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Tracing Colonial Genealogies and Feminist Solidarities of Los Angeles Koreatown Hostesses
through Affect, Aesthetics, and Performativity

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by

Se Bin Esther Kim

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

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Master of Arts in Asian American Studies

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Professor Jennifer Jeehae Chun, Chair

Through a case study of women moonlighting as karaoke hostess girls in Los Angeles Koreatown's underground nightlife, I investigate the colonial connections between the historical racialization and fetishization of women and feminized labors in the context of U.S. militarization, colonialization, and Orientalism and how these frameworks have directly impacted women participating in contemporary forms of feminized labor in ethnic economies such as Los Angeles Koreatown. Through participant observation and ethnographic interviews of women working as karaoke hostess girls in Los Angeles Koreatown's Korean karaoke bars, I trace their (in)formal social networks and capital building, aesthetics, performativity, and affective labors within and outside the workplace, examining how hostesses, both unknowingly and knowingly, build kinships and feminist solidarities across ethnic and socioeconomic borders despite the historical and colonial genealogical impact that pervade their labor environment and work dynamics, providing a more nuanced understanding of feminized labor within transnational

ethnic service economies. Past studies on hostessing work have focused primarily on the experiences of lower-class Korean and Japanese migrant women partaking in hostessing work, centering the workplace and highlighting hostess work as a form of precarious labor and conflated the labor to that of utilized solely for upward socio-economic mobility. In my research, the objective is to comprehensively explore the experiences of multi-ethnic women hailing from diverse cultural backgrounds and seeks to transcend the conventional focus on Korean and Japanese migrant women commonly associated with hostessing work. I aim to uplift the experiences and voices of my co-conspirators, searching for insights into the challenges, opportunities, informal and formal networks, and social dynamics of this highly feminized and contentious form of labor. This act of re-centering of experiences of hostesses through prioritizing their perspectives, stories, and experiences holds the power to illuminate nuances of the workers themselves instead of sensationalizing them and their labor. This deliberate shift not only provides a direct counter-narrative to prevailing masculine and patriarchal narratives pervasive in both the global workplace and everyday existence.

The thesis of Se Bin Esther Kim is approved.

Valerie J. Matsumoto

Lee Ann Shih-Ching Wang

Jennifer Jeehae Chun, Committee Chair

University of California, Los Angeles

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Dedications

This work is dedicated to the women in my life who have inspired, empowered, and nurtured me.

This work is dedicated to all the teachers who have believed, supported, and guided me.

This work is dedicated to my partner, who taught me that I deserved to be loved, cherished, and celebrated.

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Introduction: How to Rent a Girlfriend

Innocent and submissive Japanese girls. Pretty and provocative Korean girls. Spicy and curvy Hispanic girls. Fun and blonde white girls. Sexy and promiscuous Black girls. Wild and hypersexual Asian American girls.

These outdated, blatantly sexist, and racist stereotypes are frowned upon and discouraged in a politically correct and progressive city like Los Angeles in the 21st century. However, hidden in the underbelly of L.A. Koreatown's nightlife are karaoke hostess bars, where these stereotypes are normalized or even favored by the crowd. Female workers in these bars embody and market themselves through these sexist and racist stereotypes.

In these underground karaoke hostessing scenes, people of all genders, ethnicities, and socioeconomic statuses gather to seek a night of entertainment and fun accompanied by music, drinks, and beautiful young women called hostesses or doumi.¹ Perhaps better known as hostess bars or karaoke bars that grew out of the traditions of Japanese geisha and Korean kisaeng houses,² these establishments can be observed as an extension of both sex entertainment and work culture in South Korea and Japan, where male salarymen would conduct business transactions or build relations in bars that serve alcohol and employ beautiful young women who are paid to flirt and facilitate conversations with and between the clients.

As Rhacel Parreñas explains in her book about nightlife and hostessing culture in Japan, the hostess fulfills the role of the client's private female partner or "girlfriend," tending to a variety of intimate acts such as listening to her client's stories, feeding him fruit and drinks, and

¹ Doumi can be translated to “helper” in Korean. Doumi and hostess will be used interchangeably throughout the thesis.

² “Confessions of a Former L.A. Karaoke Hostess,” Elle, Accessed November, 2, 2023, <https://www.elle.com/life-love/a32623/confessions-of-a-former-la-karaoke-hostess/>

singing songs together.³ Despite public misconceptions, these karaoke hostess bars differ from other sex work adjacent establishments, like massage parlors and room salons, and do not offer explicit sexual services and are rather discouraged from doing so on their premises.

Anne Allison differentiates hostess clubs from other clubs, bars, and sex joints in her book on Tokyo hostess clubs. Allison states that hostesses treat their clients as superior and tend to their various desires by alluding to sex without sex and "supplying functional lubrication" to the group primarily through conversation.⁴ Hostess work specifically involves mediums of affective labor through conversation, emotional labor, flirtation, entertainment, light touching, and companionship that do not involve the sale of penetrative or oral sex. Instead, hostesses sell the "girlfriend" experience through their various labors.⁵

Karaoke hostess bars made their way to Korean ethnic enclaves with the influx of Korean immigration to Los Angeles from the 1970s to the 1980s, which allowed industrial and manufacturing companies to connect production directly from South Korea to Los Angeles's Koreatown, leading to rapid business and economic developments such as housing, restaurants, and shopping centers.⁶ Simultaneously, its nightlife economy developed, creating over 43 nightclubs and karaoke bars throughout Koreatown. Following the 1992 Los Angeles Civil Unrest, Koreatown experienced an economic boom and development with a stream of transnational capital from South Korea to Los Angeles, transforming Koreatown from a small ethnic community to what Edward Park describes as a "transnational bubble", a district filled

³ Rhacel Salazar Parreñas, *Illicit Flirtations: Labor, Migration, and Sex Trafficking in Tokyo* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2011).

⁴ Anne Allison, *Nightwork: Sexuality, Pleasure, and Corporate Masculinity in a Tokyo Hostess Club* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 22.

⁵ Rhacel Salazar Parreñas, *Illicit Flirtations: Labor, Migration, and Sex Trafficking in Tokyo* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2011).

⁶ Edward J.W. Park, "From an Ethnic Island to a Transnational Bubble: A Reflection on Korean Americans in Los Angeles," *Amerasia Journal* 38, no. 1 (2012): 43–47.

with upscale commercial development, high-density apartments, and luxurious spas.⁷ This economic boom and development was quickly followed by the expansion of the nightlife economy and sex entertainment businesses such as room salons and hostess bars, which recruited South Korean female sex workers through systems of "indentured labor" to cater to Korean immigrant clientele.⁸ Naturally, the expansion of the nightlife economy and sex entertainment businesses quickly followed, with the proliferation of room salons, massage parlors, and karaoke hostess bars, which initially recruited migrant Korean or Japanese women holding precarious legal statuses looking for temporary forms of labor.

Park argues that L.A.'s Koreatown has transformed from an ethnic economy to a transnational bubble, which refers to how people and communities are connected across national borders. Although Park's article and transnational frameworks play a substantial historical and sociological foundation in forming L.A. Koreatown as a Korean enclave and ethnic economy, it does not explain L.A. Koreatown's current spatial and geographical role as a service economy beyond Korean communities. It also does not explain the transnational and multi-ethnic flows of socioeconomic capital, labor, and informal networking within the context of hostessing work. According to Lee Jin-Kyung, South Korea's rapid socioeconomic development post-Korean War can be attributed to South Korea's pivotal role in mobilizing military and sex work in support of U.S. imperialism in Asia (such as in the Vietnam War), defining South Korea as a "sub empire."⁹ This reimagining of South Korea's working-class labor as a transnational sub empire endorsing U.S. imperialist notions may be beneficial in better understanding L.A. Koreatown's karaoke

⁷ Park, "From an Ethnic Island to a Transnational Bubble," 43-47.

⁸ Carolyn Choi, "Moonlighting in the Nightlife: From Indentured to Precarious Labor in Los Angeles Koreatown's Hostess Industry," *Sexualities* 20, no. 4 (2016): 446-62.

⁹ Jin-Kyung Lee, *Service Economies: Militarism, Sex Work, and Migrant Labor in South Korea* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), Introduction and Chapter 1.

hostess bars as not only an ethnic economy but also as an extension of South Korea's transnational service economy.

As quickly as Koreatown developed into a transnational bubble, the 2008 financial recession led to a massive decline in not only Los Angeles Koreatown's businesses and economy but also affected the general Los Angeles area, with people — especially women, who were deemed more disposable than their male counterparts — lost their jobs amidst the financial chaos.¹⁰ Although not new to Koreatown's nightlife scene, hostess agencies, otherwise referred to as *companies*¹¹ by many of the hostesses, emerged as the primary attraction and capital of L.A. Koreatown's nightlife scene during this time. These karaoke agencies are third-party businesses that operate as essential brokers, playing a pivotal role in facilitating the movement and employment of hostesses between different karaoke establishments that have they partnered with across Koreatown. Much like other types of brokers within business sectors, these third parties are traditionally understood as intermediaries that connect sellers and buyers. In a similar sense, karaoke agencies play a crucial role in facilitating communication between karaoke establishments that want to hire hostesses without the legal and logistical burdens of formal employment, and women who seek hostessing opportunities but prefer to avoid the stigma and commitment of full-time employment in such businesses.

Likewise, similar to labor brokers who facilitate the movement and employment of migrant workers, karaoke agencies manage a network of hostesses, negotiating their placement, payment, and working conditions without stable employment contracts or benefits. In this sense, these agencies are important players who mediate the supply and demand of hostessing work,

¹⁰ Carolyn Choi, "Moonlighting in the Nightlife: From Indentured to Precarious Labor in Los Angeles Koreatown's Hostess Industry," *Sexualities* 20, no. 4 (2016): 450.

¹¹ Karaoke agencies and companies will be used interchangeably throughout the thesis.

ensuring that karaoke establishments have steady streams of workers while maintaining flexibility to meet varying levels of client demand as they profit from the arrangement. The karaoke hostess, then, can be considered a temporary freelancer, who remains in a state of precarity and uncertainty, reliant on the agency's ability to negotiate favorable terms, payment, and networks.

While the karaoke agencies model as third-party brokers and labor dispatchers that can create precarious work environments for hostesses, there are some perceived benefits to this labor arrangement that appeal to the women. Hostesses are not bound by formal employment contracts and can move between different agencies, establishments, and clients based on demand, client preferences, or their personal preferences. Because the agency is neither a registered business nor, in effect, a legal entity, formal hiring processes are often absent. Women are frequently hired on the spot based on their appearance, personal connections within the agency, and with no background checks, aside from verifying their age. They can also negotiate their schedules and choose shifts that are most convenient or profitable to them, enabling them to balance their hostessing work with other personal or professional obligations. Furthermore, the informality of this labor arrangement can be beneficial to those without work visas or immigration documentation or who are seeking to quickly enter the job market without bureaucratic processes such as interviews, hiring procedures, and probation periods.

In addition, the karaoke agencies provide sources of protection in terms of driving their hostesses to and from each karaoke establishment, negotiating set pay rates, and dealing with difficult clients that prevent direct confrontations and dangerous situations. In a sense, the constituents of the karaoke hostessing industry – the karaoke agencies, the karaoke establishments, and the karaoke hostesses – all hold important roles in this symbiotic relationship

and one party cannot exist successfully on its own. While this arrangement certainly has drawbacks in terms of labor precarity, the commodification of affective labor, and risk exploitable conditions for the women, the perceived benefits such as flexibility, agency, informality, and protection make it a viable option for the women who are navigating the complexities of the karaoke hostessing industry.

Within recent academic work, there has been little to no research on karaoke hostessing work in the United States, and even less research on the recent fascination and participation from women of various ethnicities and socioeconomic statuses in this transnational ethnic service, Choi's article on karaoke hostesses examines the experiences of Korean immigrant women who work in the hostess industry in L.A. Koreatown through ethnographic interviews and participant observation. Choi argues that the hostess industry in Koreatown represents a shift from traditional forms of indentured labor to new forms of precarious work.¹² However, the limitation of the article is that it focuses mainly on the experiences of migrant Asian women in Los Angeles Koreatown and, therefore, may not be generalizable to other contexts (such as those outside of the U.S. or even outside of L.A.) nor can it apply to other multi-ethnic/racial communities. She briefly mentions the influx of women from various ethnicities joining this contemporary form of indentured labor (hostessing work) but does not delve further into the implications of this change in demographics.

Additionally, her analysis of hostessing work in Koreatown needs to fully account for the agencies or resistances of the women she interviewed.¹³ This research will build on Choi's work on the hostessing scene within Koreatown, focusing on the recent influx of women from various

¹² Choi, "Moonlighting in the Nightlife," 452.

¹³ Perhaps due to the article being published as a sociology article and her research being focused on migration and globalization stratifications.

socioeconomic and ethnic backgrounds in hostessing work. It will also depart from Choi's conceptual framework of hostessing as a form of temporary indentured labor and reframe hostessing as a form of feminized labor, with a focus on affect, aesthetics, performance, and the potential feminist subjectivities, kinship, and solidarities within the workplace.

Women often come across karaoke hostessing jobs through a variety of channels. Initially, many Korean and Japanese women, especially migrant workers or international students, who have had prior experience working as hostesses in their home countries, may continue the same line of work abroad, drawn by familiarity and establishment community networks. Craigslist listings or posts on social news and discussion websites such as Reddit serve as initial points of entry, with the posts advertising easy and fun ways for young women to make money by drinking and partying for free. Those who are already in the industry also play a pivotal role in sharing hostessing opportunities through word of mouth to their friends while the nightlife scene – clubs, bars, and lounges – become recruiting grounds for agency managers and drivers to scout out attractive women who are deeply involve in these environments.

Once a woman expresses interest in a company, the hiring process is straightforward. She submits her social media profiles or photos that showcase her appearance and physical features, along with her availability. If the company decides to hire her, she receives a document outlining specific company rules and policies, which cover areas such as dress code, workdays, pay rates, safety measures, and other logistics. Once she agrees to these terms, she becomes part of the company. Most karaoke hostess agencies rely on messaging platforms like KakaoTalk¹⁴ to maintain anonymity and privacy. These platforms allow the creation of temporary group chats, making it easier to manage communications and multiple conversations. There is no fixed

¹⁴ KakaoTalk, commonly referred to as KaTalk in South Korea, is an instant messenger and online services platform operated by Kakao Corporation. Used for group, private, and instant messaging like What'sApp and Signal.

schedule for the hostesses; those interested in working on a given night must contact a driver or manager within their company by a certain time to express their availability. The hostesses are then placed in a separate group chat for the night, where transportation arrangements and other communications are coordinated.

Hostesses scheduled to work for the night are then picked up at their residence or a predetermined location in Koreatown by a male company driver and driven around to various karaoke establishments until a client books¹⁵ them. According to Paul, a male driver¹⁶ and manager¹⁷ for one of the karaoke companies in Koreatown, there are more than 40 operating companies within Koreatown alone, with each agency managing up to 60 girls. When asked about the demographic of the hostesses, he stated that his company used to only hire Korean and Japanese girls who spoke their native languages but within the recent years, the company had been open to hiring girls of other ethnicities.¹⁸ The first agencies often hired Korean and Japanese migrant women who spoke the language, but with the growth of more agencies, there has been an increase in the number of women of diverse socioeconomic and ethnic backgrounds entering the labor space.

Ranging from college students looking for extra cash to supplement their lifestyles to ex-strippers and exotic dancers looking to transition out of the sex work industry, women of different ethnicities who have joined the hostessing workforce have diversified from the migrant Korean and Japanese workers looking for temporary forms of labor. Despite the precarious and stigmatized nature of the work, its financial stability and social connections prove to be alluring

¹⁵ “Booking” or getting “Booked” is what the karaoke hostess industry refers to being hired for the night.

¹⁶ Drivers -- A male driver, usually one of the company managers, who picks up and drops off the hostesses to different karaoke establishments throughout a working night.

¹⁷ Managers -- what hostesses call their agency/company employers.

¹⁸ Conversation I had with one of the karaoke agency drivers back in 2023 while waiting for a ride back home from work at one of the Karaoke parking lots.

and lucrative, with top karaoke hostesses earning upwards of \$10,000 to \$15,000 per month and catering to high-end clients, including celebrities and business tycoons. However, it is important to note, that many of the hostesses currently working in Koreatown have secondary, or even primary income and commitments, with many working corporate day jobs or attending graduate school.

Similar to other forms of highly feminized labor, such as service or care work, hostessing has been devalued within society as a stigmatized, low-skilled labor, with the misinformed public conflating hostessing work with sex trafficking and prostitution.¹⁹ As a result, karaoke hostess work is more often associated with underground nightlife and brothels that sell explicit sexual services, and in turn, also results in hostesses facing dangers and stigma related to trafficking, social death, exploitation, policing, and surveillance.

So why is it that, despite all the stigma, dangers, and public misconceptions, there has been an increased interest in hostessing work among women of diverse socioeconomic and ethnic backgrounds within the last ten years? What is it about hostessing work that attracts beautiful, young, and well-educated women to a labor force that has been and is known to have a misogynistic, patriarchal, and even racist environment and clientele susceptible to policing and surveillance by law enforcement, the city, and the public? Moreover, why is it that, despite these hostesses generally being well-educated, empowered, and commonly feminists, they subject and allow themselves to be objectified and fetishized, often playing along with the racial and misogynist stereotypes within the workplace? What type of people go to karaoke hostess bars? Who are the other actors within the industry? What goes on in a karaoke room behind closed doors? Apart from monetary compensation and financial freedom, are there other justifications

¹⁹ Carolyn Choi, "Moonlighting in the Nightlife: From Indentured to Precarious Labor in Los Angeles Koreatown's Hostess Industry," *Sexualities* 20, no. 4 (2016): 446–62.

and benefits for women working as hostesses within a transnational ethnic economy like Los Angeles's Koreatown? What are the structural conditions and social dynamics within hostessing? How is a hostesses labor defined and understood? Within these spaces, is there potential for friendship or solidarities between hostesses? How do the social geographies and social networks of hostesses within the workplace influence the hostesses' social and economic mobilities? How about outside of the workplace?

I have spent the last two years examining these seemingly paradoxical contexts while advancing and navigating my own academic inquiries and messiness associated with this research project on karaoke hostesses and their labor in L.A.'s Koreatown. Through a case study of karaoke hostess bars and women working as hostesses in L.A. Koreatown's Korean karaoke bars, I argue that a transnational feminist and interdisciplinary cultural lens is critical in developing a more nuanced understanding of these sorts of transnational ethnic service economies and feminized labor with colonial genealogies. By interviewing hostesses from different ethnic backgrounds and observing their informal social networks and socioeconomic capital building within the workplace through affect, aesthetics, and performativity, I examine how hostesses, both unknowingly and knowingly, partake in transnational feminist solidarities and build kinships across ethnic and socioeconomic borders within a highly feminized labor space with colonial genealogies such as karaoke hostessing.

Methods and Methodology

I employ a mixed methods approach in my research that combines semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and archival and cultural analysis work. It is essential to underscore that my political, ethical, and academic consciousness, as well as my chosen research methods, have been influenced by and will strive to incorporate transnational feminist and indigenous epistemologies and methodologies. By incorporating techniques such as interactive interviewing (such as reading answers back to my interlocutors), seeking community-based feedback, synthesizing life narratives, considering counter narratives as theoretical frameworks, and prioritizing the community over the researcher, I aim to engage with my research from a decolonial and anti-imperial standpoint.²⁰ Inspired by the work of Sylvanna Falcon, who has emphasized the centrality of transnational feminism as a praxis for decolonizing research and academia, I firmly believe that it is imperative to recognize and challenge our imperial privilege while consistently articulating our guiding principles.²¹ As a Korean-American scholar operating within the confines of the U.S. empire and academia, I am cognizant of my positionality and acknowledge my role as an interlocutor to the hostesses within the community.

Furthermore, it is crucial to highlight that I have an insider's perspective on the community, as I briefly worked as a karaoke hostess in Los Angeles's Koreatown from 2022 to 2023. I joined a karaoke agency through one of my interlocutors, who I had met prior to entering graduate school. Through this experience, I actively participated in the informal social networks and transnational feminist solidarities that I hope to elucidate and analyze in my research. In

²⁰ Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies*, 2nd ed. (London: Zed Books, 2012).

²¹ Sylvanna M. Falcon, "Transnational Feminism as a Paradigm for Decolonizing the Practice of Research: Identifying Feminist Principles and Methodology Criteria for US-Based Scholars," *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 37, no. 1 (2016): 174–94.

addition to the ethnographic fieldwork, I also conducted historical and archival research on the colonial connections between sex work and U.S. militarism in East Asia, the genealogies of military prostitution, European colonialism, and the gendered racialization of Asian migrant and Asian American women in cold war Asia and contemporary American media and legislation. In the early stages of my research, I planned to interview seven female hostesses of different ethnicities: Korean, Korean American, Russian, Vietnamese/French, White, Latina, and Black. Even before finalizing my project, several women from my agency and other hostess friends expressed genuine interest in participating and being interviewed. My positionality as someone who worked in the industry and my credibility as a UCLA graduate student granted me access and insider status.

However, by the time my IRB was approved in early 2024, three interlocutors of Black, Hispanic, and Korean descent decided to discontinue their participation due to personal reasons. Although they permitted me to use our interactions, conversations, and other research notes, their absence resulted in three fewer in-depth interviews. Fortunately, one of my main informants introduced me to two other women interested in my study, allowing me to conduct six comprehensive interviews in total.

Throughout the chapters, I will reference the various observations, interactions, and informal conversations I had with them throughout the last two years. However, it is essential to note that only six of these women completed the interview portion of the study. My sampling criteria were female-presenting 18- to 35-year-old persons who identified as karaoke bar hostesses working in L.A. Koreatown. The women can identify as working full-time (7 days a week), part-time (a couple of times a month), or at least have worked as hostesses within the last five years. The interviews were structured to be about 1.5 hours each, following a

course of semi-structured interview questions; the audio was recorded and transcribed for data analysis. Initially, I planned to conduct my research in ethnic-centric and privatized spaces, deliberately de-centering the actual workplace. My initial research sites included 24-hour Korean spas, private Korean gyms, and third spaces such as digital platforms and transportation hubs. I aimed to theorize transnational feminist solidarities and kinships among hostesses outside the workplace by tracing their social geographies and informal networks.

However, halfway through my project, three of my interlocutors, with whom I had the most rapport and experience discussing these ethnic-centric and third spaces, dropped out for personal reasons before I could conduct the formal interviews. This significantly impacted my research. With a smaller pool of interlocutors and a focus on qualitative methods, capturing the multifaceted experiences of hostesses' social geographies outside the workplace with just four participants proved challenging.

Unfortunately, the remaining four hostesses, along with the two new interlocutors who joined later, did not discuss their experiences in these ethnic-centric and third spaces. Instead, they focused on their lived experiences and feminist kinships within the workplace. To honor my interlocutors and their contributions, I shifted my research focus to within the workplace for this master's thesis.

The interview questions primarily centered on the hostesses' biographies and lived experiences, focusing on their employment backgrounds, socioeconomic status, migration experiences, family and household dynamics, and educational attainment. Once a foundational understanding of their political and ethical perspectives had been established, we explored their stances on feminism, sex work, and socioeconomic advancement. Additionally, I aimed to examine kinship formation and solidarity among the hostesses, aligning my research with

transnational feminist and indigenous methodologies to de-center dominant masculine and patriarchal narratives. This involved prioritizing the counternarratives of the female hostesses and subordinating the subjectivities of other actors within the service economy, such as agency managers, drivers, karaoke bar waiters, and male clientele. It is also important to acknowledge the existence of male hostesses (or male doumi) within the karaoke hostessing industry, which operates under separate entities, rules, and regulations. However, as this research focuses on centering the counternarratives of the female hostesses, exploring the male hostessing world will be omitted. The subjectivities of the female hostesses I have been working with and interviewing for the past two years will remain the central focus of this study.

Chapter Breakdowns

Chapter one aims to uncover the intricate connections between the historical racialization and fetishization of Asian and Asian American women within the context of U.S. militarization, colonialism, imperialism, and Orientalism. This analysis extends to theorize the proliferation of stereotypes not only of East Asian and Asian American women but also of Latina, Black, Russian, and white women, all deeply embedded within colonial genealogies. The chapter will also explore how these frameworks continue to influence women engaged in contemporary feminized labor spheres, explicitly focusing on the experiences of the hostesses within the workplace and how they navigate and co-opt racist and misogynistic tropes and stereotypes prevalent within the industry for their personal gain and empowerment. This microcosm serves to better understand women's participation in the hostessing industry in L.A. Koreatown. Parsing out the labor genealogies and afterlives of contemporary hostessing work within the context of U.S. militarism, European colonialism, and imperialism in East Asia is imperative. Although hostess work follows similar genealogies to prostitution in military camp towns during the Cold

War, it diverges with the removal of explicit sexual services and the introduction of affective labor. This transformation includes subsets and variations of sex work, such as hostessing, which offers forms of affective and emotional labor.

Within this research, hostessing will be categorized under the larger umbrella of feminized labor, highlighting work traditionally associated with and often disproportionately performed by women, reflecting gender-based divisions in the labor market and reinforcing societal gender stereotypes. Chapter two will, therefore, focus on the epistemic scope of sex work, framing hostessing work as a form of feminized labor rather than labeling it as sex work. Drawing on Heather Berg's "Sex Work," Jan M. Padios's "Labor," and Sherene Razack's "Gendering Disposability," the chapter also incorporates concepts of Judith Butler's "Ethics of Vulnerability" and Jin-Kyung Lee's reconceptualization of sex work as "necropolitical."²² This approach situates hostessing within feminized labor, emphasizing its distinction from traditional sex work.

Chapter three focuses on the semi-structured interviews conducted with the hostesses of different socioeconomic and ethnic backgrounds, highlighting their experiences within the workplace. The analysis centers on how hostesses utilize affect, aesthetics, and performance in karaoke bars, embodying idealized femininity to cater to clients' desires. In this chapter, I conceptualize what I call the "Perfect Girlfriend Persona." Drawing from Judith Butler's concept of performativity in "Gender Trouble," the chapter argues that hostesses engage in continuous acts of affective labor and hyper-heteronormative gender performances.²³ This performative

²² Jin-Kyung Lee, *Service Economies: Militarism, Sex Work, and Migrant Labor in South Korea* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), Introduction and Chapter 1.

²³ Anna Szörényi, "Rethinking the Boundaries: Towards a Butlerian Ethics of Vulnerability in Sex Trafficking Debates," *Feminist Review* 107 (2014). <https://doi.org/10.1057/fr.2014.3>.

analysis is crucial for examining women's choices, motivations, and lived experiences in feminized labor, moving beyond liberal feminist binaries.

Chapter four highlights the transnational feminist kinships and solidarities inside the workplace. Specifically, this chapter will discuss the anti-feminist pitfalls and affective, physical, and emotional dangers associated with hostessing work and how these very affects can simultaneously provide potential for feminist subjectivities, kinship, and solidarities. Drawing on the concept of "kinship work" from Dağtaş Seçil and Şule Can, the chapter examines the politics of feminist solidarity across differences of ethnicity, nationality, and class and how they cultivate creative, politicized, and safe spaces within the workplace decompress, build kinships, (re)hone their identities, and care for themselves and one another.²⁴ Utilizing Lauren Berlant's concept of Cruel Optimism and Clare Hemmings's concept of Affective Dissonance, I lastly attempt to theorize how hostesses can find productivity within the precarious cycle of cruel attachments to their unsustainable lifestyles, emotional and physical labors, and social tensions through affective attunements to the affects that create negative, precarious cycles in the first place.

This research centers on L.A. Koreatown hostesses' lived experiences and counter stories through a transnational feminist and interdisciplinary cultural lens. By conducting interviews and observing informal social networks, kinship solidarities, and socioeconomic capital building in the workplace, the study examines how hostesses contribute to transnational feminist solidarities. This reimagines L.A. Koreatown's hostessing as a subset of South Korea's service economy and a spatial hub for transnational flows of socioeconomic capital and mobility.

²⁴ Seçil Dağtaş, Şule Can, "Distant Toleration: The Politics of Solidarity Work among Turkish and Syrian Women in Southern Turkey," *Social Politics: International Studies in Gender, State & Society*.

Chapter 1: Colonial Genealogies and Military Afterlives of Karaoke Hostessing Work

U.S. militarization and Western imperialism led to the subjugation of Asian women as disposable objects of desire. As the United States expanded its influence and military presence in the Asia-Pacific region during the Cold War, these forms of Othering and racialization were reinforced through the institutionalized sexual exploitation of Asian women. In what Eugenia Weiss coined as the "U.S. Military-Prostitution Complex", the U.S. military presence played a significant role in the racialization and fetishization of Asian women through a hypermasculine military culture. This is exemplified by the proliferation of "camp towns" during the Korean War, used for service members' rest and pleasure, which led to the influx of local women who had to resort to sex work to support their families during wartime.²⁵ Reflecting perceptions that Asian societies were less developed and sophisticated than Western societies, U.S. military men thought Asian women to be "inferior".²⁶

In discussing relations between military men and Japanese women during the occupation of Japan post-World War II, Paul Spickard states that Japanese women were seen as more docile, less threatening, and sexual, becoming well-known among Western military men for their "attractiveness, grace, and sexual ingenuity".²⁷ With local Asian women catering to white military men and these sexual experiences as their main, if not only, encounters with Asian women, these men returned home with prejudiced generalizations that Asian women are hypersexual and are always willing to be submissive to a white man's demands, further

²⁵ Eugenia L. Weiss and Annalisa Enrile, "The US Military-Prostitution Complex, Patriarchy, and Masculinity: A Transnational Feminist Perspective of the Sexual Global Exploitation of Women," in *Women's Journey to Empowerment in the 21st Century: A Transnational Feminist Analysis of Women's Lives in Modern Times*, 2019.

²⁶ Weiss, "The US Military-Prostitution Complex, Patriarchy, and Masculinity".

²⁷ P.R. Spickard, *Mixed Blood: Intermarriage and Ethnic Identity in Twentieth-Century America* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989).

reaffirming the West's perception of Asian women as hypersexualized and disposable sex objects, ignoring the inherently coercive nature of their relationships and interactions with these women.

The presence of American military men engaging in sexual and intimate relations with local civilian women led to more than 6,000 Korean women immigrating to the United States as G.I. brides after World War II. In discussing the positionality of Korean War Brides in America, Susie Woo states that the identity of the Korean military bride became "fused with that of the prostitute", as Korea became associated with the proliferation of U.S. militarized prostitution being practiced in Korea.²⁸ Stereotypes such as the "Korean War Bride" categorized Korean women as obedient and submissive, making them the perfect but dispensable wife, further exacerbating the fetishization and racialization of Asian women in America.²⁹

The perception of Asian women as objects of desire continued to evolve outside of the military-prostitution complex and within the United States as systemic Anti-Asian racism, manifested in not only U.S. legislation but also mainstream media. Since the first arrival of Chinese immigrants in the mid 1800s, anti-Asian sentiments stoked discrimination and violence against Asian Americans. First-generation Asian immigrants were categorized as "aliens ineligible for U.S. citizenship" as the 1790 Naturalization Act had limited citizenship to white immigrants and the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 banned the Chinese from becoming U.S. citizens.³⁰ Asian immigrant women were further marginalized with the passing of the Page Act of 1875, which banned the immigration of Asian women who were suspected of "lewd and immoral

²⁸ Susie Woo, *Framed by War: Korean Children and Women at the Crossroads of US Empire* (NYU Press, 2019), retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv1f8859g>.

²⁹ Woo, *Framed by War*.

³⁰ Eui-Young Yu, "Korean-American Women: Demographic Profiles and Family Roles," in Eui-Young Yu and Earl H. Phillips, ed., *Korean Women in Transition: At Home and Abroad* (Los Angeles: Scholarly Resources, Inc., 1987)

purposes”, assuming that Chinese women who were entering the United States were engaging in prostitution, whether they were or not.³¹ Legislation such as the Page Act of 1875 reflects the gendered racialization of Chinese women as immoral prostitutes, further reinforcing the racialized sexualization of Asian women in the United States.³²

In addition to U.S. legislation, popular culture heavily influenced the morally dubious perceptions of Asian women through the creation of two highly sexualized cinematic archetypes of Asian femininity in Hollywood: the “Dragon Lady” and the “Lotus Blossom.”³³ The image of the “Lotus Blossom” characterizes a sexually “pure” Asian femininity as portrayed by Anna May Wong in the 1922 film “Toll of the Sea.”³⁴ The film portrays a Chinese woman who falls in love with an American man, who leaves her for a white woman. Completely devoted to her lover, she gives up her child to the couple and commits suicide.

Films that depicted the archetype of the “Lotus Blossom” created stereotypes of Asian women as submissive, obedient, and dispensable to the white man. On the other side of the Lotus Blossom is the archetype of the “Dragon Lady”, which defines the hypersexuality of Asian women as “desirable, deceitful, and dangerous.”³⁵ In these films, the “Dragon Lady” uses her sexuality to seduce men for her own agenda and goals.³⁶ A reflection of anti-Asian sentiment and widely believed stereotypes like “Yellow Peril,” the depiction of the “Dragon Lady” assumed

³¹ “Repeal of the Chinese Exclusion Act, 1943,” Office of the Historian, n.d., <https://history.state.gov/milestones/1937-1945/chinese-exclusion-act-repeal>.

³² “Repeal of the Chinese Exclusion Act, 1943,” Office of the Historian, accessed March 26, 2024, <https://history.state.gov/milestones/1937-1945/chinese-exclusion-act-repeal>.

³³ H. Y. Kang, *Compositional Subjects: Enfiguring Asian/American Women* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002).

³⁴ Shimizu Celine Parreñas. 2007. *The hypersexuality of race: Performing Asian/American women on screen and scene*. Durham, NC: Duke University

³⁵ Espiritu Yen Le. 2008. *Asian American women and men: Labor, laws, and love*, 2nd ed. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.

³⁶ Anthony B. Chan, *Perpetually Cool: The Many Lives of Anna May Wong (1905–1961)* (Plymouth: Scarecrow Press, 2007).

foreign femininity was not only immoral but dangerous to unassuming white men.³⁷ The creation of these two cinematic archetypes within Hollywood perpetuated the racialization of Asian women as hypersexual, but docile, and highly contributed to history in the fetishization and hyper sexualization of Asian women in the United States.

The sexualization and fetishization of Asian women as hypersexual, yet docile, not only affect every day Asian American women in the United States but also color the experiences of Asian and Asian American women within the sex work and sex work adjacent industries. With the bodies of Asian women being highly exoticized and sexualized and the perceived submissiveness of Asian culture eroticized, this fetishization reduces them to commodities and exposes them to sexual and physical violence. A study by the National Network to End Domestic Violence found that 41% to 61% of Asian women reported experiencing some kind of physical or sexual violence by an intimate partner during their lifetime, which is significantly higher than any other racial ethnic group.³⁸

However, Asian American women who participate in sex work are forced into a particularly precarious existence as they experience gendered racial violence while also navigating the perceived vulnerability and risks associated with their lifestyle and occupation. On March 16, 2021, Robert Aaron Long, a white man, targeted three spas and massage parlors in Atlanta, killing eight people, six of whom were Asian women, to combat his “sex addiction.”³⁹ Long based his shooting spree on the sheer assumption that all massage parlors and their workers would offer sexual services, reflecting narratives of anti-Asian racism and reductive rhetoric.

³⁷ Chan, *Perpetually Cool: The Many Lives of Anna May Wong*.

³⁸ Morgan Dewey, “Sexualized, Submissive Stereotypes of Asian Women Lead to Staggering Rates of Violence,” NNEDV, March 21, 2016.

³⁹ Anna North, “Claims of ‘Sex Addiction’ Are a Distraction in the Atlanta Killings,” *Vox*, accessed March 18, 2021.

Massage parlors, predominantly staffed by Asian and migrant workers, have been subjected to acts of violence, with 12% of Asian and migrant parlor workers experiencing physical or sexual assault by police in 2018.⁴⁰ Pre-existing stigmas around sex work, coupled with misogynistic and racist rhetoric, place Asian women sex workers in vulnerable positions that make them susceptible to sexualized racism and violence.

Stigma is universal in sex work, an obstacle that women participating in these intimate private sectors confront on a regular basis. Ronald Weitzer defines stigma as an “imputation of inferior status to those who have either a visible discrediting trait or some perceived moral defect.”⁴¹ In the context of sex work then, this perceived moral defect— with mainstream society labeling prostitution as immoral and wrong— creates a stigma of possible social isolation and rejection from society. However, unlike within Western society, where the sexual liberation and feminist movement from the 1960s allowed for a more liberal interpretation and discussions on sexuality and sex work, Asian societies, to this day, are labeled as family-orientated, characterized by hierarchical human and social relationships, a high level of social codifications, and gender inequality.⁴²

Sharing common ground on conservative values that emphasize cultural constraints on sexuality and sexual conduct, Asian American women who engage in sex work or sex work adjacent labor therefore experience an added layer of cultural stigma. Another stigma that exists within the sexual labor economy is that migrant Asian women who travel and engage in sex work are all poor victims of sex trafficking who pose a risk to public health. However, similar to the stereotypes that depict racist and sexist imagery of Asian women as exotic and

⁴⁰ Will Yakowicz, “Inside the \$4.5 Billion Erotic Massage Parlor Economy,” *Forbes*, accessed December 19, 2022.

⁴¹ Ronald Weitzer, “Resistance to Sex Work Stigma,” *Sexualities* 21, no. 5-6 (2017): 717–29.

⁴² Evelyne Micollier, *Sexual Cultures in East Asia* (Routledge, 2004).

hypersexualized, this stigma also reflects narratives of Asian American women as weak, damsels in distress, who need to be rescued by a white savior.

Mina identifies as a Korean American woman in her mid 20s who started hostessing in 2019, right before the pandemic. Introduced to karaoke hostessing by a friend in college, she started hostessing as means of earning extra income. Mina and I discussed in depth her identity as a Korean American woman within the hostessing industry. Prior to the pandemic, she stated, most of her clientele were older wealthy Asian men who preferred Korean or Japanese-speaking migrant women. Despite not being able to speak her ancestral language, Mina's physical appearance made her highly Korean-migrant passing, and managed to get her booked despite not being able to fully communicate with her clients. However, within those five years, she stated that the clientele demographic shifted drastically, with men of all different ethnicities and socioeconomic statuses showing interest in karaoke hostessing establishments. Furthermore, with the expansion of the client demographic, she noticed the shift in the hostess demographic as well. When asked whether she experienced any form of racism, sexism, or had been fetishized as an Asian American woman through her many years of experience, she answered:

“I experienced quite a bit of misogyny from Korean clients, especially older businessmen, who tend to talk down on you for being a woman and it was hard in the beginning because the clients all wanted you to speak Korean. But lucky enough, I still managed to get booked in the beginning and I ended up picking up some Korean... White guys love me. Probably some fetish. I mean, why would they be coming to a place that's filled with Asian girls. Sometimes I'll whisper random Korean phrases that I picked up from karaoke and speak in broken English just for the fun of it. They usually tip me more too.”⁴³

Mina, like many of the karaoke hostesses I interviewed, comes across clients who are influenced by narratives of racist and misogynistic rhetoric that fetishize not only Asian

⁴³Mina, “Karaoke Hostess Interview,” interview by Se Bin Esther Kim, March 3, 2024.

American women, but also other women of different ethnicities historically constructed as the exotic Other. However, Mina plays into the desires of her clients as the racialized Other, playing into stereotypes of the hypersexual but docile Asian woman, reclaiming her agency through manipulating her client for more monetary compensation. She is well aware of her positionality as an Asian American woman who is being fetishized as an object of desire and challenges that narrative through her work, using her power to sway the actions and emotions of clients as a form of feminist empowerment.

Justine is a transracial adoptee in her early 30s who identifies as half Korean and the other Filipino and Italian. Although recently retired from the industry, she started hostessing work over five years ago after she found success both in money and love. Perhaps due to her rather complex ethnic background and racially ambiguous appearance, she found success within the industry. When asked about how she manages to guarantee bookings in such precarious and highly competitive environments, she stated that she, similar to other hostesses, must fall into a certain “category” of sorts, a stereotype that the men are familiar with and therefore gravitate towards. When asked more about how she manages to get picked by clients and the type of category or stereotype she thinks she fits into, she answered:

“So, like the category that I figured out, I kind of fall into a, like, wifey material. Okay, so guys, generally. And then this is like not all the time, it's like more a majority of the time guys will book me because like, I'm very similar to someone that they would want to date in real life. And I am more. I'm, I think I was 27 when I started so I was a little bit more age appropriate than like a 21 or 22 year-old that was doing it. Um, and then like other girls' types like I think the most obvious one like if you go in and see the types of girls is like, oh the very like party fun girl with like, a lot of assets... There's other ones... like the girl next door.. um, like the cold Russian girls. And they all, like, dress up like it too. I think they also figured out that they need to dress a certain type of way if they fall into a certain category and like, reinforce it. So, it's like, not confusing for the guy.”⁴⁴

⁴⁴Justine “Karaoke Hostess Interview,” interview by Se Bin Esther Kim, April 2, 2024

Justine's insights into her work and the categories that she plays in reveal a nuanced understanding of the role that stereotypes and categories play in securing financial success in a highly competitive environment. Furthermore, her reflections highlight the strategic use of identity and aesthetics to align with familiar tropes that clients are drawn to, demonstrating the affective attunements and high social and emotional intelligence of the hostesses. Justine's ability to identify and leverage her image as "wifey material" underscores how hostesses often navigate and manipulate stereotypes to their advantage. In chapter 3, I will attempt to further uncover these affects, aesthetics, and performances at play within the workplace, delving deeper into how hostesses co-opt these racial and misogynist stereotypes and tropes through manufacturing certain personas within the workplace.

Mina also stated similar insights about how she presents herself to the clients when she is working:

“I can look pretty fobby⁴⁵ when I want to, so I tend to be popular with the Asian men. With a little help of Douyin⁴⁶ makeup, you know, those Chinese makeup tutorials that go viral on Tiktok and cuter dresses, I think I look pretty Korean. But sometimes, you just can’t help it because sometimes they want the curvier Latina girls or like the blonde white girl and obviously there’s only so much I can change about my appearance when they want an entirely different race [LAUGHS].”⁴⁷

Hostesses like Justine and Mina understand that their success for the night often relies on their ability to fit into predefined categories that cater to specific client fantasies and stereotypes. By strategically aligning themselves with these familiar racist and misogynistic tropes, they enhance their appeal and ensure their work and financial gain for the night. This perhaps

⁴⁵ Fobby is a variation of the term FOB for “Fresh off the boat”, a derogatory term referring to immigrants who have newly arrived from a foreign place and have yet to assimilate into the host nation’s culture, language, and customs.

⁴⁶ Douyin makeup is a catch all term for doll-like makeup styles originating from Chinese social media apps such as Douyin and Xiaohongshu.

⁴⁷Mina, “Karaoke Hostess Interview,” interview by Se Bin Esther Kim, March 3, 2024.

highlights the complexities of a hostess's personal identity and societal stereotypes that intersect within their workplace environment, revealing the much more nuanced layers of affect, manipulation, and strategy deeply embedded within this highly feminized labor sphere.

However, these racist and misogynist tropes and stereotypes deeply rooted in colonial and militarized genealogies are not limited to just Asian and Asian American women within sex work and sex work adjacent industries but also extend towards the women of Hispanic and Black descent. Like Mina's and Justine's comments on the different racial tropes on Hispanic, Black, and white women, proximities to Blackness and whiteness both have played pivotal roles in the manufacturing of these stereotypes, both throughout history and within modern-day experiences.

Stereotypes such as the "Spicy and curvy Latina" and the "Sexy and provocative Black girl" are prevalent in modern sex-adjacent work, and especially common within the hostessing spaces; they are also rooted in colonial histories and can be traced within historical European archives and erotic Orientalism. In her book *Put a Life: Seeing Latinas, Working Sex*, Juana María Rodríguez explores the figure of the puta and how sex workers function as sources of pure fascination, warnings, muses, and figures of unadulterated sexual desire through analyzing curated collections of images within archives of colonial, street, and ethnographic photography throughout history and up to the 21st century. In the second chapter, Rodríguez examines the hauntings of colonialism and slavery and how they echo across the visual archives of Latina sexuality and projected stereotypes, through Northern Africa through Spain and Europe, all the way into the Americas, showing how racial and sexual motifs that trace conquest and violence become attached to current day Latina sex workers or Latinas within sex-adjacent industries.⁴⁸ For example, Rodríguez examines the works of French photographer Felix Jacques Antoine

⁴⁸Juana María Rodríguez, *Put a Life: Seeing Latinas, Working Sex* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2023), 70.

Moulin (ca. 1800-1875), whose works played a role in the technological transition from painting to photography through his initially controversial photography of naked women. At first, Moulin's work, such as the *Two Standing Female Nudes*, that portrayed two female models of European descent of "unspoiled classic (i.e., European) feminine beauty," sparked public controversy and rage to the point where he was jailed and fined for producing "obscene images."⁴⁹

However, after later proving his pornographic images as artistic endeavors with high cultural value and re-establishing himself as an artist, he was later commissioned by the French government to document the queer cultural practices of France's new colonial acquisition, Algeria.⁵⁰ From Bedouin dancers to harem life, Moulin projected Orientalist fantasies of the colonial erotic and photography was utilized as justification for colonialism, his interest in erotic photography co-opted by French moral standards for Euro-centric supremacy.⁵¹ Within these visual motifs proliferated with Orientalist representations of "immoral and oversexed exotic prostitutes" and "deviant" women constructed as Other, Rodriguez analyzes Moulin's "L'odalisque et son esclave", a photograph where a naked Black slave woman is posing submissively with her sexualized Algerian mistress.⁵² Rodriguez states that although both the puta (Algerian woman) and slave (Black woman) are both sexually available and eroticized, they inspire functions of different registers of erotic fantasies and sexual availability.⁵³ In essence, the figure of the "puta", or Hispanic woman, must seduce and enchant her client and be charming and inviting. On the other hand, the Black woman in the photo, is haunted by the racist historical

⁴⁹ Rodriguez, *Putas Life*, 70.

⁵⁰ Rodriguez, *Putas Life*, 73.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*,

⁵² *Ibid.*,

⁵³ *Ibid.*,

implications of slavery, constructing imageries of scenes in which the Black female slave appears to be available for sexual fantasies of coercion, rape, and dehumanization.

Women, therefore closer to whiteness, such as the figure of the “puta” (Latinas) are portrayed and stereotyped as exotic due to their proximity to whiteness. Not fully white, but manufacturing feelings akin to familiarity conjures interest within the public as an accessible figure who is both erotic and enticing. This affective manufacturing of the puta aligns with the colonial fantasies and historical depictions of Latinas as a willing participant in her own objectification – a figure who, while not fully white, is still positioned within a context that requires her to actively want to seduce and appeal to the desires of the men.

In contrast, women who are Black, or have closer proximities to Blackness, are symbolized by the figure of the female slave in the photo, portrayed as inherently and unconditionally available for sexual exploitation. The status of the Black slave removes the need for seduction and her sexual availability is presumed given by the very nature of her servitude.⁵⁴ Rooted in colonial and historical depictions of Black women as naturally subservient and lacking in agency, the presence of Black women in erotic contexts like Moulin’s work often invokes a sense of innate willingness to serve their male, usually white, counterparts.⁵⁵

These colonial histories and archival images made, studied, and shared under the guise of art and knowledge production, similar to the colonial, imperialist, and militarized genealogies in East Asia to systemic Anti-Asian racism in the United States, served to justify European colonial domination and perpetuate the sexual exploitation of the female Other – sex worker or not.

⁵⁴ Juana María Rodríguez, *Putas: Seeing Latinas, Working Sex* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2023), 73.

⁵⁵ Rodríguez, *Putas*, 73.

I argue that these tropes and stereotypes established in the past continue to influence modern sex-adjacent industries such as hostessing work. Similar to how Asian and Asian American women are exoticized for their supposed hypersexuality and submissiveness, Hispanic and Black women are also eroticized within the hostessing industry; Latinas are framed as active participants in their own sexualization while the Black woman is depicted as always ready and available for her own exploitation. Furthermore, proximity to whiteness or Blackness significantly shapes the experiences of women within hostessing work, with women who are ethnically mixed and are considered ethnically ambiguous being further exoticized and eroticized by their clients, perhaps due to feelings of familiarity, novelty, and the deeply rooted erotic Orientalism that has been deeply imbedded throughout history and society.

An example of how racial stereotypes of the exoticized Other, rooted in colonial histories, manifests within the hostessing scene can be exemplified through Jenny's experience. Jenny identifies as a Black fitness trainer and professional dancer in her early 20s who works part time as a karaoke hostess on the weekends. She started working as a hostess in 2021 after hearing about the work from one of her close friends and fitness clients. As one of the two Black women in her predominantly Latina and white agency, she stated how she experienced rather unsavory experiences of racism that her Latina or white peers did not seem to experience. She recalled getting booked by a younger music producer in his 20s visiting from South Korea, who booked her and another Korean girl together in the same room. However, she noticed that the man seemed to disrespect her boundaries while he only conversed with the Korean hostess:

“That guy was really touchy with me...He had his arms wrapped around both of us and he would try to grope my boobs but would only hold the microphone in the hand where the other girl was. He would talk to the other girl in Korean out loud but whenever he spoke with me, he would whisper into my ear... He said some shit about how American girls are usually open minded and kept commenting about how sexy I was... thinking back it's honestly baffling because he went on to sing Heartless by Kanye after I told him I

wanted to leave early. I can't make this shit up [LAUGHTER]. He told me that he hooked up with a lot of Black and Blasian girls in Korea. Afterwards, I found out that a lot of the Korean dudes like to book Black or Latina girls for the 'American experience', or whatever that means...Honestly, it can be hard to get booked because the guys who come to karaoke prefer the Asian or Latina girls but there are some dudes that really want to book me because they would never be able to get with a Black girl."⁵⁶

Jenny's experiences reveal how these racial stereotypes and fetishization directly shape the interactions with her clients, affecting the treatment and opportunities of Black hostesses differently from their non-Black peers. Her client's differential treatment of her — for example, being more physically intrusive with Jenny, while maintaining a more respectful distance with the Korean hostess — demonstrates how racial dynamics influence client behavior within the hostessing workplace. His actions suggest perceptions of Black women as more sexually available and open-minded, a harmful stereotype that Jenny had to navigate through her experiences. His comments and inappropriate touching signaled disregard for her autonomy and overstepped boundaries, treating her more as a sexualized object than a professional hostess. Perhaps, this interaction reflects a broader trend where women with proximity to Blackness or even whiteness are sometimes sought after for an "American experience," a concept steeped in exoticism and othering with sexual undertones of sexual promiscuity and hypersexuality. Ultimately, racial and physical preferences pervade the industry, which can make it challenging for women of all different ethnicities to secure bookings unless they fulfill certain fetishized roles.

Interestingly enough, despite these cultural and societal stigmas within the Asian American communities, as well as the blatant sexualization and stereotyping of Latina, Black, Mixed-Race, and white women within sex work and sex-adjacent work that further marginalize

⁵⁶ Recorded conversations with Jenny back in 2023. Jenny dropped out of the study and I was unable to conduct a more formal interview after my IRB approval.

women and subject them to negative stereotypes and sexual violence, an influx of these ethnically diverse women from all socioeconomic and educational backgrounds have joined the various karaoke agencies in LA Koreatown within the last decade. To better understand the increased fascination and participation of these women within the industry, hostessing work must be defined differently and distinguished from the traditional understanding that hostessing is adjacent to sex work (exchange of sexual services, performances, or products for material compensation) and prostitution (engaging in sex or sexual activities in exchange for payment).⁵⁷ Rather, I frame hostessing work as a form of feminized and highly affective labor.

⁵⁷Alexandra Lutnick and Deborah Cohan, "Criminalization, Legalization, or Decriminalization of Sex Work: What Female Sex Workers Say in San Francisco, USA," *Reproductive Health Matters* 17, no. 34 (November 2009): 38–46.

Chapter 2: Reimagining the Epistemic Scope of Feminized Labors

“I’m not against sex work, but if you are going to perform sexual acts or engage in prostitution, I think you should get paid for it. And karaoke...well, like, our drivers are not pimps, they’re not going to like, make sure you get paid for sexual acts. We get paid by the hour to keep them company and have fun. And how you want to spend that hour is your business. But if you’re going to like, be doing that, I don’t think these girls that engaged in that aren’t getting paid enough, or I hope they are...But we are different from like massage parlors, those girls get their bags for that kind of labor that they put in. Because that’s the environment and karaoke is not that environment. So, I personally don’t understand why you would do that or risk yourself for who knows what amount you’re gonna get paid. Yeah, no.”

- *Jojo (white, 20s, part time hostess and artist) when asked about whether she considered hostessing work as sex work.*

The previous chapter focused on parsing out the colonial genealogies and military afterlives of women within sex-adjacent industries within the context of U.S. militarism, colonialism, imperialism and European colonial histories. However, despite karaoke hostessing work following labor genealogies similar to that of prostitution in military camp towns during the Cold War, karaoke hostessing work diverges from this genealogy with the removal of explicit sexual services and with the introduction of affective labors. Coupled with the temporality of sex and sex-adjacent work in the face of capitalism and time, traditional sexual labor is transformed and expanded to include subsets and variations of labor, such as karaoke hostessing.

Although an extension of the sex entertainment industry from Korea and Japan, karaoke hostessing in the United States does not include the provision of explicit sexual services but rather offers forms of affective labor, such as conversation, flirtation, and companionship.⁵⁸

⁵⁸Anne Allison, *Nightwork: Sexuality, Pleasure, and Corporate Masculinity in a Tokyo Hostess Club* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994).

Therefore, I categorize hostessing under a larger umbrella term of feminized labor, which highlights work that is traditionally associated with, and often disproportionately performed by, women, reflecting gender-based divisions in the labor market and reinforcing societal gender stereotypes. Also, similar to other forms of highly feminized labor, such as service or care work, hostessing has been devalued within society as a stigmatized, low-skilled labor, with the misinformed public conflating hostessing work to sex trafficking.⁵⁹ As a result, hostess work is often associated with underground nightlife and brothels that sell explicit sexual services, and in turn, also results in hostesses facing dangers and stigma related to trafficking, social death, exploitation, policing, and surveillance.

Existing research on karaoke hostesses in Los Angeles Koreatown frame hostess work as a contemporary form of precarious labor for migrant Asian women in lower socioeconomic classes, and as part of a Korean and Japanese sexual labor ethnic economy that focuses on migration and globalized ties.⁶⁰ However, my research centers the counter-narratives of hostess girls hailing from diverse cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds, providing autonomy and voice in attempts to disrupt, rebel against, and resist patriarchal, white, racist, and imperialist frameworks for sex work and labor.

This chapter grapples with the epistemic scope and limitations of framing hostessing work under the label of sex work and instead, I suggest that hostessing work be framed as feminized labor. Following a two-pronged approach, I examine the scope, limitations, and interventions of sex work through the prevalent feminist theorizations and frameworks depicted in Heather Berg's "Sex Work", Jan M. Padios's "Labor", and Sherene Razack's "Gendering

⁵⁹Carolyn Choi, "Moonlighting in the Nightlife: From Indentured to Precarious Labor in Los Angeles Koreatown's Hostess Industry," *Sexualities* 20, no. 4 (2016): 446–62.

⁶⁰Rhacel Salazar Parreñas, *Illicit Flirtations: Labor, Migration, and Sex Trafficking in Tokyo* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2011).

Disposability.” Secondly, I draw connections between these readings and some of the interview materials and hostesses’ perspectives on what type of labor they consider hostessing to be while also providing my own intervention to reimagine hostessing work, and other sex-work-adjacent feminized labors beyond the liberal feminist gaze.

Sex Work

Drawing from sex worker activist Carol Leigh’s coinage of “sex work”, Berg traces the origins of the term and how it encompasses various ways people exchange sexual services for money. Additionally, the term “sex work” destigmatized these activities and united sex workers against criminalization, social stigma, and violence.⁶¹ Leigh frames sex work as a legitimate form of labor and acknowledges that sex workers experience varied levels of social stigma, policing, and interactions with clients based on their industry, historical context, and social identities.⁶² The rationale “Sex work is work” humanizes sex workers’ experiences, providing autonomy, agency, and power by focusing on their labor rather than the risks and precarity that come with their occupation situated within broader geopolitical, racial, and economic flows.⁶³

Berg also unravels the prevalent discourse in liberal feminism that categorizes sex work as a legitimate form of labor. In this “sex work is work” framework, sexual labor becomes sites of simultaneous exploitation and resistance, and (sex) workers can choose to emerge as agentic actors, victims, and/or responsible wage earners. This is exemplified through sex workers of color who reclaim agency and autonomy by reclaiming systemic and historical fetishization of their bodies through performing racial tropes and partaking in hyper sexualization.⁶⁴ Within my

⁶¹ Heather Berg, "Sex Work," in *Keywords for Gender and Sexuality Studies*, ed. Keywords Feminist Editorial Collective (New York: New York University Press, 2021), 207-210, <https://doi.org/10.18574/nyu/9781479808168.003.0063>.

⁶² Berg, “Sex Work,” 207.

⁶³ Berg, “Sex Work,” 207.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*,

own research, several hostesses shared individual instances of how they were influenced by this very rhetoric of reclamation and empowerment in the face of fetishization and racialization. In one interview mentioned in Chapter 1, Mina, a Korean American hostess stated that she often played into the desires of her clients by acting as a “damsel in distress” by faking a Korean accent despite her inability to speak her mother tongue; despite her identity as an Asian American woman fetishized as an object of desire, she directly challenges that narrative through her work, using her power to sway the actions and emotions of clients as a form of feminist empowerment and monetary compensation.⁶⁵

While the article provides valuable insight into conceptualizing sex work and challenges conventional notions of work by showcasing the complex experiences of sex workers who navigate the intersections of work, exploitation, precarity, and agency, Berg fails to sufficiently explore the historical and imperialist roots of sexual labor on the global level, specifically its connection to U.S. military prostitution in Asia Pacific waters. Additionally, although the article highlights how sex work is distinguished from “other forms of intimate and emotional labor, such as massage, domestic labor, and therapy”, it simultaneously insinuates that sex work is also a form of affective labor, failing to comprehensively define sex work in a way that encompasses the different aspects often associated with the term such as: prostitution, sex trafficking, affective labor, emotional labor, and intimate labor.⁶⁶ Despite Berg highlighting how sex work is disproportionately performed by women who face economic precarity, stigmatization, and are devalued for their labor, she does not categorize sex work as a form of feminized labor despite the parallels between the two forms of labor. Increasing the scope of what types of labor can be

⁶⁵ Mina, “Karaoke Hostess Interview,” interview by Se Bin Esther Kim, March 3, 2024.

⁶⁶ Heather Berg, “Sex Work,” in *Keywords for Gender and Sexuality Studies*, ed. Keywords Feminist Editorial Collective (New York: New York University Press, 2021), 207-210, <https://doi.org/10.18574/nyu/9781479808168.003.0063>.

considered feminized labor recognizes and reconciles the commonalities in the very nature of work that is often gendered and scrutinized by societal expectations and norms. In the context of historical, geopolitical, and temporal dimensions of sex work, these limitations indicate the need for a more nuanced analysis of sex work within feminist studies that considers broader global and cultural implications of sex work beyond the local temporalities.

Labor

From a feminist perspective, Padios argues that the term “labor” must be discussed in relation to race, gender, sexuality, and citizenship as it innately involves gendered and racialized processes that extend beyond creating the economic value of a commodity of property.⁶⁷ The article challenges the traditional definition of labor, which values the labor of “white men” and is rooted within frameworks of white supremacy.⁶⁸ Despite this article providing a comprehensive feminist understanding of labor through the history of labor and welfare rights movement, prioritizing the experiences of women of color, social production within the household and society, and the transformation of labor in the context of globalization and migration, this essay will focus on how Padios theorizes sex work in the context of labor.

Padios introduces feminist discourse over sex work in the context of labor, emphasizing how gender and sexuality studies literature set distinctions between prostitution and sex work, critiquing the conflation of sex work with sex trafficking. Sex work can also be seen as temporal and porous, with the meaning of sex work changing with economic shifts and society’s ideological trends.⁶⁹ This transformation of sex work through space and time is also discussed in

⁶⁷ Jan M. Padios, "Labor," in *Keywords for Gender and Sexuality Studies*, ed. Keywords Feminist Editorial Collective (New York: New York University Press, 2021), 140-145, <https://doi.org/10.18574/nyu/9781479808168.003.0045>.

⁶⁸ Padios, “Labor,” 140.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*,

the previous chapter as I trace the colonial and war genealogies of karaoke hostessing. Karaoke hostessing shares the same origins as military prostitution, starting with the U.S. military occupation in East Asia during the Cold War, which forced local women into sex work that focused on entertainment for U.S. military men in camp towns.⁷⁰ This sex entertainment industry and sex work traveled across temporal and global boundaries to Los Angeles Koreatown as the nightlife industry and hostessing work, reflecting the temporality and porousness of sex work.⁷¹

Interventions: Framework of Disposability

In addition to feminist epistemological frameworks, the articles also introduce prevalent feminist interventions to sex work. Berg explores the predominant interventions within sex worker discourse such as partial criminalization⁷², full criminalization⁷³, legalization⁷⁴, and decriminalization⁷⁵.⁷⁶ However, in “Gendering Disposability,” Sherene Razack offers an intervention of her own, that transcends the normative feminist interventions. She seems to directly critique how feminist scholars like Padios and Berg frame sex work as a legitimate form of labor; Razack exclusively uses the term prostitution instead of terms like sex trade or sex work to emphasize the violence involved and to “problematize the notion” that prostitution is a form of labor.⁷⁷ She specifically critiques how this conflation of prostitution with work obscures the

⁷⁰ Susie Woo, *Framed by War: Korean Children and Women at the Crossroads of US Empire* (NYU Press, 2019), retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv1f8859g>.

⁷¹ Edward J.W. Park, “From an Ethnic Island to a Transnational Bubble: A Reflection on Korean Americans in Los Angeles,” *Amerasia Journal* 38, no. 1 (2012): 43–47. <https://doi.org/10.17953/amer.38.1.f55g2468307p7442>

⁷² Aimed at ending demand for sexual services that targets the perpetrators and treats the sex workers as victims.

⁷³ Criminalization through anti trafficking sentiments can have negative consequences and may endanger sex workers by forcing them to work underground, exposing them to both carceral and gendered violence.

⁷⁴ Establishment of special permits and regulations for sex work.

⁷⁵ Where sex work follows the same laws and regulations government all other forms of work/labor.

⁷⁶ Heather Berg, “Sex Work,” in *Keywords for Gender and Sexuality Studies*, ed. Keywords Feminist Editorial Collective (New York: New York University Press, 2021), 207-210, <https://doi.org/10.18574/nyu/9781479808168.003.0063>.

⁷⁷ Sherene Razack, “Gendering Disposability,” *Canadian Journal of Women and the Law*, 28, 285-307. <https://doi.org/10.3138/cjwl.28.2.285>

violence in sex work by treating it as a capitalist transaction, overlooking the violence and policing by the carceral state.

Razack also offers another kind of intervention: a “framework of disposability.”⁷⁸ This framework offers an alternative lens to understanding the violence and annihilation of Indigenous women (sex workers), who are treated as expendable and lack inherent value, justified through colonial and white supremacist ideologies. She connects this disposability to colonial and slave histories, emphasizing that sex work must be discussed in relation to race, gender, and coloniality, arguing that prostitution has been a pivotal tool to colonial regimes.⁷⁹

This framework is also utilized to challenge the legal frameworks of prostitution centering around consent and contract, critiquing the legal gray zones and power dynamics that enable dehumanization and disposability of Indigenous women and Indigenous sex workers, even within the jurisdiction of law and justice. Razack’s framework of disposability, which centers the narratives of Indigenous Cree women in Canada, bridges the gap between sex work and its temporality through time and space, which allows for the tracing of global and historical genealogies of sex work beyond the local.

However, despite offering a critical, de-colonial, and intersectional approach to sex work that highlights the disposability of Indigenous women sex workers, there are also limitations to this framework in the broader discourse around sex work. Particularly, Razack’s framework of disposability fails to consider how this may oversimplify the experiences of sex workers by framing them as victims of trafficking and exploitation when many individuals, such as the karaoke hostesses, engage in this work by choice, agency, economic necessity, or even for

⁷⁸ Sherene Razack, “Gendering Disposability,” *Canadian Journal of Women and the Law*, 28, 285-307. <https://doi.org/10.3138/cjwl.28.2.285>

⁷⁹Razack, “Gendering Disposability,” 285.

leisure.⁸⁰ Furthermore, focusing on disposability and victimhood may contribute to further marginalization and social exclusion of sex workers, making it difficult to access support, rights, and resources while simultaneously boxing out the perspectives of sex workers themselves, silencing them. Ignoring narratives of agency, autonomy, and self-identification can be harmful and disempowering to the individuals who are in the industry.

Butlerian Ethics of Vulnerability and Necropolitics

Through my research process and initial writing stages, I constantly grappled with the various definitions of sex work and its interventions. Discussing my research on karaoke hostessing often, more times than not, instigated conversations on the roots of hostessing work. Was it sex work? How was it different? How did the hostesses categorize hostessing work? Contemporary discussions specifically within neoliberal feminist academic spaces around sex work, such as the three articles discussed above, often contend with frameworks and interventions, which perpetuate unproductive conversations and fail to include the complex realities of sex work(ers) within the world's capitalist geopolitical landscape. Drawing from the work of transnational feminist scholar Anna Szôrényi on analyzing sex worker discourse through Judith Butler's works on vulnerability and consent and drawing from Kyung Kee Lee's "Necropolitics", I too offer an alternative intervention utilizing Judith Butler's theories on vulnerability and precarity to reconceptualize sex work.

Butler also emphasizes how vulnerability is inherent within the human condition and as a fundamental aspect of our existence.⁸¹ Vulnerability is further explored in Butler's book on precarity, where she merges the ideas of vulnerability with bodily harm and precariousness can

⁸⁰Mina, "Karaoke Hostess Interview," interview by Se Bin Esther Kim, March 3, 2024.

⁸¹ Judith Butler, et al., *Vulnerability in Resistance* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv11vc78r>.

be reimagined as a shared condition of life.⁸² This exploration of vulnerability can provide a way to redefine the focus on conversations around sex work. Rather than critiquing the moral or ethical choices of individuals and centering conversations of body and agency, this framework redirects attention to the inherent vulnerabilities of the human condition such as the ever-present possibility of bodily, mental, or psychological harm due to societal and geopolitical risks.⁸³ Focusing on vulnerability as a medium to examine sex work shifts the conversation from questioning individual agency to a more comprehensive examination of the societal, geopolitical, historical, and systemic factors contributing to the risks and vulnerabilities faced by the workers.

Following a Butlerian ethics of vulnerability offers an intervention that moves beyond questioning the agency of sex workers. Instead, it redirects attention towards understanding and addressing the root causes of risks and vulnerability that are associated with the human condition and their labor. This approach fosters a more comprehensive and ethical engagement that seeks to empower sex workers by acknowledging the societal, geopolitical, historical, and systemic factors that contribute to their precarious existence.

In addition to this transnational feminist framework of understanding the human condition and their choices through vulnerability, Jin-Kyung Lee's framework on necropolitics conceptualizes all labor (including sex work) as a form of necropolitical labor. In *Service Economies*, Lee reconceptualizes prostitution/sex work, along with all proletarian labor, as a form of "necropolitical labor", challenging patriarchal, colonial, neoliberal, and masculine modes of thinking. This framework surpasses mere justifications centered on agency, socioeconomic mobility, and empowerment, allowing for a profound critique of the inherently violent nature of

⁸² Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (Verso, 2004).

⁸³ Butler, *Precarious Life*.

all labor and its role in survival.⁸⁴ Hence, in the context of hostessing work, I will utilize these two frameworks to examine the ways gender, race, and socio-economic and educational backgrounds intersect to produce vulnerability within the context of hostesses and also explore the ways agency operates through hostessing work, considering the constraints and possibilities that shape the choices made by workers.

Furthermore, the reimagination of sex work as necropolitical allows for the understanding that all labor is violent and harmful, blurring the distinctions between sex work and other forms of labor. By adopting a nuanced and context-specific approach to understanding labor within frameworks of vulnerability and necropolitics, this approach will challenge dominant neoliberal and feminist discourses that tend to essentialize sex workers and their experiences. This research project therefore seeks to move beyond existing frameworks and interventions. It aims to critically examine these established paradigms while introducing interventions that challenge the prevailing norms, encouraging ethical engagement and productive conversations, both about and with sex workers and feminized laborers.

When interviewing Mina, the Korean-American hostess introduced in Chapter 1, conversations about how she categorized hostessing work came up multiple times. When asked about what she does in a night of working and how she categorizes her labor, she stated:

“It’s like working in the service industry but with extra steps. When I worked as a waitress in college, I used to look cute and flirt with my customers for extra tips. But when I get booked⁸⁵ at karaoke, it’s the same thing but now the intentions are clear and both the guy [male customer] and I both know what we want. I pretty much pretend to be the guy’s girlfriend for the night, or however long he books me for. I usually adopt a specific vibe for the night and try to match my personality to what I think my guy would like.”⁸⁶

⁸⁴ Jin-Kyung Lee, *Service Economies: Militarism, Sex Work, and Migrant Labor in South Korea* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010): Introduction and Chapter 1.

⁸⁵ “Booked” references being hired or chosen by a client.

⁸⁶2024 Interview with Mina.

The labor conditions specific to karaoke hostessing work create a unique dynamic where self-negotiation, stigma, and boundary drawing are continuously in flux. A successful and popular hostess is deemed by their ability to completely entrance her client without breaking the illusion of the desirable yet unattainable ideal woman. Her skills as a hostess are determined by how she engages her clients, appearing desirable yet unattainable. The ultimate goal of a karaoke hostess is to provide client satisfaction through her company while doing the least amount of, or avoiding altogether, physical and sexual forms of labor. The hostess must brand herself in a way that appeals to clients while also navigating the risks of having their boundaries constantly overstepped, pushed, and ignored. This constant negotiation of all boundaries – physical, sexual, affective, and/or emotional – is critical, as the line between hostessing work as sex work and “not sex work” is strategically managed by the hostesses and the boundaries that they place within the workplace themselves.⁸⁷

Rose identifies as a Latina social media influencer in her late 20s. She started karaoke hostessing in 2020, during the peak of the pandemic. She was one of the many people who got laid off suddenly during the height of the pandemic and came across an advertisement on Craigslist for karaoke hostessing work. The advertisement stated that they were looking for young, beautiful women in their 20s looking for a job where they would get paid good money (in cash) for “drinking, dancing, and having fun.”⁸⁸ Although she had initially found the ad suspicious, she was at risk of being evicted from her apartment and made the choice to contact the number on the ad. She went through a short vetting process where she had to text the agency a couple pictures of herself in her best night-out clothing, share her ethnicity, and general height and weight. Soon, she was invited to a karaoke establishment, where she met up with one of the

⁸⁷ Recorded conversation with Rose in the summer of 2023. Rose dropped out of the research project in late 2023.

⁸⁸ Ibid.,

managers of the agency that posted the advertisement. After a short conversation, she was hired and started working the next night and has been working nearly every weekend since.

When asked whether she considered this work to be a form of sex work, prostitution, or defined as something else she stated:

“I don’t see this as sex work or any type of prostitution. I don’t have a pimp, I’m not being paid for sex. I work in my own time, when I want, how I want. They might touch me here and there but it’s nothing that doesn’t happen on a night out with the girls. It’s like any service industry job or like...I see it as going out with my friends and getting invited to the table with rich and highly educated men but now I get paid for it.”⁸⁹

Karaoke hostesses like Mina and Rose sell the “girlfriend” experience through emotional and affective labor, taking the act of sex out of sex work. Reflected in the numerous casual conversations I shared with some of the hostesses in other agencies during a night out at work and interviews with my interlocutors, there also seemed to be a deliberate framing of their labor as anything but sex work. With karaoke work being heavily characterized by emotional and affective labor rather than the selling of explicit sexual services, it may be a disservice and overstatement to chalk up hostessing work as just sex work. Understanding hostess work then, as a form of feminized labor, rather than just sex work, allows for a more nuanced appreciation for the emotional, psychological, and affective labors that the women navigate while honoring their opinions and thoughts on their labor.

There are numerous strategies that hostesses employ while navigating the structural conditions of the workplace – a space where they must continuously reproduce the various forms of labors that go into creating that “girlfriend” experience to ensure their financial stability, personal safety, and client satisfaction. This reframing of their labor also may play some role in

⁸⁹ Recorded conversation with Rose in the summer of 2023. Rose dropped out of the research project in late 2023.

protecting their own reputations and sense of agency; this may also serve as a negotiation tactic to mitigate the stigmas attached to this work and to position themselves to be a part of a labor force, such as the service or entertainment industry, which would be considered more socially acceptable to themselves and their respective communities.

Jojo, who identifies as a white and Jewish artist in her early 20s, has been in the hostessing industry for over 4 years. She shared how she started hostessing when she lost her job during the pandemic and, similar to Rose, she came across an ad on Craigslist. When asked about what type of work she sees karaoke hostessing as, she stated that she considered hostessing work as a branch of adult entertainment but not sex work:

“Sex work, I think, to me, means you’re selling sex. And with karaoke, you’re selling a fantasy and you’re selling an idea...If you consider hostessing as sex work, then I would consider even Hooters to be sex work, because you’re..you’re like selling your boobs but you’re just a waitress. You’re not doing anything but like, it’s maybe no sex but rather adult entertainment. But I don’t think it’s prostitution. And it really, it kind of bothers me when people treat hostessing, like you know, like we’re in a brothel or something.”⁹⁰

Jojo also clarified that although she is not against sex work and feels comfortable within the karaoke or stripper industry, she would not feel comfortable enough to work in a massage parlor or “on the streets” as that would be a form of prostitution.⁹¹ She also mentioned that she continues to do this work because it provides her with financial freedom while providing her the space and time to focus on her art and hobbies in her own time.⁹²

Women who work within the karaoke hostess industry are constantly navigating a web of structural conditions and social dynamics entrenched by racist, patriarchal, and heteronormative

⁹⁰Jojo, “Karaoke Hostess Interview”, interview by Esther Se Bin Kim, April 10, 2024

⁹¹ Ibid.,

⁹² Ibid.,

ideals that shape their experiences of stigma, precarity, vulnerability, and economic survival. Hostesses are positioned in an environment where the stakes of their ability to perform are high and the stigma associated with the labor are even higher. Furthermore, the stigma attached to this labor is two-fold: there is the societal stigma associated with being perceived as a sex worker engaging in prostitution and the internal stigmas within the industry, where the hostess must navigate the fine line between client satisfaction and maintaining personal boundaries.

In the process of de-mystifying what happens behind closed doors in karaoke bar establishments, one may realize that the work of hostess is no different than any other form of skilled labor. The structural conditions of their workplace, the role of brokers between client and buyers, clear hierarchies with a chain of command, competitive client-based earnings, and the need to cultivate a unique brand or image specific to the worker, are all characteristics of everyday apart of professional skilled labor companies. In this manner, the karaoke hostesses are not just a service or producing a service, but they also negotiating of transactions and exchanges that directly affect their socio-economic status and identity.

Additionally, hostesses see their labor as a job that requires not only conventional beauty but also a multitude of skills ranging from customer service, sales, language, networking, singing, and dancing in order to have engaging conversation and connections with middle- to upper-class clients that range from businessmen to high ranked politicians around the world. This removes some of the stigma often associated with traditional sex work, such as the immorality, social isolation, and low-skill perceptions correlated with prostitution, garnering the attention and participation of more women in hostess work and providing more autonomy and profit than other forms of labor. However, the lucrative pay, freedom to work whenever they want, and the glitz and glamor of hostessing work cannot overshadow the realities of danger and policing

within a highly underground and non-regulated industry with misinformed public and law enforcement conflating it with prostitution.

In another interview question, Rose was asked to recount any dangers of working as a hostess:

“Sometimes there will be raids from police, it’s rare but it happens. Cops will raid the rooms after 2AM so if you go home before then, you’re fine. But you make better money if you stay longer. You have to be careful because they will cite you for escorting without a license, which can stay on your permanent record. There have also been instances of girls getting their drinks spiked by clients but that’s why you always need to be vigilant. Pour your own drinks. Never get too comfortable. You have to be smart without letting your guy catch on.”⁹³

Remi identifies as a Vietnamese and French woman who has worked as a hostess on and off since 2019. As one of my main interlocutors and a close friend who introduced me to the world of karaoke hostessing, she and I had many conversations about the possible dangers and realities of working as a hostess in a time when karaoke hostessing has been sensationalized by popular news outlets like the *Los Angeles Times*, whose journalists have been attempting to infiltrate the karaoke clubs to write exposés on the gang and drug violence associated with karaoke hostessing in Koreatown.⁹⁴

When asked about the possible dangers and risk that hostesses face on a daily basis and whether she has had experiences with law enforcement, she recalled:

“I have had experience with law enforcement in which there was a gangster I suppose, DK⁹⁵, who was in the news, who they were looking for. And he happens to have been in the karaoke that was just overall the karaoke building I was working in that day. And so the police had planned a raid to get him but the news got to him and he had already left by the time that they came to raid us. So, the police essentially put all the girls in one

⁹³ Recorded conversation with Rose in 2023.

⁹⁴ "Party girls, karaoke, extortion in Koreatown: Trial exposes dark world," *Los Angeles Times*, March 26, 2024, <https://www.latimes.com/california/story/2024-03-26/federal-trial-koreatown-doumi>, accessed April 2, 2024.

⁹⁵ "Party girls, karaoke, extortion in Koreatown: Trial exposes dark world," *Los Angeles Times*, March 26, 2024, <https://www.latimes.com/california/story/2024-03-26/federal-trial-koreatown-doumi>, accessed April 2, 2024.

room and all the guys in separate rooms and gave us just overall a very hard time, despite us not being their actual target. And it was a scary time, and I feel like it was made out to be something that was more serious than it actually was.”⁹⁶

Despite not considering karaoke hostessing as real sex work, both Rose’s and Remi’s experience with law enforcement revealed that hostessing is still associated with the criminality and dangers of sex work.⁹⁷ Karaoke establishments and agencies that provide karaoke girls operate illegally and with the recent growth of the hostessing economy, law enforcement in Koreatown have expressed concerns regarding more major criminal activity such as prostitution and drug dealing being present in these spaces.⁹⁸ In addition to concerns with policing, hostesses may also face dangers of being physically or sexually attacked, drugged, or robbed by not only clients but also karaoke waiters, managers, and law enforcement. Despite these dangers, the pros outweigh the cons, and the hostesses navigate through Koreatown’s nightlife in search of financial liberation, sexual empowerment, and self-autonomy.

Within the structures of patriarchy and systemic oppression, hostesses navigate these spaces through their labor, empowering themselves by securing financial liberation and reclaiming their agency. Women from various ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds engage in hostess work, making autonomous and self-determined choices in a patriarchal white imperialist society that structurally racializes and fetishizes women within sex-adjacent industries, starkly contrasting colonial and militarized stereotypes of the sexually exotic and available hypersexual Other waiting to be saved by a white -- or in this case, any male – savior figure.

⁹⁶Remi, “Karaoke Hostess Interview,” interview by Se Bin Esther Kim, April 2, 2024.

⁹⁷ “FBI Begin Investigation into Korean Karaoke Hostess ‘Doumi’ Agencies in America.” n.d. Allkpop. <https://www.allkpop.com/article/2014/10/fbi-begin-investigation-into-korean-karaoke-hostess-doumi-agencies-in-america>.

⁹⁸Ibid.,

Chapter 3: Affect, Aesthetics, and Performance: The Perfect Girlfriend Persona

Remi splayed out various club dresses on her king-sized bed. “This one is good if you’re going for the innocent girl-next-door look,” she said, holding a black tulle babydoll dress against herself in front of the full-length mirror. “I always have good luck getting booked⁹⁹ with this dress.”

After picking out her dress for the night, she shuffled over to the bathroom, the counter jam packed with various high-end skincare and makeup products—Lancome, Bobby Brown, Charlotte Tilbury, Tom Ford, Dior. Like a master painter swatching colors on her palette, Remi swiftly picked out her makeup products of choice before walking me through her makeup routine. Twenty-four-hour primer before foundation. Make sure the foundation coverage is strong enough to hide her Asian glow but not to the point where it gets cakey— the clients don’t like that. Eyebrows drawn straight and eyeliner like a puppy. Mascara to accentuate her doll-like eyes. Light gray contacts for that exotic look. Concealer to hide dark circles and blemishes. Plumping lip gloss for pouty lips. Heavy blush on the cheekbones and around the corners of the eyes and tip of the nose to emulate a healthy but cute flush; she called it the “Igari Method.”¹⁰⁰ Mist the face with a matte makeup setter for an airbrushed effect.

For the finishing touches, she sprayed perfume on her brush before running it through her long balayage hair and then proceeded to spritz her entire body. After picking out matching heels and a bag, she sat down next to me on the bed and said, “So today’s backstory is that I am a law school student trying to find a sugar daddy.”

⁹⁹ Booked = term for getting hired by the client in a karaoke room.

¹⁰⁰ The Igari method, also known as "drunk blush" or "hangover makeup", is a Japanese blush technique that uses unconventional placement to create a flushed look. <https://www.ipsy.com/blog/igari-makeup>

A law school student looking for a sugar daddy. An upcoming Instagram fitness model. A failed K-pop idol trainee. Hot single MILF with five kids. A foreign exchange student from Korea who speaks little to no English. A small-town girl from Long Island who came to Los Angeles to become an influencer.

Remi, alongside some of the other hostess girls that I interviewed, shared with me various fake identities and backstories that they would construct as they got ready for the night. Blending elements from their actual lives with exaggerated hyper-feminine qualities and traits inspired by daily preferences in TV shows, books, or popular culture, my interlocutors explained that these constructed narratives served the dual purpose of shielding their true identities from potentially harmful clients and immersing themselves in their work, likening it to a theatrical or acting performance. They crafted identities that leaned heavily into hyper-feminine and hyper-heteronormative roles to provide the perfect experience for their clients. Enhanced by their beautiful and conventionally attractive aesthetics, this alluring femme fatale combination often prompted clients to generously tip the hostesses and desire more time with them.

In the world of karaoke bar hostessing, the role of a hostess girl is inherently performative, requiring the embodiment of an idealized version of femininity to cater to the desires and fantasies of the clients. In exploring the aesthetics, performance, and femininity inherent to hostessing work through participant observation and ethnographic interviews with hostesses, I argue that hostesses actively engage in continuous acts of affective labor and hyper-heteronormative gender performances, constructing their identities in response to societal norms and client expectations. Drawing from Judith Butler's concept of performativity, I contend that the analysis of hostessing work through the framework of performativity is crucial in critically examining the choices, motivations, and lived experiences of women engaged in this line of

feminized labor beyond liberal feminist binaries. This chapter serves as a springboard for understanding the performance and aesthetics inherent to hostessing work and contributes to a broader discourse by providing an entry point to understanding feminized labor through critically engaging with the choices, motivations, and narratives of women in the hostessing industry.

Tavia Nyong'o's gender studies keyword contribution essay "Performativity" parses out the genealogy of the word performativity, tracing its linguistic, feminist, and queer theory roots in gender studies.¹⁰¹ Similar to Nyong'o's analysis, which acknowledges contemporary critiques that question the linguistic focus on the concept of performativity and how it neglects embodied and material experiences, my usages of performativity in my research also do not align closely with the prevalent understanding of performativity within gender studies.¹⁰² Rather, my analysis of hostessing work through performativity aligns with Judith's Butler's assertion that gender is performative and is constructed through a set of repeated performances of gender norms such as body gestures, language, clothing, and other non-verbal forms of expression that extend beyond linguistics. These repeated acts contribute to the stability of gender norms and categories, reinforcing societal expectations of gender identities.¹⁰³

Furthermore, within performativity, Butler emphasizes the potential of "subversion."¹⁰⁴ Exemplified through drag performances, subversion is the parodying or exaggeration of gender norms; individuals who partake in this subversion purposely or inadvertently expose the constructed nature and artificialness of gender identities.¹⁰⁵ Drawing on Butler's understanding

¹⁰¹ Tavia Nyong'o, "Performativity," in *Keywords for Gender and Sexuality Studies*, ed. Keywords Feminist Editorial Collective, Kyla Wazana Tompkins, Aren Z. Aizura, Aimee Bahng, Karma R. Chávez, Mishuana Goeman, Amber Jamilla Musser (New York: NYU Press, 2021), 163.

¹⁰² Nyong'o, "Performativity," 165.

¹⁰³ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 185.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990), xxii.

of performance and performativity, which proposes that gender and identity is constructed through stylized and repeated sets of actions and behaviors, hostesses also engage in a continuous act of their own, constantly re-constructing and re-embodying the aesthetics, pleasures, and performances in accordance with societal norms and client expectations of women working in feminized labor spaces.¹⁰⁶

As explained in previous chapters, hostesses fulfill the role of the client's "girlfriend", tending to a variety of intimate acts, like listening to a client's stories, feeding him fruit and drinks, and singing songs together.¹⁰⁷ These interactions between the hostesses and clients require skills such as dancing, singing, flirting, and making conversation, adding another layer to the performative nature of the job.

Comparable to how hostesses in Japan embody the "girlfriend" experience for their clients, I argue that the karaoke hostesses in Los Angeles perform a meticulous craft of what I call the "Perfect Girlfriend Persona", often a direct imitation of what is considered the ideal woman according to the preferences of the client. This involves adhering to specific beauty standards influenced by both European centric and East Asian ideals. Hostesses must conform to specific physical attributes such as being slender, possessing big eyes, maintaining a certain height, and delicate features and their ability to meet these standards directly correlate with their popularity and chances of getting picked for the night. They are also required to follow strict dress codes set by their respective hostess agencies, which emphasize the need for feminine or sexy dresses, heels, and well-maintained hair and nails. The performance also extends beyond grooming and aesthetic practices in the workplace, with many hostesses frequently maintaining

¹⁰⁶ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 179.

¹⁰⁷ Rhacel Salazar Parreñas, *Illicit Flirtations: Labor, Migration, and Sex Trafficking in Tokyo* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2011).

their physical and bodily aesthetics and mental well-being through private gym classes, trips to spas, and monthly hair, nail, and eyelash extension appointments.

Beyond aesthetics and behavioral expectations, hostesses are expected to perform hyper-heteronormative and hyper-feminine actions, actively playing into the fantasies of their clients. Blaire is a half Russian, half Korean college student who started hostessing to help pay for college. As someone who is queer and nonbinary, but highly femme presenting, Blaire shared that they do not disclose their gender or sexual identities to their clients. Despite preferring to present masculine in their day-to-day life and at school, they dress and act hyper-feminine during work hours as it brings in more revenue. When asked about whether their gender or sexual identity affected their work as a hostess, they stated:

“Not really? [SLIGHT PAUSE] It’s not hard to act like you’re straight and cis. I just pretend what they want me to be, and, let’s be real, it brings in more tips. No guy comes to karaoke and asks for a gay girl with a buzzcut. [LAUGHS] They’re obviously there because they want attention from a pretty and fun girl. Or whatever type of girl they want for the night. When I put on my wig, I’m Blaire, not [REDACTED].”¹⁰⁸

Like Blaire, hostesses leave their true identities at home and embody what they deem is the “Perfect Girlfriend Persona” for their clients, which may involve catering to racial, gendered, or misogynistic fantasies, perpetuating societal and heteronormative stereotypes for the purpose of entertainment and client satisfaction.

Summer is a hostess in the early 30s who identities as half white and half Moroccan. She migrated from Quebec in search of fame, success, and liberation within the modeling industry and then came across karaoke hostessing. Coming from a background in sex-adjacent work such as stripping,¹⁰⁹ Summer shared with me the excitement and intrigue she felt when she discovered

¹⁰⁸ Blaire, “Karaoke Hostess Interview”, interview by Se Bin Esther Kim, March 4, 2024

¹⁰⁹ Stripping, or Strip Dancing, is a form of dance, usually on a pole, intended to offer a form of adult entertainment, featuring seductive forms of dance that frequently involve the gradual removal of clothing to enhance the sexual

hostessing; it served as a means of getting out of the sex industry, promising financial freedom, safety, and a medium for sexual and artistic expression. When I asked how she defines her work as a hostess and what hostessing means to her, she explained:

“Well, for me, it's like this character that I like to play the same thing when I was on the stage [as a dancer], once I'm in the room, and I know that this is going to be my environment for the next couple hours. I like to be artistic. And I like to think about songs that they've never heard before. I like to dance. This is my expression. I love movement, dance. I love storytelling. And most people are very interested in my stories, and they love to share, you know, to experience connections. And that is a beautiful aspect, music, movement, freedom, you can work the days you want, and, and put on like, a fun show. You know, for me, it's like a very free expression.”¹¹⁰

For Summer, her work as a hostess allows her to engage with an experience akin to performance art and experience sexual and artistic freedom and expression that strip dancing once provided for her. However, hostessing becomes an enticing, safer, and much less stigmatized alternative to her previous job and she is able to curate unique experiences for her clients through emotional engagement, performance, and affective attunements with her storytelling, singing, and dancing.

In another conversation with Mina, the Korean American hostess referenced in the previous chapters, on whether she experienced any racism, sexism, or fetishization throughout her hostessing career due to her appearance, she answered:

“I experienced quite a bit of misogyny from Asian clients, especially older men, who tend to talk down on you. But the white men who book me all have some sort of Asian girl fetish. I play into their fantasies and call them “oppa”...One time, I pretended to speak in a Korean accent and told one of my white clients that I had to work extra hours so I could pay my rent. He felt extra bad for me because he tipped me \$500 that night. Obviously, that was a lie... Men can never resist a damsel in distress.”¹¹¹

element of the performance. The dancer is on a stage and the audience throws money onto the stage during their performance. Dancers are usually hired under a club and clients can request to meet for private dances after the show.

¹¹⁰Summer, “Karaoke Hostess Interview, interview by Se Bin Esther Kim, April 3, 2024

¹¹¹Mina, “Karaoke Hostess Interview,” interview by Se Bin Esther Kim, March 3, 2024.

Mina and the other hostesses often encounter clients influenced by rhetoric that fetishizes and sexualizes the women. However, Mina plays into the desires of her clients by acting like a “damsel in distress,” reclaiming her agency through her performance, manipulating her clients for monetary compensation. During the brief interaction leading to her booking, Mina strategically realized her clients’ fantasies of fulfilling the role of a white savior. She promptly assumed the persona of a vulnerable, financially precarious young woman from Korea, projecting an image of struggle in navigating life in America. This performance effectively evoked a strong masculine affect from her client, who in turn, felt compelled to provide monetary compensation and care for her.

Race and aesthetics also play an important role in conjuring one's Perfect Girlfriend Persona. Remi, being half Vietnamese and half French, explained how her ethnically ambiguous aesthetics can play a role in her popularity with her clients. When asked about whether she thought her ethnically ambiguous aesthetics affected her job as a hostess, she said:

“...Hm...I think I may be some sort of novelty for them in the fact that I am visually what they prefer. But given that I am not East Asian, it's different. And I think some find it funny or just like an overall novel, where people like to guess what I am. And most of the time, they're even surprised. I do speak East Asian languages, such as very little Korean because I lived in Korea for a bit and I did study Japanese for around four years or so. So, I could speak Japanese on a very basic conversational level.”¹¹²

Despite not being an ethnicity that is traditionally preferred within the hostessing industry (East Asian, white, Latina), her status as an ethnically ambiguous presenting hostess in an environment where all women are equally beautiful but ethnically distinguishable, becomes a means of negotiation and status symbol. Her proximity to whiteness conjures a sense of both familiarity and novelty to the clients who interact with her, providing a means of access and

¹¹²Remi, “Karaoke Hostess Interview,” interview by Se Bin Esther Kim, April 2, 2024

securing work. Furthermore, like an actress learning a new language or accent for a specific role, she has also honed her conversational skills and language abilities to fully immerse herself in her role as the objectified hostess, manufacturing a perfect girlfriend persona and experience for her clients.

Furthermore, similar to actors using method acting, a technique where actors strive to create realistic, emotionally authentic performances through fully embodying and immersing themselves in the character they are portraying, hostesses similarly study their clients' needs, wants, and desires, and actively and continuously attempt to forge identities and submerge themselves in the role. Only then are they able to become what they perceive is the "Perfect Girlfriend Persona" for that client. Often, this additionally requires constantly navigating the delicate balance between being engaging and entertaining without appearing too intelligent to intimidate male clients or too ignorant to maintain the client's attention, which parallel an actor's need to constantly gauge audience engagement or reception of their appearance in a play.

The "Perfect Girlfriend Persona" also allows hostesses to perform something similar to Butler's concept of subversion. These made-up personas that the hostesses embody are often caricatures of women inspired by daily preferences in TV shows, books, or popular culture such as the college sorority girl¹¹³, the innocent girl-next-door, e-girl¹¹⁴, damsel-in-distress, or the main-pixie dream girl¹¹⁵, featuring exaggerated hyper-feminine qualities and traits that cater to their clients; these identities serve as a form of satire and theatricality of the male gaze.

Hostesses, like Mina, Blaire, and Remi, exercise their own agency by negotiating the boundaries

¹¹³ Describes a woman who participates in Greek Life on college campuses but has been co-opted as a negative stereotype that characterizes the women as shallow, rich, privileged, and often obsessed with status and partying.

¹¹⁴ E-girls is a slang term for young women of the e-girl/e-boy subculture characterized by emo and grunge inspired fashion and heavy use of social media and online platforms.

¹¹⁵ A Manic Pixie Dream Girl is a archetype in fiction, usually portrayed by a young attractive woman with an eclectic personality and eccentric quirks that serves as a romantic interest for a male protagonist, often teaching him important life lessons and providing emotional support while expecting nothing in return.

of hostessing, finding creative, fun, and autonomous ways to perform within the constraints of their workplace.

By applying the concept of performativity to the aesthetics and femininity inherent to hostessing work, this thesis explores how hostesses utilize the “Perfect Girlfriend Persona” to actively negotiate their agency and autonomy through performance, satire, and theatrics. This analysis sheds light on the dynamic and fluid nature of identity construction within hostessing work and provides a new entry point to understanding women in feminized labor sectors beyond the liberal feminist gaze fixated on the ethical considerations and framing of sex work. This preoccupation with issues surrounding feminized labor such as ethics, stigmatization, sex trafficking, and which theoretical frameworks to utilize when analyzing feminized labor tends to overshadow the crucial narratives of hostesses themselves and their unique perspectives on their work. It is imperative to shift the focus, analyses, and conversations around feminized labor towards a more inclusive and nuanced understanding that prioritizes the voices and experiences of the workers themselves as I attempted to do so with my interlocutors through this preliminary reading of performativity within hostessing work.

Chapter 4: Transnational Feminist Kinships and Solidarities within the Workplace

Within an hour of meeting Remi for the first time in the summer of 2021, she shared with me that she worked as a karaoke hostess in the nightlife circles of Koreatown and that she made good money from karaoke and private poker games that her clients often invited her to. She said that if I was ever interested in having fun and making good cash, she would be more than happy to connect me to her agency and social networks. Perhaps it was the fact that she was a close acquaintance of one of my best friends from undergrad or that she was also part of the same social circles I associated with in college, but her excitement and enthusiasm piqued my curiosity and captured my attention completely.

From then on, she and I became close friends, and she frequently shared with me that hostessing work provided a steady influx of cash and various socio-economic connections that allowed her to live in a luxury studio apartment comfortably. As I got to know her over the years, I realized she was an incredibly accomplished individual. Despite her wealthy family background, she seemed to not rely on her family's wealth and moved across the country to Los Angeles for her college education right after high school and supported herself since. She had also traveled internationally on her own and fluent in over four languages, she possessed a global perspective and communicated with people with remarkable ease. However, over the three years I have known her, I found her in a cycle of quitting and then going back to working karaoke. Perhaps due to various issues such as mental health or whether she had found a new business venture that she wanted to focus on, she would periodically quit karaoke, stating it was bad for her mental health but then would return to the work once she ran low on funds or wanted to go out for drinks and meet new people at the karaoke bars. Other hostesses that I interviewed and

interacted with similarly fell into the same cycle of working karaoke, then quitting, then returning when certain situations of financial precarity or boredom arose.

In addition to the stressors associated with the precarity and stigma of this labor, hostesses are constantly negotiating, navigating, and engaging in affective attunements with not only their clients but also fellow hostesses. The atmosphere and workplace environment is therefore charged with a mix of camaraderie and competition, as the hostesses vie for attention and favor of not only the predominately male clientele but also the other parties in the industry, such as the waiters, their managers/drivers, and even the security guards at the karaoke bar establishments. Furthermore, the hostesses must also play into the wants and needs of her clients, who wield power through their money and ability to reject or book the women looking to work that night. Hostesses must remain unbothered by constant risks of being compared to other women and being rejected by clients, often in front of a crowd of people, which is a frequent and normalized aspect of the job.

While explaining how an average night working at the karaoke bars went for her, Summer shared with me some of the problems she had with constant rejection:

“I think the preparing for the job is really fun, And I'm like a warrior going for the night. And so I go with that spirit, put the most read the most attractive clothes on and prepare myself. And once I'm in the car with the other girls. I mean, that's when like, I feel maybe more self-conscious, because we all look different. And then we all have to line up in front of the men. You right away kind of like struggle with your confidence. And then you're in competition mode a little bit, you're trying to be friendly with the others, but you also you're in competition and going to room after room. It feels degrading, like a show pig, getting rejected sometimes hour after hour. And sometimes I do drink a little bit if we're waiting in a room and trying to get into the music and the spirit. But unless I get a book right away, I'm not in a good mood, and I'm forcing myself to be in a good mood. After an hour always I always drop, then I get anxiety I just want this to go well and just like feeling like disappointment and what's wrong with me or whatever.”¹¹⁶

¹¹⁶ Summer, “Karaoke Hostess Interview, interview by Se Bin Esther Kim, April 3, 2024

The risk of constant rejection is not merely a momentary sting or a fleeting moment of stress; it accumulates over time and contributes to the psychological and emotional labors that hostesses must perform. The repeated dismissals, disregard, and rejections can impact their self-esteem and confidence, leading to feelings of inadequacy, burnout, and also mental distress. This emotional and psychological toll is further exacerbated by the unspoken competition among hostesses themselves, who must not only manage the rejection from clients but also navigate their interpersonal dynamics where temporarily alliances, friendships, and rivalries can form, shift, and dissipate rapidly based on the room and clients that they are with.

On a similar note, Remi's attitude toward the work had changed by the time I interviewed her officially in 2024. She no longer advocated for girls to turn to hostessing work and even stated that she would "never introduce a close friend to karaoke." She said that karaoke made her realize negative aspects of herself and had not benefited her mentally or physically in any way.

When asked why she quit karaoke work now and why she thinks women continue to work as hostesses despite the unsustainable nature of the work, she responded:

"Karaoke was just a temporary form of income. I had also worked a job in an office environment in marijuana actually. And I had actually met my old boss through karaoke. And I would still work karaoke while working for him at the time... I've had a lot of very uncomfortable encounters in situations, I've been with a very high-level lawyer at one point, he booked me and he worked with a lot of big names, in politics and with celebrities. And he would show me all these things and promise me lots of connections. So, I think I did get swayed by that. One of the other big reasons why I quit is due to my physical health and just because the constant consumption of alcohol eventually does very much start to wear on you. And whether or not I see myself there again, I guess I would do it for very last-minute instances, like say, I had no other plans, and I was maybe extremely bored. Or maybe if I have a friend or a regular who was coming out who doesn't typically go out, or maybe if because the money is so instant, and a lot if I ever had an emergency and needed

the money quickly. But otherwise, I don't really see myself going to work there again, unless I particularly need to.”¹¹⁷

Many hostesses, like Remi, become attached to a certain lifestyle when introduced to this line of work. The lucrative pay, the glamorous lifestyle, the high-end clientele, and the social currency give the women a sense of false security. Ironically, the most successful hostesses find themselves unable to quit after saving up money despite working what was supposed to be a temporary gig. They face new expenses to maintain and hone the skills and traits required for effective affective attunement with their clients, including expensive clothing, accessories, beauty cosmetic surgeries, monthly med-spa treatments, and fitness classes. Furthermore, due to the competitive nature of the hostessing sphere, hostesses must maintain their beauty and performance or risk underperforming or having their clients stolen by other hostesses, highlighting tensions between the hostesses. However, this illusion of financial stability and social status is cruel, as the pursuit of these material solutions ultimately exacerbates their precarious situations, and they find themselves continuing or returning to hostessing work with no future of socioeconomic mobility or career development and risk aging out of the profession.

When asked about the money and labor that go into maintaining your beauty and aesthetic within hostessing work, Jojo stated:

“I think for everybody, there's so much income that goes into you wanting to look high maintenance, I guess for whoever is working this job, you want to look expensive. So, you probably want your nails done. I don't have my nails done, but when I do, I definitely like to make more money. You want your hair done. I have to buy extensions because guys like longer hair and I also hear girls complaining all the time when they don't wear their extensions like oh nothing books like I shouldn't have worn my short hair tonight. I think a lot of girls wear wigs too or put a lot of money into dyeing their hair. Keeping up with hair if you're blond –like your highlights...your outfit, oh your outfit, if you have a night where you don't get booked at all or you have a really bad night and you're wearing an outfit

¹¹⁷Remi, “Karaoke Hostess Interview,” interview by Se Bin Esther Kim, April 2, 2024

you're gonna be like ‘wow, I'm never are wearing that outfit again, I need to buy a whole new outfit, bad luck.’ Or if you have a night where you do really good in an outfit, you're like, ‘I'm gonna wear this every day until I stop getting booked in it.’”¹¹⁸

Perhaps an unintended consequence and byproduct of this feminized and affective labor, hostesses face a somewhat ironic and cruel reality of false security. Lauren Berlant traces this affective feeling and attachment through what she calls a relation of cruel optimism, in which she states that precarity gives people attachments, and attachments, in turn, give them a sense of fantastical illusions that they are living the good life.¹¹⁹

Despite this seemingly bleak reality, hostesses can find productivity within this precarious cycle of attachments and social tensions through the very affective attunements that create this cycle in the first place. If they can self-reflect, realize, and attune to these cruel optimisms and tensions inherent in hostessing work, there is potential for hostesses to develop feminist subjectivities.¹²⁰ Attunement to these affects allows hostesses to experience what Hemmings calls affective dissonance, “the judgment arising from the distinction between experience and the world,” where the women experience and recognize a sense of injustice and then a desire to rectify that.¹²¹

This manifestation of this transnational feminist transformation via affective dissonance can be exemplified through my interactions involving Remi and Justine. In 2022, I had just officially joined Remi’s agency through her recommendation, sharing with me invaluable insider information on how to survive within the hostessing industry.¹²² She introduced me to fellow hostesses, waiters, and regulars while sharing strategies to maximize client satisfaction with

¹¹⁸Jojo, “Karaoke Hostess Interview”, interview by Se Bin Esther Kim, April 10, 2024

¹¹⁹ Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham, Duke University Press, 2011), 1.

¹²⁰ Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press), 168–190

¹²¹ Clare Hemmings, *Affective solidarity: Feminist reflexivity and political transformation* (Feminist Theory, 13(2)), 157

¹²² Prior to pursuing my graduate studies in 2022.

minimal physical and emotional labor, such as shot dodging¹²³ and manufacturing fake identities, now known as the “Perfect Girlfriend Persona.” Rather than perceiving me as a competitor, she took me under their wing. She tried to get me booked with her, vouching for me to their clients, and in turn, we found ourselves bonding through the various experiences and situations we found ourselves in while working together.

Remi also introduced me to Justine in early 2022, right before I had started graduate school. They had met in karaoke back when Remi first started and had been inseparable since. When Justine found out that I was interested in working karaoke, she would spend valuable time typing up a guidebook of sorts and sending me guidelines, tips, and tricks. She shared with me knowledge and industry secrets that were not available to lay persons such as foolproof conversation starters to guarantee getting booked for the night. The fact that I should wear makeup that sparkles and shimmers because ‘men are attracted to shiny things.’ Or even the fact that wearing heels that are too high is not a smart move because men tend to get intimidated by taller women.

As long-time veterans in the hostessing industry, Remi and Justine had become self-aware and cognizant (affective dissonance) of the underlying realities of hierarchical dynamics, exploitation, stigmas, and precariousness innately associated with their labor (cruel optimism) and inadvertently became attuned to the potentials for mutual support and empowerment within their shared circumstances. Through fostering affective attunement with one another, recognizing the commonality of their affective labors, and realizing the counter productiveness of interpersonal hostility and competition that only adds further anxieties and tension to the already

¹²³ Since hostessing work also entails drinking alcohol with your clients, hostesses must learn how to either handle their alcohol or find creative ways to pretend to drink. Shot dodging refers to deflection techniques such as filling your glass with water while the client isn’t looking or pretending to drink and then throwing the drink to the floor.

precarious nature of the job, hostesses can mitigate and circumvent some of these tensions, ultimately leading to feminist transformations and solidarities with one another.

In my interview with Remi, I asked about the possibilities of building friendship and solidarity with other hostesses within the workplace. She spoke about how whenever she saw a new girl in karaoke, she would bring her into the rooms with her and ask the clients to book her alongside the newer girl:

“I ended up meeting a couple of my really close friends like that. That way we would end up getting booked in the same room all the time. When I first met Justine, I was actually kind of scared of her. She was very intimidating, because she was so pretty. Um, and I texted my boss and asked him about her. I asked him, “Oh, it's like there's any girls that kind of have my same vibe because I wanted to ask her advice,” and he said, “Oh, you should talk to this girl.” And so I messaged her and she sent a really extensive answer and we figured out that we lived like 15 or like 10 minutes away from each other and we started carpooling together and through that we became friends.”¹²⁴

Other hostesses described similar feelings and scenarios of building solidarities and friendships within the workplace despite the seemingly competitive environment of the workplace. Justine, Jojo, and Summer, hostesses who consider themselves seasoned veterans of industry, shared stories within their interview that often-featured bonds of solidarity and kinship building which usually featured them taking a newer hostess under their wing and making sure that they were able to set their boundaries and not get taken advantage of by their clients. All six of my interviewees and the three other hostesses who later dropped out of the study also mentioned that they found their closest confidants and built their support networks from within the industry.

¹²⁴ Remi, “Karaoke Hostess Interview,” interview by Se Bin Esther Kim, April 2, 2024

When asked about this affective phenomenon of hostesses finding solace, solidarity, and solace amongst each other despite being involved in environments that directly threaten their feminist subjectivities and instigate competition and negative feelings, Jojo answered:

“I consider myself a feminist. And I'm a complete girls' girl. And I think being a feminist is like having someone's back because, you know, because nobody else has your back in this industry. So having other girls' back is so important. And it goes beyond just like having eyelash glue in the bathroom for another girl like. And it is part like, speak up for other people when you know, what they're okay with or what, but I'm someone who doesn't really know who to talk to. I feel like the only people that could ever understand me are people that have worked this job and done what I have done. And that is why having friends inside karaoke is so important.”¹²⁵

The labor's precarious nature is highlighted through how hostesses must continuously navigate their work environment and associated physical and psychological risks through affective attunements. Hostesses are subject to a range of financial and physical vulnerabilities, from dealing with a difficult client refusing to pay their tab to getting arrested during a police raid. They are also under constant surveillance by managers and their company, who expect them to meet certain standards of performance, and from security personnel and law enforcement, who are there to manage any disruptions and physical altercations but often more times than not, will embody a source of tension and control. These added layers of precarity heightens the pressure to maintain both personal and professional relationships between other actors within the industry that are fragile yet pivotal to a hostess's success and safety. While maintaining good relationships with one's company, drivers/manager, waiters, and security may lead to beneficial outcomes and perks, perhaps the most valuable relationship a hostess can build aside from her clients is the relationship with other hostesses. Built on shared experiences of their labor, the

¹²⁵ Jojo, “Karaoke Hostess Interview”, interview by Se Bin Esther Kim, April 10, 2024

relationships between hostesses have the potential to build a strong support network that can help them navigate through the risks and dangers of hostessing work.

Affective attunements of emotional connections and shared experiences create a sense of mutual understanding and support among hostesses such as Jojo. Jojo's experiences highlight the deep sense of emotional resonance and shared understanding among the hostesses, which forms the basis of their kinships and adds to their feminist subjectivities. Their collective experiences in a challenging work environment enable them to empathize with each other in ways that outsiders cannot, fostering a unique bond beyond mere friendship. In their article on the politics of solidarity work, Dağtaş Seçil and Şule Can examine the politics of feminist solidarity between Turkish and Syrian women in the context of the Syrian refugee crisis. They argue that while social solidarities based on shared experiences of gendered violence and discrimination form the foundation for these feminist alliances, kinship-making processes, such as creating fictive familial relationships and sharing domestic tasks, play a crucial role in sustaining these relationships.¹²⁶ Drawing on the concepts of "distant toleration" and "kinship work," the authors highlight the complex negotiations and power dynamics involved in creating and maintaining feminist solidarities across differences of ethnicity, nationality, and class.¹²⁷ They conclude by emphasizing the importance of centering the voices and experiences of marginalized women in building sustainable feminist alliances that challenge systems of oppression.

These kinships and solidarity that involve the creation of familial-like bonds based on shared feminist values and mutual support among hostesses are highlighted by Jojo's alignment with feminist principles, particularly the importance of supporting other women. She emphasizes

¹²⁶ Seçil Dağtaş, Şule Can, "Distant Toleration": The Politics of Solidarity Work among Turkish and Syrian Women in Southern Turkey, *Social Politics: International Studies in Gender, State & Society*, Volume 29, Issue 1, Spring 2022, Pages 261–284

¹²⁷Ibid.,

the necessity of having each other's backs in an industry that often lacks support for women, illustrating how feminist kinship manifests through protective and nurturing behaviors. This kinship goes beyond superficial support, such as sharing eyelash glue, to advocating for each other and speaking up in challenging situations, despite ethnic and socioeconomic borders. It is about building a network of trust and solidarity among women who share similar experiences of labor.

Despite the competitive and often hostile nature of the industry, the hostesses create informal networks of solidarity and kinships built on feminist subjectivities, where they support and protect one another. This form of solidarity is essential for their well-being, as it helps mitigate the negative impacts of their work environment and fosters a sense of community and solidarity. Their narrative highlights the importance of affective attunements, feminist kinship, and solidarities hostessing. These concepts interweave to create a support system among hostesses that is crucial for their emotional and professional survival in a challenging and often unsupportive work environment. Mutual understandings of support and care embody the principles of feminist solidarity and kinship, illustrating how hostesses can create empowering social networks and partake in agentic choices within these feminized labor spaces.

However, it is important to note that in this high stakes and risky work environment, the dynamics create innate situations where solidarities among hostesses become simultaneously important and fragile; forming a critical support network can help them navigate precarity and hostile work environments but can also be easily strained by the competitive nature of their work. The bonds and kinships that develop between the women can serve as direct forms of resistance against the very system that is working against them, allowing them to offer emotional support and practical advice on dealing with clients, negotiating pay, or even protection from life

threatening situations. These solidarities and kinships, however, are constantly under threat and tested by the structural conditions of their labor, where success and financial gain is measured by client interest and retention, both of which are highly unpredictable and subject to changed constantly. The result is a work environment where the stakes and results of showing for up one another is incredibly high, the need for trust, care, and solidarity is necessarily, yet the conditions that make such relationships inherently precarious, just like the nature of their labor. This double-edged nature of the dynamics between hostesses and the pressures placed upon these women showcase the messy, contradictory, and controversial narratives and experiences of hostessing work, which can easily be sensationalized and demonized when viewed from a single lens.

By analyzing the affective and performative nature of hostessing work, it becomes apparent that the "Perfect Girlfriend Persona" is a tool for feminist transformation and empowerment through subversion, performance, and affect. This persona allows hostesses to actively negotiate their agency and autonomy and navigate the precarious nature of their work. However, embodying this persona requires continuous affective labor and attunements with clients, themselves, and others, reflecting the inevitable involvement of relationality in this affective and feminized labor space.

Furthermore, cruel optimisms arise as hostesses invest their hopes in the promise of financial freedom, social acceptance, or personal fulfillment within a highly feminized industry marked by exploitation and precariousness, only to find themselves confronted with the harsh realities of stigma, exploitation, and limited agency. However, amidst the disillusionment of cruel optimism, there is also the potential for feminist transformations and subjectivities such as resilience, kinships, and collective action. Hostesses, who experience affective dissonance, can

forge bonds of solidarity and support by fostering affective attunement and recognizing the commonality of their affective labors, departing from individualistic competition, mitigating tensions, and moving towards collective empowerment.

Conclusion

I began my research and thesis writing journey two years ago, envisioning a study that would delve deeply into the unknown and controversial world of karaoke hostessing. This endeavor was fueled by my own curiosities, personal attachments, and a desire to unpack my own complexities. It was perhaps a means of justifying my own decisions to moonlight in this industry before entering graduate school, and a way to prove that the work was more than what society and the industry thought it to be – a low-skill form of sexual labor.

I wanted to show that hostesses are more than just their jobs; they are people with their own lived experiences, hailing from diverse socioeconomic, education, and ethnic backgrounds. Furthermore, I wished to highlight the various challenges and injustices faced by the women and highly femme-presenting persons in the industry. This led to the foundation and basis for the introduction and chapter one, which explored the complex interplay of historical racialization and fetishization of Asian and Asian American women in the context of U.S. militarization, imperialism, and Orientalism. The chapters also broadened the analysis to include Latina, Black, white, and European women, linking stereotypes to colonial histories, and examined how these dynamics influence women in contemporary feminized labor, particularly hostesses, who navigate and manipulate racist and misogynistic stereotypes for personal gain and empowerment.

One of my other initial goals was to explore the colonial histories and genealogies of karaoke hostessing work, to clearly distinguish the labor from that of sex work, while also highlighting the rationale, empowerment, and labor involved in being a karaoke hostess. This was explored in chapter two, where I redefined hostessing as a form of feminized labor rather than sex work, utilizing theories from various scholars to trace the epistemic scope of sex work and possible alternatives to conceptualizing the labor of hostesses.

However, as my research went on and I started to conduct my interviews, what emerged was a far richer and more complex story. I discovered the beautiful bonds of sisterhood, feminist solidarities, and kinships that exist among hostesses, as well as the joy and fulfillment some women find in their work, and the diverse ways they navigate and resist the constraints imposed on them. This was explored in chapter three, where I analyzed in-depth semi-structured interviews with hostesses from various socioeconomic and ethnic backgrounds, focusing on their usage of affect, aesthetics, and performativity within the workplace. I conceptualized the “Perfect Girlfriend Persona”, drawing from Judith Butler's performativity concept to examine how hostesses perform continuous affective labor and hyper-heteronormative gender roles, highlighting their choices and motivations. These discoveries were both surprising and enlightening, challenging what was, at the time, my own assumptions and misconceptions, and deepening my understanding of those working in the industry by highlighting the experiences, rationales, and self-awareness of my interlocutors.

Throughout my research, my focus shifted numerous times. The most significant shift occurred when I had to change my research site due to complications in the project and the withdrawal of three key interlocutors. Initially, I had hoped to highlight the ethnic-centric establishments and third spaces that reflected the social geographies of hostesses across Koreatown. Furthermore, I had wanted to focus on the experiences of karaoke hostesses outside the workplace, motivated by concerns for both my interlocutors' and my own safety in conducting field work within the workplace. However, as conversations and interviews progressed, I realized that I could not conduct this study and write my thesis in good conscience without discussing the workplace and my interlocutors' experiences within it. Therefore, this realization led to my fourth and last chapter, which discussed the transnational feminist

solidarities and feminist kinships among hostesses within the workplace, addressing the (anti)feminist risks and emotional dangers of their work. It explored how these affective ties can foster feminist subjectivities and solidarities, utilizing concepts like "cruel attachments" and "cruel optimisms" to theorize how hostesses find productivity within precarious cycles of labor and social tensions.

Moreover, the research and writing process was long and difficult. Gaining the trust of my interlocutors and navigating the emotional weight of their stories was challenging. I also had to confront my own traumas and the negative effects that lingered even after I had formally quit working as a hostess. Additionally, the weight of having to return physically to work as a hostess for my fieldwork brought its own set of emotional challenges. Moreover, I was consistently grappling with the pressure to do justice to my interlocutors and to mitigate harm in a research project emerging from an institution with a history of producing exploitative research endeavors. I attempted to continually align my approach with transnational feminist and decolonial research methodologies while simultaneously meeting the requirements for graduation.

Conducting this research over a span of approximately two years, coupled with my pre-existing personal relationships with some interlocutors, required delicate navigation of the boundaries between friendship and researcher. I frequently asked myself whether portraying my interlocutors in specific ways might jeopardize our existing friendship. Concerns also arose about the potential repercussions if influential individuals within the industry were to read and disapprove of my work, posing risks to both my safety and the safety of my interlocutors. Lastly, a challenge that proved most different was to incorporate months of fieldnotes, conversations, and extensive interview material in a manner that gave equal and accurate representations of all my interlocutors.

Despite these difficulties, it was liberating to see how sharing these stories could contribute to a broader understanding and appreciation of hostess work. This process deepened my kinships and solidarities with my fellow interlocutors, highlighting the importance of mutual support and understanding within the industry.

This thesis sheds some light on the complex, often misunderstood world of karaoke hostessing. However, it touches the surface of what is left unexplored, such as the perspectives of the clients, waiters, agencies, and the thousands of other karaoke hostesses currently active within not only LA Koreatown but other ethnic enclaves across the county. Perhaps, then, this can be seen as a microcosm to understanding the transnational service economy of karaoke hostessing, while challenging misconceptions, highlighting the feminist subjectivities and kinships among the workers, and underscoring the value of hearing from those directly involved in the hostessing industry. By sharing my experience, observations, conversations, and interviews with my interlocutors, I hope to contribute to a more nuanced, empathetic understanding of karaoke hostessing work and the women who navigate its challenges without sensationalizing, stigmatizing, and victimizing their experiences and choices.

I concluded every interview I conducted with the same question:

“Are there any final thoughts or reflections you'd like to offer about the broader societal perceptions and stereotypes surrounding hostessing? Any last comments or things you would like to share?”

Ending with the voices of the hostesses themselves is vital. Their perspectives provide valuable insights into the realities of their work, illustrating both the enjoyable and constraining aspects. Therefore, I am concluding my thesis with these curated quotes that I deem exemplary of core themes that recurred throughout all my interlocutor's interviews and conversations: self-awareness and resilience, feminist solidarities and kinships, and that knowledge is produced through shared and lived experiences.

Justine: “I think it can be a very beneficial job. But I, as I like to put it, I would never recommend to a friend that she do it or bring her into it. And if someone, if someone wanted to do it, I would say you need to set extremely tough boundaries on yourself, like only do it a certain amount of days per week, and set an end date and stick to it. Because there is, I think we can kind of get lost in the sauce a little bit. And the financial aspects can be extremely tempting and the emotional and mental toll that it takes, it kind of sneaks up on you and you don't realize how you can say like damage but like how much is [it] affected you negatively until it's too late? But I wouldn't like if someone said, ‘Oh, you have to like erase all those experiences,’ I think the positive things that I've gotten from it like it's worth the negative.”¹²⁸

Remi: “Well, in a perfect world, I think that it'd be good for all the companies to be aligned under something similar to union, I also recognize that the job is inherently more of a gray market. And with the competition from companies with each other, how the company managers may feel about each other versus like their own connections to each individual

¹²⁸Justine “Karaoke Hostess Interview,” interview by Se Bin Esther Kim, April 2, 2024

karaoke and how that works. I think that it would be very difficult to build a single a singular system to help build that. That...sense of union between all the girls. And while in a hypothetical, in an ideal world, I think that it would work...I really do wish that more people understood what the initial purpose of karaoke was. And I feel like had more people understood and was more accepting of it, it wouldn't have devolved to what it is today, where it is a lot more sex adjacent than what it was in, say, its home country, Korea, where again, it was very much more so just being an entertainer socializing.”¹²⁹

Jojo: “In an ideal world but I think.. If it was legal and considered even... like a sort of escorting, if girls were harmed, they could go to the police. But a lot of them can't because they're afraid of doing something wrong. Also, then the drivers, managers, and companies wouldn't have much power because girls are so replaceable to them. But if we were treated as individual employees or independent contractors, even like the way strippers are, then we would have some more protections and less shady things will happen undercovers and also resources for girls, I think, you know. And there are fears against therapists, who may be mandated reporters...I think if there more resources and accessible resources for girls who are working in this industry would be really helpful because it's a lot to carry with you and a lot of emotional labor.”¹³⁰

Summer: “I have freedom now and I don't think I could go back. But I would go back if there was like a place where I knew it would be very secure and the people who go there are actually respectful. I would go back just to go have fun with my friend and to dress the way I want and put on a show. But it would have to be an extraordinary place that is open and has good reviews. I cannot go to a karaoke place that I don't know if it's good or bad. I've recently learned that here is like a strip club that are called “Conscious strip clubs” and people go and know that the woman on the stage is liked to be worshiped or like to be respected. There is no touch and they're paid to watch and I would love to do that. Conscious Karaoke. Lastly, I feel like life is experience or to be experienced. So, if something like karaoke is calling and attractive and fun to you, to remove you from experiencing yourself fully, because it might be dangerous or might have like these aspects to it. I feel it's part of your own self-discovery, to explore your body the way you want and to explore those power and it learns it taught me so much that I don't regret it. No, I will not say oh, you cannot go... I will say if it, if it's something you want to try, try it. Try it, knowing that it might give you anxiety, and it might be like, a little shaking off to your core. But then you might learn something about you, you might want to respect yourself more after. So, I might just like use something that's very good to know... And you never

¹²⁹ Remi, “Karaoke Hostess Interview,” interview by Se Bin Esther Kim, April 2, 2024

¹³⁰ Jojo, “Karaoke Hostess Interview”, interview by Se Bin Esther Kim, April 10, 2024

know unless you try. So, life is about trying and experiencing. So, I would not be against it.”¹³¹

Mina: “I wish people were more familiar about what hostessing work actually is. In Japan, hostesses are respected and the men who go to those bars are there for business. They're super respectful. In Korea, there's variations of karaoke hostesses but the top 1% hostess bars often require memberships that vet out weirdos and have high end clientele who genuinely are there for connections or businesses. But in LA, I think public perception or even the men who come to karaoke don't know what karaoke hostessing is really about. So, it would be great if this would be talked more about, you know? rather than those extreme news articles that make us look like crazy prostitutes, having real representation or even just a neutral understanding of karaoke might be helpful in getting people to understand what type of work we really are doing.”¹³²

Blaire: “At the end of the day, karaoke is and should be considered a legit job. I get up and get ready for karaoke just like every other person getting ready to go to their 9 to 5, right? The only difference is that I work unconventional hours and maybe dress a bit extra than someone who works a 9 to 5. If anything, I wish people would see this as a form of freelancing. I get hired for my time and get paid good money for looking pretty and talking to people. My friends in the restaurant industry do the same shit for less money, the only difference is the location. Like if you think about it... Like, restaurants, karaoke, bars, clubs, we are all doing the same thing. We're all in the service industry, working with people, and making connections...If people can just be more...I don't know...Educated about karaoke? I think it would lead to better conditions for us in general.”¹³³

¹³¹Summer, “Karaoke Hostess Interview, interview by Se Bin Esther Kim, April 3, 2024

¹³²Mina, “Karaoke Hostess Interview,” interview by Se Bin Esther Kim, March 3, 2024.

¹³³Blaire, “Karaoke Hostess Interview”, interview by Se Bin Esther Kim, March 4, 2024

Appendix: Interview Guide

Participant ID		Researcher Name	
Date of Interview		Interview Mode	

Reviewed Consent Form: YES NO
 Completed Demographic Form: YES NO
 Consent to Audio Record YES NO
 Time Interview Started:

Introduction:

Can I get your verbal consent to participate in the interview?

[Permission to begin recording and verbal consent process occurred prior to administering the demographic/screener form]

Content Awareness:

- We may cover some sensitive topics today such as your life experiences, immigration histories, and your experiences working as a hostess. If at any point you want to take a break, stop the interview, or skip any questions, just let me know.
- [IF OVER ZOOM]
- Before we start, I want to assure you that I am in a private and secure environment here and no one will hear our conversation since I am wearing headphones. How about for you? Do you feel you are in a safe, private, and quiet environment where we can talk about these topics? [ASK ABOUT MOVING LOCATION]
- If at any point you wish to take a quick break, just let me know.
- In the event we are interrupted or someone is able to overhear you, please feel free to change the subject until we can again ensure privacy. Other participants have chosen to switch to talking about an everyday topic, such as work/school or their last shopping experience.

Interview Part 1 – Early Life

I wanted to start by learning more about you.

1. First, can you tell me when and where you were born?
 - Probe: ethnicity, race
2. [If participant moved to the US at a young age] What was your life like growing up in the US?

- Who were you living with? Tell me about your household and neighborhood you grew up in.
 - If you feel comfortable sharing, could you please describe the general financial situation or household income level while you were growing up?
 - What do you remember about when you or your family first decided to stay in the US long-term?
 - i. Probe:
 - Where did you move from/to?
 - When was this?
 - Why did you/your family decide to stay in the US?
3. [If participant moved to the US at a later date] What was your life like growing up in your country of origin?
- Who were you living with? Tell me about your household and neighborhood you grew up in.
 - If you feel comfortable sharing, could you please describe the general financial situation or household income level while you were growing up?
 - What do you remember about when you or your family first decided to stay in the US long-term?
 - i. Probe:
 - Where did you move from/to?
 - When was this?
 - Why did you/your family decide to stay in US?
4. [If participant was born in the US] What was your life growing up in the US?
- Who were you living with? Tell me about your household and neighborhood you grew up in.
 - If you feel comfortable sharing, could you please describe the general financial situation or household income level while you were growing up?
5. Can you tell me a bit about your upbringing and childhood experiences with respect to:
- Access to health insurance and health care
 - Housing and living situation
 - Family life
 - You or your family's language ability/comfort in speaking english?
 - Parent's work
 - Access to social services (food or financial assistance)
 - Access to education
 - Any level of fear, stigma, or discrimination due to socio-economic status or ethnicity/race?
6. What was it like for you being a (ethnicity) in the US?
- Can you tell me about the neighborhoods you have lived in?

- Can you tell me about cultural institutions or community support that you used or can go to? And that provides a place or ways to connect with others from your cultural background?
 - Tell me about your experiences with:
 - i. Connecting and interacting with those around you?
 - ii. Making friends and finding community here in the US?
 - iii. Experiences with discrimination or prejudice in your interactions with others in your community?
7. Probe if relevant
- Education/school
 - Marital or Parental Status
 - Sexual orientation

Interview Part 2 – Hostessing Work

Moving forward, I'm eager to delve into your experiences working as a hostess in Koreatown. I understand that the upcoming questions might touch on sensitive topics, including in-depth inquiries about your hostessing role. I'm fully aware that discussing these matters can be uncomfortable, and I want to emphasize once more that you have agency in our conversation. If, at any juncture, you feel the need to shift the discussion, take a pause, or conclude the interview, please don't hesitate to inform me. Your comfort and well-being are of utmost importance.

1. How do you define hostessing or doumi work? And based on that definition, would you consider yourself as a hostess?
 - a. Probe:
 - i. When was the first time you heard about hostesses/doumi?
 - ii. When was the first time you heard about Korean Karaoke Bars?
 - iii. Who takes a job as a hostess?
 - iv. How did you come across this job?
 - v. What does the job entail?
 - vi. How did you come across your agency?
2. Could you tell me more about how you came across your agency?
 - a. probe :
 - i. Do you like your agency?
 - ii. How is your relationship with the managers and drivers?
 - iii. How is your relationship with the other hostesses?
3. Could you describe a general working day for a hostess? What qualities should a hostess have?
 - a. Probe:
 - i. How does one prepare for the job?

- ii. What role does attire and appearance play in your work, and how do you feel about adhering to certain dress codes?
 - iii. What are the working hours?
 - iv. How are the working conditions?
 - v. How would you describe hostessing work to someone who has never heard of it before?
 - vi. Can you describe any strategies you use to build rapport and establish connections with your clients?
- 4. What attracted you to the profession of hostessing, and how did you enter this line of work?
 - a. Probe:
 - i. How long have you been working/worked as a hostess?
 - ii. Challenges you encounter working as a hostess
 - iii. Rewarding aspects of your work as a hostess?
 - iv. Experiences before, during, after covid
- 5. When you are working, how do you communicate with your fellow hostesses and karaoke managers and drivers?
 - a. Probe
 - i. Kakaotalk - korean messaging apps
 - ii. How do you feel about the level of security and safety through these apps
 - iii. Do you only use these applications for work?
- 6. As a [ETHNICITY], could you tell me about why you chose to work as a hostess in Koreatown?
 - a. Does being [ETHNICITY] affect your work as a hostess?
 - b. Have you faced any sort of stigma, discrimination, or judgment as a [ETHNICITY] working in Korean Karaoke Lounges?
 - c. Do you think being [ETHNICITY] upholds any benefit in your job as a hostess?
 - i. Probe: language, certain aesthetic
 - d. How do you navigate potential cultural/racial stereotypes or misconceptions around hostessing work?
- 7. Is hostessing your main form of income?
 - a. Probe:
 - i. If not, do you have other jobs?
 - ii. What other jobs do you have?
 - iii. Tell me about your experience managing multiple jobs.
- 8. Do you also attend school?
 - a. Probe
 - i. (language school, undergrad, grad school, vocational school)
 - ii. Tell me about your experience working as a hostess while going to school.

As you may know, there are some negative misconceptions and stigmas that are associated with that of karaoke hostesses within the general public despite the role of the hostess focusing on social companionship to clients and being highly discouraged by their agencies from providing explicit sexual services. In my research, I align hostessing work as a form of “feminized” labor, which is characterized by temporary forms of labor with comparatively low wages and reduced union membership within service economies in developed countries.

9. With that information, how would you define your labor/work as a hostess? How do you understand your work as a hostess?
 - a. Have you ever encountered misunderstandings or misconceptions about your job from people outside the hostessing industry?
 - i. Probe:
 - How is hostess work similar to or different from other forms of labor within Los Angeles, Koreatown?
 - Waiters, waitressing, servers, nightclub girls, hair stylists, restaurant owners, etc.
10. During your time as a hostess, did you ever feel like someone might take advantage of you during, or as a result of your work as a hostess? Could you tell me about that experience?
 - a. When was this?
 - b. Did you seek any support?
 - i. Work, agency, coworkers, law enforcement?
11. During your time as a hostess, have you ever experienced any unwanted sexual activity or encounter?
 - a. When?
 - b. To the extent that you feel comfortable, can you tell me what happened at that time? What happened after? Did you feel comfortable talking to anyone? Can you tell me about that?
 - c. How did you feel after this happened? And about any support you may – or may not – have received?
12. How do you maintain your safety during a night of work?
 - a. Probe:
 - i. What protections do you have against abuse and harm?
 - ii. Agency responsibility?
 - iii. Security cameras in the karaoke lounges?
 - iv. Law enforcement?
13. Have you ever had any encounters or experiences with law enforcement such as local police or security?
 - a. Probe
 - i. Could you tell me more about this experience?

- ii. How does policing and surveillance affect hostessing work?

Time check and ask interviewee if they would like a break

Interview Part 3 - Self Care and Resilience

We've covered quite a bit of ground in our interview, and I want to express my gratitude for your openness in discussing your childhood and your experiences in the hostessing profession. From our ongoing conversation, it's becoming clear that hostessing work encompasses a wide range of experiences. One consistent theme that emerges is the demanding nature of the job, both mentally and physically. This line of work necessitates a remarkable degree of mental and physical strength, as well as resilience, to navigate the challenges that come with extended hours, social interactions, and client engagement. With this in mind...

1. Would you consider hostessing work a demanding job?
 - a. Probe:
 - i. Physically? Mentally?
2. How do you build and maintain your mental and physical health? Have you found that your coworkers within the hostessing industry also prioritize self-care, and do you exchange self-care tips with them?
 - a. Probe
 - i. Do you partake in any sports, gyms, and/or private health classes?
 - ii. Do you meditate or journal?
 - iii. Therapy if possible?
3. How do you decompress after a long night of work? And how do you prepare yourself mentally/physically before a shift at work?
 - a. Probe
 - i. Can you describe some specific practices or activities you engage in to recharge and take care of yourself?
 1. Korean spas, gastropubs, gyms, workout classes, yoga, pilates, etc?
4. Who do you talk to about your experiences at work? Are there resources or support systems you rely on when you need to address your mental health within the context of your job?
 - a. Probe
 - i. What makes them trustworthy?
 - ii. [if not] ask about why that is.
5. [IF NO LONGER WORKING AS A HOSTESS] When did you quit hostess work?
 - a. Probe:
 - i. Why did you quit working as a hostess?

- ii. Do you think your time as a hostess allowed you to build certain qualities and traits that serve beneficial to you in other work/school settings?
- iii. Would you ever work as a hostess again in the future?
- iv. Do you keep in touch with your agency, fellow hostesses, and/or clients?

Interview Part 4 - Informal Social Networks and Transnational Feminist Solidarities

Now, I am interested in learning about your social networks and kinship with other women in this community inside and outside of the work space and how we can better understand how the informal social networks between those in the hostessing community can provide a nuanced understanding of transnational feminist solidarities across socio-economic and ethnic borders.

1. How would you define feminism, and what does it mean to you personally?
 - a. In what ways do you think your work as a hostess intersects with your thoughts and definitions of feminism?
 - b. Have you encountered any challenges or conflicts between your job as a hostess and your understanding of feminism?
 - i. Probe: Do you feel empowered by your role as a hostess? If not, how come?
 - ii. How do you navigate the balance between personal empowerment and societal perceptions and misconceptions of hostessing?
2. Can you describe the relationships you have developed with other female hostesses within your workplace? How do these connections influence your experience as a hostess?
 - a. Probe
 - i. Do you speak with them outside of your work hours/work place?
 - ii. Are these hostesses from the same ethnic community?
 - iii. How about from outside your ethnic community?
3. Do you talk about your experiences with work with the other hostesses? How do you and the other women protect themselves and each other?
 - a. Probe
 - i. What happens when a hostess comes across a bad client?
 - ii. Are there any forms of solidarity or support for one another at work?
4. Can you tell me about some of the friendships/relationships you have built with others during your time as a hostess?
 - a. Probe
 - i. Are they within the same ethnic community?
 - ii. How about outside your ethnic community?
 - iii. Relations with other hostesses, clients, managers, waiters?

- iv. Do you interact with these people outside of work hours?
- 5. Do you notice any shared experiences or common issues that female hostesses often bond over? How do these shared experiences contribute to your sense of kinship with one another?
 - a. Probe
 - i. Within or outside your ethnic community?
- 6. Have you participated in any social activities or events with other female hostesses? How do these gatherings contribute to a sense of solidarity among your peers?
 - a. Probe:
 - i. Places within koreatown?
 - ii. After work hours?
 - iii. Before work hours?
 - iv. Weekends?
- 7. Have you ever faced situations where you had to support or stand up for another female hostess, either within or outside of your workplace? How did these experiences shape your feelings of solidarity?
- 8. Have you had the opportunity to participate in or witness any initiatives aimed at creating a stronger sense of unity among female hostesses?

Interview Part 5 - Concluding Questions and Feedback

Thank you so much for sharing your life and work experiences with me. I wanted to conclude with a few questions to reflect back on our conversation today:

1. Considering the challenges and rewards of your profession, what advice would you give to someone who is considering entering the field of hostessing?
2. Are there any final thoughts or reflections you'd like to offer about the broader societal perceptions and stereotypes surrounding hostessing? Any last comments or things you would like to share?

That concludes our interview, do you have any requests or suggestions for the study?

Is there anything you would like to see come out of the study?

Time interview ended: _____

Preferred mode of receipt of compensation:

Confirm email: _____

Confirm phone number: _____

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