examples of temporary Korean (re)migrations to destinations around

the world. Even in places like the United States, traditionally a preferred destination of unidirectional immigration, sociologist Pyong Gap Min has pointed out that “the radical increase in the number of temporary Korean residents” (2011, 14) is the most striking difference between twentieth- and twenty-first century patterns of migration. At the same time, dispersed members of the Korean diaspora—including “settled,” multigenerational communities in places like China, the United States, the former Soviet states, and New Zealand—are on the move once more, seeking either to “return” to the homeland or to re-migrate to other destinations that offer economic opportunity, larger co-ethnic communities, or political stability.⁶

Formations of Korean Diaspora

According to the South Korean Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Korean diaspora consists of nearly 7.5 million people in over 150 countries (MOFA 2017). This statistic includes migrants who left after the formation of the two modern Korean states in 1948 as well as those who left the peninsula during the waning years of the Chosŏn Dynasty (1392-1897), the short-lived Korean Empire (1897-1910), and the Japanese colonial period (1910-1945). Before 1948, transpacific Korean migration to the Americas was limited. In addition to the roughly 1,000 Korean migrants who arrived in Mexico in 1905, around 7,000 Koreans arrived as contract workers to work on the sugar plantations of Hawai’i between 1903 and 1905 (Patterson 2000). The signing of the Japan-Korea Treaty of 1905 made Korea a protectorate of the Japanese Empire, putting an end to legal emigration from the peninsula (Schmid 2002). Although a small trickle of students, political activists, and so-called “picture brides” continued to move to the United States throughout the Japanese colonial period, the 1905 migration, and the subsequent remigration to Cuba, is the only known movement of Koreans to Latin America and the Caribbean during the first half of the twentieth century.

The first wave of migration to Mexico in 1905, much like early Korean migration to the Hawai’i in the first decade of the twentieth century, was shaped by Japanese and Euro-American imperial interests—both the “opening” of the peninsula by Japan (1876) and the United States (1882) as well as the agricultural labor demands of cash crop economies at the turn of the century. The early Cold War geopolitical struggles between the United States and the Soviet Union resulted in the devastation of the Korean War (1950-1953) and the partition of the peninsula into two states—the Republic of Korea (ROK) in the South and the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK) in the North. After the war, a small number of North Korean prisoners of war (POW) refused repatriation and were instead accepted by Brazil (55 POWs) and Argentina (12 POWs) (see H.-J. Park 2017). In the decade following the Korean War, U.S. support of South Korea led to the second significant wave of Korean transpacific migration, which included Korean brides of U.S. military soldiers, war orphans, and other students and professionals. Cold War conditions and ongoing military aggression between South Korea and North Korea also influenced diasporic engagement, with both states competing for the loyalty of diasporic populations in nearby Japan (Ryang 1997; Lie 2008). But for the most part, both states ignored pre-1948 populations in more remote places, including displaced Koreans in Central Asian nations such as Kazakhstan and Koreans in Mexico and Cuba.

In the early 1960s, as South Korea faced its own political turmoil as well as post-war recovery pressures, the South Korean government, headed by the military dictatorship of Park Chung Hee, began to formalize their international migration policies as part of a broader national development strategy that would alleviate domestic social pressure by sending “surplus” populations abroad as well as increase foreign remittances. The management of “surplus”

populations included encouraging the international adoption of children born to unwed mothers or intergovernmental agreements to settle rural Koreans in the Argentine interior (Yoon 2015; E. J. Kim 2010). Middle-class emigration, for professional or educational reasons, sharply increased with the passage of the U.S. Hart-Celler Act in 1965, which abolished the national origins system that had effectively prohibited migration from Asia. Because entry prioritization to the United States was based on family reunification and occupational skill, post-1965 Korean immigrants were more likely to have biological kinship relations to earlier migrants as well as higher levels of education and socioeconomic status in Korea (H. S. Kim and Min 1992).

The 1997-1998 global financial crisis, commonly referred to as the “IMF crisis” in South Korea, led to the neoliberal restructuring of the South Korean economy as well as a pivot toward globalization (*seggyewha*) as a recovery strategy. Part of the state’s official embrace of globalization as the path toward South Korean national development was a reconceptualization of Korean migrants as a reserve of “human capital” instead of a jettisoned “surplus” population or source of overseas remittances. In the words of South Korean sociologist In-Jin Yoon (2005), it became common to imagine that “due to this diaspora, Korea now has an invaluable pool of worldwide human capital, and thus a competitive edge over other countries with respect to globalization” (201). This process of connection included renaming overseas Koreans as *chaeoe tongp’o*, or Korean compatriots living outside the peninsula, instead of *haeoe tongp’o*, ethnic Korean sojourners, in order to “accentuate the fraternal ties of Koreans above the territorial divide” (H. O. Park 2015). The passage of the Overseas Korean Act in 1997 and the formation of the Overseas Korean Foundation (OKF), a division of the South Korean Ministry of Foreign Affairs that is primarily responsible for increasing engagement with South Koreans nationals abroad as well as other diasporic Koreans, formalized this shift. Therefore, as Jung-sun Park and Paul Chang (2005) argue, the South Korean state’s embrace of diaspora was “an attempt to connect overseas Koreans to the new South Korean nation-building processes, which were undergoing a critical transformation due to the economic crisis at the time” (2).

Reconceptualized as members of a deterritorialized nation with vast potential as human capital resources, diasporic Koreans were to be instrumentalized in order to strengthen South Korea’s global competitiveness, especially in “underdeveloped” areas of the world. The government promoted small business ventures abroad—a reliance on individualized risk-taking labor that Jesook Song (2009) calls “the entrepreneurship of the self”—to supplement existing middle-class aspirations. Globalization (*seggyewha*) therefore went in hand with “localization” (*hyŏnjihwa*)—the idea that the South Korean state should encourage diasporic Koreans to be successful in their own local contexts in order to ultimately contribute to the global economic reach and foreign policy priorities of South Korea. The twinning of globalization-localization is reflected in the OKF’s mission statement, which, according to its website, is “to maintain ethnic bonds and connectedness among overseas Koreans and to encourage them to be exemplary members of their countries of residence.”⁷ Through exemplary membership, diasporic Koreans are to function as human mediators between the expansion of South Korea’s global reach and the local specificities of “countries of residence.”

Undergirding the construction of this global Korean diaspora is *minjok*, the ethnic nation, the belief that Koreans are an ethnically homogenous group with a shared bloodline and culture. First coming to ascendance in the early years of the Japanese colonial period (1910-1945), nationalist and anti-colonial thinkers drew from the ideology of *minjok* to argue that the Korean people had an ontological existence beyond the dissolution of the Korean state—crucially important because of the conditions of statelessness compelled by Japanese colonial rule

(Schmid 2000; Shin 2006; Em 2013). Since the formation of the Republic of Korea in the South and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea in the North, both states have claimed to be the rightful representatives of the *minjok* on the peninsula and abroad. Indeed, the belief that all Koreans are “one people” is deeply cherished, as scholars of Korean nationalism have noted. As Park and Chang (2005) write, “The ideology of Korean ethnic homogeneity and connections is so deep—and almost sacred in South Korea—that even the state does not challenge it” (22). Likewise, Gi-wook Shin (2006) argues, “If a person has Korean blood, he or she is Korean, regardless of class background or place of residence. Therefore, it can be claimed that Koreans remain Korean because they share the same blood. Neither globalization nor any other social change can alter this fact” (216).

While I do not dispute the power of the ideology of Korean ethnic homogeneity, I would add that notions of *minjok* have been seriously challenged, especially following the South Korean state's embrace of ideologies of global multiculturalism following the Asian financial crisis of 1997-1998. Growing numbers of “returned” members of the Korean diaspora as well as labor migrants from Asia—alongside the South Korean state's propagation of multicultural policies—have transformed nation, identity, and citizenship into contentious topics of public debate. Appeals to *minjok* and the rhetoric of “one nation” that transcend the existence of two states on the Korean peninsula is important for the prospect of the eventual unification of North and South Korea, but surveys show that even this sublime goal, once taken for granted, is no longer deeply felt by younger generations of South Koreans (Jeong et al 2017). In addition, collective anxieties related to South Korea's low birth rate and growing intermarriage rates have tested the notion of a monocultural, monoracial nation. For example, a 2014 study commissioned by the South Korean National Assembly proclaimed that South Koreans “face extinction by 2750” if the birth rates continue to remain among the lowest in the world (Kim 2014).

Still, in the “age of diasporas,” to use Zygmunt Bauman's (2010) term, the pull of the homeland for migrants remains powerful. And yet the project of claiming Koreanness from the location of diaspora is fraught—doubly so for those in Latin America, who are often overshadowed by larger diasporic populations in the United States, Canada, Japan, and China.⁸ Despite the ideology of *minjok*, “returned” members of the Korean diaspora such as Isaac or Yiseul often feel a deep sense of linguistic and cultural Otherness. The ideology of ethnic homogeneity often heightens the marginality of groups such as international Korean adoptees and mixed-race Koreans, whose claims to Koreanness are often questioned (see Kim 2010; Ahn 2018). As Helene Lee (2018) has argued in her comparative analysis of Korean Chinese and Korean American return migration, “Foreigners, particularly return migrants, challenge a national myth that equates ethnicity, nationality, and race as nearly synonymous concepts” (2). Koreans in Mexico—a differentiated, mixed-race, mixed-nationality group, likewise tease apart the isomorphisms of nation, race, ethnicity, and territory.

Formations of Race and Nation in Mexico

The vast majority of popular and scholarly attention to Mexican migration focuses on emigration to the United States—an emblematic case study of international migration, in which migrants are “pushed” from a poorer nation and “pulled” to a richer one in search of greater economic opportunity. Recent shifts, however, have signaled changes to the paradigms of migration in Mexico. Net migration from Mexico fell to zero in 2009, with more migrants leaving than coming to the U.S.⁹ Another highly visible form of migration, transit migration—especially from Central America—has led to the militarization of the southern Mexican border

and the enforcement of stricter immigration policies, including the rise of detentions and deportations under former President Enrique Peña Nieto's Programa Frontera Sur.¹⁰ What Nicholas De Genova (2013) calls “border spectacles”—the hypervisibility of migrants as either criminalized or victimized bodies in transit—have captured public attention in Mexico, U.S. and across Latin America and has shaped national and regional discourses on the problem of migration. These new developments, and the doubling of Mexico's registered foreign population from 492,617 in 2000 to 961,121 in 2010 (INEGI 2000; INEGI 2010), marks Mexico's shift from a country of emigration to a country of immigration and has tested the national ideology of *mestizaje*, the racial and cultural mixing of indigenous peoples and Europeans.

While placing Korean migration within a broader framework of migratory shifts in Mexico, the contemporary emphasis on the newness of the migration phenomenon masks how continuous migrations from Europe, Africa, and Asia have shaped the nexus of racial and national formation in Mexico. As scholars such as María Elena Martínez (2011) point out, it was a long and fitful process through which European settlers and their descendants began to claim “nativeness” through the “genealogical fictions” that located the foundation of the nation in the mixing of pure Spanish and Indian blood. A broad literature has identified *mestizaje*, the mixing of European and Indigenous peoples, as foundational to the national narrative of modern Mexico; in this dominant conceptualization of Mexican nationhood, Mexicans of African and Asian descent are often diminished or wholly ignored.¹¹ While *mestizaje* undergirded some nationalist claims articulated by Creole elites during and after the Mexican war of independence (1810-1821), it was not until the Mexican Revolution (1910-1920) that *mestizaje* became part of the official state ideology (see Gillingham 2011). The Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), which ruled Mexico for seven decades (1929-2000), articulated a revolutionary nationalism in which the *mestizo* became the “ideological symbol” of national progress and modernity (see Knight 1990, 86). *Indigenismo*—the appropriation of the Indigenous past—went hand-in-hand with the articulation of the *mestizo* as the subject of Mexican modernity. Steady mid-century economic growth (often called “the Mexican Miracle”) undergirded the Pax PRIísta (1938-1968), an era during which “*lo mexicano* still invoked a series of roughly shared assumptions about cultural belonging and political stability” (Joseph, Rubenstein, and Zolov 2001: 9).

Against the nostalgia of this golden age, critics have pointed out that the ideology of racial mixture sought to assimilate Indigenous communities into the dominant national culture and invisibilized the long presence of other groups—such as Africans, Asians, and their descendants.¹² Even after the growth of national imaginaries that celebrated racial mixing and *indigenismo* in the early twentieth century, elite understandings of progress—influenced by notions of scientific racism—were often tied to the ideal of *blanqueamiento*, or “whitening” the nation. Asian migrants—especially Chinese—were often seen as antithetical to this goal of national progress. As Jason Chang (2017) has argued, anti-Chinese sentiment was interlinked with the “Indian problem”—the demographic reality of a heterogenous Indigenous population and the state's ongoing struggle to transform Indigenous peoples into *mestizo* citizens.

In the last three decades, the hegemony of *mestizo* consciousness has been seriously challenged. The rearticulation of the Mexican nation must be understood within the rejection of the economic nationalist, protectionist policies of import-substitution industrialization and the growing hegemony of neoliberalism. As geographer David Harvey (2011) argues, Mexico had been “the first major test case of neoliberal orthodoxy” after the debt crisis of 1982-1984 and subsequent “structural adjustment” by the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank (29). President Miguel de la Madrid's commitment to austerity and *apertura* (opening) began a

process of privatization and trade liberalization that, during the so-called “lost decade” of the 1980s, led to swift drops in per capita income and declines in state expenditures in public goods (see Walker 2013). This era also saw the emergence of a new global discourse that reconceptualized the relationship between Asia and Mexico, comparing the “successful” development of “Asian tigers” such as South Korea, Taiwan, and Singapore with the “failures” of the economic nationalist, protectionist policies of import-substitution industrialization in countries such as Mexico. “The demotion and pathologization of Mexico,” Laura Kang (2012) argues, “were reinforced by the counterexample of the Asian miracle” (419).

Global neoliberalization only intensified during the administration of President Carlos Salinas de Gortari, and Mexico’s entry into NAFTA in 1994 is widely seen as the consolidation of Mexico’s transition from economic protectionism to neoliberal capitalism—the privatization of key industries, an emphasis on manufacturing exports, decreased regulations on capital flows, and investments in global trade infrastructure. Such transformations went beyond the economic. As Lynn Stephen (2002) argues, neoliberal reforms promised that the global market embodied by NAFTA “could be the basis for a new nationalism that would unify all Mexicans as they assumed their rightful place at the table with ‘first world’ countries” (xxv).

But NAFTA engendered an almost immediate backlash. On January 1, 1994—the treaty’s initiation date—the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN) announced a different challenge through their declaration of war against the Mexican state, claiming in the First Declaration of the Lacondon Jungle that “we are the heirs of those who truly forged our nationality.” The political and economic ruling class in Mexico, the Zapatistas argued, had “sold out” the nation to global interests for personal enrichment. Against the top-down nationalism of NAFTA, the EZLN articulated an alternative revolutionary nationalism that called for Indigenous autonomy and the recognition of the multi-ethnic composition of the Mexican nation. Importantly, as Josefina Saldaña-Portillo (2001) points out, this was not a rejection of Mexican nationalism but rather a claim on it—the “reconceptualizing of the Mexican constituency as a constituency that includes Indians as political agents in the nation-state” (409).¹³

As a nationalist ideology, *mestizaje* never seems to have ascended to the sacred quality ascribed to the Korean concept of *minjok*, even during the mid-century “golden age” of the Institutional Revolutionary Party’s rule (Joseph, Rubenstein, and Zolov 2001). Beyond the descriptive fact of racial mixing, a broad scholarship on “many Mexicos” have pointed out that the meanings of *mestizaje* vary significantly across region, class, and ethnic groups. If myths of Korean ethnic purity and cultural homogeneity remain deeply resonant, the myth of a Mexican culture based on the harmonious *mélange* of indigenous and European roots is “a carefully cultivated but thin cultural hegemony,” as Paul Gillingham and Benjamin Smith (2014) argue. Challenges to this hegemony can be seen via recent scholarly and activist attention to the histories and continued presence of groups who are rarely enfolded into the Indigenous-European binary of *mestizaje*. Contestations regarding the ongoing legacy of centuries of arrival of enslaved and free Africans, as well as Chinese, Japanese, South Asian and West Asian migrations to Mexico, have unsettled long-held notions of Mexican nationhood and belonging. For the first time ever, Mexicans of African descent were able to identify as such in the 2015 national census, reflecting a broader push toward state-led recognition of racial and Indigenous difference throughout Latin America and the Caribbean (see Lara Millán 2017).

The Mexican state still does not count or recognize Mexicans of Asian descent, and there was significant variety among my respondents for the words that they use to describe themselves—perhaps unsurprising considering their divergent life histories of migration, labor,

and settlement as well as differing alignments of citizenship, class, gender, language, generation, and ability. Considering this variation and segmentation, I struggled for a long time to come up with an appropriate term to describe Koreans in Mexico, encompassing not only recent Korean migrants but also the descendants of those who arrived in Mexico in 1905. Ultimately, I came to realize that Koreans in Mexico interrogate the particularities of my assumptions about the relationship between race, ethnicity, and nationality that came from my experience as a second-generation Korean American woman born and raised in the United States—assumptions that did not necessarily apply to the racial and national context in Mexico (see Telles 2014; Loveman 2014; Wade 2017).

Unlike in the U.S. or Canadian context, where (im)migrant Koreans often identify in hyphenated terms such as “Korean American” or “Korean Canadians,” my interviewees resisted being called “Korean Mexicans.” Responding to my Korean American identity, my Korean-speaking interviewees drew distinctions between themselves—who they referred to most frequently as *han'guk-in* (Koreans)—and me, who they referred to as *chaemi kyop'o* or *han'guk-kye miguk-in* (Korean American).¹⁴ In contrast, the descendants of the 1905 migrants describe themselves as “Mexicans of Korean descent,” with many distinguishing between themselves and the “Korean-Koreans (*coreanos-coreanos*)” or, in the tongue-in-cheek words of one interviewee, “the real Koreans (*los verdaderos coreanos*).”

The role of racial difference was also salient in these identifications. In fact, recent arrivals to Mexico quickly become aware through everyday encounters that they are only rarely recognized as “coreanos” (Koreans) or even “asiáticos” (Asians), a term that is rarely used in the vernacular, but “chinos” (Chinese). More than once, I have been jokingly told that life becomes easier if one accepts that in Mexico, “a coreano is just a type of chino.” In these conversations, it is clear that “chino” is not only an ethnic identifier but also a racial category, in which phenotypical difference signals a racialized, irreducible foreignness. For example, Sara, a 26-year-old woman who had lived in Mexico for 14 years, described Koreans’ complex social positioning in relation to both Mexico and South Korea:

Other Koreans sometimes call me a local (*hyŏnjae-in*) because I speak Spanish and I have a Mexican boyfriend. ... It makes sense to say you are *chaemi kyop'o* (Korean American), but there's something weird about *Meksican kyop'o* (Korean Mexican). ... “Coreano Mexicano” (Korean Mexican) isn't right either. Mexicans would not recognize “Coreano Mexicano.” ... [When Mexicans ask, “Where are you from?”] there is only one answer that they accept: “Coreana.” I can't say, “But I only lived in Korea for three years.” ... If I have a son with Enrique [her boyfriend], then my son will be mixed, so he can be Mexican. But I can never be Mexican because the people here will never agree that I am.

Sara felt ambivalent about identifying herself as Korean since she had only lived in South Korea as a small child. However, she also recognized that in Mexico, it was impossible to identify herself otherwise because of “the people here will never agree that I am.” Therefore, while she did not strongly identify with Koreanness, she felt that there was no other acceptable answer. Sara and other interviewees pointed out that I had arrived with peculiarly U.S. notions of multicultural identity, in which a racialized ethnic subjectivity (“Korean”) is joined to national belonging (“American”) through a hyphenated relation. In contrast, my informants argued that in Mexico, such binary identifications were illegible. As Sara explained, she felt that a hyphenated

term such as “Coreano Mexicano” would not be recognized by either Koreans or Mexicans, and therefore hardly made sense to articulate. Ultimately, she told me that she preferred to be recognized as “Korean,” instead of “Chinese or Japanese which happens more frequently.”

Interestingly, Sara also noted that if she were to have a child with her Mexican boyfriend, then the child would be mixed and therefore could be identified as Mexican. In so doing, Sara acknowledged the profoundly important role of the ideology of mixedness, or *mestizaje*, in defining the Mexican national body. Read as a phenotypically “pure” Asian woman, Sara knew that she would never be recognized as Mexican. Still, at the same time, Sara also noted that other Koreans sometimes called her “local” (*hyŏnjae-in*), which is the most common word used by Korean-speaking recent migrants to refer to non-Korean Mexicans. Sometimes, Sara explained, her friends even jokingly called her *wŏnju-min*, or “Native,” a racialized term that is almost always used to refer to Mexicans who were perceived as lower-class status for reasons of phenotype or occupation. The messy language of race, Indigeneity, and *mestizaje* present in Sara’s statement is a powerful reminder how the Mexican state’s history of racial classification and hierarchization also shapes the cognitive categories of recently arrived migrants such as Koreans, who reference purity, mixedness, and nativeness to make sense of their own social location in Mexico. Indeed, the words that recent migrants utilize—whether in Korean, Spanish, or English—are laden with racial meaning and reveal some of the boundary-making practices that limit non-white groups from access to full citizenship and national belonging.¹⁵ Sara’s frank discussion of phenotype is therefore of note here. Sara’s fluency in Spanish and her preference to socialize with Mexicans led to other Koreans referring to her as a “local” or, disparagingly, “Native.” However, she also recognized that her physical appearance limited her inclusion into Mexican society, serving as a hard boundary through which she would always be recognized as “Other.” Neither fully accepted as Korean or Mexican, Sara defaulted to the adscripted identity that broader Mexican society would accept: “Coreana.”

In this dissertation, keeping in mind that many of my interviewees are temporary migrants, I have chosen to use the term Koreans *in Mexico*—a prepositional phrase that emphasizes the relational here-and-now—rather than “Korean Mexican,” an identificatory term that was universally rejected by my interlocutors, descendants and recent migrants alike. Furthermore, I was concerned that “Korean Mexican” might problematically import U.S. binary forms of ethnic minority subjectivity to Mexico without considering the differing racial and cultural contexts through which individual and collective Asian subjectivities may emerge. That is, U.S. Asian American identity was forged in the 1960s crucible of pan-ethnic and antiwar activism, reinforced by systems of racial classification, and articulated in a society where race is a legible basis of subjecthood and rights-claims. In contrast, “Mexicans’ worldviews do not give prominence to race as a basis of group categorization and action” (48), as Christina Sue (2013) points out. As a slightly awkward prepositional shorthand, “Koreans in Mexico” gestures toward the heterogeneity and differentiation among my interlocutors. And, by taking into account the different tempos and rhythms of migrant identities and belonging, it signals some of the ways through which Korean migrants build durable spaces of belonging *through* temporariness and transience, not in spite of it.

Chapter Overviews

Chapter One contextualizes the spike in Korean migration to Mexico, which increased nearly tenfold between 1997 and 2002, within global political economic shifts: the passage of the 1994 North American Free Trade Agreement, the 1997 Asian financial crisis, and the Argentine

Great Depression (1998-2002). I use migrants' *imin iyagi* (migration stories) to place dynamics of mobility and home at the juncture of broader global crises, arguing that temporary migrants are important mediators between macro-economic processes and the lived experiences of globalization.

Chapter Two examines the racialized, gendered, and sexualized geographies of Koreanness in Mexico City in two sites: the ethnic enclave of Pequeño Seúl (Little Seoul) in Zona Rosa and the vast informal markets of Tepito. Relying on discourse analysis of an archive of Spanish-language and Korean-language newspapers, I explore how two high-profile incidents perpetuated the perception that Korean migrants are a particularly criminalized and deviant population.

Chapter Three examines the mobility of Mexicans of Korean descent—a mixed-race, Spanish-speaking group. I emphasize the stratifications of diaspora as the South Korean state becomes increasingly invested in managing the diaspora abroad, as well as the alternative articulations of subjectivity and belonging that emerge from the unique social position of Korean descendants.

Chapter Four utilizes the case study of Together Korean Presbyterian Church, a member of a church denomination headquartered in Philadelphia, PA, as a hemispheric social infrastructure. I position churches as a network of networks, in which repeated social contact produces intertwined meanings and practices of religion and ethnicity.

Chapter Five turns to a discussion of the two disasters that bookended the research and writing of this dissertation: the September 2017 earthquakes, occurring just as I arrived in Mexico for long-term fieldwork, and the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic (2020-2021). Treating disasters as moments in which the coordinates of belonging are renegotiated, I consider the possibilities of a pan-ethnic Asian Mexican subjectivity in the post-pandemic era, as well as the position of migrants more broadly across the hemispheric Americas.

¹ For romanizations of all Korean words, the McCune-Reischauer system has been used except in the cases of certain names and words that are more commonly known by a different orthography, such as Seoul. Korean names are generally given in the order they are used in Korea, with the family name first. All translations in this dissertation, from Spanish and Korean to English, are mine unless otherwise noted.

² “Chilango” is a Mexican slang term for residents of Mexico City. It should be noted that the term is not universally embraced, as it carries a slightly derogatory connotation, particularly outside of the capital. Some of my respondents, especially those with deeper roots in Mexico City, insisted that they were “capitalinos”—residents of the capital—or “defeños”—a nod to when the city was known as D.F., or the Federal District (distrito federal).

³ Cited in Nira Yuval-Davis 2006.

⁴ Much like Korean immigrants in the United States and Canada, Koreans throughout Latin America are characterized by high levels of entrepreneurship in a contentious economic niche that often exacerbate existing race and class inequalities. Indeed, scholars have detailed how Korean Americans—and immigrants more broadly—often struggle to find work commensurate with their pre-migration status and education because of language barriers, racial discrimination, and lack of networks—barriers that lead them to establish small businesses instead (see Light and Bonacich 1988; Yun 1997; K. Park 1997; C. J. Kim 2003; Chan and Fong 2012).

⁵ In job advertisements posted on Korean-language Internet forums and newspapers, 30,000 to 50,000 pesos (1,500 to 2,500 USD) is a typical monthly salary for jobs offered by Korean-owned businesses and companies.

⁶ Studies of Korean ethnic return migration have outlined the differential inclusion/exclusion of diasporic groups from locations around the world, as well as the myriad factors influencing return. For a comparative study of Korean Chinese and Korean American return migration, see H. Lee 2018; for a comparative study of Korean return migration from China, the United States, and the former Soviet Republic states, see Jo 2018.

⁷ Overseas Korean Foundation website, Accessed June 5, 2017, <http://www.okf.or.kr/portal/OkfMainView.do>.

⁸ Korean diasporas studies scholars have tended to focus on the largest diasporic communities in China, Japan, and the United States. Some scholars have emphasized Korean diasporic nation-building activities under Japanese colonialism and migrants’ economic contributions to the post-war South Korean developmental state (R Kim 2011; Lie 2008; Woo 1991), whereas others have examined the cultural and social relations that produce collective consciousness and diasporic subjectivities (J Kim 2010; Cho 2007). In the Chinese and Japanese context, the question of the division of the Korean peninsula into two separate states produces pressing questions of affiliation, as the homeland itself is produced as a site of fraction, whereas Koreans in the US or Canada are implicitly analyzed in relation to the South Korean state, with relatively less emphasis on the two-state problem. To date, the smaller Korean communities in Latin America have received very little attention.

⁹ n.a., “More Mexicans Leaving Than Coming to the U.S.” Pew Research Center, Nov 19, 2015. <<http://www.pewhispanic.org/2015/11/19/more-mexicans-leaving-than-coming-to-the-u-s/>>.

¹⁰ See Alejandra Castillo, “Program Frontera Sur: The Mexican Government’s Faulty Immigration Policy,” Council on Hemispheric Affairs. October 26, 2016. Accessed January 12, 2019. < <http://www.coha.org/programa-frontera-sur-the-mexican-governments-faulty-immigration-policy/>>.

¹¹ The limitations of historical reliance on national and nation-state frameworks have contributed to this invisibilization, as Herman Bennett (2000) argues: “As lived experience, the African diaspora is both of and beyond the nation, thus making History as it is currently conceived too limited in scope to represent the routes that defined and define the black Atlantic’s cartography” (118). One could make a similar, parallel argument regarding the lived experiences of the Asian diaspora in the Americas.

¹² Peter Wade (2010) points out that in Latin America, Indigenous groups are often studied under the rubric of ethnicity and Africans and Afro-descendants in terms of race.

¹³ In the case of Mexico, it is sometimes assumed that the neoliberal and the multicultural are antagonistic to one another, pulling apart the politics of national belonging from the politics of the state. For example, Harvey (2005) concludes, “The Partido Revolucionario Institucional in Mexico had long ruled on the theme of unity of state and nation, but that increasingly fell apart, even turning much of the nation against the state, as a result of neoliberal reforms” (85). However, while the Zapatistas explicitly rejected the global neoliberalism of NAFTA, it would be a mistake to assume that neoliberalism and multiculturalism are necessarily divergent projects. Indeed, a broad, interdisciplinary body of scholarship has observed that indigenous activism has thrived alongside a series of neoliberal reforms that have disproportionately hurt poor, rural, and indigenous communities. What Charles Hale has termed “neoliberal multiculturalism” includes “limited recognition of cultural rights, the strengthening of civil societies, and endorsement of the principle of intercultural equality” (2008: 10). Writing from the Guatemalan context, Hale has argued that state-propagated neoliberal multiculturalism works to neutralize the most radical aspects of Indigenous movements for self-determination and autonomy (Hale 2002). Many scholars of Indigenous politics and social movements in Mexico have come to similar conclusions (Martínez Novo 2006; Overmyer-Velázquez 2010; Muehlmann 2009). The articulation of Indigeneity—and the claims of ethnic and cultural difference—indeed often rely on the language of neoliberal multiculturalism for legibility, visibility, and power within the state, broader civil society, and the transnational sphere. It was international organizations and human rights agencies that first pressured the Mexican state to officially embrace multiculturalism with the 1991 revision of the Constitution; the necessity of accommodating Indigenous activist demands led to the 2001 amendment that recognized that “the Nation has a pluricultural composition” (Speed 2016). These shifts in state and nation have moved in tandem with the increasing dominance of neoliberalism as a primary developmental strategy.

¹⁴ Both *chaemi kyop'o* and *han'guk-kye miguk-in* are commonly used to describe Korean Americans. The former term is derived from *hanja* (the Korean writing system of traditional Chinese characters) and the second might be literally translated as “American of Korean descent.”

¹⁵ I have struggled to account for the messy imbrications of Asian racialization and Indigeneity, and especially to acknowledge how ongoing structures of colonization both facilitates Indigenous dispossession and Asian exclusion. One way to conceptualize the multiplicities of Koreans in Mexico is to use the term “arrivants,” which Indigenous literary scholar Jodi Byrd borrows from African Caribbean poet Kamau Brathwaite in order to “signify those people forced into the Americas through the violence of European and Anglo-American colonialism and imperialism around the globe” (2011: xix). Pointing out that the concept of the “Americas” is itself an ideological product of European and Anglo-American colonialisms, Byrd’s project of Indigenous critical theory asks that “the settler, native, and arrivant each acknowledge their own

positions within empire and then reconceptualize space and history to make visible what imperialism and its resultant settler colonialisms and diasporas have sought to obscure” (xxx). Her powerful theorization of the concept of “transit” complicates existing notions of immigrants as mobile and Indigeneity as “rooted and static, located in a discrete place” (xv) to instead focus on “a world of relational movements and countermovements” (xvii). Byrd’s intervention demands attention to the geographies of transit beyond taken-for-granted conceptual frames of nation-state and regions that map neatly onto bounded categories of racialized people groups. Examining Koreans in Mexico as “arrivants” acknowledges that Koreans transit through a heterogeneous terrain structured by the global itineraries of racial capitalism, overlapping colonial and imperial projects, and the ongoing dispossession of Indigenous peoples.

Chapter One

Koreans To and From Mexico: Narrativizing Multiple Migrations and Multiple Homes

Introduction

After arriving to Mexico City to begin long-term fieldwork in August 2017, I took the path of many other Korean newcomers. Through a quick search on Naver, the popular South Korean search engine, I searched for and found a list of *hasuk*—or boarding houses—located in Mexico City on an Internet forum for Koreans in Mexico. This list included local Mexican phone numbers as well as IDs for KakaoChat, the primary messaging client used by South Koreans. I contacted a few different boarding houses, asking questions about the location, the clientele, the rates, and the living situation at each one. One boarding home was hesitant to take in a single female lodger, citing the prevalence of male businessmen at the guesthouse. Another catered only to tourists and could not host a longer-term guest such as myself. Ultimately, I found a home due to mutual convenience: as we chatted briefly on the phone, the older woman running the boarding house offered me a discount for a month-long stay if I paid my fee upfront, and her apartment was centrally located in the heart of Zona Rosa. We met for the first time outside an eyeglasses store operated by a Korean friend of hers. A brisk woman in her mid-sixties, she looked me up and down and asked me a litany of questions in Korean: *What are you studying? Where were you born? What is your citizenship? Are you single or married? What do your parents do? Do you go to church?* When I responded yes to that final question, her demeanor softened, and she proudly told me that she was a *kwōnsanim*, a title used for women church elders, in recognition of her leadership at the local Korean Presbyterian church.

Located on the third floor of a five-story apartment building, Kim Kwōnsanim's boarding house consisted of two three-bedroom apartments on the same floor and hosted a rotating cast of people, mostly men, who came in and out of Mexico City. The building itself was known as a hub for Koreans living in the city. The commercial space on the ground floor of the building hosted a Korean restaurant, a Korean catering company, a Korean grocery store, and the business office for a company that imported South Korean food products. According to the apartment's building manager, just under half of the building's tenants were Korean, while the rest were Mexicans, with a significant but growing number of Chinese families as well.

I quickly came to realize that Kim Kwōnsanim, despite her limited Spanish, was an incredible guide to Mexico City. She had left South Korea in the early 1980s with her husband, migrating first to South America. In 1999, she and her husband came to Mexico City, following her oldest son who got a job working with a large South Korean company and hoping to take advantage of better opportunities for higher education for their two younger children. When her husband unexpectedly passed away in 2004, she began to board travelers and temporary visitors in her three-bedroom apartment in order to pay her rent; the business flourished, and when her next-door neighbors moved out, she rented out that apartment to expand her business.

Kim Kwōnsanim was equipped with an alternative knowledge, an epistemology of attending to the city and its many riddles. When Kim Kwōnsanim took her post-breakfast power walk through el Bosque de Chapultepec, the grand urban park lined with leafy boulevards and marble monuments, her sharp eyes were drawn to weeds such as dandelions and ribworts in the grass, which we foraged to make fresh *panch'an* (side dishes) for dinner. Kim Kwōnsanim was a storyteller: every stall, shop, coffee store, or restaurant contained an acquaintance with a

dramatic history, an unexpected connection, or a lurid secret. At night, the boarding house became a space of conviviality, as guests sipped coffee and neighbors stopped by to watch television in the living room, swap stories, and share information—a place that began to feel like home despite the fact that the boarding house, by definition, was a temporary and transitory space for all of us who lived there.

Kim Kwönsanim's boarding house is a site that encapsulates some of the complexities and contradictions of the lives of Koreans in Mexico. A private dwelling turned into a thriving enterprise, the boarding house is an alternative domestic space in which the boundaries between public and private become blurred. For newcomers and guests, the boarding house provides not only shelter, food, and company, but knowledge, connection, and sociality. For one night or several months, the boarding house can become a home, a place where strangers might start to feel less strange. Importantly, the comforts of home are produced through the labor of women like Kim Kwönsanim, who simultaneously played the role of caretaker, networker, cook, housekeeper, and savvy entrepreneur. By performing home for a constantly changing cast of guests, Kim Kwönsanim's boarding house functions as a nodal point in a broader landscape of Korean diasporic migration.

Home and the process of making home has long been a chief concern of diaspora studies. As postcolonial literary scholar Avtar Brah (1996) has pointed out, “the concept of diaspora itself embodies a subtext of ‘home’” (187). The tension between migratory dispersal and what Brah calls a “homing desire” has been a central problematic in a field that often emphasizes the affective and material qualities of attachment to a homeland, imagined or otherwise. Martin F. Manalansan IV (2002) has described the “ambivalent and troubled relationship between ‘being at home’ and ‘homecoming’” (123), connecting the “specter of home” to the “politics and poetics of belonging” (251). As Takeyuki Tsuda (2003) argues, second and third-generation Brazilian *nikkeijin* who “return” to Japan often lose their affective attachment to an imagined “homeland,” even as they make Japan their new “home.” Charting similar processes of ambivalence in his study of Filipino Americans who buy property in the Manila metro area, Eric Pido (2017) points out that home “is less a geographically delimited and physical space” than “a *process* containing a set of connectivities” (8).

For transnational migrants, what counts as “home” is thereby enmeshed in a complex set of power relations, cultural assumptions, and ideological fields. But for Koreans in Mexico, the frequency of serial migration further complicates the dynamism of home. In a 2005 survey of Koreans in Mexico City, only 54.9% had arrived directly from South Korea. Roughly 39% were re-migrants from other countries in the Americas, with small percentages having re-migrated from elsewhere in Asia, Europe, and Africa. These itinerant patterns distinguish Koreans in Mexico from Korean migrants elsewhere in North America—namely the United States or Canada, where there are more significant settled communities. Because there are so many re-migrants in Mexico City, it is a common joke among Koreans that they are not *iminja* (the Korean word for “immigrant,” which sounds like “two-migrant”) but rather *sam-minja* (“three-migrant”) or *sa-minja* (“four-migrant”). One interviewee, expressing his desire to eventually move to the United States, told me that it was his dream to be an *o-minja* (“five-migrant”).

These different rhythms and tempos of serial mobility both structure and fragment the politics of making home in Mexico City. That is, while engaged with their locations of residence, my interviewees' social lives existed in multiple locations throughout the Americas: parents in Buenos Aires, business partners in Guatemala City, friends in São Paulo, children in Los Angeles. These hemispheric-diasporic connections are just as important or often more significant

than the homeland-host society connections commonly emphasized by scholars of transnational migration. Korean migrants transit through the Americas, reside in Mexico, and dream about a future elsewhere—“back” in South Korea, in the United States or Canada, or other destinations throughout the world—a broadened geographical landscape that demonstrates how migrants, cultural imaginaries, commodities, and ideas circulate and are reshaped.

In this chapter, I will sketch out the contours of the Korean migrant community in Mexico, arguing that Korean migration to and from Mexico cannot be positioned only in bilateral terms between sending and receiving country but must be situated with a global cartography of multiple migrations. In so doing, I echo scholars of Korean migrations in Latin America, who have described serial migration tendencies from the vantage point of countries such as Argentina (Ko 2016; Mera, 1998), Brazil (Joo 2010), and Mexico (Gallardo García 2017). Anthropologist Kyeyoung Park (1999) describes Korean Latin Americans, especially re-migrants, as a “floating population.” She writes, “They might feel adrift like life buoys, moving in any and all directions. Floating indicates a lack of integration into the local societies and occupying often peripheral space” (690). Korean in Mexico, like other migrants in cities across the Americas, confront many challenges while living in Mexico City—language barriers, irregular visa status, pervasive racism and discrimination, and precarious and often unsafe work conditions—that position them at the margins of Mexican society. The metaphor of a “floating population” usefully reveals the links between Korean migration patterns and the sense of alienation that many of my respondents described. Yet temporary migrants are rarely aimless nomads, drifting with the wind. Coming to Mexico is a deliberate choice, and the cultural, economic, and social investments made by Korean migrants can ultimately shape the places in which they reside. In fact, many of my interlocutors also described cultural familiarity, opportunity, and a sense of comfort in Mexico that speaks to the ways in which recent migrants practice forms of making home and claiming belonging, even in locations of relatively brief residence. This constantly changing relation between mobility and home is the topic of this chapter, teasing out the dichotomy between migration as a process of motion and home as a process of settlement.

In describing itinerant migration patterns, scholarly and popular explanations alike usually turn to shifts in economic conditions such as “push” or “pull” factors that explain why migrants leave one country to move to another. Broader shifts in global political economy are necessary context for understanding how and why people migrate. It is impossible to understand contemporary Korean migration to Mexico without recognizing the impact of the signing of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) in 1994, which incentivized South Korean automotive, light electronics, and textile companies to relocate operations to Mexico, transforming cities like Mexico City, Monterrey, and Tijuana into important hubs for over 1,700 Korean companies. Furthermore, the late 1990s spike in Korean migration to Mexico is directly tied to that decade’s significant global economic downturns. As mentioned earlier in my introduction, some Korean migrants mentioned the impacts of the Asian Financial Crisis (1997–1998), which is commonly called “IMF” in South Korea because of the harsh terms attached to the terms of an International Monetary Fund loan that stipulated new rules to govern the management of government debt, opened the economy to foreign investment and ownership, and reformed the labor market to make it easier for firms to fire workers.

But I was surprised to learn that for many of them, the more impactful “push” was not the IMF crisis in South Korea but the prolonged economic crisis in Argentina, a country with a significant Korean immigrant population—itinerant migration is a key cipher that helps explain

the tenfold increase of Korean migrants in Mexico at the turn of the new millennium. Drawing from Korean migration stories, this chapter triangulates the migratory connections between South Korea, Mexico, and Argentina. Demonstrating a keen understanding of global economic shifts and patterns, my interlocutors frequently placed their migration histories and life stories within the context of benchmark moments of economic opportunity, crisis, loss, and failure. This chapter also takes the time to focus, in some depth, on the migration narratives of two individuals. In so doing, I hope to gesture toward how Koreans in Mexico are a differentiated, “superdiverse” group (Vertovec 2007), with divergent life histories of migration, labor, and settlement and segmented by citizenship, class, gender, language, generation, and ability.

Crisis and Serial Migration

On May 20, 2002, Argentine newspaper *La Nación* published an article titled, “Consequence of the Argentina Crisis: 20,000 Koreans emigrate due to insecurity and the recession.” “Three years ago, there were 35,000 Koreans in Argentina,” the article begins. “Today, there are less than 15,000.”¹ In the context of Argentina’s ongoing economic crisis, the article then goes on to describe a series of woes: abandoned storefronts in the Buenos Aires neighborhood of Balvanera, an epicenter of Korean community; break-ins reported at over seventy Korean homes in the last six months; and growing hunger and desperation, evidenced by the continuously empty shelves of a church-run community food bank.

Meanwhile, in Mexico City, mass media began to report on the curious rise of Korean merchants, particularly in the vast informal markets of Tepito and the neighboring commercial zones of the Centro Histórico. *El Universal*, a major Mexican newspaper, described Korean and Chinese businesses as appearing in Mexico City as if overnight (“de la noche a la mañana”). Indeed, the turn of the new millennium did see an astonishing growth of Korean migration to Mexico. In 1997, only around 2,000 overseas Koreans resided in Mexico. Four years later, that number had grown nearly tenfold, to nearly 20,000, with a majority in Mexico City.

Korean Population in Argentina and Mexico, 1997-2017

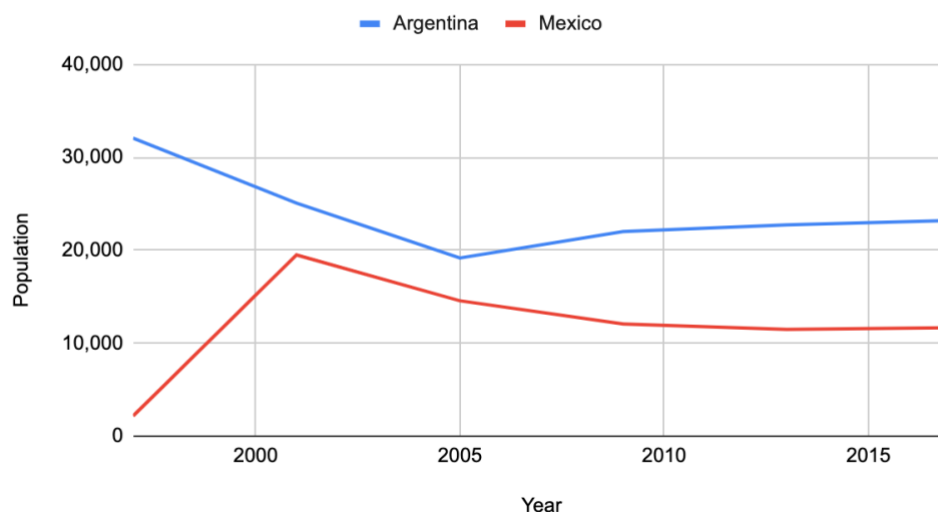


Figure 1. Korean Population in Argentina and Mexico. Source: South Korean Ministry of Foreign Affairs

Yet this narrative of sudden growth concealed the fact that there had already been a small community of Korean migrants in Mexico City since the first decade of the twentieth century. The Koreans who moved to Mexico City in 1910 were themselves re-migrants from the Yucatán peninsula. A local branch of the Korean National Association (KNA), a diasporic Korean organization headquartered in California, was founded in 1917, and a small but steady trickle of Koreans continued to move to the Mexican capital from the Yucatán peninsula throughout the first half of the twentieth century. Korean identification cards (*cedulas*) from the National Register of Foreigners, issued beginning in 1930, indicate that a concentration of Korean families lived in the neighborhood of Guerrero, near what is today the historic center of the city.²

However, as time passed, the ethnic bonds among Koreans in Mexico City weakened. According to the memoirs of José Sánchez Pac, a second-generation immigrant who served as the president of Mexico City's KNA branch, the partition of the Korean peninsula into two states demoralized and divided the community, dashing any long-held hopes of returning to one's hometown. In a letter addressed to the KNA Chairman Kim Myung-yun in Los Angeles, Pac explained the challenges of gathering Koreans, including ongoing economic hardship. In addition, he described "a coming of Mexican consciousness and a lack of Korean patriotism" among his co-ethnics that pointed to the fact that Korean descendants were increasingly well-integrated into Mexican society.³ Mexico City's KNA stopped convening in 1956. While the formal Korean association dissolved, informal relationships among Korean families persisted into the second half of the twentieth century. But the Mexico City earthquake of 1985, which badly damaged the neighborhood, led to the scattering of Koreans to newly developing areas in the far outskirts of the city, further diminishing Korean social cohesion.

Few Koreans immigrated to Mexico before 1962, when Mexico and South Korea finally established formal diplomatic relations. When Dong Soo Suh, a South Korean engineer, migrated to Mexico City in 1968 to work at a synthetic fiber plant, he explained that there were maybe less than twenty South Koreans living in the area.⁴ With support from the South Korean embassy, they organized a new Korean Association that went through various spurts of activity and inactivity. Still, through the Association, the descendants of Koreans who had first migrated to the Yucatán in the early 1900s became acquainted with the newer arrivals. For example, Martha Kim, who is the current vice president of the Association of Korean Descendants in Mexico City, remembers her father, Samuel Kim, who had been Association president in the 1990s, occasionally assisting a small stream of newcomers in the 1980s locate homes, start businesses, or simply meet other Koreans in the city.⁵

Emigration from South America was one reason for the arrival of Koreans to Mexico in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Since the 1960s, about 200,000 South Koreans have migrated to South American countries — with the first migrants arriving to Brazil in 1962, to Bolivia in 1964, and Argentina and Paraguay in 1965 — organized under agricultural immigration agreements in which Koreans would be settled in allegedly "empty" lands in rural areas.⁶ For the most part, these ventures did not produce settled agricultural communities, and Koreans began to re-migrate from the interior to larger cities such as São Paulo, Asunción, and Buenos Aires.⁷ According to Korean Argentine community historian Yi Kyobŏm (1992), Korean re-migrant families first moved from the farms to informal settlements in Buenos Aires in the late 1960s, where the men found low-wage work as peddlers, dish washers, laundry workers, and day laborers. But it was the women, who began engaging in small-scale sewing and piecework for nearby textile factories primarily owned by Jewish merchants, that found a more stable livelihood. From the first textile workshops run out of family homes, Korean entry into the

Argentine textile industry has been dramatic. About 80% of Koreans in Argentina work in the garment industry, with some estimates that giving Koreans as responsible for producing nearly 50% of clothing goods in Argentina's domestic market (Kim 2020).

These agricultural migrants-turned-textile merchants formed the basis for subsequent waves of Korean migrants after Argentina's re-establishment of democracy in 1983 and the negotiation of an immigration investment agreement between South Korea and Argentina in 1985. As a part of Argentina's broader national development project that encouraged foreign capital investment for currency gain, the agreement allowed Koreans to immigrate to Argentina upon a 30,000 USD deposit in the Argentine National Bank (Park 2014). By 1990, there were nearly 40,000 Koreans living in Argentina, with a particularly sizable Korean community in Buenos Aires. Significant numbers of this community ultimately re-migrated to Mexico.

One such re-migrant was Mija Park, a Korean woman in her early sixties, who I interviewed in 2017 at her home in Mexico City. Mrs. Park had first immigrated from South Korea to Argentina in 1987 with her husband under the aforementioned immigration investment agreement. They had decided to move to Argentina because her maternal aunt, who had migrated as part of one of the agricultural ventures to Argentina had resettled in Buenos Aires. Once in Buenos Aires, the Parks first worked for her cousin, who managed a wholesale brand of baseball caps and other headwear. They adjusted to life in Argentina, expanded their networks, and gathered capital before opening a small retail store on Once Street in the Balvanera neighborhood.

Throughout our discussion, Mrs. Park frequently signposted her migration story with references to the tumultuous vicissitudes of the Argentine economy. Their plan to open their own store had been delayed, she told me, by the spike of hyperinflation in 1989 that led to the downfall of then President Raúl Alfonsín's party and the election of Carlos Menem. The neoliberal reforms initiated by Menem's administration to stabilize the economy—privatizing key industries, introducing flexibility into labor markets, and fixing the Argentine peso to the U.S. dollar—had the effect of dramatically increasing business. For example, Mrs. Park told me that it became cheaper and easier to bring in higher-quality synthetic textiles produced abroad.

In 1998, Mrs. Park vividly remembered watching scenes of mass protest in South Korea on TV—a rare moment when South Korea featured on Argentine television. She remembered that members of her church in Buenos Aires organized a gold collection campaign, as donations to pay off South Korea's debt to the IMF—a popular practice in the homeland that was then replicated in locations throughout the diaspora. She had even talked to her younger sister, whose husband faced an impending layoff from his job as a corporate manager, about the possibility of them starting anew in Argentina. But just as South Korea's economy seemed to recover, the situation in Argentina rapidly worsened. The onset of the Argentine crisis—which was linked to what economist Padma Desai (2014) calls a “financial contagion” that “spread from Thailand to the neighboring countries to South Korea and beyond to Russia and Brazil” (212)—constituted a series of adverse external shocks that battered the Argentine economy. The government's imposition of policies intended to prevent ordinary people from withdrawing money from banks—widely called the “corralito”—led to public demonstrations and civil unrest at the end of 2001, and at the end of 2002, the devaluation of the Argentine peso.

Over the next year, business slowed to a trickle and Mrs. Park watched as the pews at her Korean church began to empty and other Korean-owned businesses in Balvanera shuttered. During that time, Mrs. Park and her husband began to argue about leaving Argentina. She explained:

Some [Koreans] went back to Korea, others went to the United States or Canada. But we didn't have relatives in the United States. My husband started to talk about how he wanted to immigrate again. . . . There was a deacon at my church [in Argentina], someone my husband was very close to, and he had many years of business experience abroad. The deacon told my husband that he was researching market opportunities in Mexico. This deacon, he was a person with good business sense [*saõp-õi chaenũng*]. That is how we first heard about Mexico. . . . My husband came home and said he heard about favorable conditions for business in Mexico. . . . Well, I opposed it very strongly at the time. Eventually, we agreed that I would take care of the Once store and he would go to Mexico. I think it was at the end of the year, Nochebuena [Christmas Eve in 1999]. . . . [I thought,] *No one can tell the future. Korea might go down, Argentina might go up.*

Mrs. Park was determined to stay in Argentina, but the situation continued to worsen, whereas her husband quickly found an opportunity working as a sales manager in Mexico City. He wanted to sell their business in Argentina in order to start a new business in Mexico, which impelled her and her two children to leave Argentina at the end of 2000. When she and her family left, they were among more than 800,000 Argentines who emigrated abroad according to the International Organization for Migration. This figure included roughly 20,000 Korean Argentines who also left the country—many for other places in the Americas, including Mexico, where re-migrants from South America constitute roughly 40% of the Korean population.

Reflecting on her re-migration from Argentina to Mexico, Mrs. Park situated her re-migration story not only as a Korean story, but one intimately related to Argentina's crisis, which culminated in a partial default on the country's international debt and a sharp devaluation of the Argentine peso. Comparing the crises in South Korea and Argentina, she stated that she wished she could have also participated in a gold collection drive for Argentina's debt. She recalled her sense of frustration as she had watched protests in both South Korea and Argentina, as well as the enrichment of elites at the expense of ordinary people: "In Korea we have the saying, 'The rich get richer while the poor get poorer' (*puikpu pinikpin*). . . . The only way to live securely in this world is to live in a powerful country that lives well."

My interviewees explicitly linked the crises in South Korea and Argentina in materially worsening their lives and leading them to migrate again. Yet they varied in their attitudes toward the causes of the crisis. Mrs. Park was sympathetic to the plight of Argentina, but she was one of the very few who pointed toward larger structural conditions that connected the financial crisis in South Korea and South America. Other re-migrants with whom I spoke instead blamed financial mismanagement that they saw as particularly endemic to Argentina or Latin American countries at large. One interviewee, for example, criticized governmental corruption in Argentina as responsible for the country's inability to bounce back as quickly from economic downturn in comparison to South Korea.

Korean migrants' ability to leave Argentina and move to Mexico following financial crisis points to a certain degree of flexibility. One could say that Koreans in Mexico engage in what anthropologist Aihwa Ong (1999) calls "flexible" patterns of mobility in order to leave unfavorable labor circumstances, seek new investments, or find educational opportunities for themselves or their children.⁸ At the same time, migrants' mobility was severely limited according to class, language, education, and citizenship—the relative power that holding different passports afforded. Take, for example, the story of Santiago Han. Santiago had only

been two years old when he left South Korea with his parents, moving first to Paraguay and then to Argentina in the mid-1970s. South Korea's unstable political situation had been a major factor for his parents' decision to emigrate. Santiago spoke about his father's concerns about the May 16 military coup d'état in 1961, during which General Park Chung Hee became installed as president of South Korea, as well as the North Korean attack on the Blue House, the presidential residence, in 1968. Then, during the October Restoration (*siwŏl yusin*) of 1972, Park suspended the existing national constitution, dissolved the National Assembly, and declared martial law, becoming the *de facto* dictator of the country. Under Park's "militarized modernity," to use Seungsook Moon's (2005) term, men were mobilized for mandatory military service and conscription and women in terms of reproductive labor—a fact that some of my respondents, such as Santiago's family, were attempting to escape (see also Eckert 2016).

South Korean conscription laws require male citizens aged 18 to 28 to fulfil mandatory military service, with very few exceptions. Fearful about the possibility of war, especially after Park's assassination in 1979, Santiago's father changed his son's citizenship from South Korean to Argentine so that he could avoid South Korea's compulsory military service. While this decision made sense at the time, Santiago explained that his Argentine citizenship had long-lasting effects on their family. During the Argentine economic depression, his younger sister, who had retained her South Korean citizenship because women were not required to complete military service, was able to return to Seoul. In contrast, Santiago felt that his renunciation of South Korean citizenship, his poor command of the Korean language, and the fact that he never finished a college degree limited his options. He contrasted his fate to that of his sister and even his parents, who still hoped to one day retire in South Korea. Wanting to leave Argentina, he decided to come to Mexico not because of any attachment to Mexico itself, but because one of his closest friends had moved to Mexico City and encouraged Santiago to follow suit.

In Mexico, Santiago lives comfortably with his wife, a non-Korean Mexican woman, in the trendy Roma Norte neighborhood. He partially owns a Korean restaurant in Zona Rosa, which provides a steady salary to support his current lifestyle. But he admitted that he was not accruing significant savings, which was a constant concern for him because of the precarious financial situation of his parents, neither of whom had been able to plan for retirement. Santiago was therefore constantly seeking out new business opportunities that he hoped would provide greater economic security. For example, he was involved in another venture to import newly popular Korean snacks and foods, such as packaged dry ramen, to Mexico. Ironically, even as South Korea's growing global cultural clout produced new opportunities in Mexico, Santiago's return to the homeland had been foreclosed.

Santiago's various investments and his ability to move to Mexico points to an agentive transnational capacity to choose different locations for flexible capital investment and accumulation. And yet such choices were geographically restricted to Latin America and the Caribbean. For Santiago, the countries of the Global North, such as the United States and Canada, were destinations only for the wealthy; even South Korea, his country of birth, was beyond his reach. He also expressed a complaint repeated across my interviews—namely, that Korean migrants directly from South Korea discriminated against Korean re-migrants from South America. Santiago's story also reveals how intra-group differences of gender, citizenship, educational attainment, and language shape the possibilities and limitations of mobility, as Santiago compared his trajectory to those of his co-ethnics or even his own family members. Wryly restating the common Korean idiom, "When my cousin buys land, my stomach hurts [*sach'on-i ttang-ŭl samyŏn pae-ga ap'ŭda*]," which expresses the envy one might feel at

another's good fortune, Santiago compared his own life progress with that of his best friend from Argentina, whose family had eventually settled in the United States, and even his sister, who had "married well" in Seoul. Paying attention to such constraints reveals the ways in which Koreans' transnational social imaginaries are circumscribed by global hierarchies as they reckon with the relative power and prestige provided by different nations on the world stage.

"Living Well" in Mexico

While most of my interviewees spoke of opportunities in Mexico, others described moving from Korea to Mexico as a downward mobility, with people often distinguishing between Korea and Mexico as a "rich" and "poor" country, respectively. Sometimes this was expressed in more technocratic hierarchies of a "developed" (*sŏnjin kuk*) versus "backward" (*hujin kuk*) nation. But the phrases that I heard most frequently, literally translated, referred to Korea as a "country that lives well" (*chal sanŭn nara*) and Mexico as a "country that does not live well" (*mot sanŭn nara*). The difference between these two modalities—to live well and to not live well—was applied to characterize national futures as well as to describe the outcomes of the lives of individuals and families. Indeed, "to live well" was a deep and underlying preoccupation with nearly all the Koreans with whom I became acquainted. To live well—and to ensure that their children would be able to live well—was an oft-cited reason to have left South Korea in the first place. As I came to understand it, living well was not about becoming particularly rich or prosperous, but maintaining what one man described as "an average life"—"to feed my family [*mŏgyŏ sallida*], support my children's education, and one day, retire." These aspirations were formulated primarily in relation to South Korean understandings of what constituted middle-class subjectivity: a college education, a salaried job, and property ownership, ideally in Seoul or its peripheral cities (see Yang 2018). Interestingly, many of my interviewees expressed their desire to achieve a middle-class lifestyle even as they talked at length about how they would likely never reach those standards. That is, Koreans in Mexico—including those who had left the homeland long ago—were deeply aware of increasing class stratification and inequality in South Korea, which they linked to their decision not only to have left the peninsula, but also not to return.

Homes provided glimpses into the ways in which South Korean middle-class norms shaped expectations for Korean migrants in Mexico City. For example, the first thing that one notices upon walking into the Choi family's apartment is the refrigerator in the living room. Squeezed between the cased opening to the kitchen and the faded couch, its sparkling silver bulk towers over the other furniture in the room. Mrs. Choi sheepishly showed me some of the refrigerator's functions. She tapped the built-in touch screen and pulled out a special middle drawer, temperature controlled for kimchi and other fermented foods. Afterwards, she carefully wiped the screen and the handles with a pink dishcloth and motioned for me to sit down at the shabby kitchen table, bought secondhand from the apartment's previous tenants. The refrigerator had been a wedding gift from Mrs. Choi's closest friends, who had pooled their money to buy the couple a brand-new, top-of-the-line machine. Less than a year after the wedding, her husband announced that he was accepting a job offer in Mexico. She refused to come unless the refrigerator came with them. "I don't know exactly how he did it," she said, shaking her head. "It probably cost as much as a plane ticket, but he got the refrigerator here."

Such conspicuously large items are not uncommon in the apartment homes of Koreans in Mexico. I have been told stories about grand pianos, kimchi refrigerators, flat screen TVs, washing machines, and other devices, either shipped at great cost from Korea or bought as gifts

to mitigate some of the pain of having moved to Mexico. Such stories are always told with a slightly embarrassed air. Another woman, Mrs. Bak, told me about her refusal to give up her ancient kimchi refrigerator, even though these days it was nearly always empty since she and her husband were empty nesters. It had been a similar leaving-the-homeland gift that had accompanied them across multiple destinations: Guatemala City, Guadalajara, Mexico, and then to Mexico City. “Back then, very few people had kimchi refrigerators,” Mrs. Bak told me proudly. The kimchi refrigerator was a physical manifestation of the hope they had felt as a young couple in the early 1990s, when they had bought a two-bedroom apartment in a brand-new high-rise complex in Uijeongbu, a rapidly expanding suburb north of Seoul.

Mrs. Bak’s kimchi refrigerator was not the only connection between the apartment in Korea and the apartment in Mexico. Reflecting back on the last twenty years, Mrs. Bak linked the refrigerator to *miryŏn*, a feeling of lingering attachment that also indexed a sense of being silly or foolish—a regretful longing, a nostalgic desire. Though it had been decades since she had lived in Uijeongbu, family members abroad and in Korea still referred to her as “Uijeongbu Aunt” to distinguish her from her husband’s other sisters. Laughing, she told me a story about how her young niece had mistaken Mexico City for “Uijeongbu” because the nomenclature continued to implicate her connection to the area. Perhaps it was an apt blunder, because, as Mrs. Bak clarified, not only did they still own the Uijeongbu apartment, but the rent that they received from the property had been a key source of income at various junctures throughout their life. The value of her apartment in Uijeongbu, she explained, had risen exponentially in the last twenty years, as the Seoul metropolitan area expanded further into the suburbs. “So thanks to our Uijeongbu apartment, we can live in our Mexico City apartment,” she explained. Alternatively, the steady employment her husband enjoyed as a textile factory manager and the relatively affordable lifestyle in Mexico City made it possible for Mrs. Bak to dream of a future when she and her husband would return to Uijeongbu to retire.

As Mrs. Bak’s story suggests, making home in Mexico was a cultural and material process that remained linked to her understanding of South Korea not only as a place of origin, but as a future destination of retirement. And the high percentage of renters among the Korean community—90%, according to Kim Hyong-ju’s 2005 survey—suggests that many migrants are not quite ready to put down roots in Mexico. Mrs. Bak recognized that owning an apartment in a coveted suburb of Seoul made her one of the luckier ones. Scholars of South Korea’s economic transformation—the so-called “Miracle of the Han”—have analyzed the pivotal role of real estate speculation in producing “winners” and “losers” in the pivotal years of the 1980s. According to Jesook Song (2014), “The possession of real estate is currently the most decisive element in determining affluence and class mobility in South Korea” (47). Laura Nelson (2000) points out that housing prices more than doubled between 1985 and 1990: “for those who owned property, these price increases were a windfall; for those who had not yet bought into the real estate market, it was like running alongside a train as it pulls away from the station” (52). Rapidly rising housing properties contributed to what Nancy Abelmann (2003) has called “the melodrama of mobility,” in which “the rapidity of post-Korean War development has made stories in which small turns of fate...spiral into great tragedies or enormous social divides” (10).

The inequalities that resulted from the quickened pace of development in South Korea is felt not only on the peninsula, but throughout the diaspora. When I began to ask questions about property ownership among Koreans in Mexico, I was surprised by the evasiveness of my respondents. I was finally told that owning an apartment, especially in or near Seoul, was so tied to perceived wealth and privilege that many migrants preferred to keep this information to

themselves. In the 1990s, homebuyers such as Mrs. Bak began to consider properties in the suburbs of the Seoul metropolitan area, but in 2018, even a property in the suburb seemed like an impossible goal for people like Santiago, who might be solidly middle-class in Mexico but considered a similar lifestyle in Korea out of reach.

Owning property in South Korea provided another great advantage to Koreans in Mexico: the ability to leverage real estate into a loan. In South Korea, the *chōnse*, or key money, is a rental system in which tenants makes a large lump-sum deposit on a property ranging from 50% to 80% of the property value.⁹ For Koreans in Mexico fortunate enough to own property in Seoul, this large lump-sum could be used in a variety of ways: as investment into a new business venture or to speculate on real estate elsewhere. Only one person told me directly that they had used a *chōnse* deposit in order to start a new business in Mexico. But rumors of this practice—especially those with tragic results—abound. Multiple times, I was told a story about a Korean couple in Mexico who invested their *chōnse* money into a business venture that then failed, leaving them bankrupt. Unable to pay back the deposit, these apocryphal landlords were no longer able to return to South Korea lest they face the financial and legal consequences of their poor investment. One variation of this story had the landlords invest *chōnse* money in a business in one country, say, Guatemala, and then overextend themselves when they attempted to expand to Mexico. The disapproval with which these stories were told did not merely critique the greed of those who had been fortunate enough to buy property at the right place and the right time. They also pointed to a pervasive sense of frustration toward the seeming randomness of their co-ethnics' good fortunes, who achieved social mobility not through hard work but what seemed to be purely chance. Such feelings can be particularly acute among serial migrants wrestling with experiences of multiple displacement.

Stories of Serial Migration

Strategies of serial migration, I suggest, illuminate a global political economic context through which Korean migrants work out strategies to maintain their aspirations for a middle-class lifestyle. As transit migrants across a South-South landscape of relative peripherality, Korean migrants are keenly aware of the racially and economically stratified world order in which they live, and their individual narratives of mobility are intimately intertwined with a hierarchical schema of nations based on notions of relative wealth and development. I contend that Korean migrants' desire to "live well" cannot be extricated from a broadened global landscape of racial, national, and economic mobility. In particular, the hierarchizations of nation—between rich and poor, weak and powerful, developed and underdeveloped—greatly affected how they positioned their narratives.

In this section, I compare and contrast the migration stories of two individuals—Diego Park and Adriana Kang—in order to think about how "living well" came to interlock with changing conceptions of multiple migrations and multiple homes. I chose these stories not necessarily because they are "representative," but because they give texture to how economic contingencies—opportunity and loss, potentiality and failure—deeply shape the migration narratives of Koreans in Mexico. I therefore emphasize Korean re-migrants' own narrativization of their reasons for migration as well as the desires they express for the future. Much like Lok Siu (2005), who approaches Panamanian Chinese narratives of serial migration "as a cultural process of meaning production" (90), I focus on how Korean migrants articulate their connections to different places and people as a meaning-making practice. In so doing, I respond to Junyoung Verónica Kim's question, "How do we articulate the experiences of those living at,

on, through this underdetermined site of Asia-Latin America?” (103) by centering how migrants themselves narrate and make sense of the sites and routes through which they transit.

Diego Park

I first met Diego Park while having lunch with a mutual friend. Diego entered the restaurant with his dog, a friendly mutt that he found on the streets of Centro Histórico, and ended up joining our table for the meal. A gregarious, self-deprecating Korean man in his early forties, Diego and I instantly connected because he recognized that my Korean accent was inflected by English, and we learned that we had both lived in the suburbs of Washington D.C. After exchanging phone numbers, he agreed to meet with me for an interview at a local coffee shop, bringing along his dog. While we spoke primarily in Korean, Diego comfortably moved between Spanish and English, often switching languages to clarify something he had said or emphasize his feelings.

Diego was born in the outskirts of Seoul, South Korea and immigrated with his parents to Buenos Aires, Argentina when he was ten years old, in the early 1980s. He described his youth in Argentina in three stages—“the good time,” “the bad time,” and “the really bad time.” His family had decided to move to Buenos Aires because one of his father’s best friends had moved to Buenos Aires some years earlier and had invited him to come and work with him. The friend helped his father set up a small clothing store, and they even lived together in the same house for a few months before his family was able to get their own place. At first, Diego explained, business was good, and his parents could afford to send him to an expensive private international school where he learned both English and Spanish and was exposed to a broader range of people: “lots of different foreigners, like children of businessmen and embassy workers, and Argentines from high class backgrounds.” He was excited about learning new languages and would pretend with his parents that he had forgotten Korean in order to “show off” his new words in English or Spanish. Diego remembered these first few years—from elementary school into middle school—as part of an idyllic childhood when his family was economically prosperous, and he felt happy and well-adjusted in his social life:

It wasn’t hard at first. Actually, I didn’t understand the concept of immigration at the time. I still remember, it was from the moment I got on the plane because my mom told me, “It’s time to ride the plane!” And that was my first time getting on a plane, and I met the pretty flight attendants, and I was just excited about it. But once we landed [in Argentina], I cried a lot. I knew, even though I was young, somehow I knew I had left. It was the idea of leaving my hometown (*kohyang-ŭl ttŏnada*).

This memory, “the idea of leaving my hometown,” came back to haunt Diego as he entered his high school years. More and more Koreans kept coming to Buenos Aires, he explained, and the increased competition made it more difficult for his parents’ business. At the same time, Diego began to feel more and more socially dislocated in Argentina, and his grades began to falter. “Maybe it was puberty, and it was an identity crisis,” he mused. “I kept thinking, I am a Korean but I am not in Korea. I am a Korean but I am not speaking Korean.” Eventually, his family’s economic situation worsened to the point that they pulled him out of international school and he began attending a local Argentine Catholic school, an environment that he hated, and he felt that it was impossible to remain motivated in his studies. After graduating high school, he attended a “not very good” university in Buenos Aires, but eventually dropped out. “I kept thinking, *what’s*

the point, I'm just going to work with my parents' business anyway. It was, I felt very stuck. Maybe I was depressed? I went out every night until 3, 4 in the morning, wasting my money, drinking, smoking, getting drunk. I didn't feel any purpose or future."

Worried, his parents arranged for him to move temporarily to the United States, where his paternal uncle's family lived in the Maryland suburbs of Washington, D.C. Working at his uncle's liquor store and without his immediate family or friends, his depression worsened. He felt culturally and socially dislocated in relation to both second-generation Korean Americans, as well as newly arrived immigrants from Korea. Meanwhile, in Argentina, the economic crisis deepened to the point that Diego's parents felt that it was no longer sustainable to stay in the country. "It was a really bad time in the country," he said, "It's hard to put it into words. There were riots and police violence in the streets. The [Argentine] peso became worthless. It was a desperate situation." Eventually, in 2000, his parents closed down their clothing store in Buenos Aires and joined him and his uncle's family in Maryland. His parents borrowed money from his uncle and put all their savings into opening a small convenience store in the city of Baltimore, but found the work extremely challenging. As an only child, Diego acutely felt the burden of ensuring his parents' financial wellbeing and poured his energy into the new enterprise:

In the United States, these kinds of costs associated with business are much more expensive. Either my parents or I had to be in the store without leaving, there were no other workers. And Baltimore...well, I can say it wasn't a safe location. ... My dad always had a good head on his shoulders, but he was getting older...I think he was too old to have migrated and started all over again. Anyway, that's how I spent my youth. That's when I learned, I should have focused on my education, that was the beginning of my regret. ... I was working 16 hours every day, like 7 days, because I knew the wholesalers, I spoke English, and my parents, they needed me to work. When I came home, I would just sit and stare at the wall like a completely vacant person.

Diego eventually came to Mexico because one of his best friends from Argentina had re-migrated to Mexico and invited him to visit. On that first trip, en route to a beach vacation in Cancún, he had spent a total of less than 24 hours in Mexico City, but found himself enchanted by the city. In contrast to his feelings of cultural and social dislocation from both first-generation Korean immigrants and second-generation Korean Americans, he felt instantly at home in Mexico. "Coming to Mexico was like returning to my hometown," he explained. "It wasn't hard to move. I'm familiarized with Spanish, I understand the Latin culture and the business customs." Therefore, after almost seven years in the United States, he began to research business opportunities in Mexico. He serendipitously reconnected with an old acquaintance in Mexico City—another re-migrant from Argentina—who gave him a job working with him at his small supermarket until he was able to open up his own business.

For Diego, moving to Mexico was a kind of homecoming—a return to familiar circumstances and a similar urban lifestyle to the one he remembered from his childhood in Buenos Aires. And yet, Diego did not want to stay permanently in Mexico City, and he envisioned moving again within Mexico, perhaps to Tijuana or a city in the Yucatán peninsula. He was filled with regret—that he had never been married, for example, or completed his college education—and while he did now have a Mexican girlfriend, he privately admitted to me that he didn't see himself getting married. While in the past, this uncertain future would have filled him

with anxiety, Diego was now accepting of his lack of future-oriented plans, as he thoughtfully explained:

For a long time, I lived only looking ahead, like I was riding a fast current. ... But the truth is that our identity is shaped by our relationships, not our work. Work is an expression of me, but it's not my identity. My circumstances are not good, and I don't earn much money, but I am still my father's son. I don't gain enough money to save and go to the U.S. or Korea or another country, but I am comfortable here in Mexico. So if there's one thing I've learned from the immigrant life, it is, don't attach too much meaning to life. It just becomes another burden. ... It's okay to just live.

Diego's experiences of multiple migrations—including his and his parents' experiences of economic hardship in Argentina and the United States—had taught him not to “attach too much meaning to life.” But his articulation of “just live” was not a nihilistic vision of the future. Instead, Diego argued that the long hours and sacrifices he had made in his younger years in pursuit of some future financial gain simply did not correlate with his happiness and satisfaction in life. Rather, he argued that it was his relationships—not his labor—that defined his identity: He was “still [his] father's son,” despite his tough economic circumstances. Diego had formulated this relational articulation of his subjectivity through “the immigrant life,” as he marked key moments of transit and residence through his relationships not only with close friends and family, but also with chance encounters with people such as an old acquaintance from Buenos Aires in Mexico City. His lived experiences—as well as the narration of his story—speak to the social obligations and affinities that become the basis for defining his meaning in life.

Adriana Kang

I met Adriana Kang in the hipster neighborhood of Condesa, at a quiet café located on a street lined with stately jacaranda trees and art deco apartment buildings. A stylish woman in her mid-20s with dyed blonde hair, Adriana gave off an air of confidence and poise. Throughout our interview, her phone kept ringing, and I frequently paused my tape recorder so that she could take these pressing calls from work, during which she switched with ease between English, Spanish, Portuguese, and Korean. I had first made contact with Adriana through a Korean missionary living in the city of Mérida, who had met Adriana when her church in Mexico City had come to Mérida for a short-term mission trip. “Maybe you can be friends,” the missionary had opined hopefully.

It turned out that Adriana was extremely busy—though we made several attempts to meet up, it took nearly four months of back-and-forth messaging before we were able to sit down face-to-face. Adriana grew up in Santiago, Chile, but her family had first moved to São Paulo, Brazil when she was five years old. Adriana's aunt had married a man who had first worked in the garment industry, but eventually expanded into his own business selling and repairing equipment and machinery necessary for textile production. When asked about why her parents had decided to leave Korea, Adriana shrugged and laughed. “She [maternal aunt] invited my family. And just through a simple phone call with my mom. It only took one phone call, and my family came.”

For two years, they lived in São Paulo as Adriana's parents worked alongside her aunt and uncle, but their immediate family eventually relocated to Santiago, Chile. “Among the adults, they did their own research and field research, and there's no company like that in Chile,”

Adriana explained. “So what if my family went there since the company here [São Paulo] is already doing well through my uncle. So we were only two years in Brazil.” Adriana didn’t remember very much from her time in Brazil, but she told me that she had been happy growing up in Santiago. Attending an international school where the language of instruction was English, she made friends from all over the world. She and her parents also frequently traveled to São Paulo and Seoul, maintaining connections with extended kin in both places. Upon high school graduation, Adriana decided to return to South Korea to attend Korea University, one of South Korea’s most prestigious universities, where she studied International Business. But the transition back to South Korea, Adriana explained, was extremely difficult, and she began to consciously self-reflect on her sense of identity:

You know, in Latin America there’s a lot of discrimination. Here [Mexico], Brazil, Chile, they just look at me a lot and every time I walk by they say, *konichiwa*, *ohaiyo* or *nihao*, though I’m not Chinese or Japanese. And so I got used to saying it: “Coreana, soy coreana [Korean, I am Korean].” So it’s obvious, soy coreana [I am Korean]. So, well, I never had any problems with my identity growing up. Korea, no one looks at me obviously, but actually it was harder for me. Because even though I look like everyone else, my culture was different. And in Korea there’s different discrimination, against people who think differently or dress differently.

For Adriana, while growing up in Latin America, her identity as a Korean was self-evident. Ironically, she pointed to persistent racial discrimination—the tendency of others to misidentify her as Chinese and Japanese—as instances of failed interpellation through which she had learned to assert her “obvious” identity as Korean. Furthermore, Adriana explained that she had grown up attending a local Korean Presbyterian church, where she easily made friends with other Koreans, as helping her maintain a connection to Korea. However, once she moved to South Korea, Adriana found her Koreanness constantly under question, “even though [she] look[ed] like everyone else,” because her “culture was different.”

To illustrate her sense of cultural difference and dislocation, Adriana gave me the example of how her education abroad in Chile was perceived in South Korea. South Korean nationals who have spent all twelve years of primary and secondary education abroad are able to be admitted to South Korean universities under different admission schemes, which are perceived to be “easier” than the standard process, in which a graduating student’s scores on a grueling national university entrance examination is the determining factor for admission. “Other students, they would say, *oh*, you are 12-*nyŏn chaeoe kungmin haksae* [12-years overseas Korean student], you didn’t really study hard,” she said, imitating the other students’ disdainful tone of voice. “No one in Korea knows Chile. But my school in Chile, it was a better school than normal Korean school.” Unlike her international school in Chile, Adriana felt that Korean education only emphasized rote memorization and rewarded students for obeying a set of rules instead of thinking creatively and analytically, and she resented that other Koreans looked down on her educational training and overseas background.

While an undergraduate student, Adriana also spent a year studying abroad at the University of Southern California in Los Angeles. While she enjoyed her time there and thought that the quality of education was higher than in Korea, she came away less than impressed with the city, noting its poor transportation infrastructure and lack of density. “Honestly, it [Los Angeles] is like the *sigol* (countryside), in comparison to real cities. I prefer Seoul and Mexico

[City], they are like real cities. ... Maybe to get married and live [in Los Angeles], okay, but not for your twenties.” After studying abroad in Los Angeles, she returned to Seoul in order to complete her studies. Upon graduation from Korea University, Adriana decided that she didn’t want to continue living in South Korea. She cited two reasons as to why she wanted to leave the country. The first was related to job prospects. Adriana described how it was difficult even for graduates of prestigious South Korean universities to avoid underemployment and contract-based labor (*pijŏnggyujik*). “Most of my friends, they are taking like one year to prepare for jobs, delaying their graduation because of jobs,” she explained. “I said no, I don’t want to go through that. I can speak Spanish, English, and they pay me more [abroad], why not?”

Adriana searched widely for job opportunities across the Americas, drawing upon her family’s extensive network of kin and friends. A cousin was able to get her an interview with a large Korean company that manufactures medical devices, and she was offered a job in their logistics department in Mexico City. Adriana freely admitted that, based on her contacts, “it was really easy to get the job after graduating.” While she was working long hours, Adriana told me that she loved “the lifestyle” she could afford in Mexico City in comparison to Los Angeles or Seoul. “I am Korean, so I can earn more than normal Mexican people, and it’s comparably more cheap than in Korea,” she explained. “Then, yeah, I feel like economically I don’t have any problem.”

Adriana was not shy about boasting about her class privilege, explaining how she benefited from earning a Korean salary while enjoying the relatively lower cost of living in Mexico. At the same time, Adriana also pointed to the cultural congruencies that she found between Mexico and her own Chilean upbringing. In Mexico City, Adriana felt that she had found a comfortable intersection between her cultural and economic worlds. Making reference to the time she had lived abroad in South Korea, the United States, and in different Latin American countries, she distinguished between “Korean culture,” “Western culture,” and “Latin culture”:

Outside of Korea, people are more free of other people. In Korea, you have to take care of everything of other people, like, what if they think my clothes are ugly, or what if they don’t like my hairstyle, or, oh, I can’t kiss in the street because people think it’s something dirty. But me, *nae-ga wŏnhanŭn-daero hago sip’ŏ* [I want to do it the way I want to]. ... For me, Western [culture], it’s too much. My American friends, they don’t take care for family, it’s very self, *kaeinjuŭi-jŏk* [individualistic], it is a very selfish culture. So it’s more comfortable [for me] in Latin culture, more than Korean or Western culture.

Like Diego, who told me that coming to Mexico was like “returning to my hometown,” Adriana’s experiences living elsewhere in Latin America made her feel comfortable in what she termed “Latin culture.” That is, while mainstream Mexican perceptions of Koreans emphasize their cultural dislocation and their inability to assimilate in Mexico, many of my interlocutors in fact described an elevated level of cultural familiarity, especially in contrast to their uncomfortable and disorienting experiences living in South Korea or the United States.

As much as she enjoyed her current lifestyle in Mexico City, Adriana told me that her “ten-year plan” was to move again, perhaps to the United States or Canada. Her younger brother was attending a small liberal arts college in New England, and she reiterated again that she thought the suburbs of Los Angeles would be a good place to raise a family. Adriana’s story points to how Mexico, as a place of arrival, transit, and departure, functions as a switchboard

location—a site of deep economic integration into the global economic flows of the global North as well as ambivalently identified as a “developing nation” within the global South. Adriana’s search for a “lifestyle” and “culture” in which she felt most comfortable points to the ways in which her experience growing up in South America deeply inflected her worldview. Like Diego, Adriana also felt more comfortable in Mexico than in the United States or South Korea, and ultimately decided to reside in Mexico based on what both interlocutors identified as a certain level of “cultural comfort.” But in contrast to Diego’s “just live” mentality, Adriana’s future-oriented “ten-year plan”—and her strategizing around different locations that she thought best for different stages of her life, such as obtaining educational training, launching a career, or starting a family—point to how the relatively privileged among Korean migrants in Mexico tactically select homes.

*

As Diego and Adriana’s stories suggest, migrants carry past experiences of migration, labor, and mobility—forms of knowledge that they utilize to interpret past circumstances, make present decisions, and plan (or refuse to plan) into the future. Indeed, the narratives above speak to the asymmetrical power relations among Koreans in Mexico—significant differences in class, gender, language, and social positioning that are erased through a focus on one monolithic “Korean community.” What Lisa Lowe (1996) has called the “heterogeneity, hybridity, and multiplicity” of diasporic Asians—plural, culturally intermingled, and situated along multiple axes of power—powerfully applies to the lives of many of my interlocutors, even among the small population of Koreans in Mexico. Yet I was simultaneously struck by the themes and topics that repeated themselves across nearly all my interviews and conversations—similar experiences of rejection, im/mobility, risk, and hope that speak to what Sara Ahmed (2004) might call an “affective economy”—a shared structure of feeling that “aligns individuals with communities—or bodily space with social space” (119).

Therefore, while scholars such as Aihwa Ong (2003) has contrasted the relative agency of transnational subjects with the exilic, abject subjectivity of diasporic populations, arguing for a “necessary conceptual distinction” between the two, the stories of Korean serial migrants suggest that the boundaries between transnational agency and diasporic dislocation might be more blurred (88). This disjuncture between transnational agency and diasporic abjection is echoed through the literature on transnational migration, which likewise often hinges on binaries between receiver and sender, core and periphery, First World and Third World, West and the Rest. In this Manichean transnational framework, Asia becomes aligned either with the oppressive powers “from above” or the exploited peoples “from below.” And yet the lives of transnational migrants rarely fit neatly into such categories. For example, diasporic networks among Koreans in Latin America go beyond the “disembedded diaspora affiliations” (88) critiqued by Ong (2003). Korean Latin Americans take advantage of concrete matrices of weak ties—friends of friends, a church member’s cousin, a vendor’s old high school buddy—that facilitate the flow of information, provide key contacts, and produce new opportunities among enterprising Koreans. In fact, my re-migrant interlocutors explained that it was in South America where they built the networks, learned the business skills, and developed the knowledge that would eventually enable them to move to Mexico. Knowledge of how to operate certain specialized machinery, sturdy relationships with factories in northern China that produced high-quality fabric, or a familiarity with the Spanish language were all transferable assets. Others cited experience negotiating with wholesale merchandisers and informal vendors in Buenos Aires that prepared them to quickly enter Mexico City’s wholesale markets.

These networks might be best described by the provisional, collaborative interactions that AbdouMalik Simone (2004) has called “people as infrastructure.” In his analysis of inner-city Johannesburg, Simone notes that most residents are relative newcomers from neighboring African countries, do not intend to stay permanently in South Africa, and are often supporting family members abroad. In this environment of rapid movement, “people as infrastructure indicates residents’ needs to generate concrete acts and contexts of social collaboration inscribed with multiple identities rather than in overseeing and enforcing modulated transactions among discrete population groups” (419). Rather than “modulated transactions”—formal policies or state-based prescriptions—people as infrastructure points to the ways in which diasporic networks intertwine with interpersonal relationships to facilitate multiple migrations.

Koreans in Mexico share a pervasive sense of uncertainty that links larger global political economic shifts to intimate decisions about family, livelihood, and home. During my time in Mexico, informal conversations and observations were dominated by a sense of uncertainty. Dramatic political shifts in South Korea, Mexico, and the United States; NAFTA renegotiations; and the ongoing possibility of a Free Trade Agreement between South Korea and Mexico were all global factors exacerbating the sense of “unknowing” experienced by my interlocutors. In the face of such uncertainty, deciding where to live, invest, raise a family, or buy property are all decisions that require Koreans in Mexico to draw upon past experiences of migration, use networks of family, friends, and business partners, and evaluate the lifestyles offered by different diasporic locations. Koreans migrants utilize feelings of comfort, the pull of aspirations, and chance encounters in order to make such decisions, all in relation to a broader imaginative cartography of multiple migrations and multiple homes.

¹ Martínez, Adrián. 2002. “Consecuencia de la crisis argentina. Por la inseguridad y recesión emigraron 20,000 coreanos,” *La Nación*, May 20. <<https://www.lanacion.com.ar/sociedad/por-la-inseguridad-y-la-recesion-emigraron-20000-coreanos-nid398097/>>.

² For a list of identification cards available in the National Register, see Romero Castilla 1999. Romero Castilla also provides a brief description of Korean families who owned shoemaking workshops and jewelry repair stores in the neighborhood of Guerrero.

³ José Sánchez Pac to Kim Myung-yun, Oct 30, 1961. Documents of the Korean National Association Building Archive, University of Southern California. Translated from Korean.

⁴ Dong Soo Suh, Interviewed by Edward Chang, February 6, 2017, Young Oak Center Oral Histories Project, University of California, Riverside.

⁵ Interview conducted by author, October 4, 2019.

⁶ Scholars have linked nineteenth century European immigration to South America to processes of settler colonialism that presented such lands as empty and devoid of Indigenous presence (Gott 2007; Taylor 2020).

⁷ Concerned about reports of undocumented border crossings, particularly by Koreans migrating from Paraguay by land to Argentina and Brazil, the South Korean government suspended migration to South America in 1977, only lifting restrictions nearly a decade later (Park 2013).

⁸ Aihwa Ong’s (1999) influential formulation of “flexible citizenship” emphasizes the agency of transnational migrants such as elite Hong Kong Chinese, who acquire multiple citizenships to access ideal conditions for secure livelihoods as well as capital accumulation.

⁹ In Seoul, the average cost of *chŏnse* was nearly \$300,000 in 2014. See Matt Phillips, “It Takes \$290,000 in cash to rent an apartment in Seoul.” *Quartz*. March 10, 2014. <https://qz.com/183412/koreas-crazy-system-for-renting-apartments-is-driving-the-country-deeper-into-debt/>.

Chapter Two

From Yellow Peril to Yellow Fever: Racialized and Gendered Geographies of Koreanness in Mexico City

Introduction

In 2006, celebrated Mexican writer and academic Rosa Beltrán published an essay about the Korean community in Mexico City in the cultural magazine *Nexos*.¹ Entitled “Yellow Fever,” her essay begins with familiar tropes of the *crónica*, the paradigmatic genre of the Latin American city.² As the author strolls through the streets of the Zona Rosa neighborhood, home to Koreatown (“la Pequeña Corea”), she experiences a profound disorientation into an “unknown dimension,” as “suddenly you realize that you are in another place because everyone who walks next to you has slanted eyes.” The neighborhood’s Korean inhabitants, Beltrán writes, have gathered widespread notoriety for being “hired thugs, masters of the business of stolen and illegal merchandise, mafia members whose meeting point is the Korean Pavilion restaurant in the Zona Rosa where they hold or plan their attacks, or even establish relationships with government authorities.” The author does not find much evidence of Korean gang activity, but her *crónica* repeats other stereotypes. One “informant” tells her that Koreans produce counterfeit clothing (allegedly “made during the journey on ships that come from Korea”). Another, a purported expert on Korea, tells her that Korean migrants have not “lost the tradition of eating cat and dog meat,” and that neighbors protested at the local delegation because the Koreans were stealing all the cats in the area. The only identified Korean interlocutor is Sung Hi Lee who, according to Beltrán, appeared in *Playboy Magazine* as “The Famous Oriental Pearl” and gives striptease performances in private singing rooms to Korean businessmen: “when she undresses, [she] ties her hair in pigtails with little bows.”

Smugglers, gang members, prostitutes, dog eaters: media texts such as Beltrán’s provide the cultural framework through which Koreans are interpreted in the local context of Mexico City. Anthropologist Néstor García Canclini (2001) has argued that the residents of immense megalopolises such as Mexico City—characterized by social disorganization, sprawling fragmentation, and anarchic urban growth—are better understood as “a disassembled jigsaw puzzle” (56). With few opportunities for meaningful contact between and among neighborhoods characterized by economic inequality, inadequate infrastructure, and spatial distance, he suggests that it is broadcast and print media—the press, radio, television, and more recently, the Internet—that organizes localized understandings of who belongs in the city. In a vast metropolitan area whose population is over 21 million people, the vast majority of *defeños* will never meet a Korean person in real life. As a result, mediatized representations are the dominant vector through which residents of Mexico City come to know and understand the Korean migrant population.

Unfortunately, for the last twenty years, Mexican news outlets have contributed to the widespread perception that Koreans in Mexico are connected to organized crime, sex trafficking, and violence. Mexican popular media—such as widely syndicated television show *El Pantera*, which tells the story of a criminal-turned-crime fighter who learns Wushu from a mysterious Indigenous teacher before taking down the Korean mafia in Mexico City, or *El Dandy*, which details the struggles for control of Zona Rosa between several competing factions, including “Los Coreanos,” an international crime syndicate—only perpetuate these stereotypes. Across mainstream Mexican newspapers and broadcast media, Koreans in Mexico are racially and culturally distinctive objects of fascination in the Mexican press and popular culture, who

represent them alternatively as threatening outsiders who increase crime, smuggle counterfeit imports, and engage in illicit activities; or as proof of Mexico City's global, tourist-friendly cosmopolitanism.

This chapter explores the twinned dynamics of exclusion and fascination by analyzing two incidents in two different urban sites—Tepito and Zona Rosa—during which the Korean community in Mexico City became both highly visible and highly criminalized. In so doing, I emphasize how gender and race co-constitutively shape contemporary understandings of Koreanness in Mexico City today. By focusing on the inseparability of racialized exclusion and gendered desires in the context of a cosmopolitan Mexico City, I argue that the twinned processes of what Evelyn Nakano Glenn (1999) has called “engendered racialization/racialized engendering” is a key mediating analytic that organizes the Korean community's legibility in Mexico. I therefore begin by analyzing the historical antecedents of Asian racialization in Mexico, focusing in particular on the reverberations of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century anti-Chinese (*antichinista*) movement. Produced across local, national, and transnational contexts, the figure of the *chino* represented the sedimentation of Asian racial difference that were consequential not only to Chinese but newer, non-Chinese East Asian migrants to Mexico.

Next, I turn to the case study of Operation Tiger (*Operativo Tigre*), the 2002 arrest of 43 Koreans for allegedly smuggling contraband to sell in the neighborhood of Tepito. According to historian Andrew Konove (2018), Tepito is “the most famous barrio in Mexico,” (13) with “a longstanding reputation for crime, poverty, and a culture of lawlessness” (1). As the city's largest informal market—which is to say, the commercial activities that take place in Tepito are usually neither regulated nor taxed by the Mexican state—the majority of goods bought and sold in Tepito are either pirated (or illegally reproduced) or contraband (having entered the country without payment of income taxes). But if Tepito is stereotyped as lawless and crime-ridden, it is also a space that is located in the heart of the city and understood to persistently resist change, preserving older, uniquely Mexican lifeways and modes of being. Indeed, it is a point of pride among Tepiteños that a number of powerful figures—from Mexican billionaire Carlos Slim to former New York City mayor Rudy Giuliani—have unsuccessfully attempted to “cleanse” and “rescue” the neighborhood (see Giglia 2018; Vodopivec and Dürr 2019).

This was perhaps why it was so unsettling that Koreans so quickly made their way into places of prominence in Tepito at the turn of the new millennium, garnering major media coverage and attracting the attention of the metropolitan police. Korean migrants were not seen as a casualty of economic restructuring that spurred hundreds of thousands of migrants to leave both South Korea and Argentina. Instead, they were presented as opportunistic criminals who used unfair—and possibly illegal—tactics to “take over” the famously pugnacious market of Tepito. The case study of Operation Tiger reveals how Koreans became associated not only with criminal activity, but with the incursion of Asian capital and goods in the decade following the passage of NAFTA. Furthermore, the persistent conflation between Korean and Chinese migrants throughout the press coverage of the incident illuminates how Asian racialization shapes the reception of Korean migrants in economically competitive spaces.

The second case study are the 2017 W Karaoke Bar arrests in Zona Rosa, where a 38-year-old Korean woman was falsely arrested for charges of solicitation of prostitution at a local *noraebang* (or karaoke bar, literally “singing room” in Korean). As Beltrán's essay suggests, Korean migrants have become increasingly associated with the neighborhood of Zona Rosa (“The Pink Zone”), a neighborhood that has long been associated with a bohemian, cosmopolitan culture as well as the nation's most prominent LGBT district. In the last twenty years, the

proliferation of Korean restaurants, coffee shops, churches, karaoke bars, clothing stores, hair salons, and cosmetics stores, as well as the high density of Korean residents, has mapped a visible “Korean community” onto Zona Rosa alongside the queer community. Travel literature, newspapers, blogs, and other popular publications refer to parts of Zona Rosa as “Pequeño Seúl” (“Little Seoul”), branded as a destination for both Mexican and international tourists seeking “authentic” forms of global cultural consumption, a demand fueled by the growing interest in Korean music, television dramas, and fashion.

At first glance, this global cosmopolitan image might seem to contradict discourses of Korean deviance and criminality. However, I contend that the alleged sexual and moral crimes of the Korean community in Mexico—located within, but not part of the city—often buttresses Zona Rosa’s reputation as an exciting space of cosmopolitan consumption. It is not uncommon for media representation to associate the Korean community with sex-trafficking and prostitution, even as they provide guides to the public availability of Korean food, products, and experiences that draw locals and tourists alike to the area. The racial fetishization of Asian bodies therefore goes hand-in-hand with Zona Rosa’s (re)branding as a globally cosmopolitan space, in which the desire for Asian commodities and experiences is inseparable from the ongoing fear of an Asian contagion that threatens the nation’s economic and moral wellbeing.

If Operation Tiger reveals the continued operative logics of “yellow peril”—in which criminalized Asian migrants are taken as the embodiment of rising Asian economic competition—then the W Karaoke Bar arrests turns our attention to “yellow fever”—the feminized threat of Asian desirability to the moral constitution of the Mexican nation. Taken together, the two incidents also reveal how itinerant belonging is shaped not only by the migration of people, but the migration of ideas—a hemispheric lexicon of anti-Asian thinking that has taken new significance in a post-NAFTA globalizing Mexico City.

Historical Antecedents of Race, Nation, and Gender

In “Yellow Fever,” the mysterious Korean man is a gangster and a criminal; the loquacious Korean woman is a prostitute who has been abused by the Korean men in her life. The relatively ease with which such stereotypes are constructed and accepted in contemporary Mexico City—this gendered dichotomy of deviant Asian masculinity and abject Asian femininity—can be traced to earlier waves of Asian migration to Mexico in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, when gendered and sexualized deviance likewise signaled and constituted the irreconcilability of Asian racial difference. In Mexico, scholars have analyzed how anti-Chinese sentiment fomented during the economic crisis of 1907-1908 and grew in response to the success of Chinese merchants, who were accused of exploitative and unfair business practices (Chao Romero 2011; Knight 1990; Lim 2010). These depictions of the Chinese as a totally inassimilable “Other” led to the eruption of mass acts of anti-Asian violence during the Mexican Revolution, most infamously in the city of Torreón in 1911, when over 300 Chinese and 5 Japanese were murdered and their homes and businesses burned to the ground.³

Importantly, however, the Chinese menace was figured as a direct threat to the nation in racialized and gendered terms that often eclipsed economic motivations. For example, Bettina Ng’weno and Lok Siu (2018) argue that anti-Chinese political cartoons—particularly those that depicted the degeneration of Mexican women and their mixed-race children following unions with Chinese men—encapsulate how the Chinese were seen not only as business competitors or carriers of disease, but a group that needed to be expelled from the nation in order to preserve its racial fitness (74). Anti-Chinese campaigns lingered even after the Revolution, as Chinese

Mexicans—Chinese men, Mexican wives, and their children—were expelled from the states of Sonora and Sinaloa throughout the 1930s (Schiavone Camacho 2012). Violence and expulsion had a dramatic impact on the size of the Chinese community: though over 60,000 Chinese migrated to Mexico in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, fewer than 5,000 remained by 1940 (Chao Romero 2010).

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, a shared “hemispheric Orientalism” meant that racial ideologies, immigration policies, and anti-Asian sentiment circulated transnationally across the Americas (E. Lee 2005). However, within the context of a distinctively Mexican racial framework of *mestizaje*, or racial mixture, anti-Asian racism is inseparable from the gender and sexual politics of miscegenation. As Jason Oliver Chang (2017) points out, the state’s project of *mestizaje* was rooted in the broader goal of *blanqueamiento*, or whitening the Mexican nation: “the improvement of the Indian population through generations of racial mixing” (36). By framing Chinese bodies as racially unfit, the anti-Asian movement succeeded in narrowly defining *mestizaje* as the “good” miscegenation between those of European and Indigenous descent. Tying Mexican women’s sexual reproduction to the racial future of the nation, the anti-Chinese movement and the dynamics of gendered social control in Mexico worked together to shape the coordinates of national and racial belonging in Mexico.

In this historical context, Asian women are nearly invisible; anti-miscegenation laws such as Law 31, passed in the state in Sonora in December 1923, prohibited the unions of Chinese men and Mexican women but were silent on the marriages of Chinese women and Mexican men (see Augustine-Adams 2011; Schiavone Camacho 2012). Much like Chinatowns in the United States, which were perceived as bachelor societies characterized by “deviant sexualities and queer domesticity” (Shah 2001, 78), Chinese communities and Chinatowns in Mexico were also perceived as predominantly male spaces that fostered undesirable sexual practices beyond the boundaries of public sexual and gender norms. The frequent overlapping of red-light districts and Chinatowns, particularly in U.S.-Mexico border cities, reinforced this perception (see Schantz 2012). In the contemporary era, the intertwining of economic and sexual threat took on new meanings in the late 1990s. If earlier discourses of anti-Asian racism were formed during the fitful years of the early twentieth century during which *mestizo* nationalism was negotiated and consolidated, Koreans were arriving to Mexico in a different era: in which Mexico and Mexicans were beginning to imagine themselves not through the homogenizing figure of the *mestizo*, but rather through the refracted lens of global neoliberalism and multiculturalism.

While much of the conversation on Mexico and globalization focuses on the NAFTA debates, another part of the story involves the increasing heft of Asian foreign direct investment and trade, as the People’s Republic of China (PRC)—and Asia, more broadly—has accelerated in importance for Latin American and Caribbean nations. In the context of Mexico, for example, Kevin Gallagher and Enrique Dussel Peters (2013) have called the PRC the “uninvited guest” to the NAFTA table, with both the United States and Mexico losing market share to China in the years after NAFTA’s passage. After the United States, China is the second largest trading partner for the Latin America and the Caribbean region, having overtaken the U.S. in key markets such as Brazil, Peru, and Chile⁴; it is also the region’s largest creditor, having surpassed Western international financial institutions such as the World Bank or the Inter-American Development Bank (Gallagher and Irwin 2017). Spectacular infrastructural projects across the region, under the auspices of China’s Belt and Road Initiative, have captured public attention and, at times, faced substantive public opposition.

These shifts toward Asia resonate with a discourse that Bruce Cumings (1999) has called “Rimspeak”—the post-Cold War spatialization of Asia and the Pacific Rim as the future of global capitalism and economic growth. As anthropologist Monica DeHart (2015) has argued in the China-Costa Rica context, growing awareness of transpacific modalities of relation have given rise to “contemporary conversations about national vulnerability and opportunity in the face of a rising global China” (186). That is, “the definition of that ‘global’ is itself changing in light of China’s growing prominence within it” (184). The question of “the rise of Asia” has led some scholars and policymakers to herald the emergence of a multipolar world order. But simultaneously, if “Rimspeak” celebrates Asia as the frontier of global development, it also articulates anxiety regarding Mexico’s location in a rapidly shifting global terrain vis-à-vis rising “dragons” and “tigers” in Asia. The growing presence of Asian “Others” in some of the most iconic zones of Mexico City have only exacerbated such anxieties.

Operation Tiger: Contraband Racialization

In the shadow of macroeconomic, state-led development ventures, Korean and Chinese-owned businesses, as well as Chinese-origin merchandise and wholesale distributing networks, have also increased in the first two decades of the twenty-first century. The expansion of Chinese multinational companies such as Huawei and the growth of Chinese foreign direct investment (FDI) increased project-specific contract labor migration, as well as greater independent migration from China; these entrepreneurial migrants have had a notable impact in the sprawling informal markets that characterize many large cities in Mexico. Scholars have, for example, noted the importance of transnational ethnic networks (Martinez Rivera and Dussel Peters 2016), cultural and business practices (Hearn 2016; DeHart 2018), and the mediating role of women in such markets (Alba 2013).

In Mexico City, such Korean and Chinese merchants are clustered primarily in the vast informal markets in the neighborhood of Centro Histórico and its surrounding areas. Centro Histórico (Historic Center) is Mexico City’s most iconic neighborhood, whose grand architecture marks the nation’s many tumultuous historical transitions—from the ruins of the Mexica capital Tenochtitlan, the baroque cathedrals of Spanish conquest, the art nouveau buildings of modern Mexico, and post-Revolutionary murals and facades. From the Zócalo, the grand square at the heart of Centro Histórico, it is a short walk to the vast informal markets of Lagunilla, Merced, and Tepito, as tilted colonial-era facades give way to the shouts of vendors selling tacos from wicker baskets mounted on bicycles and humbler storefronts and stalls selling aprons, knock-off sneakers, sunglasses, children’s toys, and other trinkets.

Starting in 1999, Mexican newspapers began to report on the activities of Korean merchants across important economic zones of the city, particularly in the neighborhood of Tepito. For example, in an article about *el mercado* Abelardo Rodríguez in the Centro Histórico, one of the capital’s oldest public municipal markets, *La Jornada* reported on July 11, 1999 about the “novelty of merchants of Korean origin [standing] in front of the stores,” only steps from the famous murals of Diego Rivera.⁵ But by the end of 2001, persistent charges regarding the nefarious activities of Koreans in Tepito began to regularly appear across print and broadcast media. For example, newspaper articles reported that local merchant groups such as the Association of Businessowners and Merchants United for the Protection of Centro Histórico and the Lagunilla Market Merchants Association had lodged formal complaints with the city government, alleging that Korean merchants were displacing Mexican merchants and flooding the market with cheap counterfeits and fraudulently imported goods. Another article accused

Koreans not only of contraband smuggling, but organized crime. One government official was quoted explaining that the application of Korean “criminal codes” accentuated violence in cities across Mexico, linking the Korean mafia to narcotrafficking, saying, “You find them at the head of everything.”⁶

Increasing anxiety regarding the alleged criminal activities of Korean culminated in “Operation Tiger,” one of the largest busts of contraband merchandise in Mexico City’s history. According to Mexican print and television media, the Federal Police deployed some 600 personnel, including special agents and members of the Federal Forces, to move simultaneously into 24 sites across Mexico City late at night on December 5, 2002. Federal Police of Mexico arrested 43 Korean migrants, seized 17 trailers, and confiscated 180 tons of merchandise. The newspaper *La Reforma* reported that Operation Tiger succeeded in “dismembering...the ‘Korean mafia,’ a network of merchants of Korean origin dedicated to contraband merchants and different pirated clothing brands.”⁷ Among the detained migrants, the article assured that the undocumented Koreans would be turned over to immigration officials and deported quickly. According to *El Universal*, the alleged Korean contraband network brought in merchandise originating in China, Taiwan, and Vietnam and stretched across 16 states, connecting suspicious shipments in the port city of Manzanillo to trailers of goods in the northern industrial hub of Monterrey, to pirated goods produced in factories in León to informal markets in Guadalajara and Puebla.⁸

However, an alternate story soon began to emerge. Soon after the arrests, *La Reforma* reported that the detained Korean migrants denied all charges, attesting that arresting officers had not bothered to look at the customs clearance documents, accounting books, tax invoices, and immigration documentation they had presented.⁹ Within a week, all but five Koreans were released from custody. A lengthy court battle for Mr. H, a Korean businessman who had established a local clothing factory in Mexico City after re-migrating from Panama in 1999, particularly angered the local Korean community; in 2017, many years after the court case, multiple people mentioned it as an example of the targeted scapegoating of Korean merchants. The case, which dragged on for almost 17 months, hinged on the court’s analysis of the composition of fabric used in the factory. While Mr. H said that the fabric had been manufactured in Mexico, the prosecutor disputed that fact, arguing that it had been imported from abroad. Despite an official letter from an independent investigator who could not verify the prosecutor’s claims, the court stalled for six months in order to allow a second composition analysis of the fabric. Though the results were inconclusive, a judge imposed a fine of 2,000 pesos for customs evasion.¹⁰

Despite the flimsy legal basis for the arrests, the cultural and social impacts of Operation Tiger were profound. Ten months later, in October 2003, the then-President of the Korean Association, Se Taek Chun, explained, “Our neighbors in Tepito know that a Korean mafia doesn’t exist, but after some newspapers and television channels published articles claiming so, some poorly-informed police search us at whatever hour, without any motive, which provokes unfortunate situations.” According to Mr. Chun, police harassment had eroded any goodwill that had existed among Koreans and Tepiteños, and many Koreans had begun to leave the zone in fear.¹¹ Soon thereafter, in November 2003, Deputy Jorge Kahwagi Macari introduced a resolution in the Chamber of Deputies, the lower house of Mexico’s Congress of the Union, calling for an investigation of Korean migrants in Mexico and casting doubt on their migratory status, alleging that “The Koreans, members of this criminal organization, enter Mexican territory mostly as tourists and, in the face of the indifference of the immigration authorities, they

remain and settle to fulfill their illicit goals.”¹² The resolution drew critique from members of the Korean community, who strongly protested its characterization of Korean migrants as members of an organized criminal organization.¹³ Similarly, in 2005, the centennial commemoration of one hundred years of Korean immigration to Mexico was similarly marred by allegations of Koreans’ illegality and criminal behaviors, with newspapers such as *La Reforma* headlining their coverage, “The Koreans reject they are a mafia,” rather than focusing on the actual festivities themselves.¹⁴

Interestingly, some media accounts acknowledged that Koreans were arriving from South America, with commentators pointing to Buenos Aires as a kind of warning story. On July 7, 2002, *La Crónica*, a daily Mexico City newspaper, gave a standard warning about the growing power of the Korean mafia but curiously included a quote from Alfredo Romero Castilla, an expert on Korean migration to Mexico: “If the Koreans keep occupying spaces in Tepito, something similar to what happened in Argentina could happen, where the Asians displaced all the Jews in a similar neighborhood in Buenos Aires and the businesses changed hands.”¹⁵

The linkages between Mexico and Argentina point to a hemispheric construction of racial difference, which iterates and builds upon other images of Koreanness that have periodically emerged throughout the Americas, from the portrayals of Korean merchants during the 1992 Los Angeles riots to persistent accusations of Korean labor trafficking in Brazil (see Buechler 2004). In the context of Argentina, Junyoung Verónica Kim (2017) has argued that media representations have equated “‘Koreanness’ with a small business ‘capitalist mentality’ [that] is furthermore projected onto a racial schema that stereotypes the Korean as labor ‘exploiter’” (37). Elsewhere, Kim (2017) has pointed out that “in the dominant media portrayal of the Korean garment industry in Argentina, not only are the Koreans singled out as the sole culprit of capitalist exploitation, but moreover, this super-exploitation is represented as a Korean attribute that stems from Korean culture” (107-8). Similarly, in the case of Operation Tiger, the meanings of Koreanness became linked not only to shifting economic relations within Tepito, but with a historically cultivated hostility toward Asian migrants. In Operation Tiger, Koreans’ racial difference became triangulated with the hemispheric itineraries of transnational migration as well as shifting global political economic conditions related to growing influxes of Asian capital.

The rhetoric accompanying these stories also recalled older ideas of Asian racial difference and unassimilability and a hemispheric history of Yellow Peril, in which Asian migration and expansion was portrayed as an existential threat to the Western World. Stories of cooperation between Chinese and Korean mafia proliferated during this era, proclaiming an “Oriental Invasion” that threatened honest Mexican merchants and ways of life. This was a rhetoric of Asian racialization that went beyond one ethnic group. In the United States context, anthropologist Leo Chávez (2013) has shown that anti-immigrant discourse used images of primarily Mexican American and Chicana migrants to construct what he calls the “Latino Threat Narrative,” which then becomes applied to other migrant groups from Latin America. Similarly, older fears of Chinese became applied to Koreans in order to construct an Asiatic racialized threat. For example, one newspaper (see Figure 1) printed a cartoon showing a stereotypical Fu Manchu figure encircling the globe in a dragon, pointing to the global menace posed by increased Asian migration. Such images recall early twentieth century stereotypes and images, in which Yellow Peril was positioned as an existential threat to nations across the Americas. The revival of such images served to make Asian migrants the human form of the abstract circuits of global capitalism, personifying the ways in which global trade was deeply shaping everyday consumption and informal economies in Mexico.



La invasión oriental

Un reporte de la Cámara de Comercio del Distrito Federal, apoyado en cifras del INEGI, concluyó que 40% de las ventas en la Ciudad de México son de contrabando y mercancía pirata.

Todo ingresa al país caja por caja, a través de pequeñas bandas como la que dirige la Abuela, pero también en barcos y furgones del ferrocarril, desde las fronteras de Baja California, Sonora, Chihuahua y Tamaulipas, así como desde los puertos marítimos de Veracruz y Colima.

CONTACTO EN TEPITO

Figure 1. "The Oriental Invasion" in *Revista Contralínea*

Koreans in Mexico are deeply aware of this uneasy positionality, which associates them with economic crises and social restructuring and dislocation resulting from rapid globalization. Sometimes, they even identified with these criticisms. While expressing their grievances toward what they considered to be a racially motivated “witch hunt,” my interviewees were faster to acknowledge the sins of Koreans in Mexico—which included an ethnocentric superiority complex, a tendency to treat their workers poorly, or an unwillingness to culturally integrate into Mexican society. Still, Korean merchants working in Tepito resoundingly denounced the idea of a Korean mafia. Among my interlocutors, not a single person attested to the existence of a Korean mafia. While I was frequently told stories about individual scoundrels who stole lucrative business contracts, reneged on financial loans, or engaged in otherwise unsavory behavior, reports about a large-scale Korean criminal invasion appeared to be fictive.

In addition to criticizing some of their fellow Koreans’ treatments of Mexican workers, they also pointed to cultural misunderstandings, racially charged resentment, and changing economic conditions that increased competition for everyone. One interviewee, a re-migrant from Argentina, explained that a Korean re-migrant propensity to avoid bank transactions stemmed from a lack of access to Mexican financial institutions. He himself was suspicious of banks, particularly having seen enormous losses of capital following the devaluation of the Argentine peso. He also carefully distinguished between the smuggling of illegal items, such as narcotics and arms, and the failure to pay tariff duties for ordinary legal items, such as clothing, accessories, and other consumer goods—a distinction that seemed to be shared not only by Koreans but by nearly all the merchants, regardless of race, in Tepito.

In fact, Korean merchants were less concerned about tariff evasion and more concerned with *mordidas*—the bribes paid to intermediaries and local officials that ensured good working relationships with other Tepiteños.¹⁶ I was told multiple times the apocryphal story of the naïve Korean merchant who carefully ensured that his products were imported legally but failed to find success in Tepito because he had not acknowledged the real power brokers in the market, thereby disrespecting local cultural and political norms. State order, then, was less important than the vernacular order, which required attentiveness to existing modes of business as well as what one Korean merchant called “convivencia,” or conviviality—the everyday cross-racial interactions

between Chinese wholesalers, Korean merchants, Mexico City officials, Tepiteño intermediaries, and local customers that characterized quotidian life in Tepito. While it would be foolish to deny the very real existence of racial tension in Tepito, many Koreans also described the reality of everyday connections and socialities, which were rarely represented in the discourses propagated by print and broadcast media.

Korean merchants also pointed to the fact that Tepito had long been integrated into diasporic Asian networks of global commerce. For example, Mr. Hong, a Korean American merchant who operates a wholesale business in Mexico City, attributed Korean success to an ability to leverage both hemispheric and transpacific networks—connections to apparel manufacturing companies in Asia that were used to shipping across the Pacific and an understanding of the supply chains of Latin American informal markets. Mr. Hong attested to a history that has been well-established by scholars of the U.S.-Mexico borderlands, in which Chinese and Korean Mexican intermediaries have facilitated the travel of clothing and accessories merchandise—popularly called “fayuca”—from the United States to informal markets across Mexico throughout the twentieth century (see Lee 2002; Romero 2011; Sandoval Hernández 2014; Lim 2017). However, the passage of NAFTA progressively eliminated taxes on large categories of goods of U.S. and Canadian origin; as it became cheaper to legally import goods, smuggling diminished. At the same time, China’s explosive increase in foreign trade, as well as its entry into the World Trade Organization in 2001, led to an east-west transpacific network that brought goods to Mexico’s ports.

Mr. Hong saw opportunity in these global developments. Before moving to Mexico, Mr. Hong had worked as a wholesaler in the fashion district in Los Angeles and, with a Chinese Mexican business partner, he decided to begin a company to facilitate the large-scale importation of clothing and accessories to Mexico. Rather than a sudden foreign invasion, Mr. Hong saw his activity as a continuation of Asian migrants’ supply chains that had long brought goods to Tepito. In fact, Mr. Hong pointed out the irony that the legalization of clothing trade across the U.S.-Mexico border had gone hand-in-hand with the illegalization of Korean merchants as external to markets such as Tepito, where they had long been important, if less visible, actors. Mr. Hong’s story suggests that the contraband racialization of Koreans in Tepito—their externalization from a trade in which they have long been involved—was related to Mexican costumers’ interest in consuming Koreans’ things, without necessarily including the Koreans themselves.

Re-situating Zona Rosa

While Zona Rosa does not have legally adjudicated boundaries, it was commonly understood among both my Mexican and Korean respondents that “Zona Rosa” referred to the roughly 25-block area flanked to the north by Paseo de la Reforma—a wide promenade lined with jacaranda trees, high-rise hotels, and skyscrapers and punctuated by imposing monuments and statues; to the west by the vast urban park of Chapultepec; to the east by Avenida Insurgentes, Mexico City’s main thoroughfare; and to the south by Avenida Chapultepec. Zona Rosa is one of Mexico City’s main shopping, tourist, and nightlife districts and home to some of its most iconic symbols, such as the golden statue of the Angel of Independence (see San Martín Córdova 2010); in 2011, Zona Rosa was designated as one of “barrios mágicos” or “magical neighborhoods” of Mexico City in recognition of the area’s importance for tourism.¹⁷ Fin de siècle mansions—some abandoned, others restored—speak to the neighborhood’s development by Mexico City’s elite in the late 19th and early 20th century, as well as recent processes of

gentrification. Two recently renovated pedestrian-only walkways provide access to bars, restaurants, cafes, and stores. In addition to the area's reputation for nightlife and tourism, in the broader spatial imaginary of the city, Zona Rosa is also marked by two minority populations, one sexual and the other ethno-racial: gays and, more recently, Koreans.

While it is inconclusive when or why exactly the neighborhood became known as the “pink zone,” my interlocutors frequently referred to either the area's reputation for seedy nightlife, prostitution, crime, or to the population of gay men to explain the name.² Since the 1970s, Zona Rosa has been well-known in Mexico as perhaps the country's most prominent gay neighborhood—home to a large and visible concentration of gay bars, night clubs, sex shops, bath houses, and LGBT cultural centers, as well as the city's annual LGBT Pride Parade. While Korean presence in Zona Rosa is relatively new, it is important to note that since the end of the Mexican Revolution (1910-1921), Zona Rosa has been marked in the broader cultural imaginary as a kind of transgressive space—cosmopolitan, bohemian, and decidedly non-Mexican—with streets named after European capitals, restaurants offering cuisines around the world, and cafes and shops geared toward tourists and foreign residents. Indeed, as geographers Álvaro Sánchez Crispín and Álvaro López López (2000) point out in their study of queer spaces in Mexico City, Zona Rosa is marked as an urban space that transgresses both sexual and racial-national boundaries in a way that is interlinked and interrelated: “These gay sites operate because their localization in tourist areas such as Zona Rosa makes it easier to explain that they served outsiders and not those from the city, although in reality it is the opposite” (3).¹⁸

A similar parallel can be made to the Koreans who now live in Zona Rosa. Sociologist José Lanzagorta García (2018) points out that certain queer socio-spatial imaginaries of the neighborhood sideline or ignore Korean migrants altogether:

This imaginary is, if not blind, at least resistant to incorporating the presence of a growing Korean migration in the zone since the end of the 1990s. ... Much as it is possible to recognize a prejudice about the presence of gay sociabilities in Zona Rosa, in this case we see a kind of prejudice toward the East, ironically in a territory on which has been projected the idea of cosmopolitanism (74).

The juxtaposition of queer space and Korean space in Zona Rosa is therefore more than a strange coincidence. As this overview suggests, the social and cultural meanings of Zona Rosa—as gay neighborhood, ethnic enclave, red-light district, and tourist destination—are contested and constructed by multiple participants, all of whom deploy competing visions of what the area represents.

Korean businessowners indicated the benefits of setting up business in Zona Rosa, where leasing agencies were more accustomed to dealing with non-Mexicans, clientele more comfortable with non-Mexican cuisine, and neighbors were more accepting of different customs, languages, and cultural practices. This unique social location offered significant advantages to recently arriving Korean migrants. As one small business owner explained, “Everything is location. So, all the Koreans in Mexico City are gathering here [Zona Rosa]. Then the locals (*hyōnji-in*) [realize], ‘Oh, this is Mexico City's Koreatown (*hanin town*).’ And people who have some interest in our [Korean] culture can come and experience shopping and restaurants at the same time.” Another described the benefits of local leasing agents' familiarity with Koreans: “If a local leases to a Korean once, and everything progresses well, then if there is another Korean businessperson, they will do business with them again.”

Many of my interviewees explained that how the recent global popularity of Korean pop culture had brought a new influx of potential customers to Zona Rosa. For example, on a busy Saturday afternoon at Coffee Kkot, a huge, three-story Korean café in Zona Rosa, young Mexicans ordered green tea drinks topped with whipped cream and tried mango or strawberry *pingsu*, a Korean shaved ice dessert. K-pop fans visited a kiosk on the second floor that sold merchandise related to popular musical groups such as BTS and BlackPink, while others caught up with friends while occasionally glancing at a big-screen television that showed a Korean romantic drama. On the first floor of the café, a big bulletin board was filled with posters and flyers advertising an array of Korean experiences: K-pop dance meetings, Korean language classes, a scholarship to study abroad in South Korea, and interest groups for fans of various popular boy bands and girl groups.

Indeed, the South Korean government and local Korean business associations have capitalized on the prominence of *hallyu* (the Korean wave) to promote Korean small businesses. For example, in early December 2016, the Mexico City government and the Korean Cultural Center, along with Korean businesses and ethnic associations, hosted the first Korean Cultural Festival in Zona Rosa. Over two days, local vendors set up food stalls in the streets, selling popular Korean street foods such as *kimbap*, fried chicken, rice cakes, and hot cakes. On a central stage, performances of Korean percussion, *t'aegwondo* demonstration, traditional dance, and K-pop entertained a steady stream of visitors. The Korean Cultural Center hosted booths where visitors could try on *hanbok*, or traditional Korean dress, play Korean board games, and learn to write their name in *han'gŭl*, the Korean script.¹⁹

Events such as the Korean Cultural Festival capitalize on the trendiness of Korean popular culture in Mexico in order to bring curious tourists and locals alike to the Korean neighborhood in Zona Rosa. Orchestrated by the Korean Cultural Center, a South Korean government-funded cultural diplomacy entity, and the Mexico City government, the event evinced the growing influence of Korean culture across the globe while simultaneously presenting Mexico City as a space of multicultural cosmopolitanism. In her study of K-pop fans in Mexico City, Erica Vogel traces similar routes of transnational circulation as they interface with the South Korean state: “The Korean Embassy would ask a fan club to put on a flash mob, the Mexican media would cover the flash mob, and Korea.net would cover the story of the Mexican press covering a story about K-pop in Mexico” (69). In both cases, Korea and Mexico become points of reference in broader networks of exchange that present both South Korea and Mexico City as producers and consumers of a global mediascape.

Despite popular assumptions that Korean merchants, restaurateurs, and other small business owners in Pequeño Seúl cater primarily to Korean migrants, I found that many, if not most, Korean business owners targeted Mexican consumers and fretted about how to appeal to a broader range of the Mexican public. As Karen Velasquez (2018) points out, Pequeño Seúl itself “is a result of the Korean community's efforts at communicating and marketing their cultural presence, which inserts Korean culture into Mexico City's established norms and orderings of urban spaces” (194). Indeed, customizing Korea to Mexican tastes, while still selling Korean “authenticity” to a cosmopolitan clientele, could be a challenging task for Korean merchants in Zona Rosa. For example, Mr. Kim, who operates a Korean restaurant in Zona Rosa, discussed the challenge of offering a “Korean experience” without being “too Korean” for Mexican tastes. When he first opened his restaurant, he had to change the menu “a hundred times,” experimenting with different ingredients—cuts of meat, types of chili peppers, and the combination of items for daily specials—to appeal to the white-collar office workers who

frequented his restaurant during lunch. Small substitutions—Worcestershire sauce for soy sauce and guajillo peppers for Korean red peppers—accommodated to the Mexican palate and were cheaper than importing uncommon ingredients from abroad. Far from simply reproducing Korea in Mexico, the carefully cultivated localization of Korean products point to ongoing processes of hybridity—the Mexicanization of Koreanness in Zona Rosa.

W Karaoke Bar Incident

As Zona Rosa becomes a site of desire for and consumption of Korean things, the relationship between the space and Korean people still remains vexed. For example, Mr. Jang, who runs also owns a Korean restaurant in Zona Rosa, explained that he had quickly learned to hire Mexican waitstaff to work the front of his restaurant. Before coming to Mexico, Mr. Jang had first left South Korea for the United States, working with his brother-in-law in his restaurant equipment business in Southern California. Contrasting the different racialized labor dynamics in the U.S. and Mexico, he explained that “[In the United States] Koreans work with customers in the front and Mexicans work in the back [in the kitchen]. In Mexico, it’s the opposite.” He felt that Mexican customers were frustrated with his halting Spanish and more likely to try Korean food if they did not see a foreign face offering it to them.

Perhaps responding to the carefully cultivated veneer of global Korea sold in Zona Rosa—cafes, restaurants, and beauty stores targeted toward cosmopolitan consumers—popular press and everyday consumers frequently seemed to assume that there was another Pequeño Seúl that was inaccessible to non-Koreans. When I told non-Korean Mexican friends and acquaintances about my research, I was frequently asked if I could take them to the “real” Korean restaurants, the places where non-Koreans would not be able to access. Circulating rumors about “secret menus” or “secret back rooms” reinforced the perception that there was a Pequeño Seúl for Mexicans and another for Koreans.

Such ideas explain publications such as *Time Out Mexico* magazine’s 2015 guide to the “secrets of the Korean neighborhood in Mexico City.”²⁰ The author contrasts the global success of Korean popular culture—predicated in part by a desire to reach across cultural borders—and the unapproachable, “exotic” Pequeño Seúl (Little Seoul) that did not easily yield its secrets. Instead, the author alleged, the Korean presence in the neighborhood demonstrated that there is a “red zone inside la Zona Rosa (Pink Zone).” Prostitution rings within karaoke bars, “coordinated by a faction of the Korean mafia...revealed that the zone is completely controlled by Koreans.” Summarizing a prevalent Mexican perception of Koreans, the writer explains:

The Korean community, unlike the Chinese, is not as integrated into Mexican society. The Chinese has come to assimilate our culture without neglecting theirs; instead, Koreans and their children try not to lose their roots. Many refuse to speak in Spanish and do not have names in our language.

In so doing, the author replicates many of the dominant assumptions about Koreans living in Mexico City. It is presumed that Korean migrants attempt to faithfully reproduce Korea in Mexico; they attempt to keep Mexicans and other non-Koreans out by speaking only in Korean, refusing to translate Korean-language menus and signs into Spanish, or treating non-Koreans with hostility. Koreans, we are told, refuse to assimilate—by prioritizing homeland ties, choosing not to learn Spanish, or by keeping their Korean names. And finally, Koreans are strongly

associated with organized crime—the Korean mafia allegedly “completely controls” the Zona Rosa, a claim echoed across mainstream Mexican newspapers and broadcast media.

In such publications, Korean culture plays a dual role. It is a bridge, providing a way to connect Korea to the world and building lines of affinity across the geographical discontinuities of Korea and Mexico. At the same time, it is a barrier, concealing a static and unchanging Korean essence whose deviant morality places Korean migrants outside the boundaries of the nation. This ambivalent positioning was evident in the W Karaoke Bar incident in 2016, during which the arrest and imprisonment of Yang Hyun-jeong, a 38-year-old Korean woman, for prostitution sparked anger within the Korean community in Mexico City. In June 2016, when I conducted preliminary fieldwork in Mexico City, the W Karaoke Bar case was a frequent topic of discussion among Koreans living in Zona Rosa. Several people advised me not to go out on the streets of Zona Rosa late at night, or to avoid bars, karaoke rooms, and other similar establishments, citing the Mexican police’s targeting of Koreans in the area. One woman insisted on giving me the contact information of a Korean lawyer in the city, just in case, and I was warned to be careful not to share too much information about my visa status, occupation, or other personal details with Mexican strangers. Others lamented the corruption and extortion that went hand-in-hand with running a business in Mexico; I was told that it was common that city and delegation officials would demand bribes, which had to be paid to gain crucial permits, avoid unnecessary closure, or evade the confiscation of merchandise.

The case came to prominence following the publication of a series of searing letters Yang wrote from a jail cell in Santa Martha Acatitla penitentiary in the outskirts of Mexico City, which were published in South Korean news outlets and circulated through Korean-language Internet discussion forums. In her letters, Yang explained how she had arrived in Mexico City on November 22, 2015 in order to visit her sister and conduct business research on the flourishing Korean textile industry in Mexico. On January 15, 2016, just a few days before she was set to return to Korea, she agreed to help her sister’s fiancé with some financial ledgers related to his work as a manager at the W Karaoke Bar in Zona Rosa. While waiting for her sister and finance at the bar, she—along with five Korean employees, three Mexicans and two Korean customers—were detained by armed, masked policemen; she was arrested and separated from the other detainees, “put in a car without explanation and carried to an unknown location.”²¹ Throughout the harrowing 72-hour ordeal, Yang was handcuffed, sexually harassed, and physically abused; she was stripped naked and forcibly examined by a male doctor, denied food, water, and access to a bathroom. Though she did not speak Spanish and was not provided an official translator, she was coerced into signing a statement that she could not read, which claimed that she had been involved in a sex trafficking ring involving five Korean women and one Mexican woman. Only then was she finally brought to the women’s penitentiary, where she was held for three weeks without visitation. During that time, she was not made aware of the charges against her until her sister was finally allowed to see her. “I am not a ‘prostitute,’” Yang wrote. “I beg you, please rescue me from this hellish reality.”²²

Her letter—first published on June 7, 2016 in the Korean newspaper *Money Today*, six months after her arrest—sparked a furor among the Korean community in Mexico City, especially since her account differed so dramatically from the narrative put forth in the Mexican public sphere.²³ According to the Mexican media, the police had received a tip from an informant, a Mexican woman who had allegedly narrowly escaped entrapment at W Karaoke Bar. This information led to a nighttime raid that resulted in the “rescue” of Korean and Mexican women who were supposedly victims of sex trafficking. Upon arrest, the Korean women signed

official declarations explaining that they had been lured from South Korea with promises of high wages and forced into sex slavery in Mexico. Yang Hyun-jeong, whose arrest photos were widely distributed across print and online media, was referred to as “Madame Yang”—a dangerous brothel-keeper who confiscated passports, withheld wages, and monitored her workers’ movements. But in her letters, Yang directly inverted the dominant media narrative: she was not a perpetrator but a victim, and the police “rescue” had been a profoundly irresponsible act of endangerment.

Indeed, as Yang’s case developed, details about the mishandling of the case continued to trickle out. The alleged informant turned out not to exist, the prosecution’s documents were riddled with factual errors, and evidence of sex crimes, such as a used condom supposedly found in the toilet, were ruled inadmissible for evidence.²⁴ Among the Korean-language newspapers, the role of the South Korean embassy’s police consul, who had initially advised the arrested women to sign the false statements, came under particular scrutiny.²⁵ Accused of laziness and incompetence, newspaper articles and online comments blamed the Korean consulate for gross negligence and failing to protect one of its citizens. In response, the police consul posted an official statement that was published in a local Korean-language newspaper and on a highly frequented online forum for Korean residents in Mexico on Daum Cafe, a commonly used South Korean web portal, contesting some of the details published in the Korean-language press and insisting that they could not interfere in the procedures of the Mexican judicial system.

Online commentary found in Koreans in Mexico online forum also focused on the many inaccuracies in the Mexican press. For example, Spanish-language newspapers reported that the Public Prosecutor for Human Trafficking Crimes in the Office of the Attorney General of Mexico City (Fiscal para la Atención del Delito de Trata de Personas de la Procuraduría General de Justicia del Distrito Federal) described karaoke as a “word that in South Korea is the same as a brothel where they practice prostitution.”²⁶ As karaoke is a popular activity enjoyed by a broad cross-section of Koreans, including groups of youth, friends, family members, couples, and coworkers, this false equivalency was pointed to as evidence that even high-level Mexican government officials and lawyers were inventing exotic fictions about Koreans in order to prosecute them.

At the same time, some online commenters also disparaged South Korean newspapers for printing inaccurate and stereotypical information about Mexico. For example, one South Korean report alleged that the Mexican police threatened the W Karaoke Bar employees with a gun, saying, “We can shoot you because this is Mexico”—a statement that many Koreans in Mexico recognized as trafficking in stereotypes about Mexico as lawless and violent. Calling Korean journalists “fiction writers,” one commenter strongly critiqued the report, defending their chosen home as a place that was rarely represented fairly in the global circulation of images.

Koreans in Mexico, then, were caught between two powerful “controlling images” (Collins 1991). The first, propagated by mainstream Mexican media, stereotyped Koreans in Mexico as “illegal” migrants whose communities were reliant on organized crime and other law-breaking behaviors. For example, a typical headline, “The Korean mafia continues to operate brothels,” spoke to a widespread perception that Koreans in Mexico were connected to organized crime, sex trafficking, violence, and police corruption.²⁷ Indeed, the W Karaoke Bar incident was one of many that stretched back to the late 1990s, when the Korean population began to grow exponentially in the city. For the last twenty years, Mexican news outlets have periodically run segments on Korean-owned businesses that allegedly served as fronts for brothels operated by the Korean mafia in central neighborhoods in the city. Much of the coverage focused on the

neighborhood of Zona Rosa, where a Korean community began forming at the turn of the 21st century. News broadcasts and articles asserted the existence of a Korean mafia that controlled Zona Rosa via a vast, shadowy, transnational network. For example, according to *El Universal*, a major Mexican newspaper, W Karaoke Bar was merely “one thread of a web that envelops diverse zones of the City: the shadow of a mafia, ‘dangerous and vengeful,’ that operates in the folds of corruption and official complicity.”

Koreans in Mexico are likewise deeply conscious of the second narrative: the global myth that Mexico is an overwhelmingly violent, dangerous, and lawless country, where criminals and cartel members run amok and the rule of law will not protect you. This second narrative pointed to the challenges that Korean residents faced when discussing the incident with outsiders like me. For example, Elena, a Korean college student in her early twenties who had migrated to Latin America as a child, connected the unfair prosecution and treatment of Yang Hyun-jeong to a broader system of Mexican police brutality and state corruption that enabled violence against women, and she spoke angrily about several high-profile cases of young Mexican women who were abducted, murdered, or “disappeared.” She also spoke at length about the racism she had experienced growing up in Mexico, and she pointed out the hypocrisy of dominant Mexican media portrayals of Koreans.

Still, Elena seemed cognizant that she was speaking to me, a U.S. citizen; she stopped herself several times to assure me, “You might think Mexico is a dangerous country, but Mexico City is a very good place to live.” In direct critique of Global North imagery of Mexico, she called Mexico City a “world city”—an amazing place to live, work, and study. While remaining critical of the Mexican state, she explicitly contested global media narratives that denigrated Mexico and Mexicans, stating, “I am proud to reside [in Mexico City] and consider myself from Mexico.” My conversation with Elena pointed to a profound sense of ambivalence experienced by Koreans living in Mexico; they were keenly aware that critiquing Mexican racism and discrimination against Koreans might only contribute to global perceptions of Mexican villainy.

I was back in Berkeley on October 10, 2016, when, on order from a judge in Mexico City, Yang was released from Santa Martha Penitentiary after nine months of unlawful imprisonment. A few days later, I messaged Elena on KakaoTalk to ask what she thought of how the case had been resolved. In addition to relief that Yang’s ordeal was now over, Elena expressed a sense of bitterness: “I promise you, I promise you, I promise you [te juro, te juro, TE JURO] not a single Mexican journalist will write about her innocence or erase the lies they printed.” Elena’s premonition turned out to be correct. While the story of the W Karaoke Bar, and the photos of Yang at the eve of her arrest, continue to circulate online, periodically resurfacing as proof of Koreans’ exceptionally bad behavior, no Mexican media platforms, to my knowledge, have ever published a retraction.

Conclusion

Incidents like Operation Tiger and the W Karaoke Bar arrests point to the important mediating role of racial difference in localized understandings of the impact of globalization, revealing interlocking relations between racial formation and the transnational circulation of capital and goods. They also signal the vexed politics of racialized belonging among Koreans in Mexico. Persistently externalized from the nation, Koreans in Mexico—even those who consider Mexico to be home—demonstrated an ambivalent relationship to national belonging.

Even “positive” representations reinforce the idea that Koreans are irrefutably foreign “others.” For example, during the 2018 FIFA World Cup, South Korea’s defeat of Germany

enabled Mexico to advance in the tournament. Mexicans celebrating Koreans through exuberant acts of gratitude was well-covered through social media networks as well as national and international media, many of whom saw the celebrations as a charming gesture of solidarity. Among my local network of Koreans living in Mexico City, however, responses were more mixed. For example, in a KakaoChat group thread of young Koreans living in Mexico City, after the game, a 21-year-old Korean woman who had been born and raised in Mexico sent a video of Mexicans celebrating in front of the South Korean embassy by chanting, “Korean, brother, now you are Mexican (Coreano, hermano, ya eres Mexicano).” Accompanying this video, she wrote sarcastically, “We are finally Mexican!” Another Korean man shared a common meme that circulated through WhatsApp networks after the game: a photo of Mexicans pulling back their eyes to slant them with the caption, “Gracias, Corea (Thank you, Korea).” He shared the message with the accompanying message, “It’s too much...”

GRACIAS COREA 🇰🇷



Figure 2. Popular meme after South Korea-Germany World Cup game, June 2018.

My interviewees described pervasive discrimination against Koreans while simultaneously downplaying the effects of racism. Elena, mentioned above, demonstrated this vexed dynamic when she discussed the frequency of catcalling on the streets of Mexico City. “Almost every day someone calls me ‘china’ or ‘chinita’ [on the street],” she complained. “Or they shout, ‘ojitos’ (small eyes) or ‘ojos rasgados’ (slant eyes).” Such incidents reinforced her feelings of peripherality, and she believed that her “Asiatic appearance” meant that she would never be fully accepted as Mexican. At the same time, however, Elena emphasized to me that these incidents were not related to structures of racism in Mexico. Instead, she spoke animatedly about her participation in a feminist activist group at her university and described the behavior of rude boys (“chicos maleducados”) who were responsible for pervasive street harassment toward all women, regardless of race.

In Elena’s understanding, gender shaped and amplified her sense of racial difference; however, by situating her racialized experience of gendered harassment within a broader critique of Mexican machismo and sexism, her interpretation not only subsumed race under the rubric of

gender but made recourse to a shared experience among all women, regardless of race, to claim a public space in the city. Sometimes, Elena said with a grin, she even shouted back: “SOY COREANA, Y HABLO ESPAÑOL.”²⁸

¹ Rosa Beltrán, “Fiebre Amarilla,” *Nexos*, January 1, 2006. Translations from Spanish to English are mine.

² For a discussion of the genre of the *crónica*, including its history and formal characteristics, see Ignacio Corona and Beth Ellen Jorgensen 2002.

³ That Japanese living in Torreón were also caught up in the violence suggests that the anti-Chinese movement was a racial discourse that could encompass ethno-specific hatred.

⁴ n.a., “Latin America & Caribbean trade statistics: Exports, Imports, Product, Tariffs, GDP and Related Development Indicator,” World Bank 2018, <https://wits.worldbank.org/CountryProfile/en/LCN>

⁵ Quoted in Romero Castilla 1999, 21.

⁶ Ignacio Alvarado, “La invasión oriental,” *Contralínea*, February 2, 2003, https://www.contralinea.com.mx/c12/html/sociedad/c12_contrabando.html

⁷ Luis Alegre, “Cae red de piratería, retienen a 43 coreanos,” *La Reforma*, December 6, 2002, 22.

⁸ Silvia Otero, “Extiende mafia coreana influencia en 16 estados,” *El Universal*, December 7, 2002.

⁹ Jesús Alberto Hernández, “Planeaban un festejo y terminan en celda,” *La Reforma*, October 25, 2002.

¹⁰ Han Tongyöp, “Meksik'o-üi han'gugin-tül 'ögurhan oksari' [The Koreans in Mexico: ‘An Unfair Life of Imprisonment’],” *Dong-A Weekly*, May 6, 2004, <https://weekly.donga.com/List/3/all/11/73661/1>

¹¹ David Vicenteño, “Ahuyenta coreanos a inseguridad,” *La Reforma*, October 23, 2003.

¹² “Con punto de acuerdo, por el que se exhorta a las dependencias federales competentes a que se tomen medidas urgentes contra la infiltración de productos de contrabando por parte de ciudadanos y de mafias extranjeros, principalmente coreanos,” presentada por el diputado Jorge Kahwagi Macari, del grupo parlamentario del PVEM, en la sesión del martes 4 de noviembre de 2003,” <http://gaceta.diputados.gob.mx/Gaceta/59/2003/nov/20031105.html#Proposiciones>

¹³ n.a., “Meksik'o han kyop'odül-ün modu map'ia? [The Korean Diaspora in Mexico: All Mafia Members?],” *Chosun Ilbo*, November 11, 2003, https://www.chosun.com/site/data/html_dir/2003/11/12/2003111270302.html

¹⁴ Alberto Acosta, “Rechazan coreanos ser una mafia,” *La Reforma*, May 2, 2005.

¹⁵ Ignacio Castro García, “Comerciantes de Tepito Denuncian Crecimiento de Mafias Coreanas,” *La Crónica*, July 7, 2002, <https://www.cronica.com.mx/notas/2002/19467.html>.

¹⁶ For an analysis of the social and political significance of the *mordida* in Mexico City’s informal economy, see Sarsfield 2012.

¹⁷ The *barrio mágico* program’s official demarcation of “Zona Rosa” limits the neighborhood to Calle Florencia to the west and Avenida Insurgentes to the east; however, I found that in casual conversation, Koreans and Mexicans alike would refer to locations to the east of Calle Florencia as part of “Zona Rosa.”

¹⁸ A review of the literature on the urban development of Mexico City is inconclusive on the neighborhood’s nomenclature. One urban legend attributes the phrase “pink zone” to painter José Luis Cuevas, who in the 1950s allegedly quipped that the neighborhood’s “daytime activities were white and those of nighttime red” (San Martín Córdova 2010, 5), while other sources point to the presence of well-known mid-century cabarets and bars. Writing in the 1960s, Mexican novelist Vicente Leñero (1968) described Zona Rosa as such: “They forced her [Zona Rosa] to copy foreign ways and the style didn’t fit. Soon she was looking pretty threadbare and was

nicknamed Zona Rosa. Too artless for red, too frivolous for white” (80). In any case, it seems that the neighborhood was called “Zona Rosa” long before the area became well-known as a space for gay men in the 1970s.

¹⁹ S.H. Nam, “S. Korea to hold 1st Korean Culture Fete in Mexico City,” *Yonhap News Agency*, December 2, 2016. <https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20161202003400315>

²⁰ N.a., “El barrio coreano de la Ciudad de Mexico,” *Time Out Mexico*, Jul 15 2015. <https://www.timeoutmexico.mx/ciudad-de-mexico/que-hacer/el-barrio-coreano-del-df>.

²¹ For original images of the letters, see the archive at “A Korean woman’s prison letter in Mexico,” *The AsiaN*, August 22, 2016, <http://www.theasian.asia/archives/95937>.

²² O Sejung, “Han'guk yösöng, meksik'o-sö 5kaewöl-tchae pudang sugam...che2-üi 'chibüro kanün kil' chaehyöndoenä? [Korean woman, unjustly imprisoned in Mexico for 5 months],” *Money Today*, June 7, 2016, <https://news.mt.co.kr/mtview.php?no=2016060214131625225&type=1>

²³ O, “Korean woman, unjustly imprisoned.”

²⁴ Ko Söngp'yo, “Meksik'o hanin yösöng...chintcha ögurhan oksariönne [A Korean Woman in Mexico.... It was truly an unfair imprisonment],” *JoongAng Ilbo*, October 7, 2016. <https://news.join.com/article/20690803>

²⁵ O Sejung, “Meksik'o noraebang chongöbwön-tül 'han yöngsa ttaemune...' vs. oegyobu 'yöngsa choryök' [Mexican karaoke employees: ‘It’s because of the Korean Consul’ vs. Foreign Ministry: ‘The Consul provided assistance’],” *Daum News*, June 7, 2016, <https://news.v.daum.net/v/20160607040506781>

²⁶ “Rescatan a seis víctimas de trata en DF,” *UnoTV*, January 17, 2016, <https://www.unotv.com/noticias/estados/distrito-federal/detalle/rescatan-a-seis-victimas-de-trata-en-df-144595/>

²⁷ “Mafia coreana sigue operando prostíbulos,” *Televisa*, January 19, 2016, <https://noticieros.televisa.com/mexico-df/mafia-coreana-sigue-operando-prostibulos/>

²⁸ “I’m Korean, and I speak Spanish.”

Chapter Three

A Korean Renacimiento: Korean Descendants in Mexico and the Making of a Global Diaspora

Introduction

On June 26, 2016, a characteristically hot day in Mérida, Mexico, the Association of Korean Descendants in Yucatán (CORYUC, Asociación de Descendientes Coreanos en Yucatán) commemorated 111 years of Korean immigration to Mexico. With the financial support of the South Korean government, around one hundred Korean descendants, as well as embassy officials, Korean American missionaries, and a few recent Korean migrants, gathered in a local banquet hall to remember the struggles of the Koreans who had arrived as contract laborers to the henequén haciendas of Yucatán in 1905.

Genny Chans Song, a 67-year-old CORYUC board member and the director of the Commemorative Museum of Korean Immigration in Mérida, began the event by gesturing toward the large banner behind her, which was emblazoned with both the Mexican and South Korean flags. She welcomed the audience with an emotional speech dedicated to her maternal grandparents and paternal grandfather, who were among the 1,033 Korean men, women, and children who came to the Yucatán in 1905.¹ She described the brutal labor and horrible working conditions endured by Koreans on the haciendas as they stripped the spiny henequen leaf and processed it into a durable fiber that was the Yucatán peninsula's primary cash crop from 1880 to 1915 (see Levy 2012; Wells and Joseph 1996). She also reminded the audience of their ancestors' devotion to the Korean *patria* (homeland). With the practiced and assured cadence that came from more than a decade of giving tours as museum director, she told the story of Koreans in Mexico as the tragic separation of sojourners from the place where they truly belonged. Though their Korean ancestors had intended to return to the Korean peninsula after finishing their contracts, history unfolded otherwise. They had arrived in Mexico just months before the signing of the Japan-Korea Treaty of 1905 that made Korea a protectorate of the Japanese Empire, depriving Korea of its sovereignty and outlawing state-sanctioned emigration. Formal annexation of the peninsula soon followed in 1910, and it became impossible to return to their beloved home. Yet Koreans in Mexico continued to support the independence cause from afar, sending regular donations to the Provisional Government in Shanghai and training their young men for what they saw as an inevitable military confrontation with the Japanese colonial government. Today, according to Genny, their descendants carried on that legacy. "We never forgot the mother country [*Nunca nos olvidamos la madre patria*]," she shouted, before leading the audience in the traditional Korean cheer: "*Manse, manse, manse!*"²

After Genny's speech, there was a lull as a volunteer fumbled with a laptop computer in order to start a PowerPoint presentation with the words to the Korean national anthem, written out phonetically in roman letters, for the audience to sing along. We then listened to speeches from CORYUC's president and the evening's special guest: Jang Jae-yoon, a South Korean diplomat stationed in Mexico City. Unlike Genny's speech, which stressed the historical conditions of displacement and Korean devotion to the homeland, Mr. Jang emphasized the importance of Korean descendants in South Korea's overall globalization strategy, rattling off statistics that showed the growing density of economic ties between the two nations. According to Mr. Jang's speech, South Korea-Mexico trade increased from 4 billion USD in 2000 to 17.5 billion USD in 2015. South Korea is Mexico's sixth largest trading partner, and Mexico is South Korea's largest trading partner in Latin America. Acknowledging "the sacrifices of our ancestors

who arrived in Mexico 111 years ago,” he ended his speech by stressing the importance of Korean descendants as transpacific bridge-builders between South Korea and Mexico: “It is my desire that the community of Korean descendants continues to play a great role in carrying out your activities in diverse areas of employment in order to find a closer relationship between Korea and Mexico.”



Figure 1. 111 years of immigration commemoration event. June 26, 2016. Photo by author.

During the meal that followed the speeches, I chatted with Mr. Jang in Korean about the relationship between South Korea and the Korean diaspora. Mr. Jang compared Korean descendants to other overseas Korean communities in the United States, Japan, Russia, and China, noting that Koreans in Mexico were unique because they were especially racially mixed and culturally assimilated. In light of these challenges, Mr. Jang enthusiastically described the cultural programming provided for Korean descendants by the South Korean government: annual summer “youth homecoming” trips to Seoul, access to special scholarships for Korean language study and educational training, and a sizeable budget for cultural events in Mérida. Yet Mr. Jang became dejected when he remembered that the Korean descendants still did not know the words to the Korean anthem. “And the PowerPoint wasn’t even written in *han’gŭl*!” he added sadly. Pondering the apparent failure of the descendants to adequately perform the anthem in Korean, he asked rhetorically, with a sigh: “If you draw lines on a pumpkin (*hobak*), does it become a watermelon (*subak*)?”

Could “drawing lines”—the kinds of cultural programming Mr. Jang described—transform a pumpkin into the watermelon he so desired? Mr. Jang’s comments hint at a broader dilemma at the heart of the construction of the global Korean diaspora, as the South Korean state increasingly seeks out symbolically significant though historically ignored groups in Mexico, Cuba, Kazakhstan, and Russia, extending their attention beyond larger and more prosperous populations. Can these Korean descendants—who left the Korean peninsula in the first half of the 20th century, long before the founding of either modern Korean state—be integrated into the South Korean global diaspora? At stake is the dominant ideology of Koreanness, which posits a relationship to Korean blood, not territory, as its defining characteristic. This genealogical

belonging is why Korean descendants can claim membership as part of the *minjok*, or the ethnic nation, a deterritorialized conceptualization of Koreanness that unites Koreans in both Koreas and across the diaspora, undergirding the “imagined community” of Korean global dispersal. Indeed, the South Korean government invokes ethnic kinship to explain why they invest in Korean descendants, who are sometimes labeled *kimin*—an abandoned peoples in a desolate land (H.J. Park 2006, 146). in need of the largess of the now-prosperous South Korean nation or their more “successful” diasporic kin in the Global North. Nevertheless, the (in)ability of Korean descendants to perform a legible variety of Koreanness has led some South Korean bureaucrats, diplomats, and other culture workers to doubt if Korean descendants in Mexico can—or should—be accepted as Korean at all.

Against this pervasive sense of anxiety regarding authenticity and belonging, Korean descendants in the second, third, fourth, and fifth generations continue to claim and contest dominant notions of Korean identity and diaspora. Pumpkin or watermelon, Mexican or Korean, Korean descendants in Mérida and Mexico City demonstrated numerous ways in which Koreanness shaped their subjectivity and life courses. Many people told me stories about their families—a recipe for *kuksu* passed down through the generations; an uncle’s penchant to sing in Korean when drunk; a grandmother’s memories of her Korean childhood. Others explained how non-Korean Mexicans reacted to their strange surnames or perceived phenotypical differences. I met numerous people who were nicknamed “chino” or “china”—*apodos* (nicknames) that they accepted or rejected to varying degrees. And lastly, descendants described how they expressed their Koreanness—by studying the Korean language, engaging with Korean popular culture, attending descendant community events, and investigating family genealogies.

There are no accurate statistics on the number of Korean descendants, which range from 5,000 (which is probably too low) to 25,000 (which is probably too high). However, it is fair to say that of the number of people who can trace their roots to the 1905 migrants, only a small percentage are still actively involved in official descendant organizations. Indeed, as one CORYUC member noted, descendant associations consist of “*asociados*”—members who are active in the community—and “*invitados*”—those who only attend holiday parties and commemorative events. Still, many descendants assert the importance of their Korean identity, spending a considerable amount of time studying the Korean language, learning about Korean culture, or connecting with other descendants.

This chapter investigates how and why these descendants, relatively distant from their migratory past, continue to identify as Korean. It analyzes how descendants rearticulate Koreanness in a moment of increasing economic, cultural, and political contact between South Korea and Mexico—ties that have shifted local meanings of “Koreanness” and, by extension, shaped new imaginations of diasporic belonging. In particular, I argue that what it means to be Korean in Mexico occurs in relation to a history of displacement, the politics of race and migration in Mexico, and South Korea’s own re-fashioning as a globally ascendant and technologically advanced nation. I emphasize the active role of the South Korean state in managing their diaspora abroad—particularly through techniques of gathering and centralization such as Korean-language scholarships, homeland trips, and other programs that bring Korean descendants to South Korea or inculcate specific ways of being Korean. These technologies call attention to the process through which Korean descendants form subjectivities that can be called “diasporic”—the feelings of being Korean that are connected not only to intimate histories of family migration, but also to the global policies and diasporic bureaucracies of the Republic of Korea and the densifying economic and cultural connections between Asia and Latin America. I

argue that the rising cultural influence and legibility of South Korea—and Asia more broadly—in Mexico is a key factor that shapes how descendants narrate their link to their Korean heritage. At the same time, as Korean descendants claim Koreanness, they contest preexisting notions of diaspora, ethnic essentialism, and cultural performance. Ongoing inter-subjective transformations among Korean descendants speak to different possibilities of diasporic belonging beyond ontological blood inheritance or a performative marker of South Korea's global success.

Throughout this chapter, I stress the diversity of points of view to show that the meanings of diaspora are constantly negotiated and in flux. Therefore, rather than assuming that all Koreans, by nature of a shared ethnic or cultural heritage, are *a priori* a “community,” this chapter analyzes when community is invoked and how the discourse of community becomes mobilized. My exploration of being Korean in Mexico emphasizes that these diasporic subjectivities and communities are always plural—that attempts to manage diasporic identity also engender counterpublic or alternative ways of being that fall outside recognized paradigms of nation, culture, and belonging. These “alternative social projects,” to use Elizabeth Povinelli's (2011) term, are emergent, indeterminate, and often contradictory. And yet the affect that propels them—a deep curiosity about family origins, a longing for a lost homeland, a place beyond the horizon of ordinary life—contains a potentiality that challenges preexisting configurations of nation and belonging.

Situating Mexico in the Global Korean Diaspora

Following decades of relative uninterest in the fate of overseas Koreans, the formation of the Overseas Korean Foundation (OKF) in 1997 and revised citizenship laws, such as the Overseas Korean Act in 1999, marked the South Korean government's increasing commitment to envisioning the broader Korean diaspora as an extension of itself (Park and Chang 2005). As South Korean popular and academic interest in diasporic histories has grown, a steady stream of South Korean museum exhibits, documentaries, television specials, movies, and journalistic accounts have represented the 1905 migration to Mexico as a tragic history of suffering and loss. These cultural productions by-and-large depict the descendants of these migrants as an impoverished group in need of the largess of the now-prosperous South Korean nation, whose contemporary compassion toward their long-forgotten diasporic kin confirms its global ascendancy and its status as the rightful heir of the Korean ethnic nation. As in the case of the Korean Chinese returnees to South Korea studied by Hyun Ok Park (2015), the language of “reparation politics” is at the heart of this new formation of transnational Korea. “Reparation politics constitutes the ethnic and national body as a site of constructing an alternative community in a transnational form,” Park argues, and it “figures the wish to heal wounds of the past and to imagine a new homogenous whole as a timeless expression of ethnic homogeneity” (98).

“Repairing” a broken ethnic-national body requires the state to recognize the suffering of Korean migrants in Mexico and reaffirm their status as members of the ethnic nation, thereby imagining a “new homogenous whole”—a transnationally linked global Korea, with the South Korean state at the center. These projects of reparation often coincide with major commemoration efforts, such as the centennial anniversary of Korean migration to the U.S. and Mexico celebrated in 2003 and 2005, respectively (Jo 2006). More recently, during the global commemoration of the March 1, 1919 movement, the South Korean government recognized select descendants of Korean migrants to Mexico as “Independence patriots” (*tongnip*

yugongja)—diasporic forefathers of the nation who contributed to the anti-colonial independence effort and therefore the establishment of the postcolonial state.³

Korean descendants in Mexico, then, are made symbolically significant in the construction of global Korea, but only if they accept the role relegated to them by the official narrative of Korean migration to Mexico—that of an undesired emigration that led to suffering, stagnation, and, eventually, cultural amnesia. According to Korean and Korean American missionaries and culture workers, Korean descendants were like long-lost kin welcomed back into a prosperous family. One of my interviewees, a Korean American missionary in Mérida named Paul Yoon, likened Korean descendants in Mexico to the biblical parable of the prodigal son, who ran away from his father's house after demanding an early inheritance, only to return home after spending all his money and suffering in a far-away land.⁴ The only difference was that this particular prodigal son not come home on his own. As Pastor Yoon explained, he had relocated to Mérida in the early 2000s because he had been so emotionally moved by stories of the suffering of the early Korean migrants who had labored on the henequén haciendas and been abandoned in a desolate land. Without the phenotypical, cultural, linguistic, and other typical markers of Koreanness, Korean descendants were severed not only from their cultural heritage, but the global ascendancy of South Korea: "My work is helping descendants find their roots and find success by helping them connect with their forgotten Korean blood inheritance (*han'guk-ŭi p'itchul*).” Supported by a large Korean American church in Los Angeles, Pastor Yoon had started offering free Korean language classes to descendants at the Commemorative Museum of Korean Immigration in Mérida. Yet in recent years, Pastor Yoon described an increasing sense of frustration toward his work and the descendant community, and he explained how his thinking had changed. "To say an obvious truth, most Korean descendants are not distinguishable from Mexicans anymore," he clarified. "So for Mexicans, if they choose to have a Korean consciousness, then they are Koreans. It's hard to say a Korean descendant is a real Korean just because they have Korean blood. If they do not choose to recognize their Korean roots, they are not Koreans."

If Pastor Yoon had come to the Yucatán because of the lure of diasporic kinship imagined through descent and lineage, he had now shifted to a different understanding of Koreanness based on what he called "Korean consciousness." He complained that his students neither attended class consistently nor regularly completed their homework, a fact he attributed to Mexican culture, which, according to him, does not place a high value on education. He used this fact to argue that his students were no longer "true Koreans" because they were not reflecting "true Korean values," which he defined as an emphasis on education as the best path to future success. He reflected wistfully on his own children, who had attended prestigious universities and now had successful careers in the United States. He explained, "For Koreans and Americans, education is the best way for immigrants to achieve their dreams."

Pastor Yoon's rhetorical distancing between "true Koreans" and Korean descendants—and the culturalist elaborations to describe this disjuncture—highlights the stratifications of race, class, and nation that are at the heart of the construction of the global Korean diaspora, which valorizes groups such as Korean Americans as "human capital" while pitying Korean descendants as lost subjects in need of repair. Indeed, South Korea's management of their diaspora enshrines hierarchical relationships among different diasporic populations, favoring "investment populations," namely "English-speaking, international professionals" (Park and Chang 2005), over Koreans in less desirable locations. The Overseas Korean Act (1997) extended "quasi-citizenship rights" such as the right to work, permanent residency, and property

ownership to the descendants of former South Korean nationals, which include the majority of ethnic Koreans living in the United States and Canada. Those who left the Korean peninsula before 1948—which include Koreans in Mexico—were excluded from these rights.⁵

By analyzing the gaps and margins of diaspora, as well as the uneven positionings of different diasporic groups, my research resonates with a growing body of literature on contemporary diasporas that emphasizes its hierarchical compositions, as nation-states increasingly intervene in managing their diasporas abroad (Shukla 2003; Louie 2004; Shefer 2006; Gamlen, Cummings, and Vaaler 2019). By placing Korean descendants within the context of a global diaspora, I argue that Korean descendants reveal how emergent global stratifications condition the expression of diasporic subjectivity, which erupts in specific—and sometimes unexpected—historical times and spaces (see Chan 2015). Instead of a unidirectional telos of loss from homeland to place of resettlement, I focus on moments of *diasporic connection and disconnection* to explore the contingencies of “essentialized” identities and origins. Diasporic connection, I argue, must be situated within a broader historical and sociopolitical context: the South Korean government’s renewed interest in managing its diasporic population as part of a larger project of globalization; new emergent forms of cosmopolitan multiculturalism circulating in Mexico; and the rise of network technologies—especially the Internet, which has fueled the explosive popularity of South Korean popular culture. These twenty-first century global connectivities graft onto existing familial and community relationships, providing a foundational weight to previously sidelined identities.

Yet diaspora moments also entail *disconnection*—the discontinuities, interruptions, and uneven power relations as different actors contest the meanings and significance of diasporic identity and community. Conflicting notions of descent and community pervade interactions among descendants, recent Korean migrants, and South Korean government workers, sometimes leading to misunderstandings and conflict that reveals the tensions and hierarchies of diasporic belonging. By examining the contingencies of diaspora within localized concepts, questions, and concerns, I argue that connection involves affective and embodied moments of disidentification, misrecognition, and refusal at the nexus of the contradictions of “global Korea.”

Un Renacimiento Coreano?

Since the early 2000s, Koreans in Mexico have experienced what one young fourth-generation descendant called a “renacimiento”—the rebirth of Korean identity and community. Some descendants explained how their enthusiasm for Korean popular culture—music, television dramas, and fashion—revitalized their interest in their heritage. Still others described changes in Mexican national culture—a growing acceptance of ethnic diversity and valorization of global cosmopolitanism—that made it easier to be proud of Korean identity. Most of my informants dated this cultural renaissance to 2005, when a celebration of the centennial of Korean immigration to Mexico led to the formalization of ties between Korean descendant organizations in Mexico—including the Association of Korean Descendants in Yucatán (CORYUC, Asociación de Descendientes Coreanos en Yucatán) and Association of Korean Descendants (Asociación Descendientes Coreanos de la Ciudad de México) in Mexico City—and the Overseas Korean Foundation (OKF). One descendant living in Mérida described how 2005 was “the moment when the community formed.” Although she had grown up “know[ing] that we were different,” it wasn’t until 2005 that she learned to be proud of her Korean heritage:

Because everyone was really happy. During the celebrations everyone came together

because there were parties, there were dances, there was commemoration, there were presents...Many people became excited and attended, and they wanted to visit Korea...It truly felt like a community.

This year-long celebration included events across Mexico, though the epicenter of the centennial was Mérida, where the Overseas Korean Foundation and the Ministry of Veteran Affairs were key financial supporters in the renovation and rebranding of the former CORYUC headquarters into the Commemorative Museum of Korean Immigration, transforming a derelict building acquired by Koreans in 1934 into a representation of Korean identification and heritage in the heart of Mérida.

The transformation of the CORYUC building into a museum that memorializes the past, and the frequent invocations of the history of Korean migration during CORYUC events, gestures toward the rhetorical importance of the past as a foundation that unites diasporic Koreans across the Americas and to the homeland. Yet 2005 was also an important year in the South Korean state's growing interest in Latin American investment and development. That is, situating the South Korean government's interest in managing its diasporic population within a broader historical and sociopolitical context that has thickened the relationships between Asia and Latin America suggests that its diasporic investments also index a larger shift in South Korea's global foreign policy. For example, in 2005 Mexico and South Korea signed the Strategic Partnership for Common Prosperity in the 21st Century, which rhetorically referenced the 1905 migration as the origins of Mexico-South Korean friendship. The strategic partnership utilized "the occasion of the centennial of the first Korean immigration to Mexico" to announce "a new era of mutual cooperation...a joint statement with the ambitious vision of a long-term partnership with a broad agenda for cooperation."⁶ The centennial, and the history of Korean migration to Mexico, were therefore also linked to the imperatives of twenty-first century economic development.

In Mexico City, where commemorative activities occurred though on a smaller scale and with less visibility, descendants pointed to the sudden appearance of Korean migrants in Mexico City as a key turning point—from only about 2,000 South Korean nationals residing in Mexico in the mid-1990s to nearly 20,000 in 2000. Descendants found themselves fielding questions from Mexican neighbors, friends, and co-workers who previously "couldn't distinguish any countries in Asia," in the words of Miguel, a 47-year-old descendant who vividly remembered the influx of Korean migrants to Mexico City:

A friend who was not a Korean descendant told me, hey, I want to know Zona Rosa, I want to know Korea. And I said, what are you talking about? He didn't know if I was Chinese, Japanese, Korean, in fact, he always called me "el chino" ... With my wife we went to have dinner and get to know [Zona Rosa]. Before there was one Korean restaurant, and now there are a hundred. And more Koreans keep coming to Mexico.

The influx of new Korean migrants, the establishment of a Korean ethnic enclave in Zona Rosa, and the revitalization of Korean ethnic associations led to a corresponding "renacimiento" in Mexico City. Interlocutors described the pleasure of discovering new Korean restaurants or their amazement that other Mexicans were not only aware of Korea, but were actively interested in Korean popular culture such as television dramas, movies, and music. Reflecting back on the last twenty years, Miguel explained that "everything had changed." Before, when he told people that

his last name was Korean, most Mexicans had never even heard of the country. Now, he said with a sly smile, “they are jealous.”

Despite the growth of the Korean migrant population in Mexico, interactions between resident migrants and descendants are, for the most part, very limited. In Mérida, where there are very few recent migrants, the lack of resident-descendant relations is not as visible an issue. In Mexico City, however, descendants expressed sadness or irritation at the fact that recent Korean migrants did not recognize them as Korean or were not interested in forging bonds across groups. Korean descendants maintain their own descendant association that is connected to, but separate, from the Korean-speaking ethnic association. They come together only occasionally, for holidays such as Lunar New Year or commemoration events. And even at these events, descendants and recent migrants rarely interact.

For example, on May 1, 2018—Labor Day in Mexico and Children’s Day in South Korea—Koreans in Mexico City came together for the Korean Sports Festival, an annual event held at a local sports venue. With high-profile sponsorships by Korean companies like Kia and Samsung as well as Mexican companies such as Aeroméxico, the festival offered lavish prizes such as refrigerators, laptop computers, an automobile, and round-trip flight tickets from Mexico to South Korea that drew the excited participation of nearly 1,200 people. The full day of events included tug-of-war, relay races, and the hotly anticipated soccer tournament. The event’s motto—“Doing Together, Mexico! Living More Closely Together, Korean Community! [*Hamkke-hanŭn meksik'o! Tō put'ō sanŭn hanin sahoe!*]”—spoke to the desire for the Sports Festival to build community and solidarity across different groups.



Figure 2. Korean descendants participating in the 2018 Korean Sports Festival in Mexico City.
Photo by author.

While the goal of the Sports Festival was to bring the community together, the spatial layout of the event also provided a visual reminder of the boundaries between the heterogeneous groups that comprise Korean community in Mexico. Encircling the large soccer field where the events took place was a series of white tents, each distinguished by banners representing groups such as various Korean Protestant churches, the Korean community police, South Korean Embassy employees, or the Korean Golf League, with each group wearing brightly colored t-

shirts or baseball caps designating their respective identity. For instance, when I arrived at the Sports Festival with the Korean Presbyterian Church of Mexico City, I was given a blue-and-white striped shirt and an orange baseball cap to label my affiliation.

The only tent with a banner written in Spanish was the Association Mexico Korea of the 21st Century (Asociación México Corea Siglo XXI), translated underneath into Korean as *Hanin huson hoe*, or Korean Descendants Organization. When I told other members of the Korean Presbyterian Church that I was going to the Korean Descendants Organization tent to greet some interlocutors, one woman expressed surprise that Korean descendants fell within the scope of my research. Indeed, I often observed that Korean descendants and more recent migrants seemed to engage in a form of parallel play, in which the groups occupied the same space but rarely interacted. Ethnicity, then, did not lead to automatic solidarity among groups, and the heightened expectations of recognition from fellow *paisanos* often led to misunderstanding and frustration on both sides.

Both recent migrants and Korean descendants described language as the most significant barrier between groups, since recent migrants were not necessarily fluent in Spanish, and Korean descendants do not usually speak Korean. Even at large community events such as the Sports Festival, all the announcements and speeches were in Korean, with Spanish translations provided only sporadically and often as an afterthought—a cause of frustration for many descendants. Describing her experiences at Korean community events that brought together recent migrants and descendants, one 25-year-old descendant named Elena complained that she rarely understood what was going on or couldn't understand the speeches or announcements: "We are in Mexico, and so they [the recent migrants] have to make an effort to at least translate, though they can't speak Spanish well." This was especially the case because Elena felt that recent migrants didn't support her attempts to practice or speak Korean. She told me a story about when she had gone with some non-descendant friends to a Korean grocery store and attempted to greet the owner in Korean. The owner, with an icy stare, rudely ignored her, embarrassing her in front of friends. Such incidents made some descendants feel ambivalent about claiming Koreanness, especially in places like Zona Rosa, which became a site that reminded them of not only Korea, but also their distance from it.

Another descendant pointed to broader tensions among recent migrants and descendants, explaining that recent migrants for the most part ignored or were uninterested in getting to know descendants:

We [descendants] have to go and do it [introduce ourselves]. Otherwise they [recent Korean migrants], I believe that they would not even realize that we are there. It's ugly because it shouldn't be this way. These events are precisely so that we can come together. It's difficult, to go up to every single person and introduce yourself. I mean, of course it's possible to do so, but it shouldn't be like this. They should make the events more united, with more *convivencia*.

A term that came up again and again across my interviews, *convivencia* is a word that literally means "coexistence" or "living together." At times, it was used as a synonym for "hanging out"; alternatively, it expressed a desire for a common sense of shared culture and togetherness. When my interlocutors expressed the desire for more *convivencia* with recent Korean migrants, they referred to an everyday sense of being together, the quotidian experience of crossing paths, becoming familiarized with one another, and learning to live together in the most mundane sense

of the word. However, for the most part, recent migrants and descendants do not “hang out.” Unlike descendants, who live scattered throughout Mexico City, a megalopolis of over 20 million people, recent migrants live together in an ethnic cluster within a few blocks of each other in Zona Rosa, work together in similar shops, factories, or in the ethnic economy, and worship together at similar Protestant churches. In contrast, the occasions in which descendants and recent migrants interacted were anything *but* mundane—large-scale ceremonial or commemorative events that were highly symbolic to the participants but could not compensate for the repeated contact that characterizes the Korean ethnic enclave. *Convivencia*—a sense of intimacy and closeness that would come from repeated quotidian encounters—remains an elusive goal.

In fact, some recent Korean migrants resented the suggestion that a shared ethnicity would automatically lead to friendship or even recognition. One 23-year-old woman named Julia, whose family had moved to Mexico when she was in elementary school, explained:

These days there are many Mexicans that are interested in Korea, because of *hallyu*, you know, the Korean Wave. But for us, K-pop doesn't mean anything, there is some Korean music that I like, but it's like nothing special to connect over. ... I don't like it when Mexicans come and ask me about K-pop, I don't know anything about K-pop. ... Korean descendants are like them. They are interested in Korea, but they don't really know much and I am not a Korean teacher, I speak Spanish fluently and I have my own friends from my school and my work, does that make sense? Even my Korean friends, we connect because we have similar life experiences. I don't connect to people who just came from Korea, who have no experience living abroad. Most of my friends are like me, people who lived outside of Korea for at least ten years, they came here in middle school or elementary school or something. So descendants, it's not easier to be friends with them just because they are interested in Korea.

Setting herself apart from both “people who just came from Korea” as well as descendants, who she described as people who “don't really know much” and are more like other Mexicans with an interest in Korean culture, Julia insisted that it was “similar life experiences” and not Korea itself that connected her to others. Stressing that she was “not a Korean teacher,” Julia resented the implication that she was responsible for teaching others about Korean culture or that she would naturally feel connected to Mexicans with an interest in Korea. Julia expressed exhaustion at feeling like she constantly represented Korea because of her phenotypical difference—experiences that set her apart from Mexicans of Korean descent. As her comments suggest, the variability and heterogeneity that characterizes the experiences of Koreans in Mexico caution against assumptions that shared ethnicity automatically leads to solidarity or affinity.

The Korean “renacimiento” in Mexico is not simply about the rediscovery of a family lineage or cultural heritage, or even the growth of an integrated ethnic community due to the presence of recent migrants from Korea. It is also intimately tied to South Korea's rising global reputation—the growing popularity of Korean popular culture in Mexico, or even the sheer fact that other Mexicans know about Korea and have positive associations with the country. At descendant community events, I frequently heard community leaders or invited speakers repeat the familiar story of South Korea's meteoric economic rise—from the ashes of the Korean War (1950-1953) to the 11th largest economy in the world by the end of the twentieth century—as an aspirational tale of success. Speaking at a commemorative event in 2018, one embassy official

described Korea's lack of natural resources and its disadvantaged geographical location between larger superpowers. Despite these challenges, he said, "Korea has found its own place. ... Our story is that with hard work, education, and sacrifice, everything is possible."

This narrative of Korean rapid development and global success is a key narrative frame through which some Korean descendants come to articulate their own perception of ethnicity, subjectivity, and belonging. In other words, Korean descendants seek not only an authentic connection with an ancestral past, but are oriented by such narrative frames toward distant and idealized dreams of global futurity that have become associated with South Korea. For example, Tomás, a Yucatecan descendant in his early thirties, has capitalized on Mexicans' increasing awareness of South Korea, opening a successful "K-pop and J-pop market" store in a local shopping mall that sells K-pop and J-pop posters, CDs, Korean face masks, and anime-character shirts and stuffed animals. Alongside Tomás' pragmatic recognition of the growing profitability of selling Asia in Mexico, however, was a more personal story toward self-acceptance. Tomás explained to me how he used to hide his Korean heritage when he was a child because of bullying and racist comments—a denial that damaged his relationship with his mother, who was half-Korean. Today, however, he embraced being Korean as "what makes me unique," and he proudly showed me how he had changed his name on Facebook to only his mother's Korean last name, completely dropping his father's Mexican last name. Tomás, who also attends Korean language classes, saw Korean language as a pathway toward future economic and social capital as well as a form of self-actualization that connected him to a family history of migration.

Often, the narrative of Korea's "economic miracle" invited comparison with Mexico's pace of development and became an outlet for descendants to express their frustration with their local contexts. For example, Sara, a 54-year-old descendant living in a middle-class suburb of Mexico City, told me how she had never been interested in her Korean heritage until about five years ago, when she became enamored with South Korean television dramas. She felt that her Korean ancestry allowed her to connect more closely to the characters, and she particularly enjoyed learning about different elements of contemporary Korean life—we spent much of our conversation talking about South Korea's high-rise buildings, modern transportation infrastructures, and fast-paced lifestyles. In contrast, she complained about the police corruption, lack of job opportunities for her son, and the inefficiencies of government bureaucracy in Mexico. When I suggested that South Koreans also disliked their government bureaucracy and struggled with high youth underemployment rates, Sara insisted that I didn't understand how serious the problems were in Mexico. She continued:

Mexico, it's very much like this. The people don't want to put forth any effort at all, they all want things to be easy. The parents of my grandfather, they came here to find a better life, make money, and return to Korea. ... We would have been happier if they never left their homeland [*su tierra*].

Sara believed that she would have been happier in an alternative timeline in which her ancestors had stayed in Korea—a country that she mostly knew from television dramas and descendant community events that presented a glamorous image of South Korean prosperity. Reflecting on the differences between Mexico and South Korea, she explained how Mexico was still behind ("estamos atrasados") because of a lack of ability to change, whereas South Korea had moved forward by embracing a rapid pace of change. While it is easy to criticize Sara's idealized image of Korea, I suggest that her perspective also shows an expanded worldview that demonstrates

how cultural imaginaries travel across relatively peripheral pathways of circulation, giving voice to social malaise. While Sara was one of few respondents whose re-connection to her Korean heritage led her to so stridently criticize Mexico, many of my other respondents expressed similar sentiments of how their embrace of Koreanness led them to feel out of place and out of time—to speculate in the past-conditional temporality of “what could have been” (see Lowe 2015). In addition to the local revitalization of ethnic associations and ethnic spaces such as Zona Rosa, the Korean “renacimiento” also gave birth to new configurations of the local and the global across the expanded cultural landscapes of global Korea.

Returning “Home”: Global Travel to South Korea

All of the younger descendants under the age of 40 that I interviewed had visited South Korea under the auspices of the Overseas Korean Foundation, either on 10-day homecoming trips or as recipients of scholarships to study Korean language or other technical skills. In fact, among younger descendants active in the community, it is difficult to find someone who had not gone to South Korea at least once, an experience that is almost like a rite of passage among the descendants with whom I interacted. My interlocutors described their trips as life-changing experiences that shifted their perception of South Korea as well as their subjective sense of self. Indeed, as Korean descendants negotiate and articulate their own conceptualizations of Korean identity and belonging, they do so in relation to diaspora policies articulated by the South Korean state. These policies—which include financial support for the ethnic associations and community events discussed in the previous section as well as homecoming trips—work in alignment with the state’s globalization and development goals to have a decisive influence among Mexicans of Korean descent today. Specifically, the descendants of the migrants who arrived in Mexico in 1905 left from the Korean Empire, a state that ceased to exist in 1910 with Japanese annexation, and today, there are two states that exist on the Korean peninsula. However, all of my Korean descendant interlocutors claimed a sense of affiliation with the Republic of Korea and never with the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea, although there is no “natural” reason that the diaspora in Mexico should belong to one state or the other. I therefore argue that we must pay attention to the transpacific processes through which diasporic subjectivities are produced transnationally instead of assuming that such identities are spontaneous expressions of an essential link to the homeland.

Scholarships and homecoming trips are for the most part offered by the Overseas Korean Foundation (OKF), a division of the South Korean Ministry of Foreign Affairs that is primarily responsible for increasing engagement with overseas South Koreans and diasporic Koreans. In 1998, the OKF offered the first “motherland” tour to diasporic Koreans, though the first Mexicans of Korean descent did not participate until 2006, following the centennial of Korean migration to Mexico and the formalization of ties between various Korean descendant organizations in Mexico and the Overseas Korean Foundation.⁷ Since 2005, Korean descendants have also participated in other Korean-language scholarship programs or job training programs in primarily technical or trade-based subjects such as automobile machinery, cosmetology, and the culinary arts. These short-term trips to South Korea are intended to increase cultural exchange among South Korean and diasporic Korean youth, teach Korean culture and language, and increase the economic success of diasporic Koreans.

In order to obtain access to these trips, Korean descendants must prove or verify their Korean heritage. This can be a much more complicated process than it might seem at first glance, as one descendant explained:

When they knew that there was scholarship announcement, everyone said, *I want to go, I want to go!*—but many weren't even children of Koreans. ... The [South Korean] embassy says, you have to prove that you are Korean descendants. The embassy has a family tree, and this is how they eliminate a lot of people. When the Koreans arrived, the owners of the henequen haciendas took away their documents, they took away their visa, well, their passports, and they took away their identification papers. Therefore it's difficult, we don't have our great-grandfather's papers that say that he was Korean. But thanks to photographs, that was another option. Well, we don't have papers, but we do have photographs. How do you all know that he was Korean? Look at the photo, he has a Korean face!

As these comments suggest, the lack of official papers that would allow descendants to verify their Korean heritage meant that they had to rely on photographs to prove that their ancestors had “Korean faces.” But this reliance on photos of “Korean faces” was not always reliable; for example, one fifth-generation descendant told me she knew her great-grandfather had been “Asian,” but that it took years of research to confirm that her family was indeed Korean. “The Korean line is very distant,” she explained. “Also, there was also Chinese migration here, and we had this doubt, this uncertainty if we were Korean descendants or Chinese descendants.” This distance from the migratory past, as well as the challenges of “proving” one's Korean ancestry, led to the circulation of rumors that Mexicans of Chinese or Japanese descent were applying for and winning scholarships for descendants, or even accusations that some descendants who participated in community events weren't really Korean at all.

This fundamental problem—deciding who was Korean, and according to what metrics—point to an omnipresent sense of loss that was repeated across nearly all my interviews, as well as a broader anxiety over being indistinguishable from other Mexicans who might be interested in traveling to Korea, but not be of Korean descent. As one interviewee said bluntly, “We are descendants, but we no longer have Korean physical features, we don't speak Korean, and we don't have Korean customs.” Without access to the usual markers that distinguish ethno-cultural groups, my interlocutors often made recourse to their own genealogical knowledge of Koreanness. Indeed, since I first began fieldwork among Korean descendants in Mexico in 2015, I have become familiar with photos of relatives or ancestors that show the existence of Korean features, passports written in *hanja*, and other documents that confirm the authenticity of a descendant's Koreanness. Without additional prompting, descendants would recite an exhaustive account of their family tree, always beginning with their ancestor who arrived in Yucatán in 1905. Of course, these recitations resulted from the fact that I was asking questions about Korean identity and community. But I also came to learn that the peculiarly detailed archival knowledge of my interviewees was related to the application process for scholarships and homecoming trips. Francisco, a 33-year-old descendant that lives in Mexico City, explained that his desire to go to Korea led him to investigate his own family history. “I had to verify my status as descendant to qualify,” and it was through this process that he learned the Korean names of his great-grandfather and grandmother. Distinguishing between himself and me, a Korean American woman with “Korean features,” Francisco argued that he needed to know every last detail of his family history in order to assert his belonging in a global Korean diaspora. “It would be easier for you,” he explained matter-of-factly. “It is clear you are Korean.”

It is important to note that these homecoming trips, scholarships, and job training

programs were only accessible to a narrow band of Korean descendants—young people under the age of 35 from middle-class backgrounds. Winning scholarships for Korean language study required submitting essays written in either English or Korean; some opportunities, like the OKFriends Youth Homecoming Camp, were available only to registered undergraduate students. In line with the localization strategy, the South Korean government targeted these descendants because their class and education background made them ideal Mexican citizens and thus, more likely to strengthen the relationship between South Korea and Mexico. At the same time, as Mexicans of Korean descent, my interlocutors described their trips to Korea as moments in which they became keenly aware of their social location within global hierarchies of nation, race, and economic development. That is, while these young adult Korean descendants were selected precisely because of their promising futures, being in Korea with other diasporic Koreans from different countries also provoked confrontations over complicated issues of racial difference, ethnic kinship, and cultural belonging.

In her analysis of a similar OKF “motherland tour” for adult Korean adoptees, anthropologist Eleana Kim describes how the cultural training provided by these camps “produce a conflicted sense of cultural belonging, often provoking feelings of inauthenticity and alienation—and sometimes active resistance” (60). Indeed, Kim highlights the disjuncture between adoptees’ desire to “come home” and the reality of living in South Korea, which is often “marked by perceived rejection, outright discrimination, and painful alienation” (68). However, unlike adoptees, who are seen as “productive links between South Korea and the global economy” (70), Korean descendants are more frequently framed as “lost” or non-affluent kin who need the help of the modern, advanced South Korean state. There is, therefore, a contradiction between descendants’ socioeconomic status in Mexico and their perceived location in the hierarchy of global Korea. For example, María, a descendant who had recently returned from taking cosmetology courses in South Korea, pointed out the disjuncture between her postsecondary education and professional career path in Mexico and the kinds of programs offered to descendants by the South Korean government:

They taught me [how to do] nails, cut hair, do perms. ... We went to museums and various temples, and I took Korean language and beauty classes. But look, here in Mexico, we studied in the Autonomous National University of Mexico (UNAM)...it is a world-class university.

While María greatly enjoyed the course and the opportunity to spend time in Korea, she distinguished between the kind of job training that she was offered and her professional class and educational status as a graduate of Mexico’s most prestigious university. While she liked giving manicures to friends and coworkers, she was adamant that cosmetology would certainly not become her profession. María was careful not to overtly criticize the OKF, but she did gently suggest that other kinds of programs—perhaps in global marketing or computer programming—might be more useful to descendants like her.⁸

My interlocutors also described getting to know other young diasporic Koreans as a highlight of the trip—an impactful experience that, in some cases, led to enduring friendships. For example, according to Carolina, a 27-year-old graphic designer living in Mexico City, “the best thing” about her homecoming trip was “meeting Koreans from all around the world, people from China, France, and the United States, all of them Korean descendants.” Meeting “people of the world,” in Carolina’s words, was an impactful experience that sparked her own passion for

travel, international food, and arts and design. However, some of my interlocutors felt that they were treated differently than other diasporic Koreans, especially in comparison to the warm treatment extended toward Koreans from Global North countries. For example, one descendant named Laura attributed the marginalization of Mexican and Cuban descendants to their lack of familiarity with both Korean and English. Many of the South Korean camp counselors, as Laura clarified, were undergraduate students who wanted to practice their English. She told me about a bad experience she had with one particular counselor who was supposed to be the Korean-Spanish translator but refused to speak in any language but English, marginalizing those descendants who couldn't understand English and were relying on this counselor for translations:

We [Mexicans of Korean descent] were assigned to a guy, a man that supposedly had lived in a couple Latin American countries, well, this is what he told me in English, because he didn't speak Spanish, only English, even though he had spent a lot of time in Latin American places, according to him. ... We understood that English, it is the global language. But we were in Korea, and this guy was the Korean-Spanish translator. It was pretty unpleasant.

Laura felt more judged on her inability to speak English than Korean, and she pointed out the irony that English, the "global language," was the prerequisite to full participation in the global Korean diaspora.

These stratifications also occurred in relation to race, color, and phenotype. Earlier, I mentioned Francisco, a descendant who felt that he needed to memorize his family's genealogical history to "prove" his Koreanness. Unlike Korean Americans and recent Korean migrants in Mexico, whose claims to Koreanness were hardly ever questioned, he pointed out that Korean descendants were not considered Korean unless they could prove otherwise. On his OKF homecoming trip, he told me he felt overlooked in contrast to diasporic Koreans "with Korean faces." While Francisco discussed how much he enjoyed his trip to Korea, he had also returned with a keen sense of the hierarchies of diaspora—that some diasporic populations were more valued than others. Concurring with Francisco, Silvia described the discrimination she faced during her own homecoming trip, which she felt most strongly during an event when attendees were "adopted" by local Korean families for the evening—discrimination she felt was related to her age, gender, and unmarried status. But, she pointed out, it was worse for the Cuban descendants who were darker-skinned:

The situation with them [the Cuban descendants] was different. Because they said that the wife of their "adopted father" disparaged them for the color of their skin. Because they were very tanned, darker [*más bronceadas, más morenas*], and they shunted them to the side. They felt really bad, in the words of the Cubans.

Silvia was uncomfortable to learn that her "light skin" made her more acceptable to the adoptive families, and she made parallels between Mexican and Korean preferences for women with lighter skin colors. In so doing, Silvia and other descendants pointed out that there was indeed an idealized South Korean diasporic subject—raised in the West, English-speaking, and therefore potential conduits of global capital. In contrast to the rhetoric of equal inclusion of all diasporic kin as members of global Korea, Korean descendants in Mexico and Cuba show how global hierarchies of race, class, language, and nation are embedded into dominant ideologies of

Koreanness and at times resist the assumptions through which their “reintegration” into the global Korean diaspora occurs. For third, fourth, and fifth generation Korean descendants, “homecoming” was not just about finding common roots, but also entailed uncomfortable reckonings with differential valorizations and power relations within the diaspora.

Conclusion: Diasporic Becomings

Korean descendants articulate diasporic belonging within the nexus of a transpacific exchange that maps onto existing social relations, power differentials, and global imaginaries. Instead of taking for granted the intrinsic bond between nation and diasporic peoples, the experiences of Korean descendants demonstrate the importance of analyzing how affinities are produced and how diaspora becomes an interceding tool in building—and contesting—ties of affiliation. These contestations occur within a broader framework of Mexico’s economic integration into transpacific infrastructures of exchange, shifting notions of cosmopolitanism and multiculturalism in Mexico, and the rising cultural influence and legibility of South Korea in Latin America more broadly. Indeed, the experiences of Korean descendants in Mexico suggest that diasporic subjectivity is not just about a migratory past or a nostalgic expression of longing, but is deeply linked to the perceived prestige, influence, and legibility of the homeland. For example, noting cynically that “it is not that aspirational to be Mexican,” one descendant observed that it was the growing influence of Korean popular culture, not an interest in “our shared history,” that led most third, fourth, and fifth generation descendants to claim Koreanness.

Yet other interlocutors told me that it was precisely Korean popular culture through which they came to be interested in the shared history of descendants. For example, Bom, a 21-year-old descendant living in Mexico City, was unique because her mother, a third-generation Korean descendant, had been particularly insistent in teaching her about her Korean heritage, even giving her a Korean first name. But, Bom explained, she had not taken a personal interest in her migratory past until she discovered a love for K-pop and Korean dramas. While Bom also defined Koreanness in relation to her familial relationships and participation in community events, it was the pleasure she derived from engaging with Korean transnational popular culture that ultimately compelled further investment in descendant community events. Bom’s notion of Koreanness, which she comprehended through her family and friend networks and her engagement with Korean transnational popular culture, shows how ethnicity becomes meaningful for Korean descendants as they engage with aspects of Korean globality, though often on their own terms. In this process, new forms of cultural circulation, epitomized by the popularity of K-pop and television dramas, are grafted onto existing familial and community relationships, shaping new social identities among Korean descendants.

As this chapter has suggested, there is an enormous diversity of perspectives and positionalities on the social location of Korean descendants within the broader Korean diaspora, even among Korean descendants themselves. The dominant narrative of Koreanness—in which being Korean is an ontological essence or ethnic consciousness that an individual either does or does not possess—fails to capture this multiplicity. The preoccupying question that presents Koreanness in binary terms—pumpkin or watermelon, in the words of the South Korean diplomat from my opening anecdote—is an impoverished understanding of belonging that largely occludes alternative forms of sociality, belonging, and knowledge already emergent among Korean descendants. Against an ontological definition of Koreanness, Korean descendants embody a diasporic subjectivity that travels co-constitutively with concepts, knowledge, and bodies—an itinerant process of belonging formation characterized by gaps and

elisions, rather than an unbroken line of genealogical plenitude from an originary homeland.

Indeed, many of my interlocutors told me deeply moving stories about how they came to understand their own relationship to their Korean heritage, even if they didn't know Korean history, language, or cultural traditions. For example, Brenda, a 37-year-old third-generation Korean descendant living in Mérida, admitted that she could not properly pronounce the Korean names of her great-grandparents and never learned to like *kimchi* or other Korean foods during her three months studying abroad in South Korea. She was also critical of some descendants' genealogical obsessions, pointing out that descendants who had a male ancestor were more likely to have kept a recognizably Korean last name, which meant that descendants who had Korean female ancestors more frequently faced accusations of inauthenticity. Brenda became emotional as she remembered the sensory and embodied experience of being in Korea, through which she came to realize, "Yucatecan of Korean descent, that is who I am":

You know that yell that Korean grandmothers make, like, *yah!* It's very distinct, and I never knew it was something Korean. I was in Korea, in Seoul, I was in the market, I think Namdaemun, and all the grandmothers were making the same sound, *yah! yah!* Oh, I loved it so much.

Primarily raised by her half-Korean grandmother, being in Korea allowed Brenda to clarify old memories and reinterpret her childhood as a Korean upbringing. After spending three months in Korea, Brenda admitted that she had barely learned the Korean language, but she had learned to code the sound of her grandmother's yell—in addition to other quotidian routines such as the way her grandmother folded clothing or her preference to separate food into small bowls—as evidence of an enduring Korean *habitus* that she had inherited. Now, as a mother to a two-year-old son, Brenda was deliberately attempting to replicate these habits in order to pass on these Korean traits to her own children. More than a verifiable genealogical lineage or an improved language skillset, Brenda argued that the sensorial and embodied experience of Koreanness was central to her diasporic subjectivity, which confirmed her identity first and foremost as a "Yucatecan of Korean descent"—a Mexican woman with Korean practices that connected her to loved ones now long gone as well as an interlocking network of diasporic Koreans she had met while studying in South Korea.

Focusing on these expressions of itinerant belonging—changing concepts of diasporic subjectivity that align less with a process of categorization than with what Stuart Hall might call "a matter of becoming" (1990: 225)—moves us toward a more capacious understanding of how diasporic attachments draw from narratives of the past as well as assert belonging in the future. These unruly lives in transit contest the desire for what Michelle Wright (2015) calls a "unified field theory" of diaspora—the hierarchical organization of fixed actors through which the chronological teleology of ethno-nation can be authenticated. Against official family trees, document verification, or even stable linear narratives of descent, Mexicans of Korean descent shared knotted, complicated stories that unfurl not only across the Pacific, but throughout the largely elided territories of the Americas. To close, I will share one such story that illustrates some of these itinerant pathways of belonging as told to me by Ana Park, a 56-year-old Korean descendant who lives in a middle-class neighborhood in the southern part of Mexico City.

Ana is third-generation and half-Korean, and her Korean features mean that genetically and genealogically, she is recognized as being relatively "close" to her Korean heritage among the descendant community. However, though her father was fully Korean and had been an

officer of the Mexico City Korean Association in the late 1980s, Ana grew up speaking only Spanish, with little knowledge about Korea, especially since her father was estranged from his parents. She knew only that her father had been born and raised in Mérida; that he had met her mother in the state of Veracruz while briefly working there; and had spent his adult years in Mexico City. Likening her father to a stopwatch whose only “ticking” was related to everyday routines, she stated that her father refused to talk about his upbringing or his family, or about his feelings in general. Indeed, her own interest in her heritage came from a chance encounter later in life. About ten years ago, she was in Mérida for a work conference when she saw an advertisement in a travel brochure for the Commemorative Museum of Korean Immigration. There, she met Genny Chans Song, also mentioned in my introductory anecdote, who immediately recognized the name of Ana’s father and her paternal grandparents. This act of recognition was profound. Ana realized that she was connected to another history in the Yucatán, one where her strange last name meant something to a broader community of people. After leaving the museum, she went into her car and sobbed. Thinking back to this experience, Ana explained, “It was a world that opened up. I realized how much I didn’t know, and then I realized that I had to know.”

Over the past ten years, Ana has devoted a significant amount of time to investigating her family history, meeting cousins and other relatives who still lived in Mérida and piecing together parts of the lives of her great-grandparents and grandparents. This meant reckoning with the aleatory roots and routes of her family tree, which included relatives and ancestors who had re-migrated from Mexico to Cuba and eventually, the United States. Ana showed me some precious family documents she had collected over the years, laying out an alternative archive of her own family’s history, one that was of little interest to the official history of Korean diaspora because of its many fissures and silences. She was especially excited to show me an envelope that she had found while going through some of her father’s materials in storage. The envelope—sent by her great-uncle Pedro, who had eventually settled in Flushing, New York—did not contain any letters: to my surprise, she opened the envelope and out fell dozens of cut-out postal stamps.



Figure 3. Stamps from letters exchanged between Ana and Pedro and photos from the siblings’ reunion in New York.

These were the remnants of a lifetime of correspondence kept between her grandmother Rosa and her great-uncle Pedro. The stamps, sent from various cities in Mexico, Cuba, and the United States, trace five decades of Rosa's and Pedro's itinerant journeys within Mexico, as well as Pedro's migration from Mexico to Cuba in 1921, and then from Cuba to New York following the Cuban Revolution. After nearly a lifetime apart, Ana and Pedro had been reunited once, in New York City in the 1980s. She explained that she hoped to find the letters that Rosa and Pedro had written to each other, to know their affective attachments and understand the commitments that they articulated despite a lifetime of distance. Carefully gathering the postal stamps back into the envelope, Ana gestured toward this speculative ghost of this itinerant archive—which points not eastward toward South Korea, but across the hemispheric cartography of the Americas—as an alternative source of diasporic belonging.

The heteropatriarchal structure of Korean global diaspora—as a series of generations emanating from one place, plotted across space and time in a linear chronology that connects back to South Korea—makes it nearly impossible to localize the itinerant voices of Rosa and Pedro in any meaningful way. Though Ana remains interested in collecting information to fill out her family tree, she also recognizes that such devotion to biological ancestry does not capture what really matters: her desire to reckon with complicated family histories of trauma and displacement, and to move toward a place of recognition, healing, and belonging. She has recently become more involved with the local Korean Descendants Association in Mexico City, in order to help others who share similar stories of secrecy and shame. When she was younger, Ana acknowledged, “Nothing happened that moved me about my family's past. But then, when I started to realize, I couldn't help but become involved.”

Managing the itinerant archive, especially at the limits of more traditional notions of diaspora, require Korean descendants to intuit their way into new forms of subjectivity and social lives. For Ana, being Korean in Mexico means “becom[ing] involved”: the mobilization of friendships and extended kin networks as well as a long-term investment in building community that gestures toward an understanding of diasporic belonging as dependent upon bonds of mutual reciprocity. Just as Genny helped her begin her journey of reckoning, Ana would also like to help other descendants become more involved—not only to be in community together, but to collectively come to understand their past history as displaced migrants. Beyond official histories and state-sanctioned documents, the itinerant archive and its attendant desires offer a different project of belonging that brings together narratives of family displacement and community solidarity.

¹ Unless noted otherwise, all interviews in this chapter were conducted in Spanish and transcribed to English.

² The literal translation of “manse” is “ten thousand years” or “long live Korea,” but the saying, as Rachel Min Park (2019) points out, “has taken on connotations that far surpass its literal translation. ... There are also instances of contemporary usage in which it is used to celebrate a collective national solidarity.” Boduerae Kwon, “On the Eve of March 1st: Imagining Peace in an Age of Violence,” trans. Rachel Min Park. Verso Blog, March 1, 2019, <https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/4255-on-the-eve-of-march-1st-imagining-peace-in-an-age-of-violence>.

³ Kim, Hochun. 2019. “Kugoe tongnip yugongja huson 97myŏng, imjŏng 100chunyŏn kinyŏm han'guk pangmun [97 Descendants of Overseas Independence Patriots, Visiting Korea for the Commemoration of the Centennial of the Provisional Government's Establishment].” *Yonhap News*. April 4. <https://www.yna.co.kr/view/AKR20190404027451503>. <https://www.yna.co.kr/view/AKR20190404027400503>

⁴ Interview conducted in Korean.

⁵ For the most part, this exclusion was targeted at Korean Chinese, who comprise a large percentage of the undocumented labor force in South Korea. Unlike Korean Chinese, Korean descendants in Mexico or Cuba are unlikely to migrate to South Korea in search of labor opportunities (Park and Chang 2005; H.O. Park 2017).

⁶ La Comisión México-Corea Siglo XXI, “La Construcción de una Asociación Estratégica entre México y Corea para el Siglo XXI: Visión y Agenda para la Cooperación,” 2005, 30. Translations are my own.

⁷ “History of OKFriends Homecoming Camp,” Overseas Korean Foundation, n.d. <<http://homepy.korean.net/~okfh/www/m01/history.htm>>; Ulises Park Lee, personal interview, August 17, 2017.

⁸ According to a South Korean government official, the OKF selected technical courses to offer to Korean descendants in Latin America because training in white-collar skills would require a higher level of proficiency in Korean and more pre-requisite classes. Informational interview, February 2, 2018.

Chapter Four

Transcendent Networks of Transnational Migration: The Hemispheric Church and Global Self-Making

Introduction

Every morning at 5:30AM, a few dedicated members of Together Korean Presbyterian Church of Mexico City gather to begin their day with an hour of dawn prayer (*saebyŏk kido*). On one cold, early Tuesday morning in November 2017, I found myself huddled in a group circle as the head pastor led us in worship. After singing a few hymns and listening to a short sermon on the Book of Job, we began a 30-minute session of dedicated prayer as the head pastor led us on a global itinerary of topics and themes—a fundraising campaign for a local seminary in Mexico City, the upcoming presidential election in Mexico, and wisdom for President Moon Jae-in of South Korea and President Donald Trump of the United States—as those in attendance shouted out their requests in a cacophony of unison.

“Lord, we lift up our mission partners in Chiapas and Yucatán,” the pastor shouted in Korean. “Protect Missionary Lee and Missionary Park, be with them as they share your Word with the Indigenous people of Mexico.”

Our circle rocked and swayed, echoing the request in a chorus of fervent voices.

“We pray for [our?] sister churches in Brazil and Costa Rica. We pray for the church in San José, who is searching for a dedicated pastor for their youth ministry.”

“Please, Father God, protect our youth!” shouted the woman next to me.

“Lord Jesus, be with the ill and infirm among our community. We pray for Deaconess Jang’s father, who is sick in Chicago. Please be with her and her family and let your healing power fall upon their family. We pray for the brother of Elder Kim, who will have a surgery in Chile. Guide the hands of the surgeons and grant Elder Kim’s brother a safe and speedy recovery.”

I mimed the prayers of those around me, my wordless lips moving silently, squeezing my eyes tightly shut, pressing my knees into the floor of the church sanctuary. Earlier this week, I had spoken with Deaconess Jang, a self-described “prayer warrior” (*kido yongsŏ*) who proudly told me that she had made a commitment to attend dawn prayer service every day for a whole calendar year. For Deaconess Jang, prayer was not merely a spiritual practice, but the vector through which the transnational and the transcendent merged, producing and maintaining a transnational intimacy between her small circle in Mexico City and other nodes in a densely knotted network that crisscrossed the globe. Through dedicated prayer, Deaconess Jang fulfilled some of her responsibilities in caring for her aging parents who lived in the United States and raising her two sons, including one who lived in South Korea. And the discipline required by the early morning prayer sessions, she explained, gave her the strength to endure the challenges of everyday life in Mexico City.

After dawn prayer service, I returned to my apartment around 7AM. In the stairwell, I ran into a neighbor, Jiyeon, a sarcastic woman in her mid-twenties. Jiyeon was on her way to work, and she was surprised to see me up and about so early in the day. I explained that I had gone to dawn prayer service that morning, and that I was returning home to hopefully take a nap. “Dawn prayer service!” Jiyeon exclaimed. She let out a short bark of a laugh. “I feel sorry for God. Every day at the crack of dawn, he has to listen to a bunch of shouting Koreans.”

Jiyeon does not go to church, having abandoned religion after high school, and she is not shy about sharing her antipathy—she despises the insistent invitations from other Korean women to attend. She also has a theory for why so many Koreans go to church, and it has nothing to do with faith, belief, religion, or even being a good person. “Most Koreans are weird bastards (*isanghan nom*),” she says bluntly. But that wasn’t the problem. “The problem with Koreans is that *they* are the strange ones, but they think the way they live is the way everyone else should live.” Korean church, Jiyeon thinks, encapsulates this dynamic—perhaps even gives it its *raison d’être*. It provides a form through which the peculiar practices of Koreans can take on a universalizing language.

*

This chapter examines the role of the Korean church in Mexico City. It does so from the vantage point of one church, Together Korean Presbyterian Church, and it draws from interviews and with congregants and pastoral staff. At the same time, this chapter includes perspectives from individuals who explicitly are *not* Christians or churchgoers. This reflects the fact that nearly all the Koreans I met—including those who were actively involved in the church, those who were loosely affiliated, and those who had never been involved or had left the church altogether—had something to say about the Protestant church and its role within the broader Korean community. In fact, the common aphorism, “Japanese come and open a business, the Chinese come and they open a restaurant, the Koreans come and they open a church,” speaks to the deep imbrication of Christianity and diasporic Korean consciousness.¹

A robust literature on Korean American Christianity has analyzed how the church functions as a key institution of Korean diasporic community—providing job training, visa assistance, and local information as well as a source of ethnic belonging and cultural affirmation (Ecklund 2006; Chong 1998; R. Kim 2006; S. Kim 2010; Kwon 2001; Min 2010). In the U.S., Korean immigrants and Korean Americans are overwhelmingly Christian—71% identified as Christian in the 2012 Pew Survey on Religion and Public Life—and scholars of Korean diaspora in other locations have likewise noted the Korean propensity for church attendance.² While there are few statistics on the religious affiliation of Koreans in Mexico, there are nearly thirty Korean Protestant churches in Mexico City alone, in addition to a Korean-language Catholic mass and a Buddhist temple. In fact, it was common for both Christian and non-Christian Koreans to refer to churches as the most important social institution in the Korean community. For example, when I first started my research, I set a goal of interviewing 20 individuals who did not attend church. One of my first interviewees, an official at the South Korean Embassy, was frank. “How will you find 20 people who don’t go to church?” he asked me. “All Koreans attend church, even if they don’t have any belief in religion.” While not literally true, the embassy official’s comment points to the church’s strong social function as a wellspring of information, support, and belonging within the Korean community, especially for people who often feel peripheral in their host societies. In fact, across interviews and casual conversations, most Koreans with whom I spoke referred first to the social utility of churches, not religious faith or transcendent belief, to explain the high rates of church attendance and membership within the Korean migrant community.

For some Koreans in Mexico, the church’s role as a community institution struck them as a paradox. As Jiyeon, my neighbor, argued, not only was it absurd to require religion in order to have access to ethnic community, but religion legitimated and perhaps obscured all the particularities of what it meant to be Korean. Indeed, one of the most common criticisms leveled against the church—from both inside and outside—was that the Korean church articulated to both Christianity and Koreanness, functioning neither as a site of pure Christian faith nor a

source of inclusive Korean community and solidarity. Many of my interlocutors told me stories about feeling judged and excluded, and they pointed to ways in which the church reinforced unequal power relations and silenced voices at the margins of the margins. Therefore, instead of treating “the community” as a stable signifier that consists of only those “within” the formal membership of the church, my analysis pays attention to those who feel excluded and perhaps had left religion altogether.

Despite the many complaints about church, why do people keep attending? Paradoxically, I found that people used the language of social utility and cultural affinity to explain why Koreans in general attend church, but to explain their own individual motivations, they always referred to their personal relationship with God and their own sacred journey. The contradictions between the mundane world of ethnicity and the sacred world of the transcendent were all the more heightened for the women I interviewed. In her study of South Korean Evangelical Christian women, sociologist Kelly Chong (2008) positions identity formation “in complex matrices of power relations and cultural/ideological fields that give rise to ambivalent or contradictory gender consciousness” (195). Significantly, Chong emphasizes that ambivalence or contradiction does not make these women blind followers or ideological dupes. Rather, these contradictions can be read as rich indicators of the types of cultural or ideological fields at work within any identity formation. Korean women and men expressed deep desires for spiritual fullness and a space of unequivocal belonging, and they drew from the transcendent language of religion to explain and imagine the transnational socialities and moral imaginaries that intertwine with the social institutions of the church. By paying attention to the fractures and interstices within these institutions and imaginaries, I argue that religion works as a kind of tacky interface between the gendered and racialized politics of quotidian life and the uncertainties of transnational movement and belonging. To borrow from Anna Tsing (2005), churches function as a zone of “sticky engagement” where “global connections give *grip* to universal aspirations” (1).

In this chapter, I will begin first by placing Together Korean Presbyterian Church in the local context of Mexico City. The impossibility of extricating religion and ethnicity—the crucial role of the church as a key mediator of Korean diaspora in the Americas—means that criticizing the church was a way to express frustration with the broader Korean community, and vice versa. I examine the church’s structure and organization, paying close attention to the ways in which the church upholds hierarchies of age and gender, providing a source of status and respect for some, while frustrating and alienating others. I argue that churches are spaces in which moral solidarity is imagined, maintained, and reproduced, but they also impose normative relationships that often discipline and exclude. In particular, I focus on the experiences of women in the church, analyzing the role of gendered hierarchies as well as the gendered labor of care that are essential, if overlooked, components of the institution. Next, I turn to a discussion of Protestant churches as a transnational social infrastructure. While scholarship on transnational religion nearly always anchors migrants in dyadic relation between a homeland and a place of permanent residence, Korean churches in Mexico are connected to a hemispheric network that exceeds the homeland-host country relations of South Korea and Mexico and evince the deep influence of U.S. evangelicalism and Korean American church structures. Finally, I explore how the local and transnational social infrastructures produced within the particularized context of the Korean church in Mexico interlock with and undergird the transnational lives of itinerant Korean migrants. I argue that Protestant churches shape migration experiences and provide narratives of spiritual and moral continuity for migrants who feel peripheral in their host societies. In addition

to providing stability and support for migrants who often live under conditions of contingency, churches are sites in which people come to articulate distinctive subject positions and form social lives that span the Americas.

Together Korean Presbyterian Church

Founded in 1997, Together Korean Presbyterian Church (hereafter TC) occupies a two-story building in the trendy neighborhood of Roma. On any given Sunday, about 200 people attend one of TC's four worship services. Two minivans shuttle congregants from Zona Rosa, where most congregants reside, to the church. Volunteers stand outside and hand out bulletins, directing children and teenagers to the youth service held on the building's second floor. Greeters smile and pass out bulletins outside the chapel, while children run up and down the stairs. Some congregants grab leather-bound Korean-language Bibles, while others head toward a small table upon which twenty headphones are stacked. The service is held in Korean, but a volunteer provides real-time interpretation into Spanish for non-Korean congregants as well as ethnic Koreans who prefer Spanish. After the head pastor's benediction prayer, worshipers stream out of the sanctuary and into the courtyard, where plates of kimchi, fried potatoes, and *chapch'ae* noodles wait on top of long plastic tables. Volunteers – all women – scurry around with colorful aprons tied around their Sunday dresses, ladling bowls of hot soup and delivering heaping bowls of white rice. The sounds of laughter and chatter saturate the air, as congregants discuss the opening of a new Korean fried chicken restaurant, the recent marriage of Deacon Kim's son, or the best English-language preschools in the city.

TC is the largest Korean church in Mexico City, and employs five pastoral staff. In addition to religious services, TC offers an expansive calendar of events and activities, including hosting key Korean holiday celebrations such as Lunar New Year, funding a local seminary, and offering enrichment classes for the elderly. TC's core demographic caters to families—married couples and their children—as well as empty nesters, and the church tends to attract longer-term migrants rather than expatriate workers who expect to live in Mexico for only one or two years. For example, one church member distinguished between TC and two other prominent Korean Protestant churches. He pointed to a relatively new Methodist church in Zona Rosa that attracts the majority of unmarried young people in their twenties, and another Presbyterian church that caters to a white-collar, transnational mobile class of workers that come directly from Korea and expect to return there in the near future. In contrast, he characterized TC as a church where the congregants were predominantly immigrants (*iminja*), with a high number of blue-collar workers and self-employed businesspeople.

As the largest and perhaps most well-established Korean church in Mexico City, TC has expanded its mission beyond the predominantly Korean-speaking congregation, having incorporated ministry for Spanish-speaking Koreans and local Mexican congregants. In addition to a 6PM Spanish-language service, the 11AM service offers real-time interpretation services from Korean to Spanish. The church also employs a non-Korean Mexican pastor in order to grow what the senior pastor called “local ministry”: facilitating the organic links between the Koreans in Mexico City and the broader, non-Korean community in which it is located. This includes a “community day” for the local neighborhood, in which the church opens its doors for an event where Korean food and Korean cultural activities, such as paper-folding, dance, and calligraphy, are offered.

The official mission statement describes the church as a “Christian gathering for two cultures (Korean and Mexican).” Referring to the name of the church, the mission statement goes

on to describe unity and togetherness as charter principles of the community. Interestingly, however, the statements in Korean and Spanish are not identical. The Spanish statement describes:

We are a church named “Together Presbyterian Church in Mexico” that lives and preaches the love of Jesus Christ without cultural barriers, united by the love of God. Within the church, the people of two different countries (Korea and Mexico) work together to serve the Lord. This does not impede us, it does not limit us as we carry out cultural exchange, missionary activities, and education.

The Korean statement, while similar, states: “Our Korean Together Church in Mexico preaches the word of the love of God, and we are a church that lives according to that love. In God’s love, two cultures (Korean and Mexican) worship together and together carry out the Lord’s ministry.”

While both statements describe how God’s love transcends cultural differences and produces unity within the church, there are some key differences. For one, the Spanish statement drops the word “Korean” from the church’s title. Perhaps more notably, while stressing the capacity of God’s love to transcend perceived barriers of language, nationality, and race, the Spanish-language statement positions TC not only as a transformative religious space, but as a conduit that allows for meaningful cultural exchange and contact. Indeed, during conversations with Mexican congregants, many explained that their interest in Korean culture, not Protestant Christianity, was what initially brought them to this particular church. One Mexican member, for example, lightheartedly referred to the potential to meet Korean people, try Korean food, and learn more about Korean food as the “hook” (*gancho*) that initially brings non-Korean Mexicans through the doors. But, he admitted, TC was not a united space but rather a “church divided by cultures that worships together.” During the 11AM service, for example, I noticed that Mexican congregants nearly always sat together in one pew; at the lunch served afterwards, they were isolated at one table, barely interacting with the Korean congregants around them.

None of the Mexican congregants were meaningfully involved in TC’s leadership, and nearly all the Mexican congregants who I spoke with were unfamiliar with its organizational structure. TC, like most Korean diasporic Protestant churches, employs a hierarchical structure that organizes relationships among and within clergy and laypeople. Within the church, it was common for congregation members to refer to each other by title—such as Elder Kim, Exhorter Bak, or Deacon Rhee—following Korean cultural conventions in which individuals rarely refer to each other by first name; status and rank was therefore immediately apparent, and failing to greet someone by their appropriate title could be a serious *faux pas*. Scholars of Korean Christianity on the peninsula and in the diaspora have explored how this status hierarchy maintains distinctions among gender, age and generation, class, language, and other factors (Chong 1998, Ecklund 2008, J.H. Kim 1997, S. Kim 2010). In particular, the unique role of elders (*changno*) within the Korean immigrant church is particularly important to maintaining such hierarchies. Sociologist Pyong Gap Min explains:

Korean elders enjoy high status and exercise high levels of power and authority not comparable to those in white American or other minority churches. The *danghe* (the “consistory” or the “session”) that consists of the senior pastor and elders makes all the important decisions in Korean immigrant churches, including hiring associate pastors. ... Most important, elders in Korean churches usually hold the position until retirement, whereas those in non-Korean churches have term limits. (225)

At TC, like most Korean Protestant churches, eldership is a status only available to men, and the posts are usually occupied by men of a certain age and class status. Studies of immigrant religion have shown that the creation and maintenance of high-status positions reserved only for men often serves to compensate against the downward social and economic mobility experienced by many immigrant men (Ebaugh and Chafetz 2000; George 2005; Kim and Kim 2001). Similarly, for Korean men who do not speak Spanish fluently and find themselves marginalized in Mexican society, the church is a place where they can be recognized as community members and for their leadership abilities. For example, one church elder, Elder Jang, who operates a Korean restaurant in Zona Rosa, explained that his life was very precarious as a small business owner, describing over a decade's accumulation of financial struggles, daily insults, and broken relationships. To encapsulate his struggle as low-status individual in Mexico, he told me a story about a Mexican wholesale supplier who had provided his restaurant with cabbages, lettuce, and other produce. One day, the supplier failed to deliver the cabbage he had promised. When Elder Jang became angry, the supplier laughed in his face, mocked his accented Spanish, and called him a "dirty chino." This incident, among others, had left him mired in resentment and caused him to feel increasingly hopeless in his quest to provide a better life for himself and his family, especially as he confronted worsening relationships with his wife and his eldest son.

A turning point came when he decided to go to a church revival many years ago. The guest preacher did not merely talk about the challenges of immigrant life, but also described how God is the perfect father not because he provides for all of our material needs and desires, but because he models a way of living that is ethical and full of love. Listening to the sermon, Elder Jang was convinced to no longer make money the central focus of his life, and he decided that he would close the restaurant on Sundays.

The work is hard and the hours are very long. I worry that the rent or ingredients will become more expensive. When I began the Christian life ten years ago, I would never have thought that I would close the restaurant one day a week. ... It makes me proud to tell customers that we close on Sunday to attend church, and that I am an elder at Together Church.

While the constant challenges of the restaurant had not subsided, closing the restaurant one day a week had brought immeasurable value and balance to his life. According to Elder Jang, the decision to close on Sundays was not only about "resting" and "keeping the Sabbath." He explained that it was the culmination of his ability to finally trust God with his family's financial security. Because Elder Jang had embraced traditional gender roles as the financial provider and head of the family, his inability to reach financial success had been a deep source of shame and guilt. Through a renewed commitment to Christianity, Elder Jang reformulated his role beyond masculine provider, explaining instead that he now saw that modeling "Godly leadership (*kyōnggōnhan ridōsip*)" was more important than providing mere financial security. Thus, he found that religion became a solace to withstand and endure the challenging elements of his life and that his title as elder provided at least one source of pride.

There are far more women than men in attendance at TC, and I observed that women did the vast majority of the work necessary for the church to survive and thrive. Although women cannot be elders, they are allowed the title of *kwōnsa*, or exhorter, a status distinction without a counterpart in non-Korean Presbyterian churches. *Kwōnsa* are generally treated with respect

within the congregation, and they are responsible for tasks that are seen as “women’s work,” such as providing childcare or preparing the weekly meals that are served after every Sunday service. They are not allowed to lead “important” committees, such as those related to missionary affairs, budget, or staffing, and they are not usually included in significant decision-making meetings such as the selection of a new associate pastor or the setting of budget priorities. All of the *kwōnsa* with whom I spoke were careful not to explicitly or overtly criticize the gendered division of labor, except to point out their “behind-the-scenes” work is an integral, if overlooked contribution to the functioning of the church community. One *kwōnsa* told me, matter-of-factly, that a free, homecooked Korean meal was often a stronger appeal to attend church than the strength of a pastor’s sermon, while another asserted that church attendance would be much lower if it were not for the childcare provided on Sunday mornings. Other women pointed out that their contributions to the church community enabled their husbands to take on leadership positions of greater visibility within the church. One woman, Park *Kwōnsanim*, whose husband was an elder, explained that her husband’s position would not be possible without the work she did:

It’s possible for a woman whose husband does not go to church to serve [in the church leadership]. But the opposite can never happen. Men need their wives to do the behind-the-scenes organization (*twit chōngni*). ... Becoming an elder means that someone needs to prepare the refreshments for their committee meetings or organize the other women for events. ... By chatting with the wives [of elders] while working on church ministry, I can know if someone’s pride is wounded. This is the work that Korean men are not able to do.

According to Park *Kwōnsanim*, her gendered labor—providing refreshments, organizing other women, and ascertaining and managing the emotions and passions of other elders—was a necessary and even expected component of her husband’s eldership. Pointing out that women could be leaders without their husbands, but the inverse was impossible, Park *Kwōnsanim* reversed the expectations of the gender hierarchy by insisting that women’s work was more important to status maintenance than men’s work. Women very rarely made recourse to theology, scripture, or Christian tradition to rationalize gendered hierarchies within the church. Instead, they would more frequently refer to the expectations of Korean culture—“This is the work that Korean men are not able to do,” as Park *Kwōnsanim* did above—or make evasive comments such as, “Oh, you know how Korean men are” or “Korean men are just like that,” to explain the differences in gender status and labor.

As noted earlier, elders make nearly all the important decisions regarding the church—such as directing church priorities and mission statements, designing budgets and financial expenditures, staff hiring, and church space allocation. Furthermore, church elders are commensurately afforded—and indeed, often demand—a high level of respect and deference. Because elders do not face term limits and it is extremely difficult to force an elder to resign, new elders at an established church such as TC are appointed relatively sparingly; after a resignation, eldership campaigns and appointments can produce fierce ruptures within a church congregation. Ambitious newcomers, or frustrated long-time members hoping for change, often find it easier to leave and join a different church than affect transformation from within.

In Mexico City, those who leave a church congregation for another face a plethora of options. There are nearly thirty Korean Protestant churches in Mexico City alone, in addition to a

Korean-language Catholic mass and a Buddhist temple. Advertisements promoting different churches and congregations feature prominently in even the briefest scan of the two Korean-language newspapers, and online searches bring up websites for a dozen more. Many of these Protestant churches are related to one another, having formed after a schism within a congregation led to the establishment of a splinter church. In this respect, the history of Together Church is likewise instructive, as it too was founded after it split off from another Korean Presbyterian Church in 1996, after disagreements among church elders and the head pastor. Because there are over twenty Korean Presbyterian denominations active in the diaspora—in addition to Methodist, Baptist, or nondenominational affiliations—splinter churches are almost always able to find a different Protestant denomination to join.

Indeed, the sheer number of Korean churches for a relatively small number of people and the frequency of schisms and splintering was a recurring topic in structured interviews and informal conversations among Koreans living in Mexico City. Contrary to my expectations, both churchgoers and church critics alike blamed schisms not on Christianity, but on the failings of Koreans themselves. One Korean man, a casual churchgoer who only attended services and events occasionally, explained that he was interested in “spiritual wellbeing” but disliked the hierarchies and judgmental politics of Korean churches. Describing the many church schisms that he had witnessed during his 15 years living abroad, he explained that church communities failed to stay together because of the power struggles among elders:

In part, this is because old people without faith, those people always become elders. Old people who aren't even believers—like old Korean men, after they retire—will come to church just because they long for that title.

In her study of Keralite Syriac Orthodox Christians in Los Angeles, Sheba George (2005) also identifies the tendency for St. Thomas Christian Churches to splinter, in part because of Keralite men's attempts to “recover status lost as a result of immigration” (120). Indeed, there are many parallels to be drawn between the case of the Korean church in Mexico City and other immigrant religious spaces, where churches, temples, and other social organizations become sites of compensation for immigrant men's downward mobility. And yet, my respondents overwhelmingly located the problem as unique to a Korean culture that overvalued status and titles. Koreans, I was told over and over again, were naturally predisposed to the kinds of petty in-fighting exemplified by church power struggles. Doyeon's Mother,³ a woman in her early thirties who had grown up attending church in South Korea and continued to attend church as an adult in Mexico, identified the frequency of gossip, status-seeking, and other undesirable behaviors as a facet of Korean culture:

You can say that across the immigrant community in the Americas, the primary organization where Koreans gather is the church. Well, that's the root of the problem. [laughing] From my perspective, the Koreans who don't go to church tend to be better people. This is because, to start with, since they aren't meeting regularly, they don't talk behind each other's back. [laughing] I think it's better that we [Koreans] just come and go and maybe greet each other (*insa*) if we see each other on the street. This way, we don't have the opportunity to fight since we don't get together. Lots of people who go to church become enemies.

Doyeon's Mother relayed this to me with a lighthearted tone, but her words expressed frustration as well as a broader sense that the undesirable friction within churches was not due to religion, but to Koreans themselves, and that the "root of the problem" was that churches just happened to be where Koreans gathered. Without opportunities to meet regularly, Doyeon's Mother joked, Koreans would not have any reason to fight, gossip, or become enemies. Still, Doyeon's Mother continued to attend church, and she was quick to identify that churches, as community institutions, served important needs in the social fabric of Korean diasporic life, especially for immigrants who didn't speak Spanish fluently.

Later in our conversation, Doyeon's Mother returned to this topic. Without the church, she mused, Koreans might not have any reason to fight, but they also wouldn't have any reason to help each other either. Describing the tendency of immigrants—people who were willing to leave a familiar homeland for the unknown—to be "stubborn" and "over-confident," Doyeon's Mother suggested religion produced norms of reciprocity among people who were prone to self-centered and perhaps even selfish behavior. For example, church members patronized her family's small store, even when their prices were not the lowest, just as she always made a point to get her hair cut at another church member's hair salon, even though the location was inconvenient. The church network, then, served to manage and organize other spheres of her life.

TC is a site in which community solidarity is imagined, maintained, and reproduced, but the church also serves as a disciplining institution in which women, mixed-race people, and others sometimes found themselves doubly marginalized. For example, gossip was a significant factor that led one 33-year-old woman, Jonghyuk's Mother, to decide to stop attending TC. Though Jonghyuk's Mother had attended the church for years and had been an active member of the women's ministry, she decided to leave the church three years ago, after she separated from her husband. As a woman, she bore the brunt of the criticism for her failed marriage, while she felt that her ex-husband did not receive the same amount of censure. Describing TC congregants, she explained, "They think they are living a Christian life. Then they go to church and gossip about others. I really hated the criticism and the gossip flying around. I told my mother not to invite me to church anymore." Despite Jonghyuk's Mother's criticisms, she admitted that she was still considering sending her son to a different Korean church, because she felt responsible for his "moral education" and wanted him to have access to a group of Korean friends. Yet ultimately, Jonghyuk's Mother was frustrated that the church controlled access to Korean community and belonging, and she complained about the lack of secular alternatives.

19-year-old college student Carina echoed many of Jonghyuk's Mother's concerns, and she complained about the gossip, judgmental attitudes, and conservative mindsets of the Korean church. While she had been raised in the church, Carina explained that she now rarely went to services or events, which was a huge point of friction between her and her parents. She explicitly pointed to the church's patriarchal gender attitudes—a double standard that brushed off young men's engagement in behaviors such as premarital sex, drinking alcohol, or smoking cigarettes, as simply mischief, while harshly condemning similar actions by women—as a key factor that led her to leave the church. As she put it, "The problem with Korean churches is that it combines the things I dislike most about Koreans and Christians."

And yet, Carina also understood why Koreans continued to seek out ethno-specific churches. Having left Korea as a toddler, Carina had always felt caught between two worlds. For example, she did not speak Korean fluently, but she had grown up always feeling racially distinctive in Mexico. Like most other Koreans who I met, Carina told me a number of stories about being racially stereotyped, and she identified the casual racism—from racialized catcalling

on the streets to being excluded or overlooked in social settings—as one of the most challenging aspects of living in Mexico. Within the walls of the church, Koreans didn’t have to worry about language barriers, cultural misunderstandings, or the threat of being stereotyped or discriminated against. But she also worried that Protestant churches impeded Korean integration into predominantly Catholic Mexican society. Much of “so-called Mexican culture,” Carina stated, was itself refracted and transmitted through the structures of Catholic tradition and ritual. In contrast, “We are Protestant, so we don’t have godparents or other opportunities for parties. ... For Mexicans, everything related to the church is turned to a party. Baptism, Communion, weddings, everything.”

Unlike the warm and fun spaces of Mexican Catholicism, where she felt welcome and invited, Carina explained that she would “never, never, never” dare to invite her Mexican friends to a Korean Protestant church. To illustrate the difference between Korean and Mexican churches, Carina told me a story about the first time she went to a friend’s nephew’s First Communion. She was shocked to see that it was a huge party, with everyone drinking alcohol, dancing, laughing, and having a good time. “For Mexicans, life is the party. For Koreans, we don’t even have parties,” she remarked. Anthropologist Dinorah Contreras (2017), who similarly studied Korean Protestants in Mexico City, notes that her interlocutors, Mexicans and Koreans alike, identified Koreans as “cold” and Mexicans as “warm.” Carina made a similar distinction, noting that Korean churches—with their strict gender rules, age and status hierarchies, and strictures for personal behavior—were “cold” places. Associating Koreanness with Protestantism and Mexicanness with Catholicism, Carina pointed to the ways in which religion, in addition to racial and cultural difference, ultimately reinforced boundaries among Koreans and Mexicans.

Transnational Networks and Faithful Connections

After church service in mid-November, I sat down at a table for first-time visitors and listened as congregants offered advice to newcomers on a variety of topics that ranged from finding apartment rentals and buying a car to translating electric and water bills. As we sipped on cups of hot, sweet instant coffee, I watched as two middle-aged women eyed each other with recognition and asked at the same time: “Have we met before?”

The two women had been congregants at another Korean Presbyterian Church in Santiago, Chile, in the early 2000s. Since their last meeting nearly 20 years ago, both women had followed an itinerant path through the Americas. One woman had migrated from Santiago to São Paulo, Brazil before coming to Mexico, while the other had moved to Guatemala City, and then to Puebla, Mexico. She was in Mexico City visiting her son, who had found work at the Latin America headquarters of a large Korean company. After learning these migration stories, they greeted each other fondly, grasping arms like old friends. They exchanged phone numbers and made plans to meet later in the week.

In many ways, this scene is recognizable to those familiar with the role of Protestant churches across the Korean diaspora. In the United States and Canada, scholars have examined how the church functions as a key institution of ethnic community—providing job training, visa assistance, and local information as well as a source of ethnic belonging and cultural affirmation. The literature on religion and migration, particularly in the U.S. context, has demonstrated how religious beliefs, practices, and institutions help immigrant acculturate to new host societies (Chen 2008; Herberg 1955; Mooney 2009; Orsi 1985). Other scholars of transnational religion have shown how migrant churches can preserve ethnic and cultural practices or sustain links between homeland and host nation (Beliso-De Jesús 2015; Grewal 2014; Levitt 2001; Tweed

1997). Yet there are important social and historical contexts that make the Korean church in Mexico a distinctive case study. As this chance meeting in a different Latin American city many years later suggests, Protestant churches across Latin America serve as a broader hemispheric network that interlocks with local networks of ethnic assistance and social gathering. Indeed, the Korean Protestant church serves as a key institution that anchors the hemispheric social networks of Koreans in the Americas, and it discloses Korean Protestant churches in Mexico City—and their connections to churches in other cities in the Americas—as a “network of networks.” Like the Santería practitioners studied by Aisha Beliso-De Jesús (2015) or the Latina/o and Latin American Pentecostals studied by Daniel Ramírez (2015), Korean Protestants share ideas, theologies, and practices across borders that exceed the binaries of homeland and host society.

By highlighting how the Korean Protestant church in the Americas serves as a network of networks, I draw from the broader field of transnational studies, which have conceptualized migrant religious spaces as “transnational social fields.” For example, Nina Glick Schiller’s (2005) work on fundamentalist church movements in small cities in the United States and Germany analyzes religious institutions as a “network of networks” to argue that the Nigerian and Congolese churches she studied “did not see themselves in ethnic terms,” but rather emphasized their global fundamentalist Christian orientation (446). She uses this fact to argue that ethnic churches, even those located in “small-scale” or marginal urban spaces, are intimately imbricated within a broader transnational social field, one whose priorities are linked to the imperatives of “U.S.-based fundamentalist transnational religious networks,” which “reintroduce and revalidate the significance of one particular state, the United States, and legitimate modes of intervention that facilitate US imperialism” (447). In other words, using a “network of networks” approach plots local congregants’ religious affiliation within the grids of imperial power and domination.

For Koreans in Mexico, this approach usefully illuminates how less visible populations, such as migrants on the margins of the Global North, navigate a transnational Christian terrain structured by U.S.-based conservative Christianity. Analyzing the Korean church in Mexico reveals that the transnational relation *between* diasporic nodes powerfully shapes the experiences of diasporic peoples outside hegemonic centers of power—Koreans in Mexico often rely on economic and spiritual resources provided by Korean American evangelical institutions headquartered in the United States or aspire to re-migrate northward. Furthermore, like the churchgoers studied by Glick Schiller, Korean Christians in Mexico utilize Christianity as a theological idiom through which they interpret and articulate lived experiences of migration, marginalization, and displacement, undergirding social imaginaries of belonging to a larger, universal church that might transcend local conditions of suffering, marginalization, or invisibility.

While locally sited in Mexico City, TC is connected to a broader institutional and theological network that links to other nodes of Korean diaspora. TC is a member of the Korean American Presbyterian Church (KAPC), a conservative, Reformed Evangelical denomination with 600 affiliated congregations throughout the Americas. In an interview, the head pastor of Together Church carefully distinguished between the KAPC denomination, which is headquartered in Philadelphia, PA, and two Korean Presbyterian denominations based in South Korea. While admitting that most congregants would not be able to theologically distinguish between the various denominations, he insisted that the differences were significant because of KAPC’s orientation toward migrants and their unique challenges: “KAPC pastors have an affinity for one another because we understand how to minister in migrant life.” He argued that

unlike Presbyterian churches headquartered in South Korea, KAPC trained its pastors in a migrant-focused theology that sought to address migrants' dislocation from host societies and feelings of marginalization. His sermons, the pastor explained, sought to "soothe and comfort" migrants who faced significant challenges in their daily lives.

The pastor also acknowledged that migrant churches faced unique social and cultural burdens. In Korea, for example, churches would not be expected to host major celebrations for Lunar New Year, as such holidays are nearly always celebrated with immediate family. As the pastor explained, "In Seoul, the church is empty during the holidays, because churchgoers went back to their hometowns." In contrast, migrants expected churches to fulfill both spiritual and familial functions—especially since hometowns and parents were so far away. Likening churches to extended family networks, he described how church members came in to stand for "cousins" and "uncles" in a situation where many people could no longer rely on biological kinship ties.

According to the head pastor, many of the church's theological and social practices had developed in the context of the United States. The pastor's sermons were frequently littered with references to U.S. history, popular culture, and prominent American evangelical figures such as Billy Graham, John Piper, and Tim Keller. The praise songs sung by the contemporary youth worship band included Korean versions of popular songs by U.S. evangelical artists and bands such as the Marantha! Singers, Keith Green, and Matt Redman. Furthermore, KAPC, the broader denomination to which TC belongs, has close ties to the Presbyterian Church of America, a conservative U.S. Presbyterian denomination, and its liturgical schedule was based on U.S. national holidays. For example, Together Church celebrates "Thanksgiving Sunday" at the end of November—a U.S. holiday that is not observed in either South Korea or Mexico. On the last Sunday of every November, volunteers put together an elaborate cornucopia—featuring seasonal Mexican vegetables such as squash and corn, as well as a giant bag of Korean short-grain rice—and arrange it in front of the chapel, while the pastor preaches a special sermon on the significance of gratitude to the Christian faith. And while some congregants were aware of Thanksgiving's connection to U.S. national mythology, I discovered that many churchgoers assumed that November's Thanksgiving Sunday celebration was a uniquely Christian holiday, like Christmas or Easter. One person even distinguished between Catholics and Protestants in order to explain why Korean Christians celebrated Thanksgiving. This conflation of U.S. national holidays and Christian liturgy exemplifies how American cultural and theological norms become intertwined with the practice of Protestant faith beyond the borders of the United States.

The KAPC denomination also provides social connections that weave together diasporic churches throughout the hemisphere. Pastors form relationships when they are educated at the KAPC seminary in California or Illinois. Annual conferences for deacons and other church leaders provide opportunities for diasporic Koreans to connect. High school and college students from different churches interact by volunteering at KAPC mission sites in Chiapas, Mexico and Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic. My personal story about how I came to study Together Church provides another example about how diasporic church networks operate. I grew up in the United States, where my family attended a Korean Presbyterian church in Lawrence, Kansas. As a high school student, I volunteered in Nicaragua at a missions site operated by a different Korean Presbyterian church, and became acquainted with the local Korean congregation in Managua. Many years later, connections forged through the church in Managua, Nicaragua, would prove crucial to my introduction to the Korean community in Mexico City and facilitate the start of my fieldwork at Together Church.

While my story is unique in that I approached the church as a researcher, I took advantage of similar networks that bring together diasporic Koreans. I glimpsed these networks in action during my first few months in Mexico City, while I attended a Bible study class taught by the head pastor for new churchgoers. To explain how they came to attend TC, other members of the class frequently referred to far-flung connections in places throughout the Americas and across the Pacific, where parents, children, friends, and business partners were differentially located. For example, Mihye's Mother, a woman in her mid-thirties who had just moved to Mexico City, told me that she had come to TC on recommendation from a Korean friend of a friend who had briefly lived in Mexico. Mihye's Mother had gone to middle school and high school in Costa Rica but had returned to South Korea in order to complete her university education. Because she chose to major in Spanish Literature and Culture, she met and befriended other diasporic Koreans who had spent time living abroad in Latin America, including her future husband, who had grown up in Argentina. After graduation, her husband greatly struggled to find steady, well-paid employment in Seoul, and they both felt a bit restless in their new lives in the Korean capital. "The truth is, we never adjusted back to Korea," she explained. According to Mihye's Mother, Koreans who had never left the peninsula were too insular, and she described a sense of alienation from the competitive culture: "you know, Koreans have a culture of competing and comparing themselves to others."

Citing cultural differences, the high cost of living, the difficulty of career advancement, and the reality of the harsh Korean education system once their daughter was born, the couple decided to look into the possibility of living abroad. While they briefly considered Australia or New Zealand, ultimately Latin America made the most sense for their growing family, especially since her husband's parents were still living in Argentina. Finally, they came to Mexico City because her father-in-law's friend from Argentina referred him to the manager of an electronic device manufacturer in Mexico, and he was able to secure a good job offer. But Mexico City was also appealing for other reasons—the many options for international schools, the relative political and economic stability, the presence of a sizeable Korean community, and accessible direct flights to and from Seoul: "Costa Rica always has a long L.A. layover. And Buenos Aires! It's almost never worth it, because you spend a whole week on just the transit time between Argentina and our country [Korea]."

During her first visit to TC, Mihye's Mother felt an immediate sense of familiarity: "It's like the Korean church from when I was young." She had fond memories of her Korean church in Costa Rica, including singing in her church's worship band, and she wanted her daughter to have access to similar opportunities and experiences. Interestingly, Mihye's Mother did not initially talk about the church to explain the connections between and among the Korean community in Costa Rica, Argentina, and Mexico City. However, as I continued to ask more questions, it became apparent that churches were an important, if invisible, social infrastructure undergirding the Korean network of networks, facilitating transnational forms of social capital that fostered sturdy norms of trust and reciprocity. For example, Mihye's Mother explained that her husband's employer

was looking for someone educated, who spoke Spanish and Korean, someone trustworthy. The truth is, there are a lot of strange people in Korean immigrant communities. You have to know who to trust. ... Well, my father-in-law, he has been an elder at the church in Argentina for over twenty years.

Her father-in-law's lengthy service at a prominent Korean church in Argentina improved his son's reputation and served as a proxy for his trustworthiness and dependability. "*Chungmi* [Latin American] Koreans, we're like a little *pueblito* [village]," she explained, mixing Spanish and Korean, as she conveyed how information and opportunities were relayed among Koreans in the Latin American diaspora.

But sometimes, churches served as leaky conduits of knowledge. Mihye's Mother bashfully admitted to me that her husband was willing to attend the Sunday services only because he considered it to be akin to a good networking experience that would make others in the Korean community aware of who he was. However, her husband refused to participate in the newcomers' Bible study or other activities. Complaining about the Korean church's tendency to spread gossip like wildfire and exaggerate or even fabricate details about others' lives, her husband had even warned her not to talk too much about their family's lives or to share intimate specifics with other congregants: "Mihye's dad says, he can see already that this church is the kind of place where the smallest thing sets tongues wagging (*suda ppurida*)."¹ Having earned his job on the basis of reputation, Mihye's Father was afraid of any information that might damage his standing, or worse, get back to his own father in Argentina.

Gossip—and the fear that such gossip could circulate not only within a local church but transnationally to other diasporic social locations—often shaped social behavior, despite the distance that separates individuals. In fact, gossip could serve as a mechanism of scrutiny and social control. For example, after an interview, I asked one man if I could visit him at his new store in the vast informal market of Tepito. Shocked, he refused what struck him as an inappropriate request. His wife, who was currently living in Buenos Aires with their young children, would almost certainly hear about it the next time she came to visit him in Mexico City.

For transnational families who were located far apart, gossip often served to fill in the gaps of knowledge about what it was like for fathers, mothers, or children living in a particular place, and I sometimes found myself unwittingly involved in these circuits of knowledge. Early on during my fieldwork, Hajoong's Mother innocently asked me if I owned a car back in the United States; I answered honestly that I had lived in Berkeley for many years without one and did not find it to be a necessity. Nearly two months later, when I remarked to another woman that I didn't really like to drive, she matter-of-factly responded, "Oh yes. I heard that from Hajoong's Mother, and she told me you don't need a car in California." In this roundabout way, I learned that Hajoong's Mother had used the information I provided her to refuse to buy a car for Hajoong, a student at a university in suburban Southern California where a car might have had much more utility. I had to learn to be careful what information I shared about my life in the United States, as I never quite knew how that information might be received or applied in the complex, transnational lives of the members of TC.

In this manner, churches function as nodal points through which people, jobs, economic opportunities, information, and gossip were transmitted—articulating not only to the East-West transnational routes between South Korea and Mexico, but to a North-South hemispheric network of networks whose transnational routes simultaneously reinforce global hierarchies of power within a Christian imaginary. That is, the close connections among diasporic churches in the hemisphere transmits U.S.-propagated evangelical theologies and practices, even as they provide tactics and strategies for sustaining Korean hemispheric socialities. For Koreans in Mexico that seek to interface with friends, family members, and business parties in cities throughout the Americas, churches often provide a practical infrastructure through which such bonds can be reciprocally maintained, though always on uneven terrain.

Religious Subjectivities, Transnational Trajectories

The prior two sections have traced how Protestant churches are an important local and transnational social infrastructure that provides information, support, and social spaces for people who are racially, culturally, and linguistically distinct in a new milieu. Indeed, Koreans in Mexico often made reference to this fact to explain why diasporic Koreans tended to be Christian. And yet, when Korean Christians discussed their own religious affinities, they always pointed to a moment of transcendence or rupture in which spiritual identity came to supersede racial or ethnic identity—that is, to explain their own Christian affiliation, personal transformation, not social utility, took precedence. In this section, I suggest that claiming a Christian identity might be a particularly powerful strategy for itinerant migrants who left the Korean peninsula long ago, but have yet to strongly identify with any one place of residence. While confronting enduring uncertainty regarding their social location in the world, many of my interlocutors expressed ambivalent positions vis-à-vis their ethnic or national identity, and they worried about how their subjectivities might transform or evolve in a way that prevented them from claiming belonging within an earthly geographical terrain. For example, one recently arrived Korean man told me, “I’m a Korean, but ... because I don’t intend to keep on living in Mexico, I’ve already started to worry that after living in Mexico, I won’t be able to adjust after returning to Korea.”

In such an ambivalent context, many of my interlocutors found solace in their certainty as a Christian—an identity that they had chosen and therefore, felt would never change no matter where they lived, what language they spoke, or who they married. For example, one woman acknowledged that, “Yes, I guess I have to call myself Korean,” but preferred to identify herself as a “child of Christ” who “goes everywhere with the knowledge that the Lord has a plan for me.” Similarly, Gabriel, a man in his mid-twenties, told me that he “didn’t like to be categorized” and jokingly identified himself as “Brasi-mexi-coreano”: Born in Brazil to Korean parents, he carried Brazilian citizenship but had lived much of his life in Mexico. Declaring a desire to “explore the world” after finishing his university studies, Gabriel expressed an interest in living in a different country sometime in the near future, coyly mentioning, “The next time I see you, my identity might become even more complicated.” Against secular categories such as race, ethnicity, and nationality, whose constraints could not adequately facilitate self-expression, Gabriel preferred to think of himself in the transcendent terms of his Christian faith, because they embodied the moral values and priorities that he would take with him, no matter where he resided: “Anywhere I go, I will always be a Christian.”

In fact, many of my interviewees suggested that their identity as Christian—a “chosen” identity rather than a “given” identity—was the interface through which a stable sense of selfhood cohered. TC congregants pointed to a conversion story, a testimony, or a moment of true conviction as a pivotal point in which they became aware of an unshakable belonging that superseded the profane categories handed to them by the world. In this way, narrativizing migratory journeys as faith journeys provided a way to reject denigrating racialized terms and to claim belonging in a transnational cosmopolitan community that transcended the messy politics of quotidian life. Against feelings of marginality, frustration, and helplessness, TC members explained how their Christian faith enabled them to reinterpret past events as meaningful experiences that enriched their ongoing development. In so doing, they retold past stories of multiple migrations not only as experiences of displacement, but as one step in a longer process through which their lives accrued meaning and significance.

For example, Mr. Kang, a businessman who sold textile factory equipment, made this connection explicit when he explained how his life had been changed after reading the book *The Prayer of Jabez* by Bruce Wilkinson with his Bible study group. Prior to encountering Wilkinson's book, Mr. Kang had been ashamed of his multiple failed businesses in Korea, and he confessed that he had frequently fibbed or made up details about his life in Korea before immigrating to avoid having to confront his failure. During our interview, he stopped to open his Bible and read out loud Jabez's prayer from 1 Chronicles 4:10:

And Jabez called on the God of Israel saying, "Oh, that You would bless me indeed, and enlarge my territory (*chiyōk*), that Your hand would be with me, and that You would keep me from evil, that I may not cause pain." So God granted him what he requested.

Studying Jabez's prayer, Mr. Kang explained, had been a turning point in his life. He realized that he had to rely on God to "keep [him] from evil" in order to achieve a successful life. He told me that he recited Jabez's prayer every single day, and that it guided the way he lived:

My motto for life is, "Go toward the Lord." In my life as a businessman, I can't know what will happen in my business life. Tomorrow I can get a call from Thailand, China, Canada, USA. But as a Christian, I can know very securely that God will grant what I request. So every day I go toward the Lord and I call on the God of Israel, "Bless me, bless me." I ask him to "enlarge my territory." And God has answered this prayer! I have been to territories that I never even imagined (*saenggakchido mot'aettōn chiyōk*). By going toward the Lord, I have been across the world.

Through Jabez's prayer, Mr. Kang knew "very securely" that God would grant his requests. Though Mr. Kang had lived in four different countries in his lifetime and was uncertain if he would have to move to another location in the future, he felt anchored by his connection to church and Christianity. As a result, though he had uncertainties about the future of his transnational business, he felt a sense of peace and serenity because of his trust in God's transcendent purpose for his life. Mr. Kang explained how his transcendental perspective helped him interpret the contours of his transnational life and grasp onto the opportunities offered by his transnational business practice.

In another emotional interview, Mrs. Choi, a woman in her late sixties, told me how she came to realize that God had been leading her through her most trying moments, including multiple migrations. Mrs. Choi had first left the Korean peninsula in the late 1960s as a teenager, enduring a grueling boat journey across the Pacific, living temporarily in Paraguay, then crossing by land to settle in Argentina. She met her husband, another Korean migrant, in Buenos Aires. Through tears, she told me about his multiple affairs and failed businesses:

When the second business failed, he [her husband] was so ashamed. He hid in the countryside [of Argentina] for one year. I went and told him to come back, but he refused. When he came home, he said he wanted to go back to Paraguay. ... Of course I did not want to leave. We fought with lots of shouting.... But back in Paraguay, I started to go to church. It first started when a friend invited me. I always said no because my husband did not want me to go. My husband was Buddhist. He didn't like the church. Then my friend invited me to go on a hiking trip with the church's women's club. I

begged my husband: “Please let me go, I don’t know anyone here, this has nothing to do with religion.” But as I was going up the mountain, I suddenly decided. I wanted to attend church, and my husband could not change my mind. So I told my husband that I would rather get divorced if he did not let me go to church. This was the first time I was so brave! ... I am a blessed woman. God was with me in Korea, Paraguay, and Argentina. Then he sent me to Mexico. He took me on this path to show that I am a blessed woman.

For many years, her husband’s failures, the marital discord, and multiple migrations were sources of shame and hurt. But Mrs. Choi’s conversion to Christianity allowed her to see her experiences in terms of God’s blessing and guidance. Every move, Mrs. Choi mused, was God bringing her closer to him. “If I stayed in Korea or Paraguay, I would never have felt God’s blessing,” she explained.

Mrs. Choi’s story also shows how churches provide access to an expanded geographical network that transcended national borders. According to Mrs. Choi, her husband was unsuccessful in his business ventures because they were not forged through the church and therefore did not have God’s blessing. In contrast, her second son had initially moved to Mexico in order to start an eyeglasses import/export business with a friend he made through the Buenos Aires church, and he secured a lease for his first office through a TC contact. Mrs. Choi explained this good fortune in terms of God’s grace, utilizing the idioms and metaphors of Christian theology to reinterpret life events in way that provided coherence across different cities and places.

Religious commitments helped manage transnational trajectories, even for those who were more permanently settled in Mexico City. The broad hemispheric connections of TC and its members meant access to different sources of belonging beyond the local constraints of Mexico City. However, this expanded frame of belonging also produces its own pains and difficulties. For those with long-term plans to live in Mexico, the constant ebb and flow of Koreans migrants was one of the greatest difficulties of forming community in Mexico City. For example, one 56-year-old woman, Suh Kwönsanim, excitedly showed me how she was connected to many other Korean Christians in the Americas through a group chat on KakaoTalk, the predominant text messaging platform used by Koreans. However, the conversation took a sadder turn:

My best friends from Mexico now live in Chicago and Toronto. They are like my sisters.... We chat through Kakao and send photos of our children.... But now, as time goes by, I am afraid to form attachments to other Koreans. It is bad luck. The moment you become friends [with another Korean], they tell you they have to leave.

Protestant churches are important elements of community stability, enabling diasporic Koreans to meet and form relationships. These relationships, however, were often temporary—as people moved away, it was all too easy for such intimacies to dissipate. Friendship came with the burden of fear, and Suh Kwönsanim told me that her far-flung friendships sometimes exacerbated her feelings of aloneness in Mexico City.

Furthermore, reaching out to others also came with the fear of rejection and abandonment. Suh Kwönsanim was well-aware of the kinds of criticisms leveled by my neighbor Jiyeon, who found invitations to church to be intrusive, and she frequently worried that she was a bother when she made phone calls on birthdays or holidays. The only way to continue these relationships, Suh Kwönsanim told me, was to think of friendship as a mandate from God. Much

like the itinerant Mixtec migrants studied by Federico Besserer (2000), Koreans in Mexico live under the “principle of uncertainty,” which is “generated by... rapid movement and the distance between members of a transnational community” (17). Without knowing where friends, relatives, and other loved ones are located or how they are doing, Suh Kwönsanim saw prayer as a resource through which she felt assured about the wellbeing of those with whom she had crossed life paths. Because she had lived in Mexico City for longer than most others who attended TC, Suh Kwönsanim felt that “God gave the calling of friendship to me.” Despite the pain of friends moving away, Suh Kwönsanim continued to form relationships because she felt that it was her way of serving God. She explained, “Here in this life, all our relationships seem temporary. We Christians believe that relationships are eternal, and one day we will all be reunited in Heaven.”

By bestowing temporary friendships with eternal significance, such relationships become sacralized, motivating the devotion of women such as Suh Kwönsanim to the church: planning events, coordinating fundraising committees, and calling individuals to see why they were no longer attending. While men’s positions as elders or ministers made them highly visible as church leaders, it was women who were committed to these oft-invisible tasks of community building—undervalued labor in the church’s gendered hierarchies that nevertheless were essential to the community. Despite the emotional and logistical complexities of building these relationships, Suh Kwönsanim saw the work of building and sustaining local and transnational ties as part of her God-given purpose in life. Her story suggests how the resonance between transcendent imaginaries and transnational lives might nourish broader social imaginaries of belonging, as diasporic Koreans draw upon the institutions and theological idioms of Protestant Christianity to interpret itinerant experiences of migration and to manage communities that cross multiple borders. Among itinerant peoples, there was always a real possibility that you might run into each other at a later date, as this section’s opening anecdote showed. But if not, the promise of eternal friendship in Heaven motivated women such as Suh Kwönsanim to cultivate an ongoing ethos of care.

Conclusion

Anthropologist Joel Robbins (2009) has argued that the *trans-* in *transnational* resonates with the *trans-* in *transcendence*: the Christian discontinuity between “heaven” and “earth” “is good for peripheral people to think with because it structurally mirrors the global model with which they have increasingly come to interpret their social lives” (57). Based on fieldwork among the Urapmin people in Papua New Guinea, Robbins argues globalization challenges “people’s sense of their own centrality,” as “peripheral people” become increasingly aware that social, financial, and cultural power is centralized elsewhere (68). But unlike the Urapmin, who are invested in maintaining “a distinct separation between heaven and earth” (57) that mirrors the distance between the center and the periphery, Korean Christians in Mexico manage their sense of both peripherality and precarity by seeing actions in heaven and actions on earth as deeply imbricated. To return to the daily practice of rigorous dawn prayer with which I began this chapter, Deaconess Jang and the other prayer warriors not only interpret the transnational dimensions of their social lives, but envision themselves as actors that shape and influence people, events, and things in far-flung places. Through prayer, they battle the illnesses of infirm family members in distant countries, combat the forces of evil that tempt world leaders, and support weary missionaries both at home and afar.

Through the transnational practice of prayer, Koreans in Mexico City become acutely attuned to contemporary global conditions: rapid shifts in political power, uncertain citizenship

status, and a changing economic landscape that often make what anthropologist Jane Guyer (2007) calls “the near future” seem unknowable. Indeed, during my 11 months in Mexico City, my informal conversations and observations were dominated by a sense of uncertainty: dramatic political shifts in South Korea, Mexico, and the United States; NAFTA renegotiations; and the ongoing possibility of a Free Trade Agreement between South Korea and Mexico were all global factors exacerbating the sense of “unknowing” experienced by my interlocutors. Much like the global and the transnational, my respondents described the sacred and the transcendent as inscrutable forces that were ultimately beyond their control—where the best strategy of living was not to bend life to one’s will, but to instead submit life to the will of God. As feminist scholars of religion have noted, the practice of relinquishing power also endows religious people with a kind of discipline that allows them to feel more in control of their lives, so that submission can in fact become a practice of empowerment (K. H. Chong 2008; Mahmood 2012). Through submission to God’s plan, Koreans in Mexico participate in world-making projects that connect their itinerant journeys to both the local specificities of Mexico City and the future homes they envision.

For the morning prayer warriors in Mexico City, dawn prayer is a religious practice that transcends ethnic particularity and trains them in a cosmopolitan ethos of Christian belonging. And yet, daily dawn prayer services are not common among non-Koreans and are in fact a peculiar feature of Korean Christian life (see A. E. Kim 2000; Phan 2011). Situated between the particularities of Korean practice and the global, otherworldly horizon of religion, the practice of dawn prayer in many ways encapsulates how religion intervenes in the rapidly changing lives of Koreans. As a disciplining practice, dawn prayer cultivates an interiorized spiritual life that exceeds the exterior markers of difference such as race and gender. And yet, it cannot be dislocated from the diasporic Korean context in which it is practiced. To pray, then, is to identify a certain quality in the tension between Christianity and Koreanness that shuttles between the global and the local, the universal and the particular, the individual and the collective, producing vibrations, currents, and disturbances that both directed and troubled the transient and transnational quality of Korean migrants’ lives in Mexico.

¹ Karen Chai and Elaine Ecklund also note that their respondents—primarily first and second-generation Korean Americans—reference this saying (Chai 1998; Ecklund 2006).

² See “Asian Americans: A Mosaic of Faiths,” Pew Research Center, July 19, 2012.

<https://www.pewforum.org/2012/07/19/asian-americans-a-mosaic-of-faiths-overview/>.

³ For those who had not completed the requirements for formal membership in the church, or casually among friends, Korean women would most frequently refer to each other or to women’s husbands by referencing their children. My chosen pseudonyms in this chapter reflect this cultural convention. Laura Nelson (2010: 200) and Nancy Abelmann (2003: 5) both discuss Korean teknonyms and their similar decisions to refer to their women interlocutors.

Chapter Five: Crisis and Belonging: Risk, Resistance, and the Contestations of Nation

“In Mexico, everybody recounted to me his or her earthquake. ... The earthquake came first. It became the indispensable condition to resume dialogue. I had to be initiated, informed, involved in what had happened. That's the way I measured what took place. And I ask myself now, If the earthquake marked Mexicans to such an extent, if it invaded their lives, their memories, their minds, if it shook them up in such a way, and if every once in a while, one way or another, the earthquake comes back, what will its final mark be?” (317)

—Elena Poniatowska, *Nothing, Nobody*

Introduction

On September 7, 2017, a magnitude 8.2 earthquake struck the southern coast of Mexico, killing nearly 100 people and displacing thousands in the coastal states of Chiapas and Oaxaca. 12 days later on September 19, 2017, another earthquake, measured at 7.1 magnitude, shook densely populated central Mexico, leaving over 600 dead and 6,000 injured.

On March 11, 2020, two months after the emergence of the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19), the World Health Organization (WHO) declared a global pandemic—which to this date has infected over 2 million people and led to over 200,000 deaths in Mexico.¹

This dissertation was bookended by two disasters—the 2017 earthquakes and the ongoing coronavirus pandemic—that deeply shaped the course of my fieldwork, the process of writing, and the spaces and sites of the project itself. The haphazard capriciousness of the earthquake, the extended stasis of the pandemic, the uncountable toll of injury and death, and the unequally distributed consequences became an unavoidable frame not only for my interlocutors but for my own praxis of interaction and reflection. That is, the continuous presence of crisis became a cipher for the experience, interpretation, and narration of the risk and precarity that defined migrant life in North America's most populous city.

This chapter explores the changing coordinates of belonging of disaster, race, and nation—in which responding to times of crisis becomes intimately related with the ongoing imagination of the nation. Disaster—and in particular, earthquakes—has played an important role in twentieth century formations of national belonging in Mexico. Writing about the “mythology” of earthquakes, which links the response to the disasters with the “political arrival of the nation,” anthropologist Rihan Yeh (2018) recounts her memory of reading *Nothing, Nobody*, Elena Poniatowska's classic account of the 1985 Mexico City earthquakes. She remembers being moved to tears by Poniatowska's story of Gisang Feng, a young Chinese Mexican man who volunteered to enter a collapsed building in search of victims. “It was there among the rubble,” Yeh describes, “that he [Feng] felt, for the first time, Mexican” (514). Yet, as Yeh writes in a footnote, Feng's identification with Mexicanness was a detail that she herself had invented—a fiction whose resonance was perhaps linked to her own experience growing up Chinese in Mexico.

What does it mean to feel Mexican? Feeling, as performance scholar Jose Muñoz (2006) has taught us, is always connected to broader structures of inclusion, exclusion, and power. The earthquake necessitated a response not only to the immediacy of disaster but also to the urgent question of belonging in Mexico: how to claim the capital city whose very name is metonymic of the nation and to be, one way or another, Mexican. This was a narrative of the nation that set

itself against the state. After the 2017 earthquakes, as in 1985, activists and ordinary people rejected the state as a source of authority and aid, relying instead on horizontal bonds between ordinary citizens who had reached out a hand to provide the resources so desperately needed. But what about those individuals who, for various reasons, were invisible through the lens of participatory citizenship?² Moving beyond the framework of social movements, this chapter turns toward affective modes of identification and disidentification to analyze the shifting grounds of belonging. It turns toward the voices of “ghostly politics”—Alberto Vanolo’s (2017) term for the groups concealed by dominant representations of the city—communities such as Koreans in Mexico who were, for the most part, invisible during the 2017 earthquakes.

If earthquakes are associated with “insurgent citizenship” (Holston 2008) and the full flowering of participatory democracy, the pandemic’s relation to the nation is much more ambivalent. In addition to the global vectors of disease and uncoordinated national response, the imperatives of public health—quarantining, social distancing, and the seemingly unending durational intensity—are perhaps less-suited toward feelings of mutual solidarity. The exclusions have been particularly profound for Asian migrants and Mexicans of Asian descent, who have felt particularly targeted during the pandemic, as the viral circulation of COVID-19 has gone hand-in-hand with a global rise in anti-Asian racism.

While Koreans were ghostly presences during the earthquake’s aftermath, the global pandemic has made them intensely visible—as the pandemic’s living embodiment to be targeted or shunned.³ Such experiences have spurred on a new generation of diasporic Korean youth who have spoken out against the rise of global anti-Asian racism, turning to social media to produce a digital archive that documents the increase in anti-Asian discrimination and articulates critique across a transnational network of Asian diasporas. I analyze these emergent critiques as they speak against a racist discourse that has increased in intensity, especially on the Internet.⁴ Treating disasters as moments in which the coordinates of belonging are renegotiated, I conclude by considering the nascent articulation of a pan-ethnic Asian Mexican subjectivity. If the logics of containment and quarantine have detained the global imperatives of trade, travel, and investment, this moment of unprecedented public emergency has enlivened another global infrastructure—the digital worlds in which life, otherwise halted, continues in a virtual form. On these platforms, Korean youth describe oft-invisible experiences of racialized exclusion while expressing the desire for more inclusive spaces of belonging to a growing audience in Mexico and South Korea. Perhaps counter-intuitively, the act of naming anti-Asian racism becomes a way for Korean youth in Mexico to assert that they, too, belong.

September 2017 Earthquakes

At 11:49PM, on September 7, 2017, one week after I officially started my fieldwork, an earthquake literally shook me out of bed. When the shaking first started, I thought it was from the traffic outside—my bedroom faced a broad six-lane thoroughfare, and I was not yet accustomed to the sudden tremors caused by passing freight trucks. But then I heard the shouts of, “Earthquake!” and the creak of the front door being thrown open. The building quivered and groaned as I joined the steady stream of people running out into the street, where we were greeted by the competing soundtracks of the gay nightclub and the Korean barbecue restaurant located on the ground level of our building. Barefoot and panting, I watched as the crowd disentangled themselves into two groups—Koreans and Mexicans, watching each other with side-glances and averted gaze. Here on the street, standing in our underwear or pajamas, clutching purses and dogs, everything had been made strange. Underneath the flickering

fluorescent lamps, the intimate bled into the public scene of fear, and the private distinction between homes and the streets folded together. All around me, the groups buzzed with gossip and information, in Korean, Spanish, and a mix of the two.

“I was in my underwear watching TV.”

“That whole block collapsed in ’85.”

“I couldn’t find my kitty, oh, I hope she’s not too scared.”

We milled around for nearly an hour before a police car approached with the sirens on, and an officer stuck his head out the window and yelled for us to all go inside. Two weeks later, this scene would be repeated in the early afternoon of September 19, 2017. I had been leaving the apartment building when the shaking started and the seismic alarm began blaring. Clutching my backpack, I bolted for the street as the ground rocked and undulated in front of me. I heard screaming and shouting; cars, trucks, and motorcycles were stopped haphazardly on the street and passersby crouched on the ground or clutched each other in fear. There were strange sights and smells: an unidentified pop-pop-pop before the shriek of shattering glass and the sudden waft of gas pouring into the street. I couldn’t have told you how long the shaking lasted, though I read later in newspaper accounts that it had been less than thirty seconds. Thirty seconds, with consequences that would reverberate far longer.

~

In an uncanny coincidence, the September 19, 2017 earthquake occurred on the exact day 32 years after the devastating Mexico City earthquake of 1985.⁵ The 1985 earthquake led to at least 5,000 deaths, displaced tens of thousands, and caused widespread damage to buildings, roads, and critical infrastructure across the metropolitan area. In the words of celebrated Mexican writer Elena Poniatowska (1988), the earthquake was a “collective epic event” that le[ft] a deep mark in the psychology of all Mexicans” (20) — a disaster that shook the very foundations of Mexico and deepened the cracks in the veneer of the national vision of progress put forth by the ruling Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI). The tepid government response, characterized by corruption, inefficiency, and confusion, produced a vacuum into which ordinary citizens stepped up to lead rescue efforts, provide mutual aid, and organize responses to basic needs. Writers such as Poniatowska recorded the stories of ordinary Mexicans — the horizontal solidarity of the Mexican people, represented by the spontaneous unity of citizens’ aid— which contrasted against the bumbling ineptitude and callous indifference of President Miguel de la Madrid (1982-1988) and his cadre of technocratic bureaucrats.

In the aftermath of the 1985 earthquake, new and strengthened popular urban movements, led by students, workers, and affected residents, demanded accountability and equitable reconstruction. Such efforts culminated perhaps most memorably with the Renovación Habitacional Popular (Popular Housing Renovation) program, in which President de la Madrid acquiesced to pressure to expropriate rental property damaged by the earthquake and reconstruct popular housing in the central zones of the city (Gilbert and Varley 1991, 47). Other social movements galvanized around rights and protections for laborers who had been disproportionately burdened by the earthquake. Garment workers, primarily women who toiled under hazardous labor conditions in unregistered factories, suffered particularly high death tolls; the collapse of multiple factory buildings, which had been shoddily constructed and maintained, killed over 1,000 workers and left 40,000 unemployed. Growing from disaster relief response

networks following the earthquake, the September 19th Garment Workers Union — named after the infamous date of the earthquake — formed to become an important women-led independent union in one of Mexico's largest industries (see Carrillo 1990).

This legacy of mutual aid, horizontal organization, and citizen action lives on today. As Carlos Monsiváis (2005), another great *cronista*, argues, the earthquake was a major turning point in the modern history of the city that “pave[d] the way for the mentality that makes believable (sharable) a hitherto distant or unknown idea: that civil society leads, summons, and distributes solidarity.” That is, for Monsiváis and other Mexican intellectuals, the popular urban movements following the earthquake represented the flowering of an independent civil society that challenged the authoritarian structures of the PRI, the entrenched ruling political party. The common view of the 1985 earthquake, as urban scholar Diane Davis (2005) summarizes, is of a natural disaster that was “truly transformative of urban life, politics and society. The massive tremors themselves...empowered urban citizens to mobilize on their own behalf to challenge a corrupt and highly bureaucratized local government.”

The memory of 1985—as a turning point for civil society, people's movements, and democracy—was re-lived, re-embodied, and re-membered simultaneously on September 19, 2017, as another major earthquake shook the city. The shadow of 1985 was inescapable in 2017, even for those who had not directly experienced the earthquake or had arrived in the city decades later. In the immediate aftermath of the earthquake, amidst the wreckage of collapsed buildings, the city once again experienced a wellspring of mutual solidarity and aid. Thousands of volunteers rushed to the deadliest sites of the earthquake—an apartment complex on Álvaro Obregón Street, a primary school called Colegio Rébsamen, a factory located at the intersection of Chimalpopoca and Bolívar Streets—to rescue victims trapped under the rubble. Armed with shovels, hard hats, and wheelbarrows, volunteers worked through the night to search out the bodies. They formed human chains to clear out the debris, passing broken pieces of concrete, shattered bricks, and crumpled metal rods away from the collapsed sites. In what would become the iconic symbol of the 2017 earthquake, volunteers would hold up a fist to ask for silence—a gestural symbol repeated and replicated down the chain—if they thought they heard a human voice underneath the wreckage. Collection centers (*centros de acopios*) for *damnificados*—those affected by the earthquake—popped up on every street corner. I received hourly WhatsApp messages listing new sites that needed volunteers, and neighbors knocked on doors to request donation items urgently required by hospitals, welfare centers, and citizen aid groups.

In 2017 as in 1985, the swift action of ordinary citizens contrasted sharply with the government's bumbling leadership, which revealed the incompetence and impunity of the state under the governance of PRI President Enrique Peña Nieto (2012-2018). The political, economic, and social consequences of the earthquake reverberated throughout my time living in Mexico City and afterward, contributing to the defeat of the political dynasty of the PRI and the rise of a newly formed leftist party helmed by President Andrés Manuel López Obrador in 2018. For the progressive and activist-minded young people among my friends in Mexico City, a lasting result of the earthquake was a sense of rejuvenated civic duty and national belonging—a feeling of democratic potentiality that lingered long after the “end” of disaster and that linked volunteers with the historical legacy of popular sovereignty that surged after '85. The earthquake marked not only the “event” of disaster but a cyclical return of the people in a broader story of belonging to the city of Mexico and, by extension, to the nation.

During the September 19, 2017 earthquake, one of the victims included a 42-year-old Korean man named Mr. Kim. The day after the earthquake, in a scene of grieving replicated

across the city, I gathered with members of the Korean Presbyterian Church to mourn Mr. Kim's passing, who had perished alongside 20 others when the building where he had worked had collapsed. After listening to testimonies from Mr. Kim's family members and friends, the head pastor of the church gave a short sermon, pointing out that God's will was often inscrutable from the perspective of human beings. He urged the mourners to trust in God, even under bewildering and painful circumstances, and to accept that all events, human and natural, were under God's control.

After the service, I and other women gathered back at the boarding house for coffee. The conversation first centered on starting a collection drive to support the family of the deceased. But a heated debate soon arose when a deaconess commented that she wanted to find an apartment in a neighborhood deemed "safer" from earthquake risk. Even if the rent were higher, the deaconess argued, Koreans should only occupy buildings that were certain to not be dangerous. Other women took exception to this argument, with one woman pointing out that some new buildings were damaged, while many older buildings were not; therefore, there was no human action capable of mitigating the risk. Natural disaster, this woman argued, affected us all—rich and poor, man and woman, Korean and Mexican—which meant that risk was beyond human control. Similarly, she had followed her husband to Mexico without choosing to come here, and she drew parallels between submitting to her husband's plans and submitting to God's will. This opinion was met with derisive laughter by the deaconess. "Isn't it the mother's responsibility to ensure the safety of their families?" she asked, proudly proclaiming that she, not her husband, managed her household (*sallimhada*), whether in Mexico or in Korea. The deaconess' harsh tone was atypical for this gathering of church women, and she quickly changed the subject, perhaps sensing the group's unease. Everyone left quickly afterward—it was the day after the earthquake, and anxiety and tension were in the air.

Meanwhile, the building where Mr. Kim had perished became one of the most potent examples of the Mexican government's inaction and corruption in the aftermath of the earthquake. Located in the working-class neighborhood of Obrera, at the corner of Bolívar and Chimalpopoca streets, the building's dramatic collapse was replayed across major national and international media as evidence of the earthquake's deadly force. The site also became a symbol of the solidarity and unity of the Mexican people, as over 200 volunteers armed with shovels, hard hats, and wheelbarrows worked through the night to search for bodies. They formed human chains to clear out debris. Volunteers closest to the collapsed site held up a fist to ask for silence—a gestural symbol repeated and replicated down the chain—if they thought they heard a human voice underneath the rubble. They worked ceaselessly for over 48 hours, until police officers and armed soldiers showed up to officially forbid further rescue efforts, claiming that all the bodies had been removed from the site. After two days of volunteer search and rescue with no state assistance, the sudden appearance of the state was not welcome. An amorphous group of volunteers, calling themselves *La Brigada Feminista*, or the Feminist Brigade, took to social media in order to resist the government's orders. The group claimed that the government was trying to cover up a sinister secret: that underneath the debris was a secret basement where undocumented workers had worked and perished.

Throughout the night, as the Feminist Brigade continued to search, different groups—neighbors, police, architects, search and rescue crews—confirmed and denied the existence of a secret basement. The primary evidence for the basement was the presence of four Asian bodies—a Taiwanese man, two Taiwanese women, and a Korean man—that had been removed from the rubble. *Expansión MX*, the CNN affiliate of Mexico, reported, "21 cadavers were

brought out of the building, including Asian women, which has awakened the suspicion among activists that they were employed illegally.” According to another online magazine, “More than a few members of the [Feminist] Brigade commented that Asian women had been rescued and, meanwhile, at least one Spanish-Korean dictionary had been found, which made them think that undocumented people worked in this factory.”⁶

Television broadcasts, newspaper articles, and social media conversations pointed to the presence of Asian bodies in the rubble as proof of illicit labor and migration practices. Recalling the devastating earthquake of 1985, when hundreds of women garment-workers perished in prison-like sweatshops in the very same neighborhood of Obrera, the collapsed building on Chimalpopoca Street came to represent not only government inaction in the immediate moments after the earthquake, but a whole system of corruption and exploitative global capitalism in which women bore a heavier burden of risk.

When I visited the site on the afternoon of Sunday, September 24, five days after the earthquake, the rescue volunteers had been disbanded and bulldozers had already removed much of the heavy debris. Over the last few days, heavy police activity and protests had made it impossible for me to approach the site. But now, the corner of Chimalpopoca and Bolívar had been emptied and transformed into a makeshift memorial, a collectively built remembrance of the 21 people who had perished there. A remaining wall was emblazoned with the words, “Not one more buried due to corruption.” Torn pieces of fabric, beads, and other remnants were strewn about the lot, covered in the dust of pulverized cement and glass. I spotted a Korean-Spanish dictionary among the debris, its torn pages fluttering in the breeze. An altar had been built in one corner of the site, with candles and pieces of paper bearing the names of the deceased. I saw the names of the three Taiwanese workers. One note, bearing the name of Cinthia Yu Tang, said: “Sister my fight is for you, today I mourn you and I don’t forget you, I won’t allow you to be forgotten, you will be remembered.” I couldn’t find the name of Kim Sung-bin, the Korean man who had also perished there.

As I stood jotting down notes and taking photos, a reporter, accompanied by a cameraman, approached me. “Do you speak Spanish?” she asked me.

When I said yes, she became visibly excited. She explained that she was doing a story on the Asian exploitation of illegal Central American labor in Mexico, and she wanted to interview me to understand the experiences of Asian women, to see if we were similarly oppressed. She wanted to know my visa status, how long I had worked in Mexico, how I had learned Spanish, if I knew Cinthia Yu Tang and Amy Hsien, the Taiwanese women who had perished at the factory site. The reporter’s questions caught me off guard. I stuttered as I tried to explain that I was a Korean American graduate student conducting research in Mexico, gently at first, then angrily as she kept insisting and her videographer kept filming. I was painfully aware that I was using my U.S. citizenship, my educational status, and my class privilege to counter her claims, to distinguish between my position as researcher and the factory worker she thought me to be. Read phenotypically as an Asian woman, I was an ambivalent figure—representing both the oppressive elements of global capitalism as well as the gendered and racialized body that was exploited by it. It wasn’t until I took out my own tape recorder that the reporter, huffing and annoyed, finally left me alone.

A few days later, the volunteers of the Feminist Brigade posted a manifesto on their Facebook page condemning the Mexico City government for their inaction and, later, eagerness to raze the building despite rumors of the secret basement. The message concluded, “We

recognize the structural violence of this patriarchal system that has resulted in death and impunity, because the deaths at Chimalpopoca and the other collapsed buildings are not a random accident of ‘natural disaster,’ there are perpetrators and they have names and they are legal business entities.”

But who were those perpetrators, and what were their names? In the coming months, I followed closely as investigative journalists revealed that the building at Chimalpopoca had once been owned by the government, then sold, then rented out—despite known structural deficiencies. But finding individual perpetrators—and bringing them to justice—proved to be more difficult than pointing out that the systemic violence of the state, endemic corruption, and patriarchal oppression were ultimately responsible. Jaime Asquenazi, a Jewish immigrant from Argentina, was named as the landlord of the building. But he himself had perished in the building’s collapse, and it was unclear if he had known that the building was unsafe. Rumors that Central American bodies had been found, hidden, or buried persisted for weeks, though the consular offices of Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras denied that any of their citizens had been affected.⁷ Some accounts accused the Taiwanese and Koreans of being corrupt managers who exploited their workers, while others pointed out that they were undocumented migrants with few legal rights. In other words, it was not easy to draw lines between perpetrators and victims.

Writing about the aftermath of the March 2011 earthquake and tsunami in Fukushima, Japan, Vivian Shaw (2017) has similarly argued that “disaster...has historically troubled the boundaries of who is included in or excluded in the nation” (62). In the case of Japan, disasters such as the 1923 Kanto Earthquake led to the scapegoating of the Korean ethnic minority and the massacring of roughly 6,000 Koreans in Tokyo and Kanagawa; Shaw points out similar rumors that Koreans were involved in criminal activities circulated after the 2011 earthquake (68). Similarly, after the September 2017 earthquakes, Asian racial difference contributed to an ambivalent figuration marked by a heightened sense of inscrutability; feminist activists, for example, sought to draw transnational lines of solidarity among women garment workers, even as the presence of Asian bodies indicated the possibility of a secret basement that hid the “true” victims at Chimalpopoca.

Racial Itineraries of the Global Pandemic

On February 3, 2020, the editorial board of *La Jornada*, a leading progressive daily newspaper in Mexico, published an article entitled, “Racism, the worst epidemic.”⁸ Writing in response to widespread alarm following the news that forty-five Asian employees of the Taiwanese conglomerate Foxconn were in self-quarantine in Ciudad Juárez as a precautionary measure, the article draws an analogous relation between the global contagion of COVID-19 and “outbreaks of racism and Sinophobia.” Reminding the reader that “racism is no less deadly than epidemics,” the article concludes by warning that the pandemic could serve as a “vector” to “reactivate and propagate” anti-Asian sentiment and calls on the Mexican government to be attentive to potential signs of prejudice and discrimination.

Three days later, on February 6, 2020, Imagen TV, a national broadcast network in Mexico, broke the news of a South Korean citizen who had been brought to Enrique Cabrera General Hospital in Mexico City over the suspicion of a coronavirus infection. Speaking over a shaky camera phone video that showed an Asian man putting on a face mask and other personal protective equipment, a reporter announced that the hospital had been shut down as a preventative measure over the suspected case of COVID-19. The clip, posted to the Imagen

News Facebook page, quickly went viral, amassing thousands of views and reactions in a matter of hours. Amidst the alarm were xenophobic comments such as, “Why do they let them in the country?” and “Send them back where they came from.” A screenshot from the news broadcast then was recirculated across other Facebook pages and WhatsApp groups, with the image of a Korean man identified as “the first Coronavirus patient in Mexico.”

In response to the panic, the Mexico City Secretary of Health released a statement that the Imagen TV broadcast included multiple falsehoods.⁹ Enrique Cabrera Hospital had not been shut down, and the Korean patient was not suspected of being infected by the coronavirus. The Korean man putting on personal protective equipment in the Imagen TV video was identified as a South Korean embassy employee, deployed to the hospital for consular assistance. Weeks before Mexico’s first confirmed case of COVID-19—on February 28, after three travelers returned from Bergamo, Italy—the Imagen TV broadcast and the ensuing panic revealed that Asian bodies had become coronavirus corporealized—the embodiment of a global pandemic.

The naming of anti-Asian racism by a major Mexican newspaper, accompanied by the rising tide of explicitly racist and xenophobic behavior, marks an important moment in a country that has long prided itself on its history of nonracism. According to legal scholar Tanya Katerí Hernández, a “trope of racial innocence” mythologizes the absence of institutionalized racism in Mexico and the Latin American and Caribbean region more broadly—especially in contrast to the history of juridically enforced structures of racism in the United States. The belief that it is impossible for Mexicans to be racist is so culturally engrained that, as Hernández (2013) points out, “even the ubiquitous utterance and dissemination of racist speech are viewed as inconsequential” (5). That is, while few people would deny the pervasiveness of the quotidian use of racial language, there is a racial common sense that such speech is not motivated by prejudicial intent and is thereby harmless. This view is pervasive across popular and academic discourses of racial difference in Mexico, reaching across class and political divides. For example, Flora Botton Beja (2008), a Mexican scholar of China, describes the anti-Chinese movement in Mexico referenced by *La Jornada* as an unfortunate aberration. Today, she argues, “Even if one hears expressions like ‘chales’ or ‘chinitos,’ they are relics of the past and do not necessarily indicate a dangerous racist quality” (484).

The idea that racialized representations are not necessarily racist surfaced again in late March 2020, during the Ministry of Health’s (Secretaría de Salud) public service campaign to encourage Mexicans to stay at home. In support of the campaign, beloved comedic actor Andrés Bustamante donned the costume of one of his most famous personas, who had been retired in 2013: “Dr. Chun-ga,” a Korean scientist known for his zany inventions.¹⁰ In video sketches first circulated on Twitter, Dr. Chun-ga introduces a series of “coronavirus solutions” to encourage the public to avoid close contact and to wear face coverings. Working from home instead of his laboratory, Dr. Chun-ga reveals various inventions. In one sketch, he puts on a red and gold “corona” (the Spanish word for “crown”) that unexpectedly unfurls a full-body plastic poncho in which he becomes entangled. In another sketch, he demonstrates how to use a “corona-vara” (“corona-stick”), which can punch strangers away to an appropriate social distance.

With taped eyes, face prosthetics, and accented speech, Bustamante’s Dr. Chun-ga conjures a long history of “yellowface” performance in the Americas that has been used to exclude and stigmatize diasporic Asian peoples and communities. But Bustamante and his many fans would certainly reject the idea that Dr. Chun-ga is a racist caricature. Mexican audiences nearly universally welcomed Dr. Chun-ga’s return as providing what one journalist called a “little ray of hope”: wholesome comic relief during times of intense uncertainty and fear.¹¹ And

Bustamante has pointed to Dr. Chun-ga as a kind of homage to Asian scientific innovation; he had first introduced the character during the 1988 Olympics in Seoul—an event that celebrated “the arrival of South Korea on the global scene” as a developed and modern country (Joo 2012, 47).

But why bring Dr. Chun-ga out of retirement in the midst of the COVID-19 global pandemic? Much as Dr. Chun-ga repurposes common objects for mischievous purposes, the character repackages ominous viral mutations coming out of Asia into comic ones. By making the foreign domestic, Dr. Chun-ga provides one way for Mexican audiences to grapple with the threat of contagion that is itself racialized as Asiatic. As a figure of scientific genius, he embodies a fascination with the “Asian way” to global modernity proposed by the rise of Asian “tigers” and “dragons” (see Dupont 1996). However, his buffoonery undercuts the promise of technological development at the very moment it is offered. In Lok Siu’s analysis of a yellowface performance by Mexican actress Jesusa Rodríguez, who likewise portrays an Asian doctor, Siu points out that scientific expertise, “when performed by a racialized Asian character ... verges on a form of ‘mad science’ or science genius gone awry” (2016, 169). Similarly, the danger of malfunction—that Asian progress might backfire, threatening the world—is coded in Dr. Chun-ga’s inventions’ glitches and errors. As exuberant parody and indignant mimicry, Dr. Chun-ga is the embodiment of ambivalence toward what Asia promises and portends. Revived at this particular moment, his reemergence is inextricable from the rise of anti-Asian racism in Mexico and across the world.

The pandemic, then, offers a moment to analyze anti-Asian panic and yellowface caricatures together as part of a broader racial project. That is, my interest in Dr. Chun-ga is not to simply evaluate whether the character is racist or not, but to point out that the character’s representation of Asianness can eclipse the voices and perspectives of Asian Mexicans, who are increasingly contesting locally specific meanings of racialized humor in Mexico. Such humorous images make it no coincidence, as Chinese Mexican writer Ricardo Ham points out, “that the anti-Chinese experience is practically erased from collective memory and, above all, from official memory” (11). Even in the current crisis, members of the Chinese Mexican community have pointed out that pervasive anti-Chinese racism continues to be both “invisibilized” and delegitimized. Speaking to the publication *El Salto*, diplomat and historian Antonio Chang explained, “The media has not addressed the theme of racism toward the Chinese community and their descendants in Mexico itself, but has rather focused on what is happening abroad.” Yuriko Valdéz, a historian and fourth-generation Chinese Mexican, echoes this assessment, pointing out that while numerous Mexican news accounts covered anti-Asian racism in the United States and Europe, none reported on the multitude of racist invectives on social media that abounded in response to Chinese New Year celebrations and announcements in Mexicali, the capital of Baja California.¹²

The ongoing invisibilization of anti-Asian racism during the pandemic is profound. And yet, the pandemic has also offered an opening in which diasporic Asian voices are beginning to explicitly contest racist discourses on public Internet platforms, producing a participatory digital archive that charts their experiences and analyzes the significance of their community’s presence. In particular, I focus on a group of Korean Mexican “influencers”—“everyday, ordinary Internet users who accumulate a relatively large following on blogs and social media through the textual and visual narration of their personal lives and lifestyles,” to use anthropologist Crystal Abidin’s (2016) definition—who deftly utilize a global digital ecosystem that includes social media sites such as Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram and video blogging

platforms like YouTube and TikTok. Speaking fluent Spanish, culturally Mexican, but phenotypically Asian, these influencers were either born in Mexico or immigrated from South Korea at a young age. Representing the increasing diversification of the diasporic Asian community in Mexico, they form part of an aspirational and upwardly mobile class of recent Asian migrants who live thoroughly transnational lives. At the same time, by proudly claiming belonging in Mexico, they counter the dominant narrative, in which “Asians are characterized as having ‘too much’ culture, as being perpetually connected to another nation, and are represented as being unwilling to give up their respective cultures in order to ‘assimilate’ into Mexican culture,” (69) as Siu and Ng’weno argue.

On YouTube, the most popular Korean content producers attract millions of subscribers and hundreds of millions of views. Their success owes much to a growing Mexican subculture that is fascinated with Korean popular music, television dramas, and other cultural products, as well as the widespread penetration of social media networks in Mexico.¹³ That is, their popularity is inextricable from the global influence of Asian popular culture and the densifying cultural connections between Asia and Latin America, which travel across South-South routes of relative peripherality instead of being mediated by hegemonic cultural powerhouses located in North America and Europe. Produced as they are directly by young Koreans in Mexico, I contend that such digital media productions are an important domain through which the ambivalences and ambiguities of diasporic Korean identity are articulated, negotiated, and critiqued—producing what Stuart Hall (1997) might call the “shared conceptual maps” through which groups forge and contest social meanings.

Unlike Asian American YouTubers, whose content is produced for and consumed by a predominantly Asian American audience, most Asian Mexican social media influencers address a non-Asian, Spanish-speaking public. As Christina Bacareza Balance (2012) argues, celebrity Asian American YouTubers often post content that “invoke[s] a certain set of shared affects” (149) among their Asian American viewers and asserts the boundaries of Asian American group membership. In contrast, Asian Mexican YouTubers tackle questions of cultural difference by presenting themselves as authentic guides who broker entry to a world that their non-Asian audiences find exotic and fascinating, while carefully cultivating a community of intimacy that reveals glimpses of their daily lives—their homes, their everyday routines, and their closest relationships.

For example, Cristian Kim of Coreano Vlogs, whose YouTube channel boasts nearly four million followers and over 350 million views, features videos where his Mexican friends try Korean snacks or restaurants for the first time or catalogues how he introduced his Mexican girlfriend to his Korean parents. Similarly, Jea Eun Kim of JEKS Corea, with 1.8 million followers on YouTube, has posted videos that describe the differences between Christmas in Mexico and South Korea or show how her father makes Korean-style tacos. These influencers’ channels are not explicitly political or activist-oriented, but they often reveal and contest some of the problematic ways in which Asians in Mexico are perceived and represented in popular discourse and media. For example, JEKS Corea has posted videos that address stereotypes that Asian men have small penises or that Korean women are vain and only interested in money. Staged as humorous interventions into these limited and subordinating characterizations, the videos nonetheless mobilize their viewers to refuse stereotypes and seek to define how Asians are both represented and perceived by a broader Mexican public.

Furthermore, in the early days of the global pandemic, many of these influencers used their relatively wide reach and public profile to display a variety of responses to the anti-Asian

racism that has abounded in Mexico. The aforementioned Cristian Kim of Coreano Vlogs has posted videos showing him distributing packets of cash to street vendors in Mexico City to encourage them to stay home because of the pandemic—a performance of civic responsibility and mutual aid.¹⁴ In so doing, he implicitly counters the common impression that Asian migrants are secretive, closed-off, and exclusionary, indifferent to and uninterested in the struggles of broader, mainstream Mexican society. JEKS Corea has used her Instagram and Twitter accounts to explicitly contest exclusionary anti-Asian discourses. For example, she publicized efforts to gather and donate protective equipment to China in early February on Twitter, inviting solidarity with her Chinese Mexican friends. She has also “called out” instances of racism against Asians, sharing photos and screenshots of racist comments left on her videos and Instagram posts. In doing so, she counters a dominant narrative that invisibilizes and dismisses the reality of pervasive anti-Asian sentiment. On March 14, for example, she tweeted, “For everyone who thinks that because we are Asian we have/or will give you #coronavirus, this is called #racism and #xenophobia. Thank you for your attention.” Her articulation of “we are Asian,” beyond an ethno-specific subject position, gestures toward a broader pan-ethnic identification, and the specific naming of racism and xenophobia is a striking departure from the themes of her regular content.

On April 8, 2020, photographer and social media influencer Seou Park posted a YouTube video entitled, “Racism is everyone’s problem.”¹⁵ The video begins as Park reaches out to turn on the camera and speaks directly into it in Spanish, introducing herself as “Korean, born and raised in Mexico.” She pauses, and says, “For many days, I’ve wanted to make this video, but I kept thinking, ‘What’s the point? Why do I even bother speaking about it?’ But just today, I understand that topics like racism are exactly the things that should be spoken about, should be pointed out, and should be made aware of [concientizar].” She goes on to describe her heartbreak at hearing about horrific acts of violence against Asian Americans in Texas and New York, explaining that she has Asian American friends, coworkers, and family members who now live in a heightened sense of fear. In Mexico, Park says she herself has not been made to feel that same sense of racialized threat. But she points out that “racism is not always obvious, loud, or big. Microaggressions arrive in comments, jokes, that we don’t know if it’s valid to feel offended or not ... but it is precisely microaggressions that give power to racism in its totality.” Casually dressed, framed against a white wall, and comfortably speaking with Mexican slang words, Park’s performance provides the viewer with a sense of intimacy—an unscripted conversation between friends—that nevertheless makes the political connection between “microaggressions” with “racism in its totality.”

In Park’s video, she specifically targets racialized humor as a Mexican social norm that perpetuates racist ideas against Asians. Her discussion is particularly striking because Park herself had been vaulted to Internet fame after a videotaped racial joke directed at her went viral. In the video, taken during a 2018 FIFA World Cup Mexico-South Korea soccer match, Mexican YouTuber and comedian Ricardo O’Farrill yells, “Take that, Korean!” to which Park retorts, “Hablo español, pendejo” (I speak Spanish, you idiot).” The video went massively viral: it was retweeted more than 24,000 times and received over 46,000 likes in the first few hours after it was posted, it was covered by national news outlets, and it continued to circulate through social media for weeks during the World Cup festivities. The jab was staged as an obvious joke: a lighthearted moment of good-natured sports rivalry between South Korea and Mexico.¹⁶ But the humor, which arose from the unexpected contrast between Park’s Korean appearance and her

retort in perfect Spanish and Mexican slang, also probed the assumptions behind who is accepted as “Mexican” or “Korean,” and how those assumptions racialize Asians as perpetually foreign.

I have suggested that it is no coincidence that Bustamante’s Dr. Chun-ga—a humorous performance of Asianness by a non-Asian actor—has reemerged during a global pandemic that has revived and remixed an array of Asian stereotypes, both old and new. As María Elisa Velázquez Gutiérrez (2020) has argued in her analysis of Mexican depictions of Africans and Afro-descendants during the 2010 FIFA World Cup in South Africa, stereotypes of minoritized groups in Mexican visual media have long counted as “healthy entertainment.” It is this context—in which racialized insults and jokes are not only seen as neutral, but also perhaps even as benign—that makes the anti-racist discourse articulated by Korean influencers a sharp departure from the norm. Their videos are cultural productions where the actual Asian faces and voices can be seen and heard, as they create a new archive that attests to the complexity of the diasporic Asian experience in Mexico. In so doing, they contest the racialized visual tropes first propagated by anti-Chinese cartoons in the early twentieth century and whose lineage echoes in contemporary yellowface performances such as Dr. Chun-ga.

In her video, Park begins by speaking to horrific acts of anti-Asian violence in the United States and ends by asking her primarily Mexico-based, Spanish-speaking audience to reject common racist jokes that alienate and marginalize Asians. While she recognizes a Mexican tradition of humor (“la carrilla”) in which physical or cultural features are not off-limits, she asks her audience to avoid sending memes in WhatsApp groups that poke fun at Asians for the shape of their eyes or for “eating bats”—jokes that she directly connects to violence. In so doing, her analysis places anti-Asian discrimination in the context of a specifically Mexican social practice, calling for a conscientiousness of how humor performs racialized exclusion—in her words, “it is clear between the jokes, there’s intention.” At the same time, by referring to horrific acts of anti-Asian violence in Los Angeles or New York, she enacts diasporic solidarity across hemispheric Asian Americas—indexing the place of U.S.-based diasporic Asians in relation to her own critique from the perspective of Mexico. Her video is therefore a compelling example of hemispheric belonging enacted by a new generation of Asians in Mexico, who make visible the quotidian struggle of racialized life in Mexico while also speaking with, across, and amidst a network of Asian diasporas in the Americas.

Whether by performing acts of “good” citizenship, calling out xenophobia, or sharing their own experiences of anti-Asian discrimination, these influencers simultaneously challenge the alleged “harmlessness” of racist speech while countering the dominant narrative that Asian Mexicans are perpetually alien, with no desire to claim or be claimed in Mexico.¹⁷ Furthermore, I suggest that Park’s act of naming anti-Asian racism indexes the seeds of pan-ethnic Asian solidarity in Mexico—part of a growing acknowledgement of the myriad ways in which race shapes subjectivity and everyday life for Asians in Mexico. Therefore, as Park’s video suggests, contesting anti-Asian racism can be both a hemispheric project and a locally sited struggle that is shaped by shared vocabularies of resistance as well as different histories of racialized exclusion. The cultural repertoires articulated by these emergent voices describe oft-invisible experiences of racialized exclusion while expressing the desire for more inclusive spaces of belonging.

Conclusion

In March 2021, one year after the WHO’s declaration of the global pandemic, the Mexican Chamber of Deputies recognized May 4, the day when the first Koreans stepped foot on Mexican soil, as the Day of the Korean Immigrant (Día del Inmigrante Coreano).¹⁸ The

announcement followed a similar recognition from the state of Yucatán, where the first Korean migrants had arrived in 1905. The recognition of the figure of the Korean immigrant served primarily to mark the growing bilateral relationship between Mexico and South Korea as economic and political partners. The press release from the Chamber of Deputies emphasized growing South Korean foreign direct investment in Mexico as well as trading volume rather than the accomplishments and contributions of Korean migrants in Mexico.¹⁹

At the same time, the Day of the Korean Immigrant also generated criticism among lawmakers. Deputy Porfirio Muñoz Ledo, for example, called the legislation “ridiculous,” stating that the initiative was a caricature of the Chamber’s more pressing duties: “We could also declare the day of soccer, which would be much more popular; the day of leisure, the day of the horse races, the day of the bread roll (*bolillo*)...”²⁰ Instead of recognizing Korean immigration, the lawmaker argued that more attention should be paid to the ongoing crisis of Central American migrants transiting Mexico in hopes of reaching the United States. In Deputy Muñoz Ledo’s speech, Central America and Korea occupy different locations in what Michael Shapiro (1994) has called a *moral geography*, “a set of silent ethical assertions that preorganize explicit ethico-political discourses” (482). Such geopolitical imaginaries—though they largely emerge from “the spatial practices of the state”—become accepted as “commitments that are as normative as the Christian imaginary, which divided the world into sacred and profane spaces” (481). The consequences of the division of the world into a stratified moral geography are often embodied in the racialized and gendered representations of migrants.

As the controversy over the state’s recognition of the Day of the Korean Immigrant suggests, the issue of Korean belonging must be situated in a global context that exceeds both the nation-state framework of immigrant incorporation and the transnational dyad of homeland-settlement country. That is, in addition to the exigencies of global capital investment and tightening economic bonds between Asia and Latin America, recognition of Korean migration in Mexico became linked to the hemispheric consequences of United States empire, as Central American migrants fleeing violence and instability transit Mexico in hopes of reaching the United States.²¹ A hemispheric lens—which necessitates an inter-relational understanding of multiple waves of migrations and diasporas across transnational contexts—raises complicated questions about how to comparatively analyze groups without either homogenizing difference or failing to notice mutually constitutive forms of domination and resistance across the siloes of area studies.²² One way to do so, as Nicholas De Genova (2011) has argued, is to look beyond the dichotomization of inclusion and exclusion, focusing instead on the “process of inclusion through exclusion.” Therefore, rather than pitting Central American migrants and Korean migrants against each other—as if recognition of one group must come at the expense of the other—I suggest that examining both groups together reveals the broader logics that animate their differential inclusion and exclusion.

Take, for example, the rumors of the collapsed building at Chimalpopoca and Bolívar during the 2017 earthquakes positioned Central Americans as the invisible, abused labor force in the basement and Koreans as a “homo economicus” that embodied the worst aspects of globalization.²³ Emphasizing the interconnected coordinates of racialization reveals that Koreans and Central American migrants might occupy different structural positions in the Mexican national imaginary, but they are simultaneously linked in their externalization from the nation—as exploiting and exploited labor, or as a recurring problem to be solved. Beyond seeing migration simply as an individual strategy of class mobility and reproduction—the quintessential immigrant search for a “better life”—this chapter has paid close attention to moments of disaster

when migrants become intensely visible or invisible. When, why, and how different migrant groups are subordinated or valorized helps us understand the shifting boundaries of race, nation, and belonging within national, hemispheric, and global scenes of spectacle.

¹ Covid-19 México, Gobierno de México, Accessed April 5, 2021, <https://datos.covid-19.conacyt.mx/>

² As non-citizens, most Korean migrants do not have access to the realm of formal politics and are explicitly prohibited by Article 33 of the Mexican Constitution from “participating in any way in political affairs” (“los extranjeros no podrán de ninguna manera inmiscuirse en los asuntos políticos del país”). While written in response to a history of foreign incursion, Article 33 has mostly been deployed against non-Mexican participants in social movements such as the Zapatista insurrections in the 1990s and, more recently, in LGBT rights protests in various cities across the country (See Cieslik 2005). The South Korean government periodically publishes announcements in local Korean-language newspapers and online message boards reminding Koreans without Mexican citizenship to refrain from participating in even widely attended events such as Mexico City’s annual LGBT pride parade.

³ There has been an increase in anti-Asian discrimination in Mexico since the beginning of the pandemic. For example, in February 2020, former Mexican actress and congressional deputy Carmen Salinas claimed that coronavirus was divine punishment against the Chinese for eating cats and dogs, and shopkeepers in Mexico City’s Chinatown and Koreatown have reported acts of discrimination and harassment. Daniel Flores, “Coronavirus ‘contagia’ de xenofobia a mexicanos,” *Publimetro*, Feb. 15, 2020, <https://www.publimetro.com.mx/mx/noticias/2020/02/16/coronavirus-contagia-xenofobia-mexicanos.html?fbclid=IwAR28vIHVX4MmMVMsdY0TtGsa7dp1fmhPmVS3CDo3giUKRK1neBKI7XtZUhg>.

⁴ Since the beginning of the global pandemic, online abuse against Asians has increased by over 900 percent, according to one report. Chris Mills Rodrigo, “As misinformation surges, coronavirus poses AI challenge,” *The Hill*, March 31, 2020, <https://thehill.com/policy/cybersecurity/490257-as-misinformation-surges-coronavirus-poses-ai-challenge>.

⁵ In a dual act of emergency preparedness and remembrance, every September 19, all of Mexico City marches dutifully out of homes and workplaces to the soundtrack of the seismic alarm for the annual evacuation drill.

⁶ N.a. “Las dudas y la frustración que rodearon el caso Chimalpopoca,” *Plumas Atómicas*, September 23, 2017. <https://plumasatomicas.com/explicandolanoticia/chimalpopoca-sotano-cisterna-trabajadoras/>

⁷ Mercedes Martínez, “La tragedia en la fábrica textil de Chimalpopoca: stampa de nuestro México,” *Sopitas.com*, September 23, 2017, <https://www.sopitas.com/noticias/chimalpopoca-fabrica-textileras-sismo/>

⁸ “El racismo, el peor epidemia,” *La Jornada*, Feb. 3, 2020, <https://www.jornada.com.mx/2020/02/03/index.php?section=edito>.

⁹ “Coreano en hospital de la CDMX, realizaba trabajo consular,” *Dinero en Imagen*, Feb. 7, 2020. <https://www.dineroenimagen.com/actualidad/coreano-en-hospital-de-la-cdmx-realizaba-trabajo-consular/119228>.

¹⁰ “‘Quédate en casa’ con Trino y Andrés Bustamante,” *El Universal*, April 14, 2020, <https://www.eluniversal.com.mx/nacion/coronavirus-quedate-en-casa-con-trino-y-andres-bustamante>.

¹¹ José Carlos López Figueroa, “Un Rayito de Esperanza: ¡El Doctor Chunga Está en Vuelta!”, *Sopitas.com*, April 2, 2020, <https://www.sopitas.com/mientras-tanto/el-doctor-chunga-esta-de-vuelta-andres-bustamante-video-coronavirus/>.

¹² Paloma Chen, “La xenofobia en América Latina se expande más rápido que el coronavirus,” *El Salto*, February 17, 2020, <https://www.elsaltodiario.com/racismo/xenofobia-america-latina-expande-mas-rapido-coronavirus>.

¹³ For a discussion of the reception of Korean popular culture in Mexico, see Erica Vogel 2019.

¹⁴ Ariadna Cruz, “YouTubers en México regalan dinero para que las personas se queden en casa,” *El Universal*, April 16, 2020, <https://www.eluniversal.com.mx/techbit/youtubers-en-mexico-regalan-dinero-para-que-las-personas-se-queden-en-casa>.

¹⁵ Seoju Park, “El racismo es problema de todos,” YouTube, Posted April 8, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GYqNZysxkhk>.

¹⁶ Darinka Rodríguez, “‘Hablo español, pendejo’: una broma para acabar con los prejuicios en el Mundial,” *El País*, June 23, 2018, https://verne.elpais.com/verne/2018/06/23/mexico/1529778276_974088.html.

¹⁷ Chisu Teresa Ko (2016) makes a similar point regarding how popular and academic discourses characterize Asian Argentines.

¹⁸ Nilsa Hernández, “México celebrará Día del Inmigrante Coreano cada 4 de mayo,” *Milenio*, April 29, 2021, <https://www.milenio.com/politica/inmigrante-coreano-celebrara-4-mayo-mexico>.

¹⁹ “Aprueba Cámara de Diputados declarar el 4 de mayo ‘Día del Inmigrante Coreano,’” *Boletín de la Cámara de Diputados* no. 611, March 2021, <https://comunicacionnoticias.diputados.gob.mx/comunicacion/index.php/boletines/aprueba-camara-de-diputados-declarar-el-4-de-mayo-dia-del-inmigrante-coreano-#gsc.tab=0>

²⁰ Claudia Salazar, “Pide Muñoz Ledo a diputados frenar ocurrencias y ridículo” *El Reforma*, March 18, 2021, https://www.reforma.com/aplicacioneslibre/preacceso/articulo/default.aspx?_rval=1&urlredirect=https://www.reforma.com/pide-munoz-ledo-a-diputados-frenar-ocurrencias-y-ridiculo/ar2146615?referer=--7d616165662f3a3a6262623b727a7a7279703b767a783a--.

²¹ A critique of hemispheric U.S. empire foregrounds how the coronavirus pandemic has augmented xenophobic sentiment against all migrants, particularly those fleeing violence and instability in Central America, who often transit through Mexico in hopes of reaching the U.S. For example, former U.S. president Donald Trump made a border wall a centerpiece of his presidency campaign and pursued an anti-migrant crusade of exclusion, detention, and incarceration that has left Central Americans, including unaccompanied children and refugees, stranded along in towns the Rio Grande. During the early months of the coronavirus pandemic, under the pretext of public health, the Trump administration closed the U.S.-Mexico border, expelled over 10,000 asylum-seekers at the border, and halted all immigration court hearings, putting enormous pressure on an already-strained infrastructure in Mexico. Recent news that some migrants at Mexico’s northern border have been forcibly moved and abandoned in remote locations along the southern border has exacerbated already tense conditions: in the state of Chiapas, for example, violence and intimidation against Central Americans has flared. Nicole Narea, “The US has abandoned asylum seekers in Mexico during the pandemic,” *Vox*, April 27, 2020, <https://www.vox.com/2020/4/27/21232808/asylum-seekers-mexico-coronavirus-trump>; “Instituciones se pronuncian contra actos de xenofobia de habitantes de Palenque, Chiapas,” *Heraldo de México*, March 3, 2020, <https://heraldodemexico.com.mx/estados/chiapas-xenofobia-migrantes-inm-conapred-comar/>; “Demanda Conapred al INM explicar traslado de migrantes a

frontera sur,” *La Jornada*, April 14, 2020,

<https://www.jornada.com.mx/ultimas/politica/2020/04/14/demanda-conapred-al-inm-explicar-traslado-de-migrantes-a-frontera-sur-2327.html>.

²² At the same time, a relational analysis must also take care not to overstate U.S. power and underestimate the unevenness of U.S. imperial projects and the ongoing construction of national identity.

²³ As Michael Chang (2004) argues, the “homo economicus” paradigm—in which diasporic Asians “are valued and perceived in reductive economic terms” and “represent the worst characteristics of globalization” (112)—presents Asians and diasporic Asians as amoral vehicles of transnational capital.

Conclusion: Becoming Korean and Mexican in a Global World

It was August 25, 2018, the second day of the fourth annual Korean Camp funded by the Overseas Korean Association. For an extended weekend, a group of thirty Korean descendants and other Korean aficionados—almost entirely women—stayed together at a Presbyterian retreat center in the outskirts of Mérida, cooking Korean food, practicing Korean language, and learning about Korean cultural traditions. Wearing “I Love Korea” t-shirts, K-pop socks, and other Korean paraphernalia, the group gathered in the retreat center church sanctuary to hear a presentation by a special guest—Irving Lee, the president of the Association of Korean Descendants in the state of Campeche.

Although there were some non-descendants in the room, Lee used “we” to refer to the Korean descendant community, covering the familiar history of Korean migration to the Yucatán peninsula and connecting it to current challenges facing Korean descendants as well as the contemporary politics of migration in Mexico. To the rapt audience, he asked, “What happens to us when we migrate? [¿Qué nos pasa al migrar?]” Migrants, he argued, faced a number of interconnected challenges such as loneliness, discrimination, and lack of confidence that were connected to the pernicious force of *desarraigo*, a sense of dislocation. Suffering in the henequén haciendas, their ancestors had felt “rejected by Korea” and quickly assimilated, trading economic stability for a deep and abiding cultural loss. But this was a Faustian bargain; in the present, Korean descendants continued to be “rejected for our origins and race, assimilated into a culture that doesn’t value us.” Without authentic cultural ties and a sense of “historical consciousness,” “we are lost, without references.”



Irving Lee, President of the Association of Korean Descendants in Campeche, speaking at the 4th Annual Korean Camp in Mérida. August 25, 2018.

Lee identified Korean rejection and Mexican pressure to assimilate as directly responsible for the community’s loss of culture, and he argued that descendants needed to learn Korean language, cook Korean food, and take an interest in Korean traditions in order to heal

historical trauma and to demand recognition from Mexican society. Language was particularly important not only as a communication tool but as a signifier of cultural authenticity for a community that was no longer physically distinctive from other Mexicans. Acknowledging the difficulty of learning Korean, Lee stressed that cultural practice had to be accompanied by an affective desire:

It also includes one's identification with a cultural tradition and being part or wanting to be part of it. ... What do we feel? Who are we? What are our characteristics? We feel alone, without connections...we don't recognize ourselves, we don't accept ourselves, and for this reason, we don't take advantage of our treasures.

In addition to the “self-observation of our attitudes and internal processes,” Korean descendants needed to “take on public commitments of inclusion that are verifiable [asumir compromisos públicos de inclusión que sean verificables].” As an example, Lee mentioned the recent renaming of a major boulevard in Mérida as the Avenida República de Corea—a verifiable act of inclusion made by the state that recognized the contributions of Korean migrants and their descendants to Mexican society. According to Lee, Mexico was a migrant nation—not just “multicultural,” but what he called “transcultural”—“the mixture among many cultures, going beyond European and our indigenous groups.” Descendants, he argued, needed to demand recognition of the histories of migration to Mexico. “Everyone was, are, or will be migrants at some time to some place in the world,” he concluded. “We all want security, political stability and a better quality of life.”

Lee's speech argued that Korean descendants had a twofold responsibility. The first was private, on the level of interior subjectivity. Korean descendants had to embark on the “self-observation of our attitudes,” attuning themselves toward Koreanness through a desire to be part of a broader cultural tradition. This included practice—learning Korean language, cooking Korean food, and inculcating Korean habits in their children. But it also included a commitment to self-recognition and identification, an excavation of “who we are” in order to take advantage of “our treasures.” The second responsibility was located in the public sphere, in interactions with the state and civil society. In addition to self-recognition, Korean descendants needed to demand state recognition of immigration history and migrants' contributions to society. In so doing, they were to agitate for a more capacious vision of *la mexicanidad*—one that would, in Lee's words, recognize that “everyone was, is, and will be a migrant.”

These two responsibilities—private and public, intimate and exterior, subjective and social—were inextricably intertwined. Mediating between the two was “culture”—an ambiguous signifier that marked Korean descendants' difference from *lo mexicano* as well as the terms on which they would demand inclusion within it. Becoming Korean, then, was also about the changing meanings about becoming Mexican.

This dissertation's themes echo many of the cultural and political problems raised by Lee's speech. What does diasporic affiliation mean in a globalized world? How do different temporalities of settlement and migration—and attendant processes of inclusion and exclusion, representation and marginalization—shape the legibility of claims? And, the question with which Lee began his speech: what happens to us when we migrate? This dissertation has explored these questions by linking migrant itineraries with political questions of belonging—the contested negotiations of what it means to claim “home.” Far from an abstract ideal, belonging is always enacted through the categories of race, class, gender, and nation. Itinerant belonging emphasize

that the contestation of such categories occurs not only in locally specific sites but across transnational circuits of people, goods, and ideas, all of which co-constitutively shape the formations of home.

The liminal positionality of Koreans to and from Mexico provides an ideal case study for understanding how new temporalities of temporary, transient, and transit migrations shape migrant belonging. Korean migrants grapple with hemispheric lexicons of anti-Asian exclusion, global ethno-racial hierarchies, shifting national ideologies, and gendered discourses of labor, as explored by Chapter One and Chapter Two. These changing conceptual matrices also have consequences for people who are not physically on the move. As Chapter Three argues, new waves of Korean migration to Mexico, perceptions of a globally ascendant South Korea, and contested ideas of Mexican nationhood shape the diasporic affiliations of third, fourth, and fifth generations of Mexicans of Korean descent. The messiness of nation-based forms of belonging makes Protestant Christianity—which offers a transcendent home in the Kingdom of God—particularly appealing to itinerant migrants. Chapter Four teased out the interplay of ethnicity and religion to trace the interrelation between transnational networks of diaspora and transcendent networks of religion. Chapter Five examined the ruptures of disaster: how earthquakes and the ongoing coronavirus pandemic provided moments for Koreans in Mexico to re-negotiate the boundaries of national belonging. As some Korean youth begin to assert themselves in the Mexican public sphere, they do so in a country that is beginning to think of itself differently, not only as a migrant-sending nation but a nation that has been shaped by the migrants it has received.

Finally, the story of Koreans to and from Mexico sheds new light on Korean diaspora and diasporic identity, especially beyond the migratory pathways of the Global North. That is, it gestures toward more capacious understandings of Korean “American” identity—beyond a hyphenated relation that subordinates Korean ethnicity to United States citizenship or a static essence that reifies a genealogically authenticated “Koreanness.” Instead, I have linked Korean diasporic becomings to the negotiation of cultural imaginaries between South Korea, Mexico, and other locations in the Americas. This includes diasporic formations of ethnic belonging—the subjective feeling of what it means to be Korean and to be connected to other Koreans, both far back in time and across the globe—as well as shifting ideas of what it means to be Mexican in the new millennium.

Diaspora is always personal. The seeds of this project were planted during the summers I spent in Nicaragua with my maternal aunt and uncle, who lived in the capital city of Managua. One of the most striking experiences of my time in Managua were the friendships I forged with other Korean youth — friendships that reoriented me to think about Korean diaspora beyond the borders of the United States. I remember fondly the Sunday afternoons hanging out at the local Korean Presbyterian church or walking around the local mall with my cousins and their friends in Managua. From my own limited vantage point as a Korean American teenager growing up in the Northern Virginia suburbs, I also remember being fascinated — and perhaps even a little envious — of the cosmopolitan lives of my Korean friends in Nicaragua, who spoke multiple languages and had lived in many different countries. It was only many years later that I also came to realize how the structural inequalities of citizenship, race, and class—the relative power and privilege afforded by different passports, language ability, and socioeconomic status—also molded our respective migratory experiences and our affective orientation toward Korean diaspora.

These early experiences have shaped this dissertation project, which was motivated not only by a curiosity regarding the lives of Koreans in Latin America and the Caribbean but by the desire for a solidarity that would reckon with the lures of diasporic affinity. Rey Chow once warned against the “lures of diaspora”—the desire of Chinese intellectuals in the West to “speak for” oppressed groups “back home” in China (1993, 101). In this dissertation, I have tried to be mindful of a parallel hazard—telling the stories of diaspora from the perspective of the United States. By tracing residual and emergent linkages among heterogenous diasporas, I emphasize that diasporic solidarity comes not from an inherent ethnic sameness but a choice to come together as a multiplicity. I believe that embracing these complex and often contradictory subject positions might open a discursive space for thinking through the current politics of belonging, not only for Koreans in Mexico but all migrants who move across uneven global terrains.

Bibliography

- Abelmann, Nancy. 2003. *The Melodrama of Mobility: Women, Talk, and Class in Contemporary South Korea*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.
- Abelmann, Nancy, and John Lie. 1997. *Blue Dreams: Korean Americans and the Los Angeles Riots*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1997.
- Abidin, Crystal. 2016. “‘Aren’t These Just Young, Rich Women Doing Vain Things Online?’: Influencer Selfies as Subversive Frivolity.” *Social Media + Society* 2 (2).
- Ahmed, Sara. 2004. “Affective Economies.” *Social Text* 22 (2): 117–39.
- Ahn, Ji-Hyun. 2018. *Mixed-Race Politics and Neoliberal Multiculturalism in South Korean Media*. New York, Palgrave Macmillan.
- Anastario, Mike. *Parcels: Memories of Salvadoran Migration*. New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2019.
- Ang, Ien. 2001. *On Speaking Chinese: Living Between Asia and the West*. New York: Routledge.
- Antonsich, Marco. 2010. “Searching for Belonging - An Analytical Framework: Searching for Belonging.” *Geography Compass* 4 (6): 644–59.
- Applebaum, Nancy, Anne MacPherson, and Karin Alexandra, eds. 2002. *Race and Nation in Modern Latin America*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.
- Augustine-Adams, Kif. 2011. “Marriage and ‘Mestizaje’, Chinese and Mexican: Constitutional Interpretation and Resistance in Sonora, 1921—1935.” *Law and History Review* 29, no. 2: 419–63.
- Azuma, Eiichiro. 2014. “Japanese Immigrant Settler Colonialism in the U.S.-Mexican Borderlands and the U.S. Racial-Imperialist Politics of the Hemispheric ‘Yellow Peril.’” *Pacific Historical Review* 83, no. 2: 255–76.
- Babb, Sarah. 2001. *Managing Mexico: Economists from Nationalism to Neoliberalism*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press.
- Bacchetta, P., Sunaina Maira, and Howard Winant, eds. 2018. *Global Raciality: Empire, Postcoloniality, Decoloniality*. New York: Routledge.
- Bachner, Andrea and Pedro Erber. 2017. “Remapping the Transpacific: Critical Approaches between Asia and Latin America.” *Verge: Studies in Global Asias* 3, no. 2: vi.
- Balance, Christine Bacareza. 2012. “How It Feels to Be Viral Me: Affective Labor and Asian American YouTube Performance.” *WSQ: Women’s Studies Quarterly* 40 (1–2): 138–52.

- Bauman, Zygmunt. 2010. "Education in the World of Diasporas." *Policy Futures in Education* 8 (3–4): 398–407.
- Beaverstock, Jonathan V, and James T Boardwell. 2000. "Negotiating Globalization, Transnational Corporations and Global City Financial Centres in Transient Migration Studies." *Applied Geography* 20, no. 3: 277–304.
- Beliso De Jesús, Aisha. 2015. *Electric Santería: Racial and Sexual Assemblages of Transnational Religion*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Beltran, Cristina. 2004. "Patrolling Borders: Hybrids, Hierarchies and the Challenge of Mestizaje." *Political Research Quarterly* 57, no. 4: 597–607.
- Bennett, Herman. 2000. "The Subject in the Plot: National Boundaries and the 'History' of the Black Atlantic." *African Studies Review*, 43, no 1: 101-124.
- Besserer, Federico. 2000. "Política Cuántica: El Uso de la Radio por Comunidades Transnacionales," *Nueva Antropología* 17, no. 3: 11-21.
- Besserer, Federico, and Daniela Oliver, eds. 2014. *Ensemblando La Ciudad Transnacional: Etnografía Especular de Los Espacios Transnacionales Urbanos*. Mexico City, Mexico: Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana, Iztapalapa: Juan Pablo Editor.
- Boehm, Deborah A. 2013. *Intimate Migrations: Gender, Family, and Illegality among Transnational Mexicans*. New York: New York University Press.
- Botton Beja, Flora. 2008. "La persecución de los chinos en México," *Estudios de Asia y África*, 43, no. 2.
- Brah, Avtar. 1996. *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities*. London: Routledge.
- Buchenau, Jurgen. 2001. "Small numbers, great impact: Mexico and its immigrants, 1821–1973," *Journal of American Ethnic History* 20, no. 3.
- Buechler, Simone. 2004. "Sweating It in the Brazilian Garment Industry: Korean and Bolivian Immigrants and Global Economic Forces in São Paulo." *Latin American Perspectives* 31 (3): 99–119.
- Byrd, Jodi A. 2011. *The Transit of Empire: Indigenous Critiques of Colonialism*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Cardenas, Maritza E. 2018. *Constituting Central American-Americans: Transnational Identities and the Politics of Dislocation*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press.

Carrillo, Teresa. 1990. "Women and Independent Unionism in the Garment Industry." In *Popular Movements and Political Change in Mexico*, edited by Joe Foweraker and Ann L. Craig, 213–34. Boulder: L. Rienner Publishers.

Castillo Gómez, Amaranta Arcadia. 2009. "Cosmopolitismo y Modernidad: Inmigrantes y 'Locales' En Tiempos de Globalización. El Caso de Los Coreanos En La Región Sureste de Tamaulipas." *Cultura y Representaciones Sociales* 3, no. 6.

Castles, Stephen, Hein de Haas, and Mark J. Miller. 2014. *The Age of Migration: International Population Movements in the Modern World*. Fifth edition. New York: Guilford Press.

Chai, Karen. 1998. "Competing for the Second Generation: English-Language Ministry at the Korean Protestant Church." In *Gatherings in Diaspora: Religious Communities and the New Immigration*, edited by R. Stephen Warner and Judith Wittner, 295–331. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press.

Chan, Carol. 2018. "Imagining and Linking Latin America: Chinese Regional Mobilities and Social Networks in Chile." *Journal of Latin American Geography* 17, no. 2: 23–45.

Chan, Elic, and Eric Fong. 2012. "Social, Economic, and Demographic Characteristics of Korean Self-Employment in Canada." In *Korean Immigrants in Canada*, by Samuel Noh, Ann Kim, and Marianne Noh, 115–32. University of Toronto Press.

Chan, Shelly. 2015. "The Case for Diaspora: A Temporal Approach to the Chinese Experience." *The Journal of Asian Studies* 74 (1): 107–28.

Chang, Jason Oliver. 2017. *Chino: Anti-Chinese Racism in Mexico, 1880-1940*. The Asian American Experience. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press.

Chang, Jason Oliver. 2016. "Toward a Hemispheric Asian American History." In *The Oxford Handbook of Asian American History*. Edited by David K. Yoo and Eiichiro Azuma, 30–49. New York: Oxford University Press.

Chang, Michael. 2004. *Racial Politics in an Era of Transnational Citizenship: The 1996 'Asian Donorgate' Crisis in Perspective*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Publishers, 2004.

Chavez, Leo R. 2013. *The Latino Threat: Constructing Immigrants, Citizens, and the Nation*. Second edition. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press.

Chen, Carolyn. 2008. *Getting Saved in America: Taiwanese Immigration and Religious Experience*. Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press.

Chew, Selfa A. 2016. *Uprooting Community: Japanese Mexicans, World War II, and the U.S.-Mexico Borderlands*. Tucson: University of Arizona Press.

- Cho, Yoonyoung, Anastasiya Denisova, Soonhwa Yi, and Upasana Khadka. 2018. *Bilateral Arrangement of Temporary Labor Migration*. World Bank, Washington, DC.
- Chong, Kelly. 1998. "What It Means to Be Christian: The Role of Religion in the Construction of Ethnic Identity and Boundary among Second-Generation Korean Americans." *Sociology of Religion* 59 (3): 259–86.
- Chong, Kelly H. 2008. *Deliverance and Submission: Evangelical Women and the Negotiation of Patriarchy in South Korea*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press.
- Chow, Rey. 1993. *Writing Diaspora: Tactics of Intervention in Contemporary Cultural Studies*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Chu, Julie Y. 2010. *Cosmologies of Credit: Transnational Mobility and the Politics of Destination in China*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Chun, Jennifer Jihye, and Ju Hui Judy Han. 2015. "Language Travels and Global Aspirations of Korean Youth." *Positions* 23, no. 3: 565–93.
- Chong, Kelly H. 2008. *Deliverance and Submission: Evangelical Women and the Negotiation of Patriarchy in South Korea*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press.
- Chorba, Carrie C. 2007. *Mexico, from Mestizo to Multicultural: National Identity and Recent Representations of the Conquest*. Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press.
- Cieslik, Thomas. 2005. "El problemático artículo 33 de la Constitución mexicana: la participación ciudadana de los extranjeros en los tiempos de la globalización," in *Pulsos de la modernidad: diálogos sobre la democracia actual*, eds. Dejan Mihailovic and Marina González Martínez. Monterrey: ITESM, 141–160.
- Cohen, Shana. 2004. *Searching for a Different Future: The Rise of a Global Middle Class in Morocco*. Durham, N.C: Duke University Press.
- Contreras, Dinorah. 2017. "La gente de la tierra fría y la gente de la tierra caliente: Etnografía de una comunidad cristiana de origen coreano en la Ciudad de México." M.A. Thesis. Mexico City, Mexico: National School of Anthropology and History.
- Corona, Ignacio, and Beth Ellen Jorgensen, eds. 2002. *The Contemporary Mexican Chronicle: Theoretical Perspectives on the Liminal Genre*. Albany, N.Y: State University of New York Press.
- Coronado, Raúl. 2013. *A World Not to Come: A History of Latino Writing and Print Culture*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.
- Cumings, Bruce. 1999. *Parallax Visions: Making Sense of American-East Asian Relations at the End of the Century*. Asia-Pacific. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

D'Avella, Nicholas. 2019. *Concrete Dreams: Practice, Value, and Built Environments in Post-Crisis Buenos Aires*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Dávila, Arlene. 2012. *Culture Works: Space, Value, and Mobility across the Neoliberal Americas*. New York: New York University Press.

Dávila Valdés, Claudia. 2018. *Libaneses y coreanos en Yucatán: historia comparada de dos migraciones*. Mérida, Yucatán, México: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, Centro Peninsular en Humanidades y en Ciencias Sociales.

Davis, Diane. 2005. "Reverberations: Mexico City's 1985 Earthquake and the Transformation of the Capital." In *The Resilient City: How Modern Cities Recover from Disaster*, edited by Lawrence J. Vale and Thomas J. Campanella, 255–81. New York: Oxford University Press.

Day, Iyko. 2016. *Alien Capital: Asian Racialization and the Logic of Settler Colonial Capitalism*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Dehart, Monica. 2015. "Costa Rica's Chinatown: The Art of Being Global in the Age of China." *City & Society* 27 (2): 183–207.

DeHart, Monica. 2018. "Chino Tico Routes and Repertoires: Cultivating Chineseness and Entrepreneurism for a New Era of Trans-Pacific Relations: Chino Tico Routes and Repertoires." *The Journal of Latin American and Caribbean Anthropology* 23 (1): 74–93.

De Genova, Nicholas. 2013. "Spectacles of Migrant 'Illegality': The Scene of Exclusion, the Obscene of Inclusion." *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 36 (7): 1180–98.

Delgado, Grace. 2013. *Making the Chinese Mexican: Global Migration, Localism, and Exclusion in the U.S.-Mexico Borderlands*. Stanford University Press.

Desai, Padma. 2014. *Financial Crisis, Contagion, and Containment: From Asia to Argentina*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press.

Dupont, Alan. 1996. "Is There an 'Asian Way'?" *Survival* 38 (2): 13–34.

Düvell, Franck. 2012. "Transit Migration: A Blurred and Politicised Concept: Transit Migration." *Population, Space and Place* 18 (4): 415–27.

Eckert, Carter J. 2016. *Park Chung Hee and Modern Korea: The Roots of Militarism 1866-1945*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.

Ecklund, Elaine. 2006. *Korean American Evangelicals: New Models for Civic Life*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Fernández-Kelly, Patricia, and Douglas S. Massey. "Borders for Whom? The Role of NAFTA in Mexico-U.S. Migration." *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 610, no. 1 (March 2007): 98–118.

FitzGerald, David. 2009. *A Nation of Emigrants: How Mexico Manages Its Migration*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009.

Fong, Vanessa L. 2011. *Paradise Redefined: Transnational Chinese Students and the Quest for Flexible Citizenship in the Developed World*. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press.

Frank-Vitale, Amelia. 2020. "Stuck in Motion: Inhabiting the Space of Transit in Central American Migration." *The Journal of Latin American and Caribbean Anthropology* 25 (1): 67–83.

Freeman, Caren. 2011. *Making and Faking Kinship: Marriage and Labor Migration between China and South Korea*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

Galemba, Rebecca B. 2018. *Contraband Corridor: Making a Living at the Mexico--Guatemala Border*. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press.

Gallagher, Kevin, and Enrique Dussel Peters. 2013. "NAFTA's Uninvited Guest: China and the Disintegration of North American Trade." *CEPAL Review*, August, 83–103.

Gallagher, Kevin, and Amos Irwin. 2017. "China's Economic Statecraft in Latin America: Evidence from China's Policy Banks." In *The Political Economy of China-Latin America Relations in the New Millennium: Brave New World*, edited by Margaret Myers and Carol Wise, 50–65. New York: Routledge.

Gallardo García, Sergio. 2017. "La Migración Coreana, 1960-2015." In *Cruzando Océanos y Fronteras: Migración Interna e Internacional*, edited by Raquel Barceló and Gerardo Manuel Medina Reyes, Primera edición, 169–200. Pachuca de Soto, Hidalgo, México: Universidad Autónoma del Estado de Hidalgo.

Gallardo García, Sergio. 2018. "De Corea Del Sur a Baja California Sur: Identidades Masculinas En Torno a La Minera 'El Boleo.'" VI Congreso Nacional de Ciencias Sociales Las ciencias sociales y la agenda nacional, COMECOSO. San Luis Potosí.

Gálvez, Alyshia. 2018. *Eating NAFTA: Trade, Food Policies, and the Destruction of Mexico*. Oakland, California: University of California Press.

Gamlen, Alan, Michael E. Cummings, and Paul M. Vaaler. 2019. "Explaining the Rise of Diaspora Institutions." *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 45 (4): 492–516.

García, Jerry. 2018. *Looking like the Enemy: Japanese Mexicans, the Mexican State, and US Hegemony, 1897-1945*.

- García Canclini, Néstor. 2001. *Consumers and Citizens: Globalization and Multicultural Conflicts*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- García Canclini, Néstor. 2014. *Imagined Globalization*. Translated by George Yudice. Latin America in Translation/En Traducción/Em Tradução. Durham: Duke University Press.
- George, Sheba Mariam. 2005. *When Women Come First: Gender and Class in Transnational Migration*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Giglia, Ángela. 2018. *Renovación Urbana, Modos de Habitar y Desigualdad En La Ciudad de México*. Mexico City: Juan Pablos Editor.
- Gilbert, Alan, and Ann Varley. 1991. *Landlord and Tenant: Housing the Poor in Urban Mexico*. New York: Routledge.
- Gillespie, Kate, and J. Brad McBride. 2013. "Counterfeit Smuggling: Rethinking Paradigms of Diaspora Investment and Trade Facilitation." *Journal of International Management* 19, no. 1: 66–81.
- Gillingham, Paul. 2011. *Cuauhtémoc's Bones: Forging National Identity in Modern Mexico*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press.
- Gillingham, Paul, and Benjamin T. Smith, eds. 2014. *Dictablanda: Politics, Work, and Culture in Mexico, 1938-1968*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Glick Schiller, Nina. 2005. "Transnational Social Fields and Imperialism: Bringing a Theory of Power to Transnational Studies." *Anthropological Theory* 5 (4): 439–61.
- Gott, Richard. 2007. "Latin America as a White Settler Society." *Bulletin of Latin American Research* 26 (2): 269–89.
- Grewal, Zareena. 2014. *Islam is a Foreign Country: American Muslims and the Global Crisis of Authority*. New York: New York University Press, 2014.
- Guyer, Jane I. 2007. "Prophecy and the Near Future: Thoughts on Macroeconomic, Evangelical, and Punctuated Time." *American Ethnologist* 34 (3): 409–21.
- Hage, Ghassan. 2005. "A Not so Multi-Sited Ethnography of a Not so Imagined Community." *Anthropological Theory* 5 (4): 463–75.
- Hale, Charles R. 2002. "Does Multiculturalism Menace? Governance, Cultural Rights and the Politics of Identity in Guatemala." *Journal of Latin American Studies* 34 (03).
- Hall, Stuart. 1997. *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*. London: Sage Publications.

- Ham, Ricardo. 2013. *De la invitación al desalojo: Discriminación a la comunidad china en México*. Mexico City: Samsara, 2013.
- Hamlin, Rebecca. 2021. *Crossing: How We Label and React to People on the Move*. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press.
- Harvey, David. 2011. *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*. Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press.
- Hearn, Adrian H. 2016. *Diaspora and Trust: Cuba, Mexico, and the Rise of China*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Herberg, Will. 1983 [1955]. *Protestant, Catholic, Jew: An Essay in American Religious Sociology*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Hernández Rodríguez, Claudia Guadalupe. 2020. “Estimación de los inmigrantes coreanos residentes en Nuevo León Una Aproximación desde la sostenibilidad social.” M.A. Thesis, Universidad Autónoma de Nuevo León.
- Hernández, Tanya Katerí. 2013. *Racial Subordination in Latin America: The Role of the State, Customary Law, and the New Civil Rights Response*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Hindman, Heather. 2013. *Mediating the Global: Expatriate’s Forms and Consequences in Kathmandu*. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press.
- Hindman, Heather and Robert Oppenheim. 2014. “Lines of Labor and Desire: ‘Korean Quality’ in Contemporary Kathmandu.” *Anthropological Quarterly* 87, no 2.
- Ho, Elaine Lynn-Ee. 2019. *Citizens in Motion: Emigration, Immigration, and Re-Migration across China’s Borders*. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press.
- Holston, James. 2008. *Insurgent Citizenship: Disjunctions of Democracy and Modernity in Brazil*. Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press.
- Hu-Dehart, Evelyn, ed. 1999. *Across the Pacific: Asian Americans and Globalization*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Ifekwunigwe, Jayne O. 2003. “Returning(s): Relocating the Critical Feminist Auto-Ethnographer.” In *Theorizing Diaspora: A Reader*, edited by Jana Evans Braziel and Anita Mannur, 184–206. Malden, MA: Blackwell Pub.
- Ikeuchi, Suma. *Jesus Loves Japan: Return Migration and Global Pentecostalism in a Brazilian Diaspora*. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2019.
- Jo, Ji-Yeon O. *Homing: An Affective Topography of Ethnic Korean Return Migration*. Honolulu, Hawai‘i: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2018.

Jo, Nam-hwan. 2006. *Meksik'o Hanin saenghwalsa 100-yŏn*. Los Angeles, CA: Christian Herald.

Joo, Jong Taick. 2010. "Culture and Ethnicity in the Korean Transnational Community in Brazil." *Iberoamerica* 12 (2): 323–56.

Joo, Rachael Miyung. 2012. *Transnational Sport: Gender, Media, and Global Korea*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Joseph, Gilbert M. 1985. "From Caste War to Class War: The Historiography of Modern Yucatan (c. 1750-1940)." *The Hispanic American Historical Review* 65, no. 1: 111.

Joseph, Gilbert M., Anne Rubenstein, and Eric Zolov, eds. 2001. *Fragments of a Golden Age: The Politics of Culture in Mexico since 1940*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Kang, Laura Hyun Yi. 2002. *Compositional Subjects: Enfiguring Asian/American Women*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Kang, Laura Hyun Yi. 2012. "The Uses of Asianization: Figuring Crises, 1997-98 and 2007-?" *American Quarterly* 64, no. 3: 411–36.

Kang, Yoonhee. 2012. "Singlish or Globish: Multiple language ideologies and global identities among Korean educational migrants in Singapore," *Journal of Sociolinguistics* 16, no. 2: 165–183.

Kearney, Michael. 2000. "Transnational Oaxacan Indigenous Identity: The Case of Mixtecs and Zapotecs." *Identities* 7, no. 2: 173–95.

Khagram, Sanjeev, and Peggy Levitt, eds. 2008. *The Transnational Studies Reader: Intersections and Innovations*. New York: Routledge.

Kim, Andrew E. 2000. "Korean Religious Culture and Its Affinity to Christianity: The Rise of Protestant Christianity in South Korea." *Sociology of Religion* 61, no. 2: 117-141.

Kim, Claire Jean. 2003. *Bitter Fruit: The Politics of Black-Korean Conflict in New York City*. New Haven,: Yale University Press.

Kim, Dohye. 2016. "Geographical Imagination and Intra-Asian Hierarchy between Filipinos and South Korean Retirees in the Philippines." *Philippine Studies: Historical & Ethnographic Viewpoints* 64, no. 2: 237–64.

Kim, Eleana Jean. 2010. *Adopted Territory: Transnational Korean Adoptees and the Politics of Belonging*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Kim, Hyong-ju. 2006. "La Experiencia Migratoria de La Nueva Comunidad Coreana En México." *Iberoamerica* 8, no. 2: 1–25.

Kim, Jaeun. 2019. "'Ethnic Capital' and 'Flexible Citizenship' in Unfavourable Legal Contexts: Stepwise Migration of the Korean Chinese within and beyond Northeast Asia." *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 45, no. 6: 939–57.

Kim, Jodi. 2010. *Ends of Empire: Asian American Critique and the Cold War*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Kim, Junyoung Verónica. 2017. "Asia–Latin America as Method: The Global South Project and the Dislocation of the West." *Verge: Studies in Global Asias* 3 (2): 97.

Kim, Rebecca. 2006. *God's New Whiz Kids? Korean American Evangelicals on Campus*. New York: New York University Press.

Kim, Richard S. 2011. *The Quest for Statehood: Korean Immigrant Nationalism and U.S. Sovereignty, 1905-1945*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Kim, Sharon. 2010. *A Faith of Our Own: Second Generation Spirituality in Korean American Churches*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.

Ko, Chisu Teresa. 2016. "Toward Asian Argentine Studies." *Latin American Research Review* 51 (4): 271–89.

Konove, Andrew. 2018. *Black Market Capital: Urban Politics and the Shadow Economy in Mexico City*. Oakland, California: University of California Press.

Kozen, Cathleen. 2016. "Traces of a Transpacific U.S. Empire: A Japanese Latin American Critique," *Amerasia* 42, no. 3: 108–28.

Kusow, Abdi M. 2003. "Beyond Indigenous Authenticity: Reflections on the Insider/Outsider Debate in Immigration Research." *Symbolic Interaction* 26 (4): 591–99.

Kwon, Ho-Young, Kwang Chung Kim and R. Stephen Warner. 2001. *Korean Americans and Their Religions: Pilgrims and Missionaries from a Different Shore*. University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press.

Lara Millán, Gloria. 2017. "Visibilización En Los Censos. Afrodescendientes En La Encuesta Intercensal 2015 En México." *Legajos. Boletín Del Archivo General de La Nación* 8 (12): 95–129.

Lee, Ana Paulina. 2018. *Mandarin Brazil: Race, Representation, and Memory*. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press.

Lee, Erika. 2002. "Enforcing the Borders: Chinese Exclusion along the U.S. Borders with Canada and Mexico, 1882-1924." *The Journal of American History* 89 (1): 54.

Lee, Erika. 2005. "Orientalisms in the Americas: A Hemispheric Approach to Asian American History." *Journal of Asian American Studies* 8, no. 3: 235–56.

Lee, Helene K. 2018. *Between Foreign and Family: Return Migration and Identity Construction among Korean Americans and Korean Chinese*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press.

Lee, Jane Yeonjae. 2018. *Transnational Return Migration of 1.5 Generation Korean New Zealanders: A Quest for Home*. Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books.

Leñero, Vicente. 1968. *La Zona Rosa y Otros Reportajes*. Mexico City: Instituto Nacional de la Juventud Mexicana.

Leonard, Karen. 1992. *Making Ethnic Choices: California's Punjabi Mexican Americans*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

Levitt, Peggy. 2007. *God Needs No Passport: Immigrants and the Changing American Religious Landscape*. New York: New Press.

Levy, Juliette. 2012. *The Making of a Market: Credit, Henequen, and Notaries in Yucatán, 1850-1900*. University Park, Pa: Pennsylvania State University Press.

Lie, John. 2008. *Zainichi (Koreans in Japan): Diasporic Nationalism and Postcolonial Identity*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Light, Ivan, and Edna Bonacich. 1988. *Immigrant Entrepreneurs: Koreans in Los Angeles 1965-1982*. Berkeley: Univ. of California Press.

Lim, Julian. 2017. *Porous Borders: Multiracial Migrations and the Law in the U.S.-Mexico Borderlands*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press.

Louie, Andrea. 2004. *Chineseness across Borders: Renegotiating Chinese Identities in China and the United States*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Loveman, Mara. 2014. *National Colors: Racial Classification and the State in Latin America*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Lowe, Lisa. 1996. *Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Lowe, Lisa. 2015. *The Intimacies of Four Continents*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Lu, Sidney Xu. 2019. *The Making of Japanese Settler Colonialism: Malthusianism and Trans-Pacific Migration, 1868-1961*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.

Mahmood, Saba. 2012. *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*. Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press.

Marcus, George E. 1995. "Ethnography in/of the World System: The Emergence of Multi-Sited Ethnography." *Annual Review of Anthropology* 24 (1): 95–117.

Mares, Peter. 2016. *Not Quite Australian: How Temporary Migration Is Changing the Nation*. Melbourne: Text Publishing.

Martínez, María Elena. 2011. *Genealogical Fictions: Limpieza de Sangre, Religion, and Gender in Colonial Mexico*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Martínez Novo, Carmen. 2006. *Who Defines Indigenous? Identities, Development, Intellectuals, and the State in Northern Mexico*. New Brunswick, N.J: Rutgers University Press.

Martínez Rivera, Sergio, and Dussel Peters. 2016. "La Diáspora China En México. Asociaciones Chinas En El Distrito Federal, Mexicali y Tapachula." *Migración y Desarrollo* 24 (36): 111–43.

Mera, Carolina. 1998. *La Inmigración Coreana En Buenos Aires: Multiculturalismo En El Espacio Urbano*. Buenos Aires, Argentina: EUDEBA.

Min, Pyong Gap. 2008. "Severe Underrepresentation of Women in Church Leadership in the Korean Immigrant Community in the United States." *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 47, no. 2: 225–41.

Min, Pyong Gap. 2010. *Preserving Ethnicity through Religion in America: Korean Protestants and Indian Hindus in New York City*. New York: New York University Press.

Min, Pyong Gap. 2012. "Twice Migrant Koreans in the United States: Their Origins, Socioeconomic Characteristics, and Ethnic Attachment." *Korean American Data Bank*.

Min, Pyong Gap. 2011. "Koreans' Immigration to the U.S.: History and Contemporary Trends." The Research Center for Korean Community. New York, NY: Queens College of CUNY.

Molina, Natalia, Daniel HoSang, and Ramón A. Gutiérrez, eds. 2019. *Relational Formations of Race: Theory, Method, and Practice*. Oakland, California: University of California Press.

Monsiváis, Carlos. 2005. *No sin nosotros: Los días de terremoto, 1985-2005*. Mexico City: Ediciones Era.

Moon, Seungsook. 2005. *Militarized Modernity and Gendered Citizenship in South Korea*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Mooney, Margarita A. 2009. *Faith Makes Us Live: Surviving and Thriving in the Haitian Diaspora*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Muehlmann, Shaylih. 2009. "How Do Real Indians Fish? Neoliberal Multiculturalism and Contested Indigeneities in the Colorado Delta." *American Anthropologist* 111 (4): 468–79.

Muñoz, José Esteban. 2006. "Feeling Brown, Feeling Down: Latina Affect, the Performativity of Race, and the Depressive Position." *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 31 (3): 675–88.

Nakano Glenn, Evelyn. 1993. "Racial Ethnic Women's Labor: The Intersection of Race, Gender and Class Oppression." In *Intercultural and Interracial Relations*, edited by Nancy F. Cott, 275–97. De Gruyter Saur.

Nakano Glenn, Evelyn. 1998. "Gender, Race, and Class: Bridging the Language-Structure Divide." *Social Science History* 22, no. 1: 29–38.

Nakano Glenn, Evelyn. 2004. *Unequal Freedom: How Race and Gender Shaped American Citizenship and Labor*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press.

n.a., *Migration Report 2017*, United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs. Accessed July 27, 2018. <http://www.un.org/en/development/desa/population/migration/publications/migrationreport/docs/MigrationReport2017_Highlights.pdf>.

Nelson, Laura. 2000. *Measured Excess: Status, Gender, and Consumer Nationalism in South Korea*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Ng'weno, Bettina and Lok Siu. 2018. "Comparative Raciality: Erasure and Hypervisibility of Asian and Afro Mexicans." In *Global Raciality: Empire, Postcoloniality, Decoloniality*, ed. Paola Bacchetta, Sunaina Maira, and Howard Winant. New York: Routledge.

Ong, Aihwa. 1999. *Flexible Citizenship: The Cultural Logics of Transnationality*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Ong, Aihwa. 2003. "Cyberpublics and Diaspora Politics Among Transnational Chinese." *Interventions* 5 (1): 82–100.

Orsi, Robert. 2002 [1985]. *The Madonna of 115th Street: Faith and Community in Italian Harlem, 1990-1950*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Ossman, Susan. 2013. *Moving Matters: Paths of Serial Migration*. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press.

Ota Mishima, María Elena. 1982. *Siete Migraciones Japonesas en México, 1890-1978*. Mexico, DF: El Colegio de Mexico.

Overmyer-Velázquez, Rebecca. 2010. *Folkloric Poverty: Neoliberal Multiculturalism in Mexico*. University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press.

- Park, Hea-Jin. 2006. "Dijeron Que Iba a Levantar El Dinero Con La Pala: A Brief Account of Early Korean Emigration to Mexico." *Revista HMiC: Història Moderna i Contemporània*, no. 4: 137–50.
- Park, Hea-Jin. 2013. "Nobody Remembers the Losers: The Story of Korean Agricultural Emigration to South America," Australian National University, PhD diss.
- Park, Hea-Jin. 2017. "North Korean POWs Seeking Last Chance to Return Home after Decades in Exile." *The Conversation*, July 2. <https://theconversation.com/north-korean-pows-seeking-last-chance-to-return-home-after-decades-in-exile-79929>.
- Park, Hyun Ok. 2015. *The Capitalist Unconscious: From Korean Unification to Transnational Korea*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Park, Jung-Sun and Paul Chang. 2005. "Contention in the Construction of a Global Korean Community: The Case of the Overseas Korean Act." *The Journal of Korean Studies* 10 (1): 1-27.
- Park, Kyeyoung. 1997. *The Korean American Dream: Immigrants and Small Business in New York City*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Park, Kyeyoung. 1999. "I'm Floating in the Air: Creation of a Korean Transnational Space among Korean-Latino American Remigrants." *Positions: East Asia Cultures Critique* 7 (3): 667–96.
- Park, Kyeyoung. 2014. "The 'Foxes' Outfoxed: Contestations between Koreans and Jews in South American Textile Industries." *Dialectical Anthropology* 38, no. 1: 17–39.
- Parreñas, Rhacel Salazar, and Lok C. D. Siu, eds. 2007. *Asian Diasporas: New Formations, New Conceptions*. Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 2007.
- Parreñas, Rhacel Salazar. 2015. *Servants of Globalization: Migration and Domestic Work*. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press.
- Parreñas, Rhacel Salazar, Rachel Silvey, Maria Cecilia Hwang, and Carolyn Areum Choi. 2019. "Serial Labor Migration: Precarity and Itinerancy among Filipino and Indonesian Domestic Workers." *International Migration Review* 53, no. 4: 1230–58.
- Paul, Anju Mary. 2017. *Multinational Maids: Stepwise Migration in a Global Labor Market*. Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press.
- Patterson, Wayne. 1993. "The Early Years of Korean Immigration to Mexico: A View from Japanese and Korean Sources." *Seoul Journal of Korean Studies* 6: 87-103.
- Patterson, Wayne. 1994. *Korean Frontier in America: Immigration to Hawaii, 1896-1910*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press.

Patterson, Wayne. 2000. *The Ilse: First-Generation Korean Immigrants in Hawai'i, 1903-1973*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press.

Phan, Peter C., ed. 2011. *Christianities in Asia*. Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell.

Pido, Eric. 2017. *Migrant Returns: Manila, Development, and Transnational Connectivity*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Poniatowska, Elena. 1988. "The Earthquake: To Carlos Monsivais," *Oral History Review*, 16, no. 1: 7-20.

Poniatowska, Elena. 1995. *Nothing, Nobody: The Voices of the Mexico City Earthquake*. Translated by Aurora Camacho de Schmidt and Arthur Schmidt. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

Povinelli, Elizabeth A. 2011. *Economies of Abandonment: Social Belonging and Endurance in Late Liberalism*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Ramírez, Daniel. 2015. *Migrating Faith: Pentecostalism in the United States and Mexico in the Twentieth Century*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.

Rénique, Gerardo. 2001. "Anti-Chinese Racism, Nationalism and State Formation in Post-Revolutionary Mexico," *Political Power and Social Theory* 14: 89-137.

Robbins, Joel. 2009. "Is the *Trans-* in *Transnational* the *Trans-* in *Transcendent*? On Alterity and the Sacred in the Age of Globalization." In *Transnational Transcendence: Essays on Religion and Globalization*, edited by Thomas J. Csordas, 55–71. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009.

Robertson, Shanthi. 2014. "Time and Temporary Migration: The Case of Temporary Graduate Workers and Working Holiday Makers in Australia." *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 40 (12): 1915–33.

Romero, Robert Chao. 2011. *The Chinese in Mexico, 1882-1940*. Pbk. ed. Tucson: University of Arizona Press.

Romero Castilla, Alfredo. 1999. "Coreanos en la Ciudad de Mexico," in *Babel Ciudad de México 2. Asiáticos en la Ciudad de México*, eds. Romero, Alfredo, et al. México: Corporación Mexicana de Impresión.

Rouse, Roger. 1991. "Mexican Migration and the Social Space of Postmodernism." *Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies* 1 (1): 8–23.

Ruiz, Raúl, and Martha Lim Kim. 2000. *Coreanos En Cuba*. Havana, Cuba: Fundación Fernando Ortiz.

Ryang, Sonia. 1997. *North Koreans in Japan: Language, Ideology, and Identity*. Boulder, Colo: Westview Press.

Saldaña-Portillo, Josefina. 2001. "Who's the Indian in Aztlán? Re-Writing Mestizaje, Indianism, and Chicanismo from the Lacandón." In *The Latin American Subaltern Studies Reader*, edited by Ileana Rodriguez and María Milagros López, 402–23. Duke University Press.

Salzinger, Leslie. 2016. "Re-Marking Men: Masculinity as a Terrain of the Neoliberal Economy." *Critical Historical Studies* 3, no. 1: 1–25.

San Martín Córdova, Ivan. 2010. "Visibilidad de La Comunidad Gay y Lésbica En El Espacio Público de La Ciudad de México: La Zona Rosa." *Revista Digital Universitaria* 11 (9). <http://www.revista.unam.mx/vol.11/num9/art85/index.html>.

Sánchez Crispín, Álvaro, and Álvaro López López. 2000. "Visión Geográfica de Los Lugares Gay de La Ciudad de México." *Cuicuilco: Revista De Ciencias Antropológicas* 7 (18): 271–86.

Sandoval Hernández, Efrén. 2014. "Mayoristas Asiáticos En La Frontera Texas Con México. Comercio, Migración y Fronteras Étnicas." *Trayectorias* 16 (39): 59–82.

Schantz, Eric. 2012. "Meretricious Mexicali: Exalted Masculinities and the Craftinf of Male Desire in a Border Red-Light District, 1908-1925." In *Masculinity and Sexuality in Modern Mexico*, edited by Víctor M. Macías-González and Anne Rubenstein, 101–32. Diálogos Series. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press.

Schiavone Camacho, Julia María. 2012. *Chinese Mexicans: Transpacific Migration and the Search for a Homeland, 1910-1960*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.

Schmid, Andre. 2002. *Korea between Empires, 1895-1919*. Studies of the East Asian Institute. New York: Columbia University Press.

Shah, Nayan. 2001. *Contagious Divides: Epidemics and Race in San Francisco's Chinatown*. American Crossroads 7. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Shapiro, Michael J. 1994. "Moral Geographies and the Ethics of Post-Sovereignty." *Public Culture* 6, no. 3: 479–502.

Shaw, Vivian. 2017. "'We Are Already Living Together': Race, Collective Struggle, and the Reawakened Nation in Post-3/11 Japan." In *Precarious Belongings: Affect and Nationalism in Asia*, edited by Chih-ming Wang, Daniel Pei Siong Goh, and Adrian Vickers. New York: Rowman & Littlefield.

Shefer, Gavri'el. 2006. *Diaspora Politics: At Home Abroad*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Shih, Shu-mei. 2011. "Against Diaspora: The Sinophone as Places of Cultural Production." In *Transforming Diaspora: A Community Beyond National Boundaries*, edited by Robin Field and Parmita Kapadia. Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, pp. 3-20.

Shimizu, Celine Parreñas. 2007. *The Hypersexuality of Race: Performing Asian/American Women on Screen and Scene*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Shin, Gi-Wook. 2006. *Ethnic Nationalism in Korea: Genealogy, Politics, and Legacy*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Shukla, Sandhya Rajendra. 2003. *India Abroad: Diasporic Cultures of Postwar America and England*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press.

Simone, AbdouMalik. 2004. "People as Infrastructure: Intersecting Fragments in Johannesburg." *Public Culture*, 16 (3): 407-429.

Simpson, Audra. 2017. "The Ruse of Consent and the Anatomy of 'Refusal': Cases from Indigenous North America and Australia." *Postcolonial Studies* 20 (1): 18-33.

Siu, Lok C. D. 2005. *Memories of a Future Home: Diasporic Citizenship of Chinese in Panama*. Stanford, Calif.: Stanford Univ. Press.

Siu, Lok. 2012. "Serial Migration: Stories of Home and Belonging in Diaspora." In *New Routes for Diaspora Studies*, edited by Sukanya Banerjee, Aims McGuinness, and Steven C. McKay. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Siu, Lok C. D. 2016. "Hemispheric Raciality: Yellowface and the Challenge of Transnational Critique." *Asian Diasporic Visual Cultures and the Americas* 2 (1-2): 163-79.

Song, Jesook. 2009. *South Koreans in the Debt Crisis: The Creation of a Neoliberal Welfare Society*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Song, Jesook, ed. 2010. *New Millennium South Korea: Neoliberal Capitalism and Transnational Movements*. New York: Routledge.

Song, Jesook. 2014. *Living on Your Own: Single Women, Rental Housing, and Post-Revolutionary Affect in Contemporary South Korea*. Albany: State University of New York Press.

Speed, Shannon. 2016. "States of Violence: Indigenous Women Migrants in the Era of Neoliberal Multicriminalism." *Critique of Anthropology* 36 (3): 280-301.

Stephen, Lynn. 2002. *Zapata Lives! Histories and Cultural Politics in Southern Mexico*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

- Sue, Christina A. 2013. *Land of the Cosmic Race: Race Mixture, Racism, and Blackness in Mexico*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Sue, Christina A., and Tanya Golash-Boza. 2013. “‘It Was Only a Joke’: How Racial Humour Fuels Colour-Blind Ideologies in Mexico and Peru.” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 36, no. 10: 1582–98.
- Taylor, Diana. 2003. *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Telles, Edward Eric. 2014. *Pigmentocracies: Ethnicity, Race, and Color in Latin America*. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press.
- Taylor, Lucy. 2020. “Four Foundations of Settler Colonial Theory: Four Insights from Argentina.” *Settler Colonial Studies*.
- Tsing, Anna. 2000. “The Global Situation.” *Cultural Anthropology* 15 (3): 327–60.
- Tsing, Anna Lowenhaupt. 2005. *Friction: An Ethnography of Global Connection*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press.
- Tsuda, Takeyuki. 2003. *Strangers in the Ethnic Homeland: Japanese Brazilian Return Migration in Transnational Perspective*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Tweed, Thomas. 1997. *Our Lady of the Exile: Diasporic Religion at a Cuban Catholic Shrine in Miami*. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Tweed, Thomas. 2008. *Crossing and Dwelling: A Theory of Religion*. Cambridge, Mass. London: Harvard University Press.
- Vanolo, Alberto. 2017. *City Branding: The Ghostly Politics of Representation in Globalising Cities*. York, NY: Routledge.
- Velasquez, Karen. 2018. “Sense-Making in the Megalopolis: Navigating Korean Signs in Pequeño Seúl.” In *Mapping the Megalopolis: Order and Disorder in Mexico City*, edited by Glen David Kuecker and Alejandro Puga, 191–210. Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books.
- María Elisa Velázquez Gutiérrez. 2018. “Racismo y Discriminación en Televisa.” *Nexos*. July 18. <https://redaccion.nexos.com.mx/?p=1799>.
- Vertovec, Steven. 2007. “Super-Diversity and Its Implications.” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 30, no. 6: 1024–54.
- Vodopivec, Barbara, and Eveline Dürr. 2019. “Barrio Bravo Transformed: Tourism, Cultural Politics, and Image Making in Mexico City.” *The Journal of Latin American and Caribbean Anthropology* 24 (2): 313–30.

Vogel, Erica. 2019. "K-Pop in Mexico: Flash Mobs, Media Stunts, and the Momentum of Global Mutual Recognition." In *Pop Empires: Transnational and Diasporic Flows of India and Korea*, edited by S. Heijin Lee, Monika Mehta, and Robert Ji-Song Ku, 55–71. University of Hawaii Press.

Vogt, Wendy A. 2018. *Lives in Transit: Violence and Intimacy on the Migrant Journey*. Oakland, California: University of California Press.

Wade, Peter. 2010. *Race and Ethnicity in Latin America*. 2nd ed. New York: Pluto Press.

Wade, Peter. 2017. *Degrees of Mixture, Degrees of Freedom: Genomics, Multiculturalism, and Race in Latin America*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Walker, Louise E. 2013. *Waking from the Dream: Mexico's Middle Classes after 1968*. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press.

Wang, Leslie K. 2021. *Chasing the American Dream in China: Chinese Americans in the Ancestral Homeland*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press.

Wells, Allen, and Gilbert Michael Joseph. 1996. *Summer of Discontent, Seasons of Upheaval: Elite Politics and Rural Insurgency in Yucatán, 1876-1915*. Stanford University Press.

Wimmer, Andreas, and Nina Glick Schiller. 2003. "Methodological Nationalism, the Social Sciences, and the Study of Migration: An Essay in Historical Epistemology." *International Migration Review* 37 (3): 576–610.

Winant, Howard. 2004. *The New Politics of Race: Globalism, Difference, Justice*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Woo, Jung-en. 1991. *Race to the Swift State and Finance in Korean Industrialization*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Wright, Melissa W. 2006. *Disposable Women and Other Myths of Global Capitalism*. New York: Routledge.

Yang, Myungji. 2018. *From Miracle to Mirage: The Making and Unmaking of the Korean Middle Class, 1960-2015*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

Yankelevich, Pablo. 2012. "Mexico for the Mexicans: Immigration, National Sovereignty and the Promotion of Mestizaje." *The Americas* 68, no. 3: 405–36.

Yeh, Rihan. 2018. "2017: 'Mexicano, México Te Necesita.'" In *1968-2018: Historia Colectiva de Medio Siglo*, edited by Claudio Lomnitz. Mexico City, Mexico: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México.

Yi, Chagyŏng. 1998. *Han'gugin meksik'o iminsa: chemulp'o esŏ yuk'at'an kkaji* [The History of Korean Immigration to Mexico: From Chemulp'o to Yucatán]. Seoul: Chisik sanŏpsa.

Yi, Kyobŏm. 1992. *Arŭhent'ina hanin imin 25nyŏnsa* [A 25-Year History of Korean Immigration to Argentina]. Busan: Sŏnyŏngsa.

Yoon, Won K. 2015. *Global Pulls on the Korean Communities in Sao Paulo and Buenos Aires*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books.

Young, Brigitte. 2003. "Financial Crises and Social Reproduction: Asia, Argentina and Brazil." In *Power, Production and Social Reproduction*, edited by Isabella Bakker and Stephen Gill, 103–23. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Yuh, Ji-Yeon. 2004. *Beyond the Shadow of Camptown: Korean Military Brides in America*. New York: New York Univ. Press.

Yun, In-jin. 1997. *On My Own: Korean Businesses and Race Relations in America*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Yuval-Davis, Nira. 2006. "Belonging and the Politics of Belonging." *Patterns of Prejudice* 40 (3): 197–214.