Urban Diaspora Space in Cinema: the performance and manifestation of Korean American cultural identity in Koreatown, Los Angeles

Sieun Lee

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Introduction

Significance and Research Question

The so-called ethnic enclaves, neighbourhoods characterised by the high concentration of minority ethnic groups, have become a significant part of the urban landscape, especially in global cities. As a distinctive node of multiculturalism, ethnic enclaves are often sites of contestation where diasporic experience is met with the struggle between assimilatory agenda and longing for and preservation of one's origin and its culture. Madanipour (2016) argues that a "fragmented social geography" (p.49) have emerged in modern cities, and the public space of ethnic enclaves become a stark point of diversity and inequality leading to conflict. Nevertheless, these spaces are also where "new alliances and identities are forged"(ibid. p.50), when their diversity is recognised as "an inherent feature of urban society"(p.52). Similarly, Finlay (2019) signifies the mutually constitutive relationship of diasporas and cities: "[D]iasporas imbue cities with 'new' cultures, identities and economies, participating in the transformation of urban space" while the urban context of "specific histories, cultures and economies, partly construct diasporas, influencing formations of diasporic dwelling, identity and belonging"(p.786). The cultural practice and identity formation of diaspora groups in ethnic enclaves have a strong connection to its urban locale and placemaking.

Ethnic enclaves often become a target of gentrification and touristification, leading to a disintegration of its community network and landscape for the commercialisation of cultural experience, indicating the celebration, tolerance and exploitation of minority culture in the host society. Santos, Belhassen & Caton (2008)'s study on Chinatown in Chicago denotes the city's active efforts to reframe Chinatown's image to attract tourists to the neighbourhood. A hegemonic ideology governed such practice, where the culture of the neighbourhood was signified as 'the Other', orientalising the subjects that belong to the place while framing the

experience as comfortable enough to be consumed. Such increasing planning and marketing attention brought to ethnic enclaves and a hegemonic ideology often at play, underscores the importance to inquire into the people who identify ethnically and culturally with these enclave space.

Ethnic enclaves: space and identity

Ethnic enclaves become the frontier for ethnic groups in performing and manifesting their cultural identities, ingraining such identity to the space, and attaining a sense of belonging in the city. Such diaspora placemaking practice extends to a claim of being in the space and ownership of it, as a "transnational aesthetics" is imbued into the urban space (Werbner & Fumanti 2013, p.149). Finlay (2019)'s study of Moroccan diaspora in Granada, Spain and their self-orientalising practice highlights such process of mobilising material culture that is highly visual and multi-sensory, in order to attract tourists and maximise their economic gain. Such encoding of a diaspora culture into local space indeed stems from the desire to maintain "either a concrete or imagined relationship to an originary homeland" (Campt 2004, p.171). However, economic factors and market forces intertwined with discrimination and minoritisation of ethnic communities leads to the formation of acutely visible enclaves, often configured in abandoned neighbourhoods (White 2002). Therefore, the multi-sensory and spatial communication of ethnic culture can be seen as a proactive pursuit for a 'right to the city'. This is achieved through the transformation of often neglected urban space, and territorialisation of their identities with material culture to overcome their marginalised status in the city.

In exploring such diasporic experience, along with the practice of placemaking and urban transformation, Koreatown, Los Angeles, an ethnic enclave in California, United States is highlighted as a case study. Los Angeles holds a special place in the history of Korean

American diaspora. It is a place where Korean immigrants gained a sense of autonomy in attaining economic and social success in America. It was the place of immigrant entrepreneurship and immigrant community development, that became one of the biggest nodes to attract Korean immigrants in later years and continue to welcome newcomers to America as a gate-way city. Moreover, many second-generation Korean Americans have endeavoured to increase their media representation. Korean American filmmaking is active in Los Angeles, from documentaries that recorded the LA 1992 uprising, to fictional films that are set in Los Angeles. The city achieves a symbolic representation of Korean diaspora in America, where their visual presence is marked by the concentration of ethnic and cultural activities, or 'Koreanness' and 'Korean Americanness', a hybrid form of both home and host culture. Despite such significance of Los Angeles for Korean Americans, the media attention and public inquiry to this place and the Korean American community are heavily centred around political readings of the LA 1992 uprising and the culinary experience of Korean cuisine recently made accessible to white mainstream America through commercialisation of Koreatown. There is little focus on how the Korean American communities in and around Los Angeles interact with this urban space, and what connection they build and sustain with the place for their cultural identity practices. Such focus on Los Angeles specifically is significant in understanding Korean American identity and cultural production, especially because the city is home to a visually marked cultural ethnic enclave titled Koreatown, which is the biggest Korean community outside of South Korea. Koreatown communicates cultural symbolism and representation of Korean American diaspora, and the manifestation of their diasporic imagination of home and a desire for a place of belonging and refuge, as alienated subjects in American society. Kim (2010) shares her perception on Koreatown: "I like to think of it as a kind of "home" - however idealized and hypostatized - for the soul, an anchor, a potential refuge, a place in America where I could belong without ever being asked, "Who are you and

what are you doing here? Where did you come from and when are you going back?"" (p.81). Hence, the following question is addressed in this research: *in what ways do Korean American Angelenos perform, ingrain and manifest their cultural identities in the urban space of Koreatown, Los Angeles?* Two films depicting the life of Korean American young adults in Koreatown, Los Angeles are examined to investigate their cultural identity practice and how this relates to urban space.

Case study: Koreatown, Los Angeles

Imagination and realities of Los Angeles

Los Angeles is a city that plays "the double role of utopia and dystopia" (Davis 2006, p.18). In *Reyner Banham Loves Los Angeles*, a documentary film that captures the historical, social and cultural ethos of Los Angeles that Banham adores, depict the domestic dreams that migrants chase after and the dreams that the city disseminate to the world through the screens of Hollywood. As Banham tells us, "it takes a city to support style and craft. But it takes a very great city indeed, to impose that kind of style on the rest of the world [...] Los Angeles has done just that". A kind of "California mystique", the romantic aspirations that the city holds, "a belief that anything is possible", is what draws people to the metropolis, specifically the middle class, to pursue the lifestyle surrounding automobility and single-family dwellings.

However, behind such imagination, the reality of Los Angeles is concealed. The realities of the American metropolis are depicted in film noir; a genre that sheds light on the isolation, decadence and the nihilism that underly the suburbia. A sense of detachment from the public is configured by an inherently private landscape of Los Angeles, further disconnected by the distance between one place to another, travelled in a private vehicle. Such configuration of

Los Angeles is founded upon "a desire for racial purity" (Fotsch 2007, p.94) shared by the majority of the suburban middle-class who came to the city to flee the supposedly derelict and immoral inner-city.

From 1890 to 1930, Los Angeles faced a great influx of domestic migrants, largely white Midwesterners who were relatively affluent (Abelmann & Lie, 1995). One of the crucial factors in attracting these domestic migrants was the suburbanisation of the middle-class driven by the opportunity for homeownership and the romanticisation of country life (ibid). Moreover, the defence emergency post-World War Two also had a significant effect on the development of a suburban metropolis, as Los Angeles welcomed workers for shipbuilding and aircraft industries, which lead to a 50% increase in the number of persons employed (Hise 1997). The community builders in Los Angeles who had promoted real estate boosterism and constructed numerous developments with single-housing dwellings explicitly prohibited the non-white purchase of properties on their newly built developments (ibid). This has led to systemic segregation of non-white residents and immigrants of Los Angeles, which manifested into the "salient division between "white" and "nonwhite" (Abelmann & Lie 1995 p.90), creating a landscape of disparity between prosperous neighbourhoods like Beverly Hills and deprived ethnic neighbourhoods such as barrios and Little Tokyo. Los Angeles today is a legacy of such racialised geography, resulting in ethnic enclaves and multi-ethnic urban space including Koreatown in question.

Being Asian/Korean in America

In examining the ethnic concentration of Koreans and Korean businesses in Koreatown, an understanding of the history of Asian migration to America is essential. When immigration from East Asia mainly from China and Japan increased, Asians were put into a distinct racial category that was neither white nor black, leading to the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1882 and the informal limiting of Japanese immigrants through the Gentlemen's Agreement in 1908 (Sohoni 2007). This provided incentives for white employers to seek cheap labour elsewhere, leading to the start of Korean immigration to America. A group of Koreans migrated to Hawaii in 1903, as sugar plantation workers. According to the National Association of Korean Americans (NAKA), they typically had a three-year contract with the sugar plant owners, leading to half of them migrating to the US mainland after the contract expired where California became a major destination (NAKA, 2003). The Koreans who settled in Los Angeles during this period were concentrated in Bunker Hill, where non-white residents were allowed to live (Chaiwat 2015). Furthermore, California Alien Land Law was passed in 1913 which prohibited ownership of land or property by foreigners. An act which implied anti-Japanese and anti-Asian sentiments (NAKA, 2003). This is also tied to the anti-Asian naturalisation and miscegenation laws that were being established in numerous states across America including California (Sohoni 2007). The Asian figure became an alien subject in American society, explicitly being denied citizenship which was granted to white immigrants and African Americans in the Naturalization Act of 1875. Asian Americans could not become legitimate citizens regardless of their specific ethnicity, until 1952 when the McCarran-Walter Act abolished race-based citizenship (Sohoni 2007). Founded upon such racial construction of Asian Americans, the rhetoric surrounding them are highly hybrid, multigenerational and transnational and seeks a commonplace that connects different experiences of being Asian in

America, to highlight the impact of colonial American domination on people originating from Asia Pacific region (Ong 2008).

Making of Koreatown

The establishment of Koreatown was greatly impacted by the wave of Korean migrants who settled in America post the relaxation of the Immigration and Nationality Act in 1965. This group was characterised by a large number of professional workers such as medical practitioners, although many have sought self-employment through small business ownership to generate more income (Yoon 2012). These Korean businesses took the lead in the establishment of a spatially marked ethnic enclave, by concentrating around Olympic Boulevard, as opposed to Jefferson Boulevard where earlier Korean migrants had concentrated in, constituting the 'old Koreatown' (Myung 2015). As a result, the City of Los Angeles recognised the ethnic enclave by officially designating the neighbourhood as 'Koreatown', and installed the exit sign on Santa Monica Freeway (ibid.). Such naming of a place that explicitly identifies an ethnic group "create[s] not only place-identities, but social identities and relations of power, occupation and control" (Lippai & Webermann 2016, p.24), giving the power of entitlement to the Korean American community.

Koreatown received significant media attention in the LA Uprising in 1992. The riot catalysed by police brutality against Rodney King, and the murder of Latasha Harlins by a Korean merchant Soon Ja Du, caused unrest in South Central Los Angeles, leading to targeted looting of Korean businesses in Koreatown. Media portrayal of this case was centred around the narrative of Black-Korean ethnic divide, increasing the tension between these ethnic groups that had already existed in the area (Sastry & Bates, 2017). This tension can be dated back to the 1970s when Korean businesses started entering Black neighbourhoods in and around South

Central Los Angeles, where Korean entrepreneurs were seen as exploitative predatory figures by the black population (Chang 1994). The superficial interaction between Korean merchants and black patrons, along with model minority myth about Asian Americans and negative racial stereotypes surrounding African Americans held by Korean merchants fuelled this (ibid.), leading to a disconnect between the two groups. This often resulted in non-violent conflicts such as boycott against Korean businesses and Korean merchants' racial bias in the selective employment of Korean and Latino workers over black workers (Min 2008). The targeted looting that Korean businesses met in 1992 was a result of such tension erupting after decades. According to *Sa-I-Gu*, a documentary film that highlights the voices of Korean female merchants after the riots, the media was in favour of scapegoating Korean entrepreneurs and the black community over this matter. Public attention was steered towards the inter-minority conflict, rather than the true cause of the incident that is racial prejudice deeply rooted in state power and the criminal justice system, which has translated to the spatial configuration of racially segregated Los Angeles.

In fact, despite the homogenous image the name Koreatown asserts, more than half of the residents in Koreatown are Latino, with Koreans consisting only 22 per cent of the total population (Kang 2016). The Korean population in Los Angeles is the largest outside of Korea (ibid.), and Koreatown signifies their presence with signages of restaurants and retailers using Korean script, *Hangul*, masking the multi-ethnic demographic of the neighbourhood. While Abelmann & Lie (1995) suggests that poverty is what keeps its residents in Koreatown, the enclave also plays an essential role in the lives of largely suburbanised Korean American population both symbolically and economically (Bae, 2015). Furthermore, Chung (2009) highlights the clustering of not only Korean restaurants and supermarkets but instead political organisations and services that meet the demands of the diverse clientele. It is indicated that

the suburbanisation and decentralisation of Korean migrants in California have intensified the concentration of these institutions along with small businesses, establishing a further consolidated business enclave catering for the needs of Korean Americans in Los Angeles. In more recent years, Koreatown has undergone gentrification, attracting attention as a tourist destination. Its culinary experience has been marketed to non-Korean consumers, in particular, bringing Koreatown's cultural experience to the mainstream (Addison & Escárcega, 2020). Suh (2016) denotes the effect of the gentrification process in replacing the neighbourhood's image of a "working-class immigrant space" (p.400) with the new outlook of an attractive destination to immerse in the 'authentic' or 'exotic' culture. He indicates the destructions caused in the LA Uprising 1992 have driven the rebranding of the enclave, now characterised with modern shopping complexes and high-rise office buildings as opposed to flea markets and concrete strip malls (ibid.). Moreover, South Korea's efforts to globally market its nation has played a crucial role in the transformation of Koreatowns around the United States, providing investment in achieving a contemporary and consumptive outlook of the enclaves (Kim, 2018).

Methodology

To investigate the spatial implications of the performance and manifestation of diaspora cultural identity, two moving image media texts are comparatively analysed. One is a web-series published on YouTube called *Ktown Cowboys* (2010), co-written by Daniel DPD Park and Danny Cho, and directed by Daniel DPD Park. The series consists of 9 episodes, depicting the protagonist John's first night out experience in Koreatown Los Angeles, guided by Korean Angeleno characters who act as cultural insiders of Koreatown. The second piece is *Ms. Purple* (2019), a film co-written by Justin Chon and Chris Dinh, and directed by Justin Chon. The film depicts the struggles of a Korean immigrant family, centred around the daughter Kasie's job as a karaoke bar hostess to support her dying father, and her reunion with the estranged brother in the process. Although the films share the setting in Koreatown Los Angeles and have a common focus on the experience of second-generation Korean American young adults, the tone and plot of the narratives are contrasting. The distinct stories told in the two pieces underscore the conflicting identity practices between different social groups. The analysis, therefore, focuses on the class hierarchies, labourer-consumer relationship, and gender-dynamics that fuels diversified cultural identity performance and manifestation among different characters depicted. Despite the distinct narrative structure, both pieces explore the diaspora experience of Korean Americans in Los Angeles, suggesting the significant role of urban space and especially its nightlife, in cultural identity construction and reproduction.

Naficy (2001) identifies such filmic texts as 'accented cinema', referring to films that depict the experiences of "displacement from the margins to the centres" (Naficy 2010, p.14). He suggests that "accent is one of the most intimate and powerful markers of group identity and solidarity as well as of individual difference and personality" (Naficy 2001, p.23). This

reasoning for the label of 'accented' cinema, reflects the endeavours of the characters of the two pieces in searching for their identity and place of belonging, through the participation in the ethnic community based in and around Koreatown.

The value of studying such accented cinema in understanding urban diaspora groups lies in the close connection between the city and the cinema. Dudrah (2010) points to the haptic visuality of films, arguing that material representations in cinema and the way the audience responds to the haptic experience encourages us to "consider possible aesthetic readings of a filmic and media text in terms of its relationship to the urban and the cultural" (p.34). Furthermore, Clarke (1997) suggests the conceptualisation of cityscape as screenscape, indicating the power of film in providing a new perspective for examining our society, signifying its value as a source to understand reality. Similarly, Lewis, Rodgers and Woolcock (2008) also denote the thin line between literature and social sciences and the strength of fictional writing in presenting social phenomena due to their "freedom of fabrication" (p.206).

Ktown Cowboys: Performance of cultural identity through consumption

According to its creators, *Ktown Cowboys* intends to depict "the types of people that you're going to see here" (Kim 2016, para. 23). The series is "based on memories of when I [the director] was younger" (Yoo 2015, para. 16), resulting in a light-hearted web series which quite accurately resembles a typical night out of a group of Korean American young men in Los Angeles. Therefore, as it is in Koreatown at night, consumption is at the fore of every episode in *Ktown Cowboys.* The plot follows a night out which includes 'four rounds' in total, where the protagonist, John is guided by his new friends to four different places, a restaurant, a bar, a 'booking' club, and a karaoke bar (figures 1 and 2). Every visit involves consumption of alcohol, often food and other entertainment, portraying hyper-consumption practices throughout the series.

Left - Figure 1: The group at the restaurant consuming alcohol (first round)
Right - Figure 2: The groups at the karaoke bar consuming alcohol (fourth round)

Kim (2018) establishes Koreatown as a public space for Korean Americans, where their hybrid identities embodying both Koreanness and Americanness are fostered through consumption of ethnocultural goods and services. The frequent bilingual conversations between characters highlighting the varying degree of fluency in Korean and English implies the different levels of hybridity in their cultural identities. This also applies to the 'rules' presented, such as referring to your elders as *hyung*, which translates to 'older brother', a term

that younger men use to refer to elder men to show respect. Such explanation of the rule is followed by a 'footnote' stating "not everyone cares about Rule#1", implying the different ideas and levels of cultural performance and expectations of second-generation Korean Americans (figures 3 and 4). The narrative is structured around John, someone who "grew up in Virginia, with a lot of white people" as one of the characters describes, being lectured on cultural and social codes of Koreatown by cultural insiders. This also connotes a certain process of becoming that occurs in this specific urban space. As the night progresses and John adapts to the social circle, it is implied that his mediation through the spaces of cultural consumption in Koreatown has infused a sense of Koreanness to his cultural identity. This further reveals how the characters define Koreanness, which is highly dependent on the consumption of goods and services they identify as distinctly Korean. By consuming 'the Koreanness' materially embodied in the food, alcohol and the activities provided in Koreatown, one gains a sense of being or becoming more Korean.

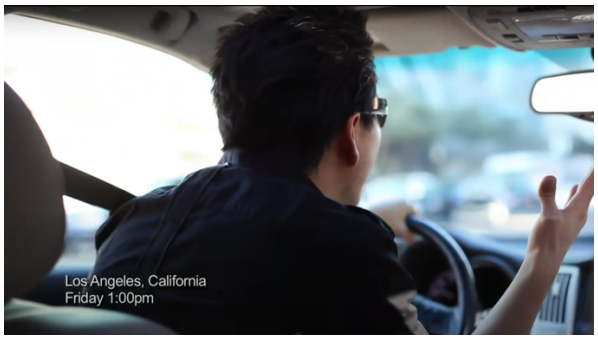
Figure 3: Peter, who is older than John, gets a checkmark on the *hyung* box

Figure 4: footnote a: not everyone cares about Rule #1

Furthermore, the symbolic power of consumption practices in "reshaping of the urban landscape" (Kim 2018, p.280) is also conveyed in *Ktown Cowboys*, where the series progresses with the movement of the characters between distinctly Korean ethnic businesses, denoting the mutually constitutive relationship between people and the space enabled by consumption. Moreover, how the characters move through Koreatown to actively consume at restaurants and bars run by co-ethnics, is read as a way to "stake claims to a space they regard as both representative and affirmative of their marginalized identities" (Suh 2016, p.407). Consumption involves a decision-making practice where "we define what we consider publicly valuable" and "the ways we integrate and distinguish ourselves in society" (Canclini 2001, p.20). This denotes the significance of consumptive practices in asserting one's cultural identity, thus the formation of a territorial consciousness, with the characters fostering a sense of belonging and entitlement to Koreatown. Moreover, *Ktown Cowboys* configure the image of Koreatown as an attractive destination through the glorification of their consumption habits, which Suh (2016) claims has an appeal to capitalist American values, challenging their minoritised identity and promoting Korean American cultural life as desirable.

Moreover, a gradient in the 'Koreanness' of each character also highlights the hybrid cultural identities they possess. The title of the series refers to the groups as 'cowboys', a motif iconographic of the American white male figure. This reference brings attention to the 'Americanness' in their sociality and behaviour, despite the emphasis placed on their cultural insider status that mediates the American audience into the 'authentic' Korean cultural experience in Los Angeles. Suh (2016) views this reference as a way to contest the rhetoric of the effeminate Asian masculinity, and to portray the characters as essentially American and able to claim entitlement to the space. Nevertheless, as Asian American figures who have

been historically marked as outsiders in American society, whether they are perceived as insiders of wider Los Angeles or the United States is debatable. Nevertheless, the juxtaposition between John and others emphasise their insider status not merely within the boundaries of Koreatown but in Los Angeles and California as well, due to John's migration from Virginia. This contrast is especially notable in the interaction between John and Jason, who is his cousin and one of the 'cowboys' from Fullerton, California. Jason's statements such as "we don't have taxis here man I'll pick you up" and road rage depicted through him yelling at other drivers while answering John's questions about Koreatown, portrays Jason as the insider of Los Angeles as opposed to John (figure 5 and 6). Jason states "welcome to LA man" after yelling at another driver to get off the phone, indicating the filmmakers' intention to establish the Korean Americans in the series as valid figures who belong to Los Angeles and in urban America more generally. This endeavour to be recognised and justified as both Korean and American is found in their consumption practices in the transnational enclave embedded in Los Angeles.

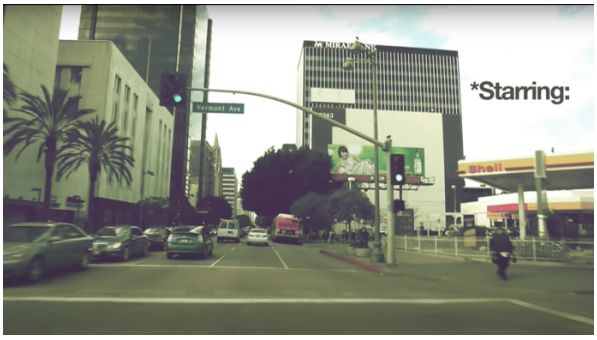


Left - Figure 5: Jason driving John yelling at other drivers
Right - Figure 6: John's clueless expression is juxtaposed with John's road rage

The Salience of consumption practice in the affirmation of Korean American identity is in close connection with the enclave's landscape resembling contemporary South Korea, or more specifically the capital city of Seoul. The ways in which characters entertain themselves with various activities through the night can be called a "Seoul-style consumption" (Kim 2018,

p.284). This underscores their desire to practice cultural activities that resonate with contemporary South Korean practices, to defy the traditional image of the dilapidated immigrant enclave that Koreatown was known as. The rules and cultural codes presented as 'lessons' to John and to the audience through him, also highlight such desire to be in tune with contemporary Korean cultural practices. In episode one, a "K-town dress code" is introduced, explained as something similar to what male characters in Korean drama T.V. series wear. Moreover, characters sing Korean pop songs at Karaoke bars and consume distinctively Korean alcohols such as *soju* and *pok-tan-ju*. Such consumptive activities are referenced both explicitly and implicitly to contemporary South Korean popular culture and its media representation. This indicates their active pursuit for the performance of a modern cultural identity beyond the ethnic-national Korean identity.

This endeavour is also established within the larger landscape of sunny California. The opening sequence of each episode in the series shows a montage of the Los Angeles cityscape, many of them photographing the built environment and streets in and around Koreatown. The repetition of palm trees along the road is prominent in pictures of Korean businesses, many of them shot from or on the driveway (figures 7 and 8). The appropriation of this distinctively Californian scenery through the organisation of a built environment imitating contemporary South Korea denotes a blending of Korean and American identities. The manifestation of a hybrid identity is observed in the imagined home culture presented in the host society space which many Korean Angelenos call home.



Left - Figure 7: A Korean restaurant shot from the driveway
Right - Figure 8: Photo of Vermont Avenue, with an advertisement for a Korean alcoholic drink *(soju)* at the back

Ms. Purple: Performance of cultural identity through labour

Ms. Purple, in contrast to *Ktown Cowboys*, depicts the story of "the Asian Americans who didn't make it" (Chang 2019, para. 5) contrary to the successful immigrant stories that the model minority myth has instilled. Although *Ms. Purple* also frequently depicts spaces of consumption within Koreatown as *Ktown Cowboys* does, the narrative is from the perspective of a labourer who provides the services. Among Korean Americans, labour work is looked down on (Abelmann and Lie, 1995), which is also reflected in the frequent exploitation of workers by Korean business owners (Chung 2009). The ethnic elites have significant influence over the development of Koreatown Los Angeles by working in collusion with the city officials (Oh & Chung, 2013). This highlights how their efforts to strive in society has reproduced the "American hierarchies of race/ethnicity, class, and gender" (Chung 2009, p.214) within the Korean American community. Such a hierarchy is vividly illustrated through the protagonist Kasie's hardship as a *doumi*, a karaoke hostess, providing company to Korean men who visit karaoke bars (figure 9). Her agony and fatigue towards her job as a *doumi* set a slow mood throughout the piece, juxtaposed with the neon lights and loud music at the karaoke bars (figure 10), thus with the energetic and flashy image of Koreatown that *Ktown Cowboys* depict.

Left - Figure 9: Kasie sitting between male patrons at the karaoke bar
Right - Figure 10: Neon lights at the karaoke bar

Doumi are Karaoke bar hostesses, who accompany clients and provide a "girlfriend experience" (Choi 2017, p.451) in karaoke rooms. In Koreatown Los Angeles, there are *doumi* agencies who act as a broker between freelance *doumi* and customers who place an order for their service through the karaoke bars (ibid.). As the film illustrates, hostesses are dropped off at karaoke bars where an order is placed and are selected by clients. According to Choi (2017), those who are not chosen by the customers go back to the car to be driven to the next karaoke bar. She denotes that *doumi* workers experience income insecurity due to their freelance status, resulting to no income after five hours of shifts at times, and are susceptible to sexual abuse by customers as the services that *doumi* provide are less regulated, and escalate frequently from the pressures of the increasingly competitive market due to a rise in non-Korean hostesses.

Kim (2011) denotes that the choice for informal employment is often rational and voluntary, signifying the informed individual decision-making involved in seeking jobs, despite market barriers that restrict their opportunities. Furthermore, Lee (1992) argues that such a segmented labour market for Korean immigrant workers leads to the appropriation of ethnicity as a selling point towards potential employers within the enclave economy. As Kasie's work depends on co-ethnic patrons consuming a heavily racialised and gendered service, it reveals her rational decision to maximise income by commodifying her Korean American female identity in the informal labour market. Hence, Koreatown is interpreted as a space which "reproduces ethnicity as an object of consumption" (ibid. p.269), leading to Kasie's performance and exploitation of her ethnic-cultural identity, in acquiring income to take care of her father.

Furthermore, Kasie's performance of cultural identity at the workplace leads to the manifestation of her identity through filial piety. One of the central themes of the film is the decision Kasie has to make whether to pursue autonomy and live for herself or to take care of her family, especially her ill father (Lim 2019) (figure 11). The film depicts Kasie's struggle through rich symbolism and motifs, showcasing her need to hold on to her father despite the repeated advice from nurses to put him into hospice. Moreover, a scene depicts Kasie as a young girl pouring a drink for her father at the dining table, after he fails to convince the children's mother who ran away to come back for Kasie and her brother (figure 12). This is juxtaposed to Kasie's job as a *doumi* which involves pouring drinks for male patrons, comparing her intention behind the overlapping action. Kasie's job of pouring drinks for male patrons is illustrated as the method for her to look after her father, which is connoted in the common gesture towards him. As the 'cowboys' in *Ktown cowboys* are cultural insiders of Koreatown, Kasie is also an insider as a labourer in the hostess industry catering for clients in Koreatown. However, Kasie's detachment from her work depicted through blurry scenes at the karaoke bar and her silence for the most part in these scenes, clearly highlighting how she considers herself an 'outsider'. On the other hand, the audience sees Kasie in a positive mood in few scenes such as when she reconciles with her brother Carey (figure 13), when she interacts with Octavio, a Latino man who works as a valet in Koreatown (figure 14), and when she finds refuge in playing the piano, as she used to be an aspiring music student before her father fell ill. It is implied throughout the film that Kasie seems to feel at ease when the Korean cultural space is absent, when she performs her 'American' self in the everyday space of Los Angeles, away from her father and hostess work. Nonetheless, although she identifies best with the American space of Los Angeles and the American society, as an Asian American figure she is forever alienated, and Kasie herself acknowledges this and exploits the orientalised self.


Left - Figure 11: Kasie and Carey's ill father
Right - Figure 12: Kasie as a young girl pouring *soju* for her father


Left - Figure 13: Kasie walking with her brother Carey
Right - Figure 14: Kasie with Octavio

A scene shows Kasie lining up with her colleagues in front of their clients to be selected, with only her wearing a purple *hanbok*, a traditional Korean dress, whereas others all wear black evening dresses (figure 15). She then gets selected by the Korean male clients who were amused by the *hanbok*, which symbolises Kasie's performance and commodification of her Korean female identity using a cultural object. A concrete connection is made between her deliberate presentation of Korean cultural identity and the familial duty she strives to fulfil as a second-generation Korean immigrant and the manifestation of such identity. Moreover, this is followed by the scene where Kasie, still in her purple *hanbok*, walking on the driveway at dusk to get home. The cinematic shot is filled with the soft light of sunrise, with Kasie's figure in focus (figure 16). The scene illustrates a typical scenery in residential neighbourhoods of California. Although this background alienates Kasie in the traditional

Korean dress, another scene where Kasie imitates the swaying of a palm tree establishes the palm tree, a motif representing the landscape of Los Angeles, as a representation of her (figure 17). Schueller (2004), examining Tseng Kwong Chi's photograph of him, a Chinese man wearing a Mao suit standing in front of the Hollywood sign, indicates that "[i]t is this experience of being othered, in Tseng's case through cliches of orientalism, that he exploits by constantly staging the drama between the familiar American tourist spot and the stranger inhabiting it" (p.181). The scene from *Ms. Purple* shares such intention, where Kasie, identified as the 'other' and the 'foreign' through the self-orientalising performance, takes determined steps on the driveway, in the space of suburban California. Her entitlement to this quintessentially American space as the 'other' is persuaded to the audience, as the colour purple of her dress in figure 16 and the purple that fills the screen in figure 17, ties together the two scenes. Furthermore, towards the end of the film, Kasie reminisces a conversation with her father when he could still speak to her: "Palm trees...They're not native to California. Did you know that? They're all brought here from other places and planted here. Like us. Those two palm trees are just like us. We've become rooted here. Just like them." As an Asian American woman in Los Angeles, "neither black nor white, whose foreignness no numbers of generations of immigrant lineage can erase" (Schueller 2004, p.181), Kasie is forever alien in the American space. However, she continues to inhabit and lay her roots on the ground of Los Angeles, negotiating her hybrid cultural identity to become a legitimate being in the urban space, like the palm tree that became an icon of California has. At the same time, her negotiation of identity is also tied to a sense of liberation that the suburban space of Los Angeles offers. Her work as a hostess in the ethnic enclave as well as letting go of her father and putting him to hospice care in the end, and multi-ethnic sociality she takes part in by joining the Quinceañera, shows a process of self-reinvention. *Ms. Purple* depicts such diasporic struggle in process of escaping the self that is bound to cultural and ethnic

identities, as well as encountering and becoming a reconfigured self in suburban Los Angeles.

Figure 15: Kasie in *hanbok* lining up with other hostesses wearing evening dresses

Figure 16: Kasie in purple *hanbok* walking on the driveway

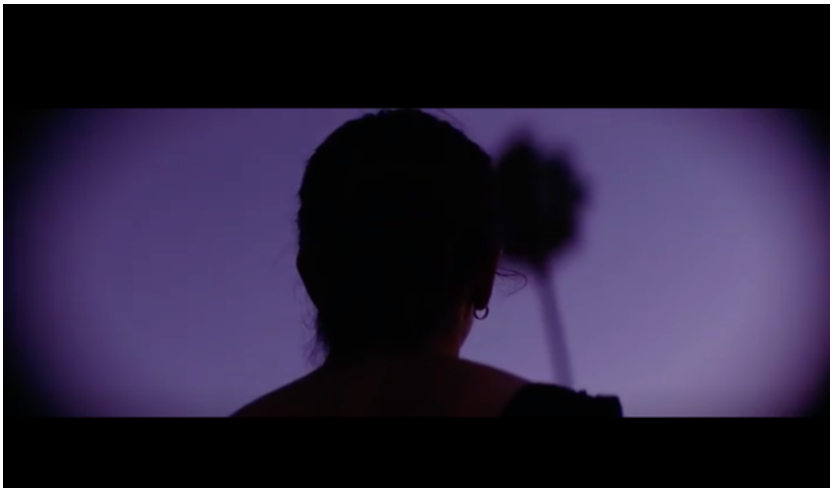


Figure 17: Kasie swaying with the palm tree

Gendered Landscape of Koreatown: Confucian gender ideals

A common theme central to the plots of *Ktown Cowboys* and *Ms. Purple* is highlighted through the analysis of the characters' sociality, gender identities, and gender roles (re)produced in Koreatown. Both films exhibit highly gendered social interactions, seen in the bonding of male characters and John's assimilation to the Koreatown culture in *Ktown Cowboys*, and Kasie's relationship with her patrons and how she negotiates her self-actualisation in *Ms. Purple*. The gender hierarchy constituted through hypermasculine practice and objectification of female bodies and companionship is prevalent in both films, which reflects Confucianist gender ideals that South Korean society holds. Choi and Woo (2018) highlights the respect for authority as a core value in Confucianism, which the hierarchical and vertical societal structure is found upon. Regarding gender, they underscore the dominant and central role of men in family, society, and governance, which fuels patriarchy and gender inequality in South Korea. Although it is debated whether Confucianism advocates for female subordination, at least the interpretation of its scriptures have been manipulated to favour the ascendency of men in family life and society (Koh 2008).

Such gender ideals, especially the expectations on femininity in South Korean society, to some degree have migrated with Korean immigrants to Koreatown and ingrained into the space through commercial activities in the night-time economy. Suh (2016) signifies the social connections the male protagonists foster through hypermasculine behaviours in *Ktown Cowboys*, observed through the racial, sexual and homophobic jokes frequently used in their interactions. These include remarks such as "Stop being gay and go get ready" or "Didn't get laid since the 2002 world cup", to point out behaviours that exhibit weakness or effeminate traits of members of the group. Such sociality translates further to how all their night-time

activities are centred around seeking and acquiring female companionship, reflected in interactions such as asking for a waitress's phone number and asking a female bartender to join them to a night club. The conversations around such goal of the night also convey the active objectification of female bodies, such as one of the characters telling off the protagonist for pouring an expensive drink for female hostesses who are "not going to go home with us tonight". Choi (2017) evaluates that the hostesses "bolster clients' masculinity by making them feel sexually desirable and facilitate the exchange of male camaraderie through the creation of a relaxed social atmosphere" (p.451), referring to the significant role such services play as a place to build business relationships in Asian cultures.

Furthermore, the plot of the story develops as John and a female bartender, who the group met at a bar, build a connection with one another. His peer praises him for successfully asking her out on the very day he arrived in Los Angeles, and the statement "You're one of us now" connotes the group's acceptance of John to the social circle. Such acceptance surfaces when his ability to seek a potential mate was demonstrated, after countless advice from the group, revealing John's adaptation to Korean American male sociality in Koreatown, which contrasts the committed past relationship he had back in his hometown, Virginia.

Furthermore, a scene where the group gets into a physical fight with another group of men, also underscores the explicit masculine performance of these men, essentially over female companionship which is the cause of this fight (figure 18). The social life of the characters in *Ktown Cowboys* is suggested to be mostly based in Koreatown, which implies the significant impact its gendered landscape seems to have had on how these men interact with and present themselves to one another.

Figure 18: The group getting involved in a physical fight with another group of men

In *Ms. Purple*, the notion of gender is explored through a female perspective. The notorious *doumi* business Kasie is a part of, emphasises direct subordination of women by their male clients and the cultural practices in Koreatown. A clear power structure is portrayed in the film with one of Kasie's patrons dismissing her as just a *doumi* when introducing her to his peer at a wedding, with the peers responding by asking permission to hire her next. Such established gender hierarchy in the *doumi* work environment deploys Confucian female ideals, which plays a significant part in Kasie's internal conflict. *Naehoon*, a scripture intended to educate women on Confucian principles, instructs that womanly virtue means "curbing one's talents so that they do not outshine others" (Han & Ling 1998, p.65). Whether Kasie personally holds such values is unclear as her personal life outside her *doumi* labour is not depicted in detail. Nonetheless, one's co-ethnic Korean status frequently leads to certain expectations and cultural norms to be cast upon the individual (Lee 2013), guiding Kasie to fit these cultural expectations at her workplace serving co-ethnic customers. Especially the ideals of feminine speech of refraining from arguing others (Han & Ling 1998) governs Kasie's interaction with her clients. In a scene towards the end of the film, Kasie crashes a glass bottle on a customer's head, illustrating the explosion of her anger towards her clients that has been suppressed throughout her work (figure 19). Furthermore, Chong (2008) enquires into Korean evangelical churches and their principle in re-establishing "basic

principles of "virtuous" Confucian femininity and womanhood" (p138), which is heavily focused on the unconditional obedience of the wife and the daughter to the husband as a way to achieve harmony in the family. Kasie's mother who ran away for a better life in Los Angeles becomes the antithesis to such figure, providing the source of Kasie's strong sense of duty to take care of her father herself.

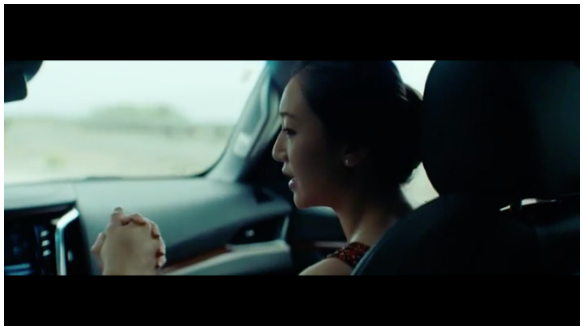
Figure 19: Kasie holding a broken glass bottle by a client's neck

The Multiethnic Automobile City: Driving past Los Angeles

Both *Ktown Cowboys* and *Ms. Purple* treat automobility as a central mode of transit. The way they navigate in and out of Koreatown is dominated by driving. Los Angeles, a metropolis often associated with ideas of chaotic sprawl and the low-density suburbia, is indeed dependent upon automobiles. The post-World War two suburbanisation of the middle class indicated "a rejection of cities and civic life and the emergence of a homogeneous and transformative culture" (Hise 1997, p.2). This suburbanisation was supported by a reorganisation of the countryside, for it to be habitable by the middle-class, which included a provision of a mode of transportation that connects the suburban homes and the city (Fotsch 2007). Hise (1997) argues that Los Angeles is meticulously planned, and the term suburban sprawl does not reflect the proactive planning for a polynucleated city that was carried out at its peak of development post-World War Two. For the new suburban houses to be sold, there needed to be a way to connect the suburb and the inner-city, which the trolley fulfilled and allowed equal access to at least a snippet of country life, and later on, believed to be achieved by automobility. Nevertheless, the trolley eventually became crowded with the urban working-class, and the automobile came to represent wealth as car owners were able to "avoid confronting poor people within the crowded trolley car" (Fotsch 2007, p.27). Furthermore, the automobile obtained a "narrative of upward mobility" (ibid., p.28) at the beginning of the twentieth century, as it was believed that those who work hard could, in the end, achieve car ownership, which symbolised autonomy and individualism.

This sense of autonomy in driving one's car seems to translate to the lack of Kasie's ability and power to own and drive an automobile in *Ms. Purple*. Although scenes shot inside vehicles are prominent in *Ms. Purple*, Kasie is always being driven around, either by the car that delivers hostesses to karaoke bars or the car that belongs to one of her male patrons she

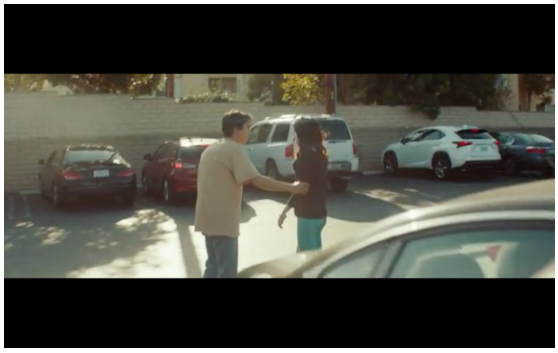
gets closer to (figures 20 and 21). Car ownership signifies class hierarchies in *Ms. Purple*, providing a reinterpretation of autonomy that automobility supposedly grants. As a hostess, the way Kasie navigates Los Angeles is restricted by the automobile, by being driven around, which is metaphorical of her autonomy being taken away as she does not hold the power to decide the destination. This is juxtaposed to scenes where Kasie moves around the urban space on foot, such as when she chooses to visit a quinceañera Octavio invited her to and walks to the destination herself.

Left - Figure 20: Kasie and other hostesses being driven to karaoke bars
Right - Figure 21: Kasie being driven to a wedding on her male patron's car

Another effect of automobility in the multi-ethnic community of Los Angeles is isolation, segregation, and especially insularity in Koreatown. This is observed especially in *Ktown Cowboys*' plot development, as each episode picks up the different destinations the group socialise at, with the scenes of moving from one place to another often absent in the storytelling. Despite the lack of information on how the group moves around Koreatown, a scene in the last episode shows the men getting off of two cars in front of a food truck (figure 22). Hence, the audience does not get to observe the interactions inside the car when they move to a new destination. Therefore, as the spaces in between the destinations for cultural consumption are cut out, an image of a tight-knit community in Koreatown is configured despite its location in a highly multi-ethnic space, as the scene of the Mexican food truck briefly showcases. Such structure describes the insularity of Korean Americans in Los Angeles, with Koreatown being

the spatial manifestation of such insular community ethos transcendent even in dispersed second-generation Korean Americans. The automobile promotes such sociality as when moving around inside a car, "one can keep a distance by rolling up the windows and locking the doors, or one can simply bypass certain neighborhoods altogether" (Fotsch 2007, p.113). This is also denoted in *Ms. Purple*, with the scenes of unexpected encounters of Kasie being introduced to Octavio, and Carey running into his mother who ran away, always taking place in the parking lot outside the vehicle (figure 23). Spontaneous encounters that are characteristic of urban sociality is infrequent in these films due to the mobility of Los Angeles being dependent on private vehicles. Moreover, this translates to Koreatown's configuration as a node for widely suburbanised Korean Americans in California to drive towards to for cultural consumption and social bonding, rather than a place where they mediate by strolling around without intent.



Left - Figure 22: The group coming out of two cars at the destination
Right - Figure 23: Carey bumping into his mother at the parking lot

Conclusion

The evaluation of *Ktown Cowboys* and *Ms. Purple* underscores diaspora identity construction of the Korean American community in Los Angeles, and how such cultural practice formulates the urban space of Koreatown. The comparative analysis of the two films shed light on the significance of consumption practices, the commodification of cultural identity, and the reproduction of cultural expectations in the performance and manifestation of Korean American identity. Furthermore, the appropriation of Los Angeles' landscape and how the American suburban space configures Koreatown' social, economic and cultural life is revealed.

The consumptive practice is central to the narratives of both films, especially in *Ktown Cowboys*, highlighting a state of hyper-consumption as a core element of social bonding in Koreatown. Consumption of Korean goods and services, which are culturally Korean and also provided by co-ethnic entrepreneurs and workers in Koreatown is understood as an affirmation of Korean cultural identity. It allows an explicit performance of cultural identity, communicated among peers and towards the host society. Furthermore, such practice also establishes a sense of territoriality in Koreatown, where consumer demand for cultural consumption shape the cultural and economic landscape of Koreatown. Moreover, such territorialisation of Koreatown has manifested the imaginary and originary contemporary homeland in Koreatown, where the built environment is organised to resemble the modern city of Seoul, the rapidly developing capital of South Korea, as opposed to the dilapidated immigrant neighbourhood which was the historical image of the enclave. The marginalisation and minoritisation of Koreatown are further contested with consumption practices of the characters in *Ktown Cowboys*, where their cultural life and identity is glorified through the repetition of hyper-consumptive scenes. Moreover, the characters, being called 'cowboys',

claim their legitimate American status through such glorification and the establishment of insider status. Not only are they illustrated as cultural tourist guides of Koreatown, but as guides of Los Angeles and California in contrast to the protagonist John who is new to the city.

The commodification of cultural identity is salient in the narrative of *Ms. Purple*. The protagonist's occupation as a *doumi* provides a precarious service that is highly racialised and gendered. Although this notion is also a significant part of the cultural consumption that takes place in Koreatown, *Ms. Purple* sheds light on the decision making behind the choice to become a *doumi* by the protagonist, Kasie. Her decision entails a rational choice of maximising income, by commodifying her cultural and gender identity as a Korean American woman, serving mainly co-ethnic customers. In such way her cultural identity performance contributes to the establishment and sustenance of the *doumi* culture at karaoke bars in Koreatown, reproducing the Korean hostess work industry in Los Angeles consumed and provided by Koreans. Moreover, Kasie's selling of her ethnic, cultural and gendered identity is depicted as the way for her to fulfil filial piety, in taking care of her dying father inside their home. Her endeavour is a manifestation of Korean Confucian values, driving her self-commodification which in turn allows her to be the 'good Korean daughter' by looking after her father. Furthermore, her hybrid cultural identity is depicted through her self-orientalising practice as a *doumi*. The film depicts her figure as alien in the American suburb, but also as a valid American figure who embeds herself in the space as the palm trees did in California, to be recognised as essentially Korean and American at the same time. In such process her identity is reinvented, where she escapes the commodified cultural and ethnic identity she is bound to, reconfiguring herself in the space of Los Angeles, constituted by its multi-ethnic community and a sense of freedom and autonomy.

Both films highlight how cultural expectations and codes of South Korean society translates to the urban space of Koreatown, through cultural identity practice among Korean Americans. This is especially the case for Confucianist gender ideals, with gender hierarchy imbedded in the enclave economy of Koreatown. Cultural expectations on masculinity and femininity provide the backdrop of commercial activities and the sociality of Korean American young adults in the enclave economy. Men depicted in both *Ktown Cowboys* and *Ms. Purple* bond with one another through deploying hypermasculine behaviours, such as making racist and sexist jokes and objectifying female bodies. On the other hand, ideals of women had a crucial role in configuring how Kasie acts especially at her workplace, by performing a gender ideal to serve her patrons.

Los Angeles, where the two films are set in, overrides and governs the diasporic practices that take place in Koreatown. Especially the ascendancy of private vehicles as a mode of transport actively constitutes the way Koreatown and the Korean American community is organised. While car ownership in the American suburb like Los Angeles, symbolises wealth, upward mobility and autonomy, *Ms. Purple* reinterprets what kind of autonomy automobiles grant to its users. By being 'driven around', Kasie loses control over her mobility and destination in the private vehicle. A true sense of autonomy is found when she navigates the space of Los Angeles on foot, liberated from the automobile that traps her from moving freely in space. Furthermore, the insularity of the Korean American community is also promoted through automobility, as spontaneous encounters in the city take place in the parking lot, while interaction is confined to those within the vehicle. Such insularity is also highlighted in *Ktown Cowboys*, with the scenes of moving from one destination to the next is mostly absent. While Los Angeles and even Koreatown is a multi-ethnic space, as the

Mexican food truck in the series briefly illustrates, the audience is introduced to largely homogenous groups of Korean Americans, interacting within Korean businesses. Moreover, as the Korean American community is dispersed to the suburbs of Los Angeles, Koreatown is a destination to drive to. This leads to segregation between the vehicle and outside neighbourhoods, allowing the driver and the people being driven to entirely pass and ignore the places in between.

Korean Americans in Los Angeles as an ethnic minority group experiencing diaspora, demonstrates practices that affirm and configure their cultural identity, by performing their Koreanness and/or Korean Americanness in the ethnic enclave economy. This research highlights the role diasporic residents have in transforming and constructing ethnic enclaves as a space for displaying individual and collective identities that are cultural rather than being merely ethnic, signified by the emphasis on cultural consumption in *Ktown Cowboys* and *Ms. Purple*. Moreover, the urban space surrounding the enclave has significant influence over the organisation of social, economic and cultural activities that takes place in the enclave. Los Angeles liberates and entraps the Korean American individuals existing in the enclave space. The city represents and fuels the making of the highly hybrid identities of Korean Americans, and provides a space with a sense of freedom, providing a place for them to negotiate the manifestation of their cultural identities. The urban space of an ethnic enclave has crucial symbolic and functional roles in giving diasporic groups a place to perform and manifest their ideas of homeland and ingraining themselves in the reproduced cultural experience, to affirm and discursively establish their identities.

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