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Koreatown in Los Angeles:

A Transnational Borderline in the American Nation

ABSTRACT

Koreatown in Los Angeles is an ethnic enclave where the majority of businesses are Korean, the majority of the population is Hispanic, and the politics is mainly controlled by Whites and Blacks. In Koreatown, Korean is predominant in that the town is named “Korea” and the streets are mostly covered with business signs written in Korean. Since language is a crucial factor in the constitution of a nation, the town’s Korean-language business signs are intriguing when considering the notion of national identity. These commercial signs challenge the national identity of the town in that the primary language of the United States is supposed to be English. However, the town cannot be said to form part of the Korean nation due to its physical location in the United States. In this sense, Koreatown is representative of a kind of transnational borderline between the United States and Korea. The transnational borderline reminds Korean-Americans and others that the United States cannot exist without heterogeneous elements within it.

INTRODUCTION

When I came to see Koreatown in Los Angeles in 2003 for the first time, my first impression was that the place could hardly be said to represent a typical American town. The people were mostly Koreans and Hispanics, not White Europeans, the ethnic group that constitute the majority population in the United States. The streets hardly seemed different from those in Korea; no one spoke English and most of the business signs were written in Korean. I thought then that Koreatown might form an interesting topic for a consideration of national identity and other transnational phenomena. This essay is a sketch, rather than a substantial scholarly work, dealing with Koreatown from the perspective of national and transnational identity formation.

WHAT IS A NATION?

In considering the identity of a nation, the first thing to do is to clarify the conceptual confusion that exists between the concepts of “nation” and “state”. A nation is a collective community in whatever way it may be defined, while the concept of the state refers to a political system with a government and a people. The state has existed since the concept of central government first came into being, while the nation is very much a modern product. Essentially, the nation occurs when mass communication can bring about the notion of a collective consciousness among the people in a specific area. The seemingly singular term “nation-state” is a product of the political movements of the nineteenth century when states subjected peoples sharing a common collective consciousness to their ruling systems. In this sense, nation and state are not just different

from each other; they are actually contradictory terms in that the diversity of national constitutions are controlled and unified in the imposition by states of standardization projects such as public education.

The nomination of the “United States of America” is an uneasy combination of a state “Union” and the nation of “America,” that is, “we, the people.” The state system of the United States has been dominated by Anglo-Saxon whites; and “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness,” manifested in the Declaration of Independence, was exclusively applied to White Europeans throughout much of its history. However, the American nation, “we, the people” has been racially, culturally, and ethnically heterogeneous to such a degree that the state system cannot really unify the people. Throughout the long history of America, the people, which also includes Aboriginal Americans, Hispanics, and Asians, have never been homogenously constituted.

In this essay, my interest is in the concept of the American nation as distinct from the United States. In considering the idea of Koreatown as a border of the American nation, I take “nation” to mean “an imagined community” as defined by Benedict Anderson in his *Imagined Communities*,¹ and Ernesto Laclau’s notion of a “constitutive outside.”² By analyzing the commercial signs and billboard in Koreatown in Los Angeles, I will argue that the American nation is constituted along ethnic and cultural borders.

¹ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983). According to him, the vernacular printed language in newspapers and novels has played a crucial role in forming the community consciousness among the people and the consciousness thus formed on a large scale is the national consciousness.

² Ernesto Laclau, *New Reflections on the Revolution of Our Time* (London: Verso, 1990). Laclau argues that any social identity is determined by the relation to its external force and the operation of the force functions to transform the identity of the given society.

LANGUAGE AND THE NATION

Although, as Ernest Renan demonstrated in the nineteenth century, there are no objective factors alone, including such concepts as race, geography or economy, that by themselves serve to build a nation, language nonetheless does play a dominant role.³ Language *per se* does not constitute a nation. But most communities that can be explained in terms of the concept of nation have a common language. Language not only builds the community consciousness of a nation but also delimits its boundaries. The crucial role of language in the formation of a nation stems from its differentiating function. In principle, all human beings possess the ability to speak at least one language, but no one possesses the ability to speak all the world's languages. In other words, every person belongs to his or her language community, while no one belongs to all the possible language communities. The nation of France is a community of the French language, while Germany is a community of the German language. The reason that France and Germany are different nations is because the French and German people speak different languages. In addition, no language can claim superiority in relation to other languages. French cannot be said to be better than German and vice versa, which means that the nation of France cannot be said to be superior to Germany or indeed to any other nation. If a nation claims superiority, that nation transforms itself into an empire and nationality begins to lose its significance. We may remember that the rise of the European nations came about with the breakup of the Holy Roman Empire.

³ Ernest Renan, "What is a nation?" *Nation and Narration*, ed. Homi K Bhabha (London: Routledge, 1990).

In the case of the American nation, the language question needs more consideration. At one level, of course, English is undoubtedly accepted as the language of the American nation. The Constitution grants a privileged status to English by the fact that English was the language in which the document was written, even though English is not officially the US state language. The American nation, which can be theoretically separated from the political state of the United States, however, can hardly claim English for itself, even if English is *de facto* the national language and most nationwide communication is conducted in English. From the earliest times when the newly-settled Anglo-Europeans faced Aboriginal Americans in New England to the present day when Hispanics and Asians comprise a significant portion of the American people, languages other than English have always been present.

Here, we see a tension between English and other languages in the formation of the American nation. While English has played the dominant role in forming the imagined language community of America, it has never been the exclusive medium of communication. This unstable status of English seems to have accelerated recently, a fact which is ironically reflected in the proposal first put forward in the 1980s to legislate an English-only policy for government business. The proposal would not have been put forward if English were really the only language of official and non-official communication.

KOREATOWN

The history of Korean immigration to America is relatively short. Although the year

2003 was celebrated as the centennial of Korean immigration, the majority of Korean immigrants came to America after the 1970s. This wave of immigration followed the passage of the 1965 Immigration and Naturalization Act, which allowed Asians immigration to the United States. Within the short period of about 30 years, the Korean population in the United States, especially in Los Angeles, increased remarkably rapidly. According to the US Census of Population, there were only 8,811 Koreans in Los Angeles County in 1970, but by 1980 the population had grown to 60,618 and by the year 2000, it had reached the figure of 195,150.

Before the influx of Korean immigrants in the 1970s, the first Korean community had formed around Jefferson Boulevard near the University of Southern California. After the influx, however, the center of the Korean community moved to the area where Olympic Boulevard and Western Avenue meet. Although the name was issued to the area by the Department of Transportation of the City of Los Angeles in response to a request from Korean residents and business people in 1980, the name “Koreatown” has in fact no official standing in the city administration or elsewhere. In this sense, Koreatown has no officially recognized boundaries. Nonetheless, Koreatown is now generally known to be bounded loosely by Pico Boulevard to the south, Crenshaw Avenue to the West, Hoover Street to the east, and Beverly Boulevard to the north.⁴ However, if we accept the tendency of Korean-Americans to recognize the real boundaries of Koreatown by the presence of Korean business signs, these dimensions can be extended.

As an ethnic enclave, Koreatown can be compared with Chinatown or Little Tokyo.

⁴ Timothy R. Tangherlini, “Remapping Koreatown: Folklore, Narrative and the Los Angeles Riots,” *Western Folklore* 58.2 (1999): 154.

Like these two other areas, it mainly functions as a commercial and residential center for the ethnic community. However, it also serves as a provider of a set of diverse cultural needs for those who want to experience a different culture. In Los Angeles, Koreatown is more noticeable than other Asian ethnic enclaves both because Koreatown is spread more extensively and because the community appears to be more exclusive than other ethnic communities. While Chinatown or Little Tokyo might be said to be no more than villages, Koreatown is a town with a relatively big size. Koreatown plays a centralizing role in the Korean-American community, whereas Chinatown, in contrast, has been reduced in size. The Chinese population nowadays seems very much immersed in the American mainstream and may no longer need the “China” in their American life. The present status of Koreatown in Los Angeles therefore partly explains the failure of Korean-Americans to be assimilated into the dominant white American nation. But it also explains the unstable status of the American nation vis-à-vis ethnically minority communities. The failure may reveal the ambiguous, contingent status of Koreatown in the formation of the American nation, which in turn demonstrates something about the contingency of the American nation itself.

If someone takes a walk or drive in Koreatown, the first thing that he or she might notice is the series of Korean business signs and the commercial and cultural billboards. If the signs were written in a language like French or Spanish that used Roman characters, this might not seem so noticeable. The Korean signs, in contrast, seem challenge non-Korean communities in a provocative manner. If business signs are supposed to draw potential customers to the place by identifying the business, those who cannot read Korean will, in many cases, be excluded. Even when English

accompanies the Korean on the sign, the English often does not give sufficient information. In fact, many of the accompanying English signs are just a phonetic Romanization of the Korean, neglecting to offer precise information about the business. In the end, it would seem that the Korean business signs in Koreatown are just for those people, the overwhelmingly majority of whom will be Korean, who can read them. (See photograph 1)



Photograph 1

The Korean business signs are thus illustrations of the enclave character of Koreatown in Los Angeles. Most Korean-American businesses in the area do not aim at attracting ethnic non-Koreans. From the small labor-intensive businesses such as barbershops to

highly professional businesses such as medical clinics, the customers are mostly Koreans or Korean-Americans. If someone happens to enter a Korean restaurant in Koreatown, he or she will note that most of the clients are Koreans. This contrasts markedly with the Chinese restaurants. The business signs in Chinese restaurants work differently. They serve to bring about an exotic Oriental ambience, and this attracts non-Chinese customers. Most clients in Chinese restaurants are non-Chinese. The Korean-Americans in Koreatown appear to maintain their own ethnically-defined Korean community and have not been assimilated into the main currents of American life.

Koreatown is not only a business area for Korean-Americans; it is a residential area as well. Among the 195,000 Koreans in the County of Los Angeles, 60 percent of them are believed to reside in the Koreatown area. However, the majority population in Koreatown is not Korean-American; Korean ethnics comprise about one-third of the Koreatown population. More than 50 percent of the population is Hispanic, and the remainder consist of African-Americans European-Americans. Although they have business in the area as well, the Hispanics do not seem to dominate, at least on Western Avenue and Olympic Boulevard. Interestingly too, given the nomination of the area as Koreatown, and the major population of Hispanics in the area, neither ethnic group plays the leading role in managing the community, i.e., in politics. With a combined Korean and Hispanic population of more than 70 percent and the dominance of business by Korean-Americans, African-Americans still dominate politics. In 2007, the California state assemblyman representing Koreatown is a Latino-American (Fabian Núñez) and the Los Angeles City councilman representing the district is an African-American (Herb J. Wesson Jr). Koreatown is dominated by Hispanics in population, by

Korean-Americans in commerce, and by Latino and African-Americans in politics.

Photograph 2 shows something of the heterogeneous quality of Koreatown.



Photograph 2

This photograph was taken at the intersection of Wilshire Boulevard and Western Avenue in Koreatown in March 2003. Although the photograph shows one of the central locations in Koreatown, most of the people in the picture are Hispanics. Koreans and Korean-Americans can hardly be seen at all. Nonetheless, the business signs on the top-left of the building are mostly in Korean, with some English admixture. One of the most interesting aspects of the picture is the political campaign poster for the Los Angeles City Council member, Deron Williams, an African-American (he was subsequently replaced by another Afro-American, Herb J. Wesson Jr.). While the people who are in a position to see the campaign posters are Hispanics, the name of the candidate is written in Korean, with the candidate's name in English only in small letters. The fact that the name is prominently written in Korean means that the candidate's political campaign is

actively targeting Korean-Americans. In campaign politics, the majority population of Hispanics is excluded, at least in this area. The politics of the Los Angeles City Council in this case is dominated by a representing African-American and a population of Korean-Americans. But, as Marx argues in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, an unbridgeable gap exists between the political representation and those who are represented.⁵ The representative does not necessarily represent the interests of the represented as those represented may desire. The represented interest is not that of the represented, but of the representative. In other words, the political interests of the majority population of Hispanics and Koreans appears to be excluded from Koreatown politics.

The billboard in Photograph 2 presents another interesting aspect of Koreatown. Anybody unfamiliar with the contemporary Korean cosmetic industry would not understand the commercial billboard. Although the sign “ISA KNOX” is written in English, it is in fact meaningless as an English sign. This is because the words that make up the message are not in fact English words. According to the manufacturer’s Internet web site, ISA is a common French feminine name and KNOX is the name of the goddess of night. By combining a feminine name and the goddess of night, the billboard aims to attract customers for the cosmetic product. The Korean sign under the Roman characters is the phonetic equivalent. By displaying the name of the manufacturer of the product in Korean mostly in the top right of the board, the billboard aims at attracting only Korean or Korean-American customers. Whereas business signs are attached to a specific business place and produce an identity for the business and its customers, the

⁵ Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (New York: International Publishers, 1963).

product does not have a specific business location in the area and yet even so produces a cultural and political effect. The presence of the billboard symbolically claims that Koreatown belongs to Korean or Korean-Americans who are culturally and ethnically Korean. In comparison with the people on the street and the political campaign poster on the building's wall, the billboard plays a dominant role in the plaza by means of its placement on the top of the building and as a result of its attractive color and design.

Although it seems that the commercial billboard claims Koreanness, culturally and commercially the billboard is hardly a Korean thing. The female model on the board is not a Korean woman; she is Western, specifically French, according to the manufacturer's web site. The presumed ideal beauty in the billboard message is not Korean; it is a white Westerner, and the silent message of the billboard is that the use of this cosmetic product will give the consumer ideal beauty. The claimed Koreanness in the billboard in turn comes into self-denial by ultimately appealing to Western beauty, negating its Koreanness. At the very moment when the dominance of Korean identity is claimed by the billboard's commercial and cultural message, the Korean identity is negated by its own image of the idealization of a Korean commercial commodity.

KOREATOWN AS A TRANSNATIONAL BORDER

To Koreans or Korean-Americans, Koreatown is something temporary. It stands between the past and the future of Korean-American identity. For new Korean immigrants, Koreatown is a comforting place in that they do not have to face any language and cultural barriers in their new American life. Daily living in Koreatown is

very much like living in Korea; it is possible to speak Korean and consume Korean products. However, Korean-Americans who have succeeded in culturally assimilating to American life in business or career try to escape Koreatown by moving to more prestigious residential areas such as Santa Monica or Irvine. Those who reside in Koreatown are conscious of their immigrant status, i.e., they are conscious that they are not the same as Koreans in the Far East, and they tend to have more Korean than American identity. In contrast, Korean-Americans who have moved away from Koreatown tend to have more American than Korean identity. Moreover, while the first generation immigrants are likely to stay close to Koreatown life, the second or third generations tend to keep their distance. In this sense, Koreatown is a temporal location in both space and time; the more Korean-Americans become Americanized, the less significant Koreatown becomes for them; the more Korean-Americans become assimilated to American life, the further they remove themselves from Koreatown. In time perhaps, Koreatown will lose its status as a centripetal location for Korean-Americans, particularly when the wave of Korean immigration to the United States dissipates and Korean-Americans assimilate more to the norms of mainstream American life. As a border between Korea and the United States, Koreatown has only a temporary existence; it is fated ultimately to lose its status as a border line. At the moment, however, Koreatown is neither Korean nor American but somewhere in between. Koreatown is an operational force which reminds not only Korean-Americans but other Americans too that the American nation cannot but have heterogeneous elements within itself.

The American nation, as distinct from the political system of the United States, has no

origin. White settlers cannot be the origin of America, as far as the Native Americans are concerned, while Native Americans cannot be the origin of America in that they did not formerly have any sense of the American nation as it exists in its present form. The American nation does not have an essential identity in a positive sense either. The American nation's motto is "out of many, one" (E Pluribus Unum) is a statement that the presumed positive identity of the "one" is in a state of constant change as a result of the operations of the identities of the "many." The location of the "many" is the American border; Koreatown is one of such many borders. In this sense, the national identity of America is on the border line, and the border line is neither in America nor outside it. The borderline constantly transforms the nation's identity, while lacking any positive identity of its own.

SUPPLEMENTARY PHOTOGRAPHS



Photograph 3

The white letter signs on the green background are not provided with any accompanying English words or names; the purple English signs are phonetic transcriptions of the red letter Korean signs, which does not give information about the business in English (in fact, it is a Korean restaurant serving Korean style ox-bone stew and rice). This picture illustrates the fact that many Koreatown businesses appear to be for the exclusive use of Koreans.)



Photograph 4

The ethnically heterogeneous business area in Koreatown, containing Korean, Spanish and English business signs. The business sign on the left for a dry cleaning service shows that the business is for both Koreans and English speakers. The central one, which is for a karaoke club, appears to be for the exclusive use of Koreans, judging by the exclusively Korean business sign. The sign on the right is for a business used exclusively by Spanish-speaking people.

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