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Neighbourhood Portraits

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You've got to be there to know it

Experiencing LA's Koreatown

Chima Michael Anyadike-Danes

Introduction

On a blazingly hot, azure-skyed morning I walked from Van Nuys' austere metal and concrete bus station to its extravagant, art deco civic building where the LA City Council held a meeting. My route included a main street, fronted by tall, sun-stretching palms, where numerous bail bonds agencies abutted franchise eateries, like Subway, and banks, like Chase. Later, at the meeting, while puzzling over the anomalous landscape I heard a neophyte council-person in an ill-fitting, shiny, gray suit say condemnatorily, 'I think it is a problem that people in Los Angeles seem to care more about their neighborhoods than they do their city'. Appropriate, as the rationale for occasionally meeting in a strongly secessionist neighborhood twenty-eight kilometers north of downtown was to render municipal government real. The council-person's statement serves as a prompt for my discussion of Koreatown, an LA neighborhood, whose landscape has long fired fierce passions amongst its stakeholders.

Koreatown is a densely populated neighborhood of several square kilometers whose toponym belies its multicultural, multilingual, and multi-ethnic landscape. Its boundaries are disputed by various municipal agencies and social scientists. Uncontested are Koreatown's origins in the 1965 Hart-Cellar Act, which repealed a 1924 ban on Asian immigration, and a South Korean policy of incentivizing emigration. A late 70s Korean American growth machine promoted the area while white capital and bodies fled. In 1980 Mayor Bradley, the city's first black mayor, acknowledged their lobbying and designated it Koreatown. Then, as now, Korean American capital and black politicians dominated, but residents were mainly Latino and indigenous.

Since the 1970s scholarly literature has largely focused on Koreatown's Korean American *umwelt* (Bonacich, Light, and Wong 1977; E. Park 2012; Suh 2016), while lavishing considerably less scholarly attention on the neighborhood's other inhabitants (Blackwell 2017; Sanchez 2018). In this piece I seek to strike a balance by describing the lifeworlds and landscape that I encountered between Wilshire Boulevard and Third Street – two of Koreatown's commercial thoroughfares – while I was conducting my fieldwork between 2013 and 2015. My account is informed by phenomenologically influenced works favoring personal, illustrative, and experiential description over statistics' seemingly omniscient perspective (Tilley 2019). This literature emphasizes how dissimilar ways of dwelling result in continually contested reconfigurations of urban landscapes (Bender 2001).

In describing these varied landscapes I focus on marking and movement. The former term describes how inhabitants sought to draw others' attention to their dwelling through acts of inscription. These were necessary because, as I detail in the latter section, the more informal acts of landscape forma-

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tion while deeply sensorial were frequently transitory. They were erased by other beings in other lifeworlds. Thus, arguably, the very constant bustle that was Koreatown's chief characteristic ensured impermanence.

Marked Landscapes

In late 2013 I attended a neighborhood meeting at Young Oak Kim Academy. The school was built in the 2000s and its gray and yellow exterior walls and chain-link fencing on its roofs had a penal quality, but inside were classrooms with posters and artwork telling of community and an interior courtyard with splendid trees. At the meeting the Koreatown Cultural Gateway, a proposed futuristic archway with LED lights strung between white-painted steel poles, was discussed. This name, like the toponym, obscured a complex reality. With that reality in mind I detail a range of signs inscribed on this landscape that reflect its diversity.

Boo Eung Koh, a South Korean Professor of English, visited Koreatown in 2003 and described Korean language signs as dominant. He felt they more accurately delineated Koreatown's boundaries than any government agency's map and made it something of a foreign landscape to non-Korean speakers. However, to my eyes, this purported Korean symbolic hegemony was consistently disrupted by other signs, like the neighborhood's graffiti, which indexed other collectives and forms of dwelling. At the edge of Third and Catalina, a place of plentiful palms, browning lawns, several story-tall apartment buildings with tired exteriors, and distressed, wooden family homes converted into apartments, was the local thrift store. There I would routinely see Koreatown Youth and Community Center workers, a non-profit contracted to provide services by the city, furiously scrubbing the store's faded brown walls to remove gang tags. The simple tag of a letter and numbers was written in a lurid red and marked the area as being MS13's – a transnational Salvadoran American gang founded in Koreatown in the 1980s – territory. When I crossed Third the tags continued. Indeed, MS13 and the 18th Street gang seemed to be in an ongoing struggle to signify dominance through tagging. Consequently, the tags were swiftly resprayed.

Long before the toponym existed Korean Americans were drawn to the neighborhood's Korean shops to purchase Korean goods. However, spaces that seem to mark ethnic identity can be misleading. One hot summer day in June I was walking along Wilshire Boulevard with Ronald – a tall, plump Mongolian man in his late twenties studying for a business degree. We had just finished enjoyably unctuous *tsuivan* (a fried dish of noodles, vegetables, and meat) at the tiny Golden Mongolian restaurant – LA's only Mongolian eatery and an informal Mongolian meeting place. There identity was reflected in both the cuisine and the many curios and pictures that decorated the interior. While there we had witnessed an American customer leave because they did not serve Mongolian barbecue– a Taiwanese invention advertised as 'real' Mongolian food whose popularity in California predated any significant Mongolian presence in the state. During our walk we discussed this incident and Ronald observed that restaurant signage was not necessarily reflective of reality. He gestured at a sushi restaurant and explained that they may have a Korean owner, Mongolian waiting staff, and Latino kitchen hands. And yet the sign and the cuisine suggested a Japanese presence otherwise absent from the neighborhood.

Not all Koreatown studies have focused on signage as indicative of hegemony. In 1992 Koreatown was badly affected by civil unrest that followed the acquittal of three LAPD officers for brutalizing Rodney King. Afterwards *p'ungmul* (farmer's music bands), with their rhythmic drumming and striking gongs, played an important role in helping to 'rewrite a Korean-American identity onto the landscape' (Tangherliini 1999, 155). However, these were far from the only sounds helping to mark presence in the landscape. Since the 80s thousands of Bangladeshis had settled in Koreatown. Street signs on a section of Third Street bore the toponym Little Bangladesh and there were several restau-

rants and supermarkets. The community had wanted their toponym affixed to considerably more land, but the Korean American growth machine's opposition had resulted in long-standing bitterness. Normally I barely heard the Bangladeshi presence as I walked along the street it carried faintly in sounds like Dhallywood music radiating from a restaurant. Once in March of 2015 raucous cheers emanated as spectators watched the cricket on a restaurant's wall-mounted television. Ordinarily such sounds were drowned out by constant traffic. However, the Bangladesh Day parade was exceptional. The community marked their presence sonically through flutes, brass bands, and drums.

Mutable Landscapes

The Koreatown I encountered was akin to an infinite regress where each apartment building, street, and block mirrored the other levels in their boundless diversity

Thus far I have described attempts made to preserve evidence of lifeworlds in the landscape. These were a response to an awareness that any landscape's duration is limited. However, dwelling rarely completely reconfigures the landscape more often it creates half-acknowledged palimpsests understood differently by varied stakeholders. This was readily evident on Wilshire Boulevard where the art deco Bullocks Wilshire, a former department store with a tarnished copper green tower and large display windows, was now a law school library and filming location. With this in mind I focus on describing some of the contemporary movements producing Koreatown's palimpsestic landscape.

Recent Koreatown studies have highlighted Korean Americans out-migration to Southern Californian ethnoburbs (K. Park and Kim 2008; Trinh Vo and Yu Danico 2004). However, such migrants and their children would frequently return to shop and partake of nightlife. Indeed Stephen Cho Suh has argued that for second-generation returnees acts of consumption are 'their primary means to claim a sense of affiliation or belonging to the district' (Suh 2016, 414). Gene, a thin, wiry civil engineer, with a Southern California drawl, would seem such a person. Despite residing in the suburbs he would frequently visit Koreatown in the evenings to meet friends, down deceptively intoxicating *sojo* shots, eat *budae jjigae* (a hearty Korean stew of American processed foods, red-chili paste, and *kimchi*), and sing in *norebang* (Korean karaoke parlors with soundproof rooms). Gene and his friends shaped Koreatown's landscape through consumption, but they also actively participated in creating its infrastructure. They helped organize the Koreatown element of *Ciclavia* (an open streets event where streets are closed to motor cars), campaigned for parks and trees, and sought to bring small lots subdivisions to the neighborhood. Gene explained that the last of these was part of a bold plan to reverse out-migration by providing affordable family housing for middle-class Korean Americans.

In contrast to these Korean Americans other actors reconfigured the landscape through highlighting specific parts of the area's pre-Korean heritage. On Wilshire Boulevard where the towering temple-like headquarters of nation's biggest Korean American banks were located one also found a pocket-park and memorial to Bobby Kennedy. These fronted the spacious grounds of the Robert F. Kennedy Community Schools, so named because in 1968 he had been assassinated there. Also on the boulevard was the oddly named Brown Derby Plaza. At the back of this beige three-story mall was a curiously hat-shaped structure. The remnants of the Brown Derby restaurant. In the 1920s it had been patronized by Hollywood glitterati. Wilshire Boulevard was full of these remainders from a period when white capital defined its landscape. Their wealth was visible in the many elegant churches that lined the boulevard and once led to it being nicknamed Five Million Dollar Church Street. A historical society had lovingly erected plaques allowing navigation of this landscape. Meanwhile the Wilshire Centre Business Improvement District's (WCBID) purple-shirted community safety officers patrolled the street in pairs on their bikes. Their presence, the buildings, and plaques served to differentiate this

area.

Private citizens were not the only ones whose movements shaped Koreatown's landscape. Several blocks east of the Brown Derby were the Wilshire/Vermont subway station entrances. The county's transportation planners envisioned such stations as a means to reclaim LA from the car. They believed in increasing the density of human habitation near stations to succeed. Consequently, the city had approved a development on the opposite side of the boulevard and above the station had constructed a mixed-use development with parking, a school, eateries, and a courier's office. During the week the courtyard at the center of the development was a hive of activity with office workers, the unhoused, and school children all mingling. For a few hours a weekly farmer's market would intensify traffic. Infrequently activity would subside as the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department arrived to inspect the tickets. Rarely protests were held in the square. During my fieldwork Korean American protestors twice congregated to vent their fury at the South Korean government. Thus, although the car was an ever-present feature of the neighborhood's landscape, the imperative to move bodies by public transit, as shaped by investment of public funds, also played a prominent role.

Conclusion

The Koreatown I encountered was akin to an infinite regress where each apartment building, street, and block mirrored the other levels in their boundless diversity. The toponym has continued to matter too despite this diversity, the circumstances in which the neighborhood was named, and the various other signs people made. Even as recently as 2018 there was tension over an attempt by some Bangladeshi activists to split the neighborhood association with one section being renamed Wilshire-Center Bangladesh. Some eighteen thousand people opposed this move with a number waiting for three hours to vote down the proposal. A commitment suggesting that in Koreatown, at least, the toponym serves as more than a mere signifier of boundaries but in fact plays an important role in how Koreans and Bangladeshis imagine themselves.

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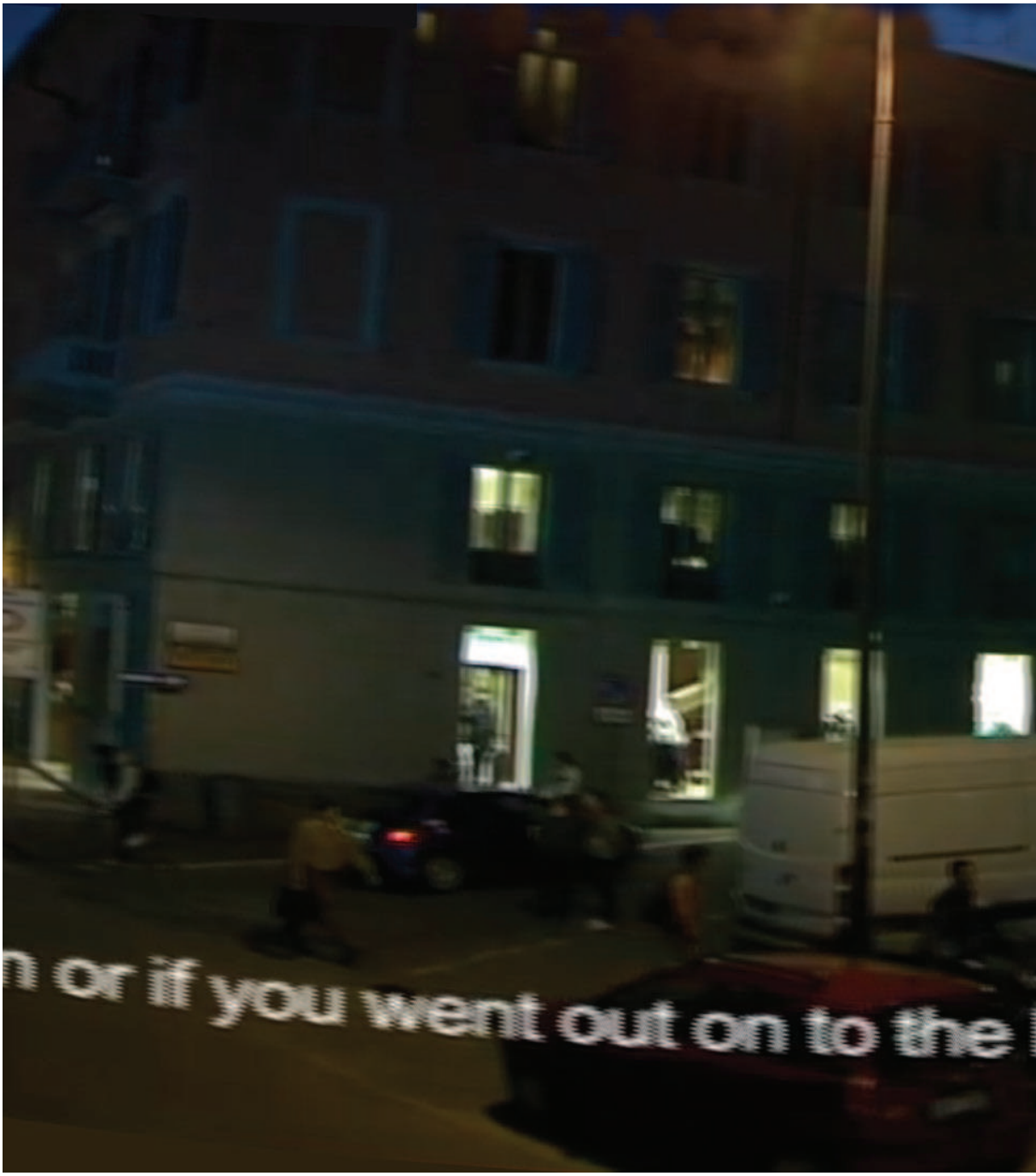

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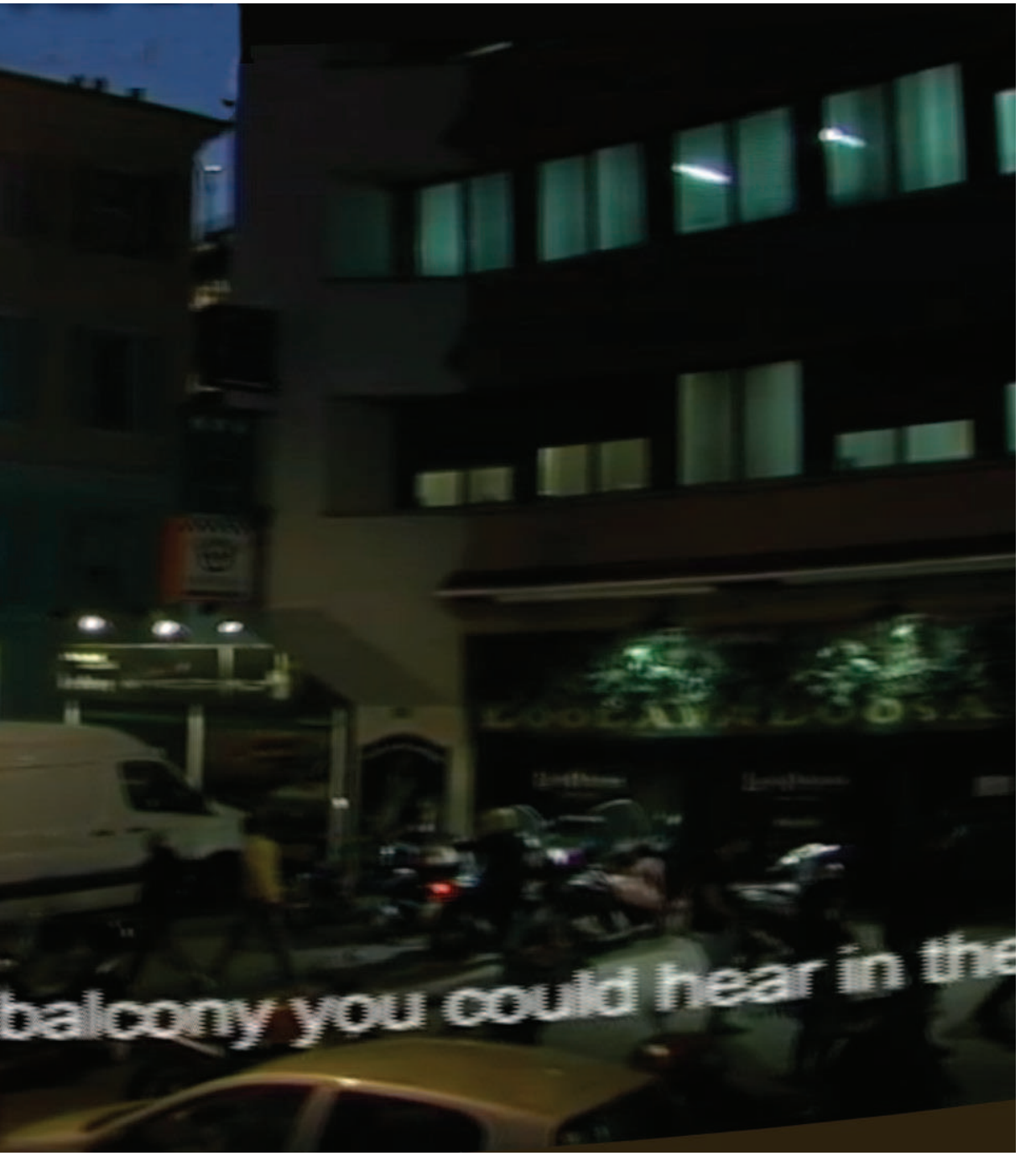

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