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Mapping the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Ethnic Communities

Designing an Interactive Cultural History of Koreatown

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Abstract—This paper presents the interactive online cultural history “The Seoul of Los Angeles: Contested Identities and Transnationalism in Immigrant Space” (<http://seoulomla.com/>). Informed by interaction design and urban studies, this project examines and visualizes the sociocultural networks shaping immigrant communities and how local neighborhoods negotiate a sense of place within an increasingly globalized space. Geographer Doreen Massey recognizes space not as a static entity but as the product of interrelations from the immensity of the global to the intimately tiny. These interrelations are part of a story, an interpreted history that changes and develops over time. One could recognize cultural heritage in a similar way – as dynamic and part of a narrative trajectory that is not merely frozen in a romanticized or essentialist past. Much of what constitutes the dynamics of ethnic community formation is intangible as it is largely a lived experience rather than one that is necessarily documented or archived. As such, this project serves as a digital archive and platform for community storytelling that enriches our understanding of the city and the often intangible narratives that create a sense of place.

Currently, Los Angeles has the largest population of Koreans in the United States living outside of Korea. Nicknamed the “L.A. district of Seoul City”, most visitors understand Koreatown as an extension of Seoul. But, what most people may not know is that the majority of inhabitants who comprise its residential and working class population are not Korean, but Latino. The everyday space of this community is inhabited by a mix of immigrants coming from Mexico, Central and South America, and other parts of Asia including Bangladesh. These networks of nationalisms converge in the urban space of Koreatown. This contests predominant conceptions of ethnic enclaves being understood as homogenous and makes us re-imagine what we think we understand about them—they are increasingly becoming polycentric in complex ways.

Combining design, documentary and issues in contemporary media studies including global/local relations, ethnic and urban studies, this work uses new media and mapping to create greater awareness of our built environment and the peoples who populate it. Mapping is a dynamic system that changes according to the shifts in culture and community that characterize any geographic place. How can this system be visualized in order to read a space with newly informed imaginations? What kind of urban interfaces could be designed to communicate with the spaces we move through and what overlooked stories could be

uncovered in order to enrich our understanding of cities and the intangible cultural histories embedded in them? Such questions are explored in this project.

Keywords—*interactive; cultural history; ethnicity; urban studies; mapping; los angeles; koreatown*

I. INTRODUCTION :NEW MEDIA AND MAPPING

Mapping now has become ubiquitous and commonplace in the digital era. Social media platforms such as History Pin modify Google Maps using an Application Programming Interface (API) to “...share photos and histories of their local communities” [1]. Other projects such as the Racial Dot Map by Dustin A. Cable at the University of Virginia Demographics Research Group use publicly available data from the 2010 United States census bureau to visualize “geographic distribution, population density, and racial diversity of the American people in every neighborhood in the entire country.” In this interactive map comprising 308,745,538 color coded dots, viewers can zoom into any geographic neighborhood in the United States to see how racial demographics are distributed, with each dot representing a single person and the racial category they fall under – White, Black, Asian, Hispanic or Other Race/Native American/Multiracial [2]. Though a highly useful tool often used, as in this case, to visualize data, there is a lack of critical discourse about mapping and what it overlooks. For example, though the Racial Dot Map uses census data to visualize how racial groups are dispersed across the United States, it does not tell us much about who these people are or why they live in the places they do. Mapping is no longer static, but rather a dynamic system that changes according to the shifts in culture and community that characterize any geographic place. As we all live in increasingly dense urban environments that are rapidly shifting, we often lose sight of the human element of urbanization. It is the people who inhabit and move through cities that shape its culture and history and comprise the often ephemeral and under-represented narratives of city spaces.

The work I am presenting in this paper is a visual project, an interactive cultural history, online archive and mapping project on Koreatown—an ethnic enclave in Los Angeles that is complex and multi-layered in terms of its ethnicity and

history. This project engages the fields of critical cartography and spatial ethnography—using mapping as a dynamic platform for sharing overlooked histories of ethnic communities and how they claim space in cities. The term spatial ethnography is most identified with the work of architecture and urban historian Margaret Crawford whose work on “everyday urbanism” draws attention to places in the city that are not typically considered glamorous such as yard sales and street vending [3]. Other urban scholars such as Annette M. Kim have used spatial ethnography to combine social science research and physical spatial analysis to uncover how sidewalks are used and the social processes of that use in Ho Chi Minh City. Kim uses the label “critical cartography” to “describe the subset of mapmaking that aims to bring to the fore issues of power.” She states:

“For centuries, primarily empires have commissioned maps and developed our cartographic conventions. Therefore, maps privileged and served the interests of the powerful, rendering many people either nonexistent on the map or in disturbingly distorted portrayals...Critical cartography’s intellectual project is to alter the terrain of cartography’s privilege. One strategy has been to make alternative maps. Maps may be critical because of the choice of subject. They could be people, spaces, and phenomena that conventional maps have historically not acknowledged...An underdeveloped question of critical cartography is how we think mapmaking can critique power and be part of an emancipatory practice [4].”

These scholars, among others, exemplify a larger spatial turn in critical history, asking us to consider the often overlooked, everyday spaces of socio-cultural activity in the city and to ask how mapping can be used in more critical ways, to re-see these spaces. The outcome is to create discourse on the ways in which space is visualized and also, in my case, to create creative platforms that connect people more deeply to each others’ histories embedded in the geographies of place in order to help disturb histories of forgetting and to help disturb the negation of unrepresented narratives in order to enrich our understanding of immigration and cultural heritage in the transnational metropolis of Los Angeles.

II. LOS ANGELES’ KOREATOWN

Los Angeles is characterized by many cultural geographers like Mike Davis and Edward Soja, as the ultimate postmodern, polycentric city with satellites of ethnic enclaves throughout. As Soja describes it, “Everywhere seems also to be in Los Angeles. ...And from every quarter’s teeming shores have poured a pool of cultures so diverse that contemporary Los Angeles represents the world in connected urban microcosms, reproducing *in situ* the customary colors and confrontations of a hundred different homelands [5].” The developmental history of Los Angeles by historians and geographers, and their characterization of the city as a constellation of segregated and homogenous ethnic communities, is succinctly summarized by David E. James in his discussion of Los Angeles culture and community formation. Recognized for its

fragmented spatiality with an endlessly shifting constellation of unique ethnic communities and cultures, Los Angeles today is predominantly understood as “a conglomeration of distinct ethnic communities, some large and others small, some relatively stable and others kinetic in transformation—at once one of the most diverse cities in history but also one of the most segregated [6].” In other words, it is assumed that these ethnic communities are isolated from each other. This tradition by social theorists of over-emphasizing ethnic and cultural homogeneity within these segregated urban enclaves, is no longer relevant. In one of the most ethnically identified neighborhoods in Los Angeles, Koreatown, a community with clear spatial boundaries, with a long history whose immigrants originated from a country as nationalistic and ethnically homogenous as Korea, even here it is impossible to define the community along any singular ethnic or cultural lens.

Currently, Los Angeles has the largest population of Koreans living outside of Korea. Most visitors understand Koreatown as an extension of Seoul culture, but what most people may not know is that the majority of inhabitants who comprise its residential and working class population are not Korean, but Latino. Despite being one of the most ethnically identified neighborhoods in Los Angeles, Koreatown is incredibly heterogeneous in its ethnic makeup. According to a recent study by the USC Program for Environmental and Regional Equity (PERE), “Koreans are the single largest national origin group within Koreatown, at 22 percent of the population. However, while Koreatown has by far the largest concentration of Koreans in the region, they are a racial/ethnic minority; Latinos, with origins in Mexico, El Salvador, Guatemala, other Latin American nations constitute 58 percent of the population. The remaining 20 percent is made up of non-Hispanic whites, African Americans, non-Korean and Asian and Pacific Islanders, and others [7].” Furthermore, Koreatown is not only multiracial, but also a multiclass community that includes immigrant families, upwardly mobile professionals, as well as elderly Korean “empty-nesters” who are returning to the community they had left years earlier to find better schools and safer streets. Considering these factors, Koreatown radically breaks from previous assumptions that ethnic communities have a stable homogeneity within them.

Yet, in many people’s imagination, Koreatown is a simulacrum of Korea. Though the majority of businesses are owned by struggling first generation Korean immigrants or, in some cases, financed by Korean transnational capital, the everyday space of this community is largely inhabited by a mix of immigrants. This complex network of national affiliations, each with its own distinct cultural history, converge in the urban space of Koreatown. This convergence results in a shift in dominant conceptions of ethnic enclaves being understood as homogenous or segregated. This makes us re-imagine what we think we understand about ethnic enclaves – they are increasingly becoming more complex and polycentric. These ethnic communities are inscribing the topography of Los Angeles, claiming space in the city in order to create a symbolic sense of cultural heritage, place and belonging. Such collisions of cultural identities claiming

space in the city are explored in the project presented in this paper.

III. THE SEOUL OF LOS ANGELES

The Seoul of Los Angeles: Contested Identities and Transnationalism in Immigrant Space is an online cultural history on the multi-ethnic identity and development of Los Angeles' Koreatown. Using Koreatown in Los Angeles as a case study, this project examines how immigrant communities shape a sense of place and how these local ethnic communities in large urban cities reconfigure our understanding of transnational identity. As previously stated, though Los Angeles has the largest population of Koreans living outside of Korea, Koreatown's residents are primarily Latino with Koreans comprising a surprising minority of its residential population. There is even a sub-community within Koreatown called Little Bangladesh that was established in 2010. Little Bangladesh is effectively an ethnic community within another ethnic community. Considering such developments, this project examines how conceptions of ethnic affiliation have changed, and how a homogeneous sense of national identity is destabilized in order to create a more complex sense of being for the diverse communities that share the space of Koreatown.

Using a combination of original interviews, film clips, archival photographs, mapping techniques and written material, this research project is presented as a scholarly website and digital archive conceived as a platform for community storytelling. It utilizes a combination of open-source web tools to present a unique interface design consisting of an interactive map and database designed metaphorically and visually to reflect the uneven nature of urban development. Visitors can explore original edited interviews, geo-located archival images and video using an adaptation of Google Street View and Maps, to explore the cultural history of this ethnic neighborhood near downtown Los Angeles.

The web-based study is organized under four topics: "Early Pioneers," which describes the establishment of Korean settlement in Los Angeles in the early 1900s and before 1965; "Re-mapping Immigrant Spaces: Koreatown after 1965," which describes the development of contemporary Koreatown in the period following the 1965 immigration act—a period that saw the arrival of a significantly increased number of newer Asian immigrants, among them Korean, to Los Angeles; "Sa-I-Gu: The 1992 Los Angeles Riots," which looks at the struggle for ethnic coalition building surrounding the 1992 Rodney King riots and how the tensions among the various ethnic communities comprising Koreatown's population magnified the heterogeneity within the community; and "Transnational Identities," which looks at how Koreatown reconfigures our understanding of ethnic enclaves and transnationalism in local communities.

Viewers can freely select and explore individual items in the main menu (Fig. 1) or they may choose one of the four topics. Once a topic is selected, the database reconfigures itself to display only those materials related to the chosen topic with associated explanatory text (Fig. 2). Individual

video interviews or archival images can be opened to further explore this database narrative (Fig. 3).

Fig. 1. An image from the opening screen of "The Seoul of Los Angeles" online cultural history.

Fig. 2. An image from the section of the website "Early Pioneers." When a topic is selected, the database is reorganized to show those materials related to the section.

Fig. 3. Each video and archival image can be opened to display associated interviews and information.

IV. THE ARCHIVE AND DATABASE NARRATIVE

Having introduced the organizing rubrics in which *The Seoul of Los Angeles* online cultural history is presented, I will now discuss why the archive and database narrative are useful as structuring devices for exploring the complex relationships comprising Koreatown's socio-cultural history.

Archives are traditionally thought of as collections of historical material housed in cultural institutions and often representative of official, state-sanctioned accounts of historical memory. As such, they are presumed to be fixed both spatially within the places they are housed, and epistemologically within dominant historical narratives. In her book on reconsidering the archive and the role of performance in transferring knowledge and cultural memory, Diana Taylor identifies the archive as a cultural construct, a means developed to preserve cultural memory in the form of "supposedly enduring materials." She distinguishes the archive from the "ephemeral repertoires of embodied practice/knowledge" such as the spoken word and proposes that archives are primarily understood as a way to preserve knowledge in a similar way that written texts serve to transfer and document knowledge. This privileging of the supposed unmediated, material purity and incorruptibility of the archival object as a means of sharing and transferring knowledge is a myth. Furthermore, this assumption that archival objects are representative artifacts of cultural memory or heritage denies the value of what Taylor identifies as the embodied or "performed acts [that also] generate, record, and transmit knowledge." She writes,

"By shifting the focus from written to embodied culture, from the discursive to the performative, we need to shift our methodologies. Instead of focusing on patterns of cultural expression in terms of texts and narratives, we might think of them as scenarios that do not reduce gestures and embodied practices to narrative description. This shift necessarily alters what academic disciplines regard as appropriate canons, and might extend the traditional disciplinary boundaries to include practices previously outside their purview [8]."

Taylor makes a convincing argument for re-evaluating the methodologies of transferring knowledge to include performative, ephemeral and intangible modes of knowledge production and dissemination. I would add digital practices and the creation of digital artifacts among these methodologies and propose that digital methodologies are themselves changing the conception of the archive as a fixed and purely institutional construct.

With the introduction of digital media and the resulting transformation of archival information, documents that were once rarified and not easily viewed are now available, through digital reproduction, to a much wider public using technologies like the Internet. Furthermore, the creation of archives is no longer limited to institutional practice. Open-source, social networking tools have allowed the general public to become active participants and creators of shared knowledge production. Such developments have introduced new considerations in terms of online archives and mapping

that include the relationship between database structures in which archives are organized, and their relationship to narrative as a means of constructing meaning. These developments have resulted in a reconsideration of the archive and of knowledge production as mutable, open-ended constructs that are no longer representative of any singular view but are inclusive of multiple and sometimes contradictory perspectives.

In her discussion on the relationship between database and narrative, Marsha Kinder defines database narrative as "narratives whose structure exposes the dual processes of selection and combination that lie at the heart of all stories and are crucial to language: certain characters, images, sounds, events and settings are selected from series of categories and combined to generate specific tales [9]." Kinder points out another characteristic of digital archives that is tied to its mutability—the aspect of *open-endedness* and incompleteness that creates new possibilities through the recombination of modular items in a database into a variety of aesthetic forms including narrative. The open-ended structure of database narrative resists any totalizing construction of meaning. Rather, they "diffuse the force of master narratives, which can no longer be seen as merely *natural* or, even more simply, *the truth*, because users are reminded that alternative versions of the story and new combinations of the components are always possible. Instead of master narratives, what emerges is a more open narrative field full of possibilities, which is in turn fueled by an underlying database that continues to grow [10]." The digital archive as database narrative makes us reconsider historical artifacts, not as fixed constructs representative only of official accounts of history, but as open systems that generate meaning through storytelling.

An example not only of the mutability of the digital archive but of digital mapping can be found in the "Map" section of "The Seoul of Los Angeles." Here, viewers can explore an adapted version of Google Maps showing three different highlighted areas where Korean settlement took place between the early 1900s to today. In the area known as Koreatown today, there are two overlapping boundaries that show the shifting spatial understandings of Koreatown (Figs. 4-5).

Fig. 4. The Map section of the website shows different Korean settlements from the early 1900s to today.

Fig. 5. Shifting spatial understandings of the boundaries of Koreatown persist to this day.

The current official boundaries of Koreatown were created as a result of a proposal made in 2009 to designate an existing ethnic community within the boundaries of Koreatown, Little Bangladesh (Figs. 6-7). According to a mapping project undertaken by the cultural and advocacy group the South Asian Network in 2005, the current population of Bangladeshis living in the area is approximately 20,000 [11]. Community members representing both the Korean and Bangladeshi immigrant population worked with the City Council to negotiate the new official boundaries of Koreatown and its sub-community of Little Bangladesh. Though it is perceived as a predominantly Korean immigrant place in Los Angeles due to the number of Korean businesses and the proliferation of signage in the Korean language (known as “hangul”), its residents are 70 percent foreign born with 62 percent from Latin America and only 22 percent from Korea [12]. Despite its name, Koreatown is ethnically heterogeneous with Koreans comprising a minority population.

Fig. 6. A visual showing the location of Little Bangladesh in Koreatown.

Fig. 7. A video interview can be played that explains how the Bangladeshi community formed Little Bangladesh as a sub-community of Koreatown.

V. CONCLUSION

Combining the structuring frameworks of the archive and database narrative, *The Seoul of Los Angeles: Contested Identities and Transnationalism in Immigrant Space* is designed as a platform for community storytelling that reconfigures the digital archive as a place for collective knowledge creation and transfer—a space that is inclusive of the conflicting and contested narratives that together form the complex and uneven development of transnational identities in ethnic enclaves. The project is designed ultimately to be a resource for exploring urban history through the embodied narratives of community members, scholars, artists and activists who, together, challenge the conception of ethnic enclaves as being fixed, homogenous constructs.

This project is an interdisciplinary study and media art project presented as a database narrative and digital archive. It serves not only as a resource for those engaged in cultural history, urban and ethnic studies of Los Angeles, but can also be viewed as a model in the field of digital and urban humanities. The significance of this research is to combine scholarly content with thoughtful design in order to create exemplary models of spatial ethnography and critical cartography. It uses new media tools to expand the reach of humanities based content to audiences both academic and public. It serves as a digital platform for revealing and giving voice to overlooked peoples and places in the city so that we can re-see our everyday socio-cultural environment with new perspectives. Ultimately this research shows the limits of understanding ethnic communities along the lines of any simplified or static geographic view of nationalism since ethnic identity embodies a more dynamic network of racial, economic, historical and cultural affiliations that blur or call into question the boundaries of nation. This project is a case study for exploring how ethnic communities have become more complex, diverse and hybrid in ways that reveal a way of re-imagining how we identify, interact and inhabit urban environments today.

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