2025 International Conference

Cultural Imagination and Practices in the Age of Migration

이주 공동체의 문화적 상상력과 실천

주최·주관: 한성대학교 인문과학연구원 이주의 인문학 사업단
후원: 한국연구재단, 교육부

Program

Friday, 23 May 2025	
12:30–13:00	WELCOME AND OPENING REMARKS
	Hwang Hae Sung | Director of Research Project on Migration Humanities, Hansung University
	Lee Chang Won | President of Hansung University
13:00–14:30	SESSION 1 Spatial Narratives and Cultural Dynamics in Migrant Communities
	Chair person :: Kang Jeong Hyang | Sookmyung Women's University
13:00	**Refugee Spatiality: Tales, Affect, and the Art of (Un)Settlement** Michelle Bae-Dimitriadis | The Pennsylvania State University
	Discussant :: Oh Sun Young | Independent curator
13:40	**Territory, Mobility, and New Hierarchies: Transnational Networks and Cultural Dynamics of Asian Communities in Latin America** Carolina Mera | University of Buenos Aires, CONICET
	Discussant :: Seo Dae-Seung | Seoul National University
14:20	QUESTIONS & ANSWERS
14:30–15:00	TEA BREAK
15:00–16:30	SESSION 2 Cultural Practices and Digital Narratives of Migrants in South Korea
	Chair person :: Park Dahn | Sogang University
15:00	**Cultural Practices of Migrants and the Possibilities of Artivism in Korea** Kim Jiyoun | Hansung University
	Discussant :: Ohnmar Lwin | SungKongHoe University
15:40	**Critiquing South Korea from a Veil of Anonymity: Image Analysis of Memes from Grumpy Aliens Korea** Yun Jiwon | Yale University
	Discussant :: Lee Da Eun | National University of Singapore
16:20	QUESTIONS & ANSWERS
16:30–17:00	TEA BREAK

17:00-18:00	KEYNOTE ADDRESS
	Unessentialising Migrants. Researching the performance of multiple belonging in everyday life and on stage Monika Salzbrunn | University of Lausanne
18:00-20:00	CONFERENCE DINNER

Saturday, 24 May 2025	
10:00-11:30	SESSION 3 Sensory Dimensions of Migration
	Chair person :: Shin Ji Hye| Chonnam National University
10:00	**The Power of the Visual: Rethinking Governance in the Context of Migration** Alice Massari | Toronto Metropolitan University & University of Copenhagen
	Discussant :: Shin HaeRan | Seoul National University
10:40	**Acoustic Regimes of Labour: The Sound Lives and Sound Worlds of Transient Workers in Southeast Asia** Nengsih Suprihatin & Shzr Ee Tan | Royal Holloway University of London
	Discussant :: Yuk Joo Won | Kyungpook National University
11:20	QUESTIONS & ANSWERS
11:30-12:00	TEA BREAK
12:00-13:00	ROUNDTABLE
13:00	CLOSING REMARKS
	Cho Kyu Tae | Director of Institute of Humanities, Hansung University

프로그램

1일차 : 2025년 5월 23일 (금)

12:30 - 13:00 개 회

개회사 : 황 혜 성 | 한성대학교 이주의 인문학 사업단 단장

축 사 : 이 창 원 | 한성대학교 총장

13:00 - 14:30 세션1. 이주 공동체의 공간적 서사와 문화적 역학
Spatial Narratives and Cultural Dynamics in Migrant Communities

사 회 : 강 정 향 | 숙명여자대학교

13:00 **난민의 공간성 : 이야기, 정서, 그리고 (비)정착의 예술**
Michelle Bae-Dimitriadis | 펜실베니아 주립대학교
토 론 : 오 선 영 | 독립 큐레이터

13:40 **영토, 이동성, 그리고 새로운 위계 : 라틴아메리카 아시아 공동체의 초국적 네트워크와 문화적 역학**
Carolina Mera | 부에노스아이레스 대학교
토 론 : 서 대 승 | 서울대학교

14:20 **질의응답**

14:30 - 15:00 휴 식

15:00 - 16:30 세션2. 한국 이주민의 문화적 실천과 디지털 서사
Cultural Practices and Digital Narratives of Migrants in South Korea

사 회 : 박 단 | 서강대학교

15:00 **이주자의 문화적 실천과 아티비즘의 가능성**
김 지 윤 | 한성대학교 인문과학연구원
토 론 : Ohnmar Lwin | 성공회대학교

15:40 **익명으로 한국 사회 비평하기 : Grumpy Aliens Korea의 밈에 대한 이미지 분석**
윤 지 원 | 예일대학교
토 론 : 이 다 은 | 싱가포르국립대학교

16:20 **질의응답**

16:30 - 17:00 휴 식

17:00 – 18:00	기 조 강 연
	이주민의 탈본질화 : 일상과 무대에서의 다중적 소속감 연출 연구하기 Monika Salzbrunn | 로잔느 대학교
18:00 – 20:00	저 녁 만 찬

2일차 : 2025년 5월 24일 (토)	
10:00 – 11:30	세션3. 이주의 감각적 차원들 Sensory Dimensions of Migration
	사 회 : 신 지 혜 | 전남대학교
10:00	**비주얼의 힘 : 이주의 맥락에서 거버넌스를 다시 생각하기** Alice Massari | 토론토 메트로폴리탄 대학교·코펜하겐 대학교
	토 론 : 신 혜 란 | 서울대학교
10:40	**노동의 음향학적 레짐 : 동남아 지역 이주 노동자들의 음향적 삶과 음향적 세계** Nengsih Suprihatin & Shzr Ee Tan | 로열홀로웨이 대학교
	토 론 : 육 주 원 | 경북대학교
11:20	**질의응답**
11:30 – 12:00	휴 식
12:00 – 13:00	라운드테이블(전체토론)
13:00 – 13:10	폐 회
	폐회사 : 조 규 태 | 한성대학교 인문과학연구원 원장

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Opening Remarks

It is a great pleasure to welcome all of you to the International Conference *"Cultural Imagination and Practices in the Age of Migration,"* hosted by the Institute of Humanities at Hansung University. I would like to extend my heartfelt gratitude to our distinguished guests, especially Professor Monika Salzbrunn from the University of Lausanne, President Lee Changwon of Hansung University, and esteemed scholars of migration from Korea and abroad, for joining us today.

Our Research Project team was formed with the support of the National Research Foundation of Korea and Hansung University. We aim to deepen our understanding of migration by connecting ideas from various disciplines, with a focus on the humanities. Thus, we are more interested in the narratives about the movements and social imaginations of human beings than in "scientific" facts and data on migration. In pursuit of this goal, our research team has held 11 domestic conferences, 23 colloquiums, and has published articles and a series of books on migration humanities based on solid research. We also hosted our first international conference in 2022, marking an important milestone in expanding our global academic engagement.

The title of this year's conference is *"Cultural Imagination and Practices in the Age of Migration."* Migration today is not a peripheral issue but a defining condition of our global era. As mobility reaches unprecedented levels, we are witnessing diverse cultures intersecting, clashing, and reshaping one another in transformative ways. This conference highlights the role of migrants not as passive beings, but as active cultural agents who pursue aspiration and creativity. Moving beyond crisis-centered narratives, we seek to foreground the constructive and imaginative dimensions of migration.

To explore these themes, we have invited seven distinguished scholars from diverse fields in the humanities and social sciences. Over the next two days, their presentations will examine how migration redefines cultural identity, artistic expression, and the social discourses and structures that shape our world. By focusing on the cultural practices of migrants and refugees, this conference aims to reveal how these practices challenge stereotypes, foster empathy and dialogue, and contribute to new forms of solidarity in increasingly interconnected societies.

We are honored to welcome Professor Monika Salzbrunn from the University of Lausanne as our keynote speaker. A leading scholar in the fields of migration, religion, and the arts, Professor Salzbrunn will present her lecture titled *"Unessentialising Migrants: Researching the Performance of Multiple Belonging in Everyday Life and on Stage."* Her work challenges fixed notions of migrant identity and highlights how everyday and artistic performances reveal the complexity of belonging in diverse societies.

This conference aspires to be more than just a venue for academic dialogue. We hope it becomes a space where we can collectively imagine and enact a more inclusive cultural future. May this gathering inspire us to envision a better world—one grounded in shared imagination and creative solidarity.

Thank you once again for being with us. I wish you all a meaningful and inspiring two days.

May 23, 2025

Hwang Hae Sung
Professor Emeritus, Department of History
Director, Migration Humanities Research Project
Hansung University

Congratulatory Address

Good morning. My name is Lee Changwon, President of Hansung University.

I would like to extend my sincere congratulations on the hosting of the second international conference, *"Cultural Imagination and Practices in the Age of Migration,"* by the Migration Humanities Research Project at the Institute of Humanities.

I'd also like to express my special gratitude to Professor Hwang Hae Sung, Director of the Migration Humanities Research Project, Professor Cho Kyu Tae, Director of the Institute of Humanities, and the senior researchers serving on the conference organizing committee.

I welcome all the distinguished scholars of migration who have joined us from six countries—the United States, Argentina, Switzerland, Canada, the United Kingdom, and South Korea—for this International Conference on the Humanities of Migration.

Since its selection in 2019 for the Research Support Program for Institutes of Humanities and Social Sciences by the National Research Foundation of Korea, the Migration Humanities Research Project at Hansung University has been dedicated to fostering positive awareness of migration and migrants.

To date, the project has published over 60 academic journal articles and seven anthologies on migration humanities. It has also hosted 11 domestic conferences and one international conference.

We are living in a rapidly evolving world shaped by overlapping transformations. Among these, global migration stands out as a defining force of our time. It brings new energy and opportunities to our societies, while connecting people of different races, cultures, and worldviews. Migration serves as a bridge between distant and diverse communities, fostering mutual understanding across boundaries. It is through migration that we can move toward a more inclusive and pluralistic society.

This international conference on the Humanities of Migration offers a valuable opportunity to explore the multifaceted nature of migration today. I am confident that it will deepen our insights and help cultivate a culture of openness and empathy. I hope this conference will both highlight the project's achievements and point the way forward.

Thank you.

May 23, 2025

Lee Changwon
Ph.D. in Histology, State University of New York
President of Hansung University

Keynote Adress

Unessentialising Migrants. Researching the performance of multiple belonging in everyday life and on stage

Unessentialising Migrants. Researching the performance of multiple belonging in everyday life and on stage

Prof. Dr. Monika Salzbrunn
Full Professor of Religions, Migration, Arts, University of Lausanne
monika.salzbrunn@unil.ch

Abstract

Migrants have long been reduced to their (national) origin or their religious practice –be it in media discourses, politics or even in certain research settings. The present keynote provides constructive suggestions for researching multiple belonging in everyday life and on stage, in order to unessentialise the research approach as well as the image of migrants. Artistic practices, namely performances within public space, are particularly insightful to study the complexity of societal interactions from an intersectional perspective.

Introduction: Unessentialising migration studies by the event-approach

When cultural imagination processes are at work in the age of migration, stereotypes between members of the host society and immigrants circulate and change interactively. Discourses, attitudes, and practices from the populations involved are shaped by images about self and the other(s), and the political context reflected in diverse media adds another layer of complexity on those processes.

Instead of focusing one particular group based on ethnic or religious commonality, I have followed urban events in a specific territory to unessentialise the perception of migrants and the epistemology of migration studies.

Despite a decade of self-criticism, research perspectives on migration studies remain too often centred on national belonging (Glick Schiller & Caglar 2011), which is only one aspect of multiple belonging processes[1]. An exclusive focus on nationality reproduces

1) The following pages are based on conceptual reflections based on Salzbrunn (2022). Please refer to the original publication in citations. The case was presented in the same publication, but the theoretical frame and the analysis has been enriched and developed here, as well as the conclusion.

methodological nationalism even in a transnational research setting and does not take into consideration how migrants manage to overcome those boundaries by creating local alliances thanks to their economic, political, social, and cultural activities. Hence, social research on migration should implicate a profound reflection on sociological categories: Who defines who is a migrant and in which social situations? This question is particularly crucial during anti-migration politics, which often only concerns a specific type of migrants, depending on the economic, political, and social situation in the country in which the debate takes place. Expatriates are hardly concerned by certain stigmata and migrants who sustain the health sector are crucially needed, whereas refugees tend to be collectively rejected by populist governments and the press that supports their opinion.

This article provides a critical in-depth reflection on various ways of constructing local belonging through art and activism in a context of increasing anti-migration politics on a local, regional, and national level. Based on field studies conducted in Maddalena La Superba (a district in Genoa/Italy), I will show how "event lenses" can constructively replace "ethnic lenses"[2] in the analysis of artivistic practices that aim at changing political situations and living conditions. Wearing "event lenses" also helps us to question supposed homogeneities and to investigate common civic or political practices and interests by emphasizing multiple belonging processes in various social situations (Yuval-Davis et al. 2006, 7). As stated in Yuval-David et al. (2006), "Citizenship and identities, as well as 'cultures and traditions'—in fact all signifiers of borders and boundaries play central roles in discourses of the politics of belonging"(3). Politics of belonging are situated temporally, spatially, and intersectionally (2006, 7).

According to Lamont & Molnar (2002), "Symbolic boundaries are conceptual distinctions made by social actors to categorize objects, people, practices, and even time and space. They are tools by which individuals and groups struggle over and come to agree upon definitions of reality. Examining them allows us to capture the dynamic dimensions of social relations, as groups compete in the production, diffusion, and institutionalization of alternatives systems and principles of classifications. Social boundaries are objectified forms of social differences manifested in unequal access to and unequal distribution of resources (material and nonmaterial) and social opportunities'" (168).

As I have mentioned in my ERC ARTIVISM project proposal as well as in a recently

2) On the critique of "ethnic lenses"see Nina Glick Schiller and Ayse Caglar's constructive suggestions on "Locating Migration" (2011). Rogers Brubaker (2006) also criticised "groupism" in social sciences.

published epistemological article:

> [a]rtistic expressions that illustrate political claims and demands for civil rights "become manifest in political, cultural, organised or spontaneous events celebrating belonging and non-belonging by "means of performance"[Pfaff 2011]. Typically, such events are carnivals [Salzbrunn 2011c, 2014], festivals [Salzbrunn 2011a, 2011d; Salzbrunn & von Weichs 2013], pilgrimages [Salzbrunn & von Weichs 2013], assemblies, and demonstrations. Events are therefore particularly suitable entry-points to the field of art and activism and to the public space that is appropriated by marginalised social actors and collective groups" [Salzbrunn 2010a, 2011a].
>
> Furthermore, researching art and activism through events helps to avoid a limited perspective on pre-defined groups and widens the horizon to broader forms of participation, including spontaneous, punctual or changing ways to join artivist actions. A focus on events, combined with situational analysis and consideration of multiple forms of belonging [Yural-Davis et al. 2006] also avoids reducing artivists to a single cause since in many cases, several events mingle different issues and/or an individual can be engaged or sympathize with various causes (antifascism, environmental issues, feminism, LGBTQ+, education, anti-gentrification and anti-touristification claims, etc.). Nevertheless, the understanding of events created by artivists also requires an in-depth understanding of their life-worlds through a share of everyday-life in a long-term research setting. (Salzbrunn 2021, 179-180)

When belonging is expressed through music, clothes, and food, it expresses feelings and emotions. In the ERC project "ARTIVISM. Art and activism. Creativity and Performance as Subversive Forms of Political Expression in Super-Diverse Cities",[3] we have developed an event-centred approach and applied multi-sensory ethnography to various fields in Africa, America, and Europe (Salzbrunn 2015, 2016, 2021; Amiotte-Suchet & Salzbrunn 2019).

The events I will analyse, with their preparatory phases, their performativity (Turner 1988), their disruptive elements, and their post-phase can be considered as part of a general struggle for recognition (Fraser 1995). Each actor gives a particular meaning (Deleuze 1969)

3) This project has received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation program (ARTIVISM –grant agreement No 681880). I would like to express my deepest thanks to my interlocutors in Genoa who generously offered their time. I thank my ERC team, Raphaela von Weichs, Federica Moretti, Sara Wiederkehr, Pascal Bernhard, Lisa Zanetti, Blaise Strautmann, Maura Soupper, Michèle Jaccoud Ramseier and Natalie Emch for stimulating exchanges and fruitful collaboration.

to his or her performance (Butler 1993) in a certain context (Rogers & Vertovec 1995) and in a given social situation (Clarke 2005), which in the present case is during the fashion show. The study of the event allows us to observe how strategic groups emerge around a common political goal (Bierschenk & Olivier de Sardan 1998) and a common political strategy. Finally, focusing the performativity of the events allows us to understand their interactive and transformative effects in the construction of symbolic boundaries of belonging. Cultural imagination processes and/or the motivation to reverse perceived stigmata can lead to creative practices, as I will show in the empirical case of fashion design and their public display in Genoa.

These are considerably under-researched topics in migration and diaspora studies despite the emotional or affective turn which the social sciences are currently undergoing(Bens et al. 2019). Furthermore, artistic practices (Martiniello 2008; Martiniello & Lafleur 2009) in super-diverse societies (Vertovec 2011) remain a topic urgently needing more profound exploration, as we have shown recently (Rodriguez Quinones and Salzbrunn 2024). The main epistemological challenge is to research super-diversity and multiple belonging without reifying individuals or groups to one single aspect (ethnicity, religion, etc.).

Following the event-centred approach developed in previous publications, I will focus here on fashion shows in Genoa, organized by the local population to reverse stigmata. The Maddalena district of Genoa suffers from negative stigmatisations related to informal economical practices (prostitution, drug dealing etc.). Furthermore, the district is part of top-down and bottom-up urban gentrification processes. For example, while the historical center hosts a larger immigrant population then other districts, its percentage of residents with a university diploma is also higher than elsewhere. This complex social stratification can also be observed vertically: In certain streets of the historical centre of Genoa, the dark ground floor apartments are occupied by prostitutes (as in other harbour cities) while the sunny upper floor penthouses with rooftop terraces are owned by a wealthy educated population.

This situation puts into question the socio-cultural dynamics of the district which threaten certain residents with low income and/or a fragile juridical status. How does the super-diverse population in these spaces react to these political economic processes in a context of growing extreme-right discourses and, in the case of Genoa, of populist and extreme-right governments with anti-migration and/or anti-refugee discourses and restrictive politics at the local, regional and national[4)]level? In this context, populist discourses

contribute to construct symbolic borders between desired foreigners (expatriates, tourists, etc.) and undesired immigrants, namely refugees.

Hence, stigmatising articles associating Senegalese nationals to drug sales have appeared in the Italian press in recent years, particularly through news agencies. The xenophobic discourses of the Italian Minister for Interior Affairs in 2018 have also contributed to dissemination of racism and to downgrade refugees. Only recently and in another locality, the difficulties of the many Senegalese street vendors suffering from circulation restrictions due to the coronavirus were subject to a more benevolent article (ANSA Press Agency 2020). During the last five years, there articles which consider Senegalese as a "group" – in one case in a fight against a "group" of Tunisians – have still been published, but there have also been examples about support projects carried out by associations or a religious group (in one case the Mourid brotherhood)[5].

We will see below how the local population valorised their biographies and multiple belongings in this context, as a creative response to excluding and shifting border politics on a local, regional and national level (Shachar 2020). In 2017, the idea of reversing the stigma through a fashion show was born in Genoa. The show valorises diversity and gives a positive image about the super-diverse population and its fashion-economy to change cultural imagination about migration. The study provides insights on the way art and activism can create local belonging and foster positive images and practices in a context of growing xenophobia.

Based on empirical examples, I will show how the research perspective of migration studies can be guided by the complexity of migrants' multiple belongings and by situational analysis. This approach can become a productive advance for migration studies as well as for general social theory.

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4) On a local and regional level, police control andthe number of instances of the expulsion of refugees who squatted empty buildings have increased. On a national level, xenophobic discourses, laws and the boycott of refugee support organisations and rescue boats have considerably increased when Matteo Salvini was Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Interior Affairs (from 1.6.2018 until 5.9.19). Due to their victory of the national elections of 25thSeptember 2022 with 26 per cent of the votes, the extreme-right party Fratelli d'Italia (Brothers of Italy) leads the government on the national level until now, with Giorgia Meloni as Prime Minister. During the elections for the European parliament in 2024, Fratelli d'Italia reached 28 per cent, which was also the highest score.

5) Based on research in newspaper articles in the database Nexis, 28.4.25.

Migration and Diversity in Genoa in a Context of Xenophobic Politics

When I arrived in Genoa in Autumn 2017 to carry out a long-term research project on art and activism, I was struck by the very negative headlines in the local press about the Senegalese population, which was described as a "mafia" flooding the streets of the old city with "crack"(Fregatti & Indice 2017). Having worked for some twenty years on the political-religious networks of Senegalese people and their translocal roots in Senegal, Europe, and the United States, I noted a particularly negative media coverage in Italy, which contrasts with the excellent image that the Senegalese immigrants enjoy in New York (Salzbrunn 2004; 2016) or those that they build up of themselves by performing publicly their religious practices in Geneva (Salzbrunn 2017). From the beginning, I was thus led to rethink the local, regional, and national logics of performances in a context of growing xenophobia. Moreover, the stigmatisation observed concerned not only groups of people, but also an entire district, the centro storico, one of the largest remaining historic centres in Europe, and more particularly the area known as the Maddalena. Having initially chosen the city of genoa as one of the areas to be covered as part of my ERC ARTIVISM project, the discovery of the different representations circulating on the Maddalena, a neighbourhood that embodies all the diversity of Genoa's residents, thus echoed another project carried out in Paris (Salzbrunn 2011b), with the representation of oneself and others during public events, as a common issue. I wanted to understand how residents of these neighbourhoods dealt with and returned the stigma of being different, outside their country of origin (Goffman 1963). One way of returning these stigmata was the positive, joyful performance of difference and commonality during fashion shows in Genoa.

In this Italian "super-diverse" city (Vertovec 2007), characterized by a diversity of social, economic, and legal statuses, as well as a high number of countries of origin of the residents, I followed the organization[6] of fashion shows in working-class neighbourhoods with a very rich history of migration. The use of visual methods allowed me to analyse how body language reflects a process of empowerment during the self-presentation in the preparatory phase (documented by filmed interviews) and at the time of the fashion show. In the Maddalena district of Genoa, a group of Ivorian, Senegalese, and Ligurian tailors, in collaboration with vintage shopowners, organized three fashion shows in order to reverse

6) I did immersive long-term fieldwork during several years, living in the district where the events have been created. I followed the local actors in their day-to-day routines as well as during the concrete planning of the events. I took part in several shows, filming and interviewing the participants, and was also part of follow-up meetings. Before the lockdown in 2020, the Maddalena Défilétook place in Spring and Autumn from 2017.

the stigma of delinquency that weighs on this district and on some residents, especially those from sub-Saharan Africa. In contrast to the latter, residents of Latin American origin (of which Ecuadorians are by far the largest group) are more positively represented and even have a dedicated page in Spanish in the daily newspaper Il Secolo XIX.

Individuals subject to racism have to deal with downgrading attitudes and, in case their legal status is fragile, with a continuous threat of being imprisoned and sent to their country of origin. Those who benefit from a secure legal status still have to cope with non-verbal and verbal signs of exclusion and therefore desire to return these stigmas through counter-performances. Being physically present within the public space as an undocumented migrant represents a symbolic transgression of borders, since they have been shifted from frontiers to the inner territory (Shachar 2020).

In our latest book (Amiotte-Suchet & Salzbrunn 2019), we discussed different ways of dealing with 'the (un)foreseeable event', following my earlier proposal to focus research on an event that takes place in an (urban) space rather than starting from a group (pre-)defined by the researcher (Salzbrunn 2015, 2017, 2021). This approach, which takes the event, organized and/or disruptive, as a starting point, allows us to observe the ways in which the actors stage their multiple affiliations, among which origin can play a role. It should be noted straight away that nationality, religion, or migratory background do not necessarily come into play in the social situation observed. We shall see later on that migration is not always the subject of discussion as such, since we wanted to avoid opening the exchange with this subject. Indeed, the people filmed emphasise more spontaneously their belonging to their neighbourhood of residence as well as their professional skills and spoke less about their past migratory trajectory. The research therefore focuses on political commitment and the expression of local belonging as well as on the unifying event that is being prepared. This does not exclude to notice the way in which other affiliations are staged (through make-up, fabrics, body language, etc.). Those interactive performances include a play with symbolic boundaries of belonging such as expressing bodily signs of community-building through make-up or dance.

Défilé La Maddalena Genoa: Transforming Legal and Social Orders through a Fashion Show

The Genoese district of La Maddalena, near the port, is marked by a very large diversity of its population, the highest in the city. In the larger Centro Est district to which la Maddalena belongs, only 12.1% of the residents have a foreign nationality. According to the statistical atlas of the city from 2008, more detailed, the district of La Maddalena hosts 21.3% of foreign residents (Comune di Genova 2021). La Maddalena has seen the settlement of workers from the nearby port as well as from all the industry and business, both formal and informal, found in the port cities. Today, La Maddalena, which is part of the centro storico, the largest old town in Europe, also has the highest percentage of inhabitants with university degrees. In this sense, it already reflects a process of gentrification of which artists and intellectuals are the ambiguous precursors. However, real estate pressure is less in Genoa because, over recent decades, the total city's population has decreased by 30%. Specifically, from 1971 to 2019 the population decreased from 816,872 inhabitants to only 565,752 (Comune di Genova 2021). This change can be attributed to demographic reasons and because of the decline in the local (steel) industries which left dozens of dwellings vacant and/or occupied by people living in precarious conditions. Indeed, Genoa is not only named "La Superba", but also the "South of the North"since it has the lowest birth rate and the highest rate of elderly residents (Comune di Genova 2021, Atlante demografico della città).

The refugees who reside in the Maddalena district have a temporary permit if they are still waiting for the decision made on their application for asylum. If their claim is rejected, they perceive national borders everywhere: even though they had managed to cross national borders, the shift of border controls to the interior territory threatens them daily (Shachar 2020). Therefore, the local network of solidarity who includes them in their artivist events allows them to feel an emotional and morally legitimate belonging to this place. The new right-wing municipal team, elected after decades of left-wing domination in 2017, has "militarised" the historic centre in response to security concerns. On the other hand, more and more groups of cruise tourists are passing through the historic centre due to its proximity to Via Garibaldi, a UNESCO World Heritage Site with many museums and palaces from the Renaissance period.

There are many craftsmen's workshops in La Maddalena, including a dozen or so dressmakers of West African (Senegal, but also Ivory Coast) and Ligurian origin. In addition, several vintage shops have opened, working for charities or individuals and

catering to a wide variety of customers in terms of purchasing power. In 2017, the designers and managers had the idea of getting together to organize a fashion show on Maddalena Street, which runs through the neighbourhood. One of the motivations was the desire to turn around the stigma of crime and danger that weighs on the neighbourhood, and to value the diversity of its residents, regardless of their origin, status, or social class. I followed the preparations for the second Maddalena parade in Genoa, which took place in autumn 2017, with Raphaela von Weichs (the senior researcher of the ERC ARTIVISM project) and Pascal Bernhardt (a Frenchman living in Genoa, who was working as a cameraman on our team at that time).

From the outset, the fashion show seemed to me to be a form of political performance, a staging of self and otherness, a way of staging diversity and commonality (the common point of being attached to this neighbourhood, whatever the reasons). As Lehnert (2013) points out, a transformation happens at the moment of the staging of the clothes by the body or of the bodies by the clothes. According to her, fashion clothing changes the body and produces new bodies, the fashion bodies, which are neither just clothes nor just wearers of clothes. The transformative power of this experience has been expressed by several participants, as I will show below. Namely, it legitimizes their presence within this space, during the event, regardless of their legal status.

During the preparatory shots, we asked the models, none of whom were professionals, what effect the covering of these clothes had on them. After putting on a silk suit from the 1960s, one young man of North African origin who had a few setbacks in his adolescence replied, "it makes me feel important". The young man gradually inhabited his clothing, blending in with the symbolism of the important person, with responsibilities that emanated from the very materiality of the costume: the shirt, the scarf, the jacket, the trousers and so on. All the experiences of rejection, of the depreciation he had been subjected to at times during his youth, seemed to have faded behind the joy of wearing a signifier representing another status. The exchange took place in great complicity with the cameraman who, having seen the young man evolve, shared his pride in having overcome his difficulties, and in embodying his success through this precious costume. Another actor in the situation, Patrick, a former political refugee and well known in this neighbourhood for his generosity, also radiated joy and pride, telling the camera "I am very happy that I am in Italy and that I am in Genoa", then declaring his love "more than anything" for the neighbourhood, La Maddalena. Patrick has lost an arm but is now used to doing most tasks with one hand. On the way to the parade catwalk he wore a jacket, but took it off

on the way back so that his missing arm was visible. Applauded very warmly during his appearance, kissed by the next mannequin, he had a very moving moment.

Later on, Cheikh, the Senegalese boss of a sewing workshop, proudly retraced the 24-year long migratory trajectory of his family of dressmakers: Senegal, Ivory Coast, Italy. For him, the fashion show was above all else an opportunity to show his creations to everyone. Sambou, who at the time had worked in Italy for two years and six months, has been trained in Senegal and in Italy. He has just opened his second tailor workshop and store. Reflecting on the parade he said:

> It suits us well, really, through this we can show our product to everybody... We are happy with this, because we had already done it once, and we can see that it has brought us customers and relations, really, and it makes this via, which is Via della Maddalena, become alive too. Really, it's good. (Bernhardt & Salzbrunn 2018)

As one of the motivations of the people gathered around the idea of the parade was to value the sewing work, the common trade emerged as a rallying point, more important than the origins or religious affiliations of people who do not appear as such during the event. They were nevertheless mentioned when we conducted interviews with the tailor Cheikh. The question of religious practices was raised in the spring of 2019 when the parade fell during Ramadan. Enthusiasm for maintaining the public showcase of these creations eventually outweighed the criticism of the choice of date. On the other hand, a critical attitude towards the globalised fashion industry and in favour of local creations and second-hand circuits brought the participants together.

In the end, a strong point emerged as the representation of oneself, of one's attachment to the district, to the locality - a much more important aspect than the performance of the origins, which was rather emphasised during the interviews in preparation for the parade. In the memory of the inhabitants, this event strengthened the ties between the people and the neighbourhood, as well as the inhabitants' feelings of attachment towards the neighbourhood. Living and performing with the joy and pride of being a participant in the parade of a day in the Maddalena district allows one to affirm one's place in this place, which is particularly important for people subject to the growing racism in Italy, especially (former) refugees, many of whom took part in the parade. The reinforcement of the attachment to the local community strengthens local borders and allows to cross national borders situationally, during the artivist event. The othering process does not implicate the criterium of nationality but belonging to the place. In this context,

cruise-ship-tourists or bourgeois residents from the outskirts are clearly those who do not belong to the place and are the object of jokes or disregard. A collective place-making process goes along with the reinforcement of internal borders (of the artivists'community) during an interactive boundary-making process with those outside (tourists and wealthy residents from the outskirts).

After the fashion show, one of the tailors from Ivory Coast whom we frequently met as clients for our own clothes, had told his painful but successful trajectory in a short video he has sent us. In his story, he insists a great deal on his technical and artistic competences as well as on his resilient and enduring character. The video is a promotion of his entreprise, but also a testimony of his trajectory as a refugee.

Conclusion

In general, the event approach of the ERC ARTIVISM project, starting from events within the urban space to grasp how art is mobilised as a political act, made it possible to avoid the trap of groupism denounced by Brubaker (2006), or that of the reproduction of methodological nationalism (Wimmer & Glick Schiller 2002) by the very conception of a research project. Arriving in a field to understand what is at stake requires accompanying residents and crafts people in their daily concerns and activities (Fontorbes & Granié2018), in order to understand the local issues: the promotion of local craftsmanship, alternative economic models, and the reversal of stigmas based on the origin of residents. Representations of migration were performed implicitly through make-up and fabrics during the event, but sometimes explicitly mentioned during the interviews: diversity was valued, staged, but in a playful and theatrical way (through make-up, dance steps and fabrics combined) and rarely in an essential andreifying way. The playful way of playing with fabrics and make-up is a way of returning the stigma that weighs on this neighbourhood and on some residents, who are sometimes insulted on the basis of their respective origins. In other (rare) cases, such as that of the Senegalese tailor Cheikh who talks about his migratory trajectory, the know-how of a profession (tailor) has been proudly linked to a country (Senegal). This appreciation of one's own origins does not exclude a strong attachment to the current neighbourhood of residence or cooperation with tailors from Ivory Coast and Liguria, working in the same neighbourhood. The analysis of individual life-courses, day-to-day routines in a specific urban setting as well as the planning and conducting of events has allowed me to grasp the complexity of multiple

belonging processes and their performativity.

In a context of stigmatisation and rejection of entire urban neighbourhoods and/or of the population living there, conveyed by the media, especially since the strong increase in the influence and political responsibility of the extreme right in Italy, the desire to return the stigma, especially by enhancing their particular creative potential through fashion, is greater than ever among the target people. Talking about professional trajectories, as the Senegalese tailor does in a context of stigmatisation linked to the drug trade in the neighbourhood where he works, is a way of counter-performing the self-image in the individual sense, but also collectively, because not only has the Maddalena neighbourhood been negatively connoted by the local press, but also "the Senegalese".

Throughout the whole research process, event lenses have replaced ethnic lenses to leave a maximum degree of liberty to the expression of individual and collective dynamics which are staged during public performances as well as during individual filmed interviews and informal talks. Triangulating various methods allowed us to study these belonging processes situationally, and to understand their interactive and performative articulation. Hence, wearing event-lenses allows us to perceive the intersection of various individual aspects of belonging with collective strategies. The latter can be territorial, class-based, corps-based, gendered, racialised, etc.

Refugees who are vulnerable because of their status could cross physical and symbolic borders, feeling legitimate on the local territory. The attachment to the district had an empowering effect on them. Nevertheless, it does not prevent them from feeling excluded from other urban or regional public spaces, where boundaries are interactively constructed regarding skin colour, economic or symbolic capital and legal status, so that intersectional exclusion process are still ongoing.

Finally, as Kim Jiyoung and Mihye Cho have shown for the case of a sewing village in Seoul, state intervention in urban regeneration processes can lead to depoliticization "under the banner of participation, partnership, and governance ㅋ (2019, p. 424). In the case of Genoa, participation has evolved bottom-up, but one of the unintended consequences of the fashion show could be a growing attractivity of the district, which in turn could enhance gentrification and touristification processes.

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and an edited volume on creative research methods on carnival, *Enquêter en carnaval. Méthodologies créatives autour d'un plaisir partagé* at Presses Universitaires de Rennes (2025, in print). The full publications list with open access to the articles can be found here:
(https://www.unil.ch/issr/home/menuinst/chercheurseuses/salzbrunn-monika/publications.html)

Session 1

Spatial Narratives and Cultural Dynamics in Migrant Communities

Please contact me via mxb1065@psu.edu if you are planning to cite for your publication and presentation.

Refugee Spatiality and Affect: Art and Tales of (Un)Settlement

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Abstract

Within the western cartographic imagination, refugee spatiality is represented and defined as confinement and venerability in need of recovery, management, and intervention. Refusing such a damage-centered spectacle, my presentation seeks new geographic stories and artistic imagination through re-storying to highlight their speak ability and alterability of place and time. I raise the following questions: in what ways can refugee art and media alter normalized cartographic forces that unjustly organize refugee geographies and life? How can unnoticed refugee's geographic stories contribute to the deliberate formation of an alternative geography that renders their affective spatiality to be livable, possible, and imaginable?

Animating this discussion, I introduce desire-centered collaborative art/media works of Karen tribal refugee teen girls from Burma who relocated to the U.S. in 2010s. Over a decade of our relation building and work through community art and educational collaboration generates a series of artistic creations of counter-mapping and counter-narratives through site-specific performances, urban drift, mobile storied maps, and graphic novels as new spatial configurations attempting to make them fully visible and audible. Drawing on decolonizing land-based, transnational feminist geographical epistemology and critical refugee studies (Day, 2018; Espiritu, 2018; Grewal and Kaplan,1994; Rifkin, 2014; Saito, 2020; Tuck & Yang, 2012), my presentation highlights artistic refugee spatiality as a prolonged

affective space expressing on goingness of the girls' struggles out of sight in a resettlement that exists behind, between, and beyond the publicized spaces. It is also importantly noted that this ongoing affective space does not exclusively contain the "unhappy archive" (Ahmed, 2004, p.12) of the past and the place of conflict before migration. Unhappy stories can elevate and confirm problematic narratives of refugees as being in need of rescue and help by the both U.S. military power and capitalist philanthropy to make refugees 'happy', which validates the U.S. settler colonialist-imperialist superiority. Moving beyond the (un)happy binary construction of refugee feeling, narrative, and spatiality enforced by the settler colonial, masculine, racialized ideologies, the refugee girls' art-in-action offers their own spatiality disrupting and expanding the existing geographic narratives. In this alternative space, refusal is an artistic tactic for their geographic imagination and vision by challenging the view of refugee marginality, exclusion, and invisibility as natural and preconditional in daily living in the Indigenous land while acknowledging prolonged feeling and extensive experiences of displacement that continues in the present (Nguyen, 2019). This new space engages unlearning/ undoing of U.S. miseducation of histories, geographies, common-sense, and place-making operated by the settler colonial system. Beyond existing discourse of the South Asian refugee migration in connection to the U.S. imperialism, this unlearning space attends transnational conditions of the refugee resettlement where an incommensurable challenge generates both resistance against imperialism and subordination to settler colonial imperatives. This presentation provides a discussion offering a new possibility of acknowledging South Asian refugee's rich and complicated space and time through their artistic, imaginative, affective force that enacts their hopes, beliefs, and politics. I conceptualize this space as radical acts that envision worlds that refugee people can bring to life by rearranging the social, geographic orders, ceasing colonial displacement, and freeing from the static, essentialist representation as well as reconfiguring ways of knowing.

Introduction

The recent global social and political landscape that is characterized by a tremendous increase in anti-immigrant and anti-refugee sentiment has led to excessive policing, deportation, and dehumanization that enhances refugees' sense of fear and distrust. The scale of forced displacement continues to be a major challenge across nations. In this precarious climate, space and place give a refugee's life certain meanings in a world that has often deemed their populations' geographies incorrectly as "ungeographic". This view is generally predicated upon the single "deficit" image of refugees, such as "homeless" and "nationless". Therefore, I argue that (post)refugee spatiality does not subscribe to the long-held reductionist representation that portrays them as deficient, uncultivated, unworthy, threatening, and in need of Western philanthropic help. This is often consistent with refugees' dislocation and dispossession that makes it difficult for them to be bound to a place for permanent settlement, such that they are in a constant state of flux instead. Thus, it is important to understand that refugee spatiality is continuously in the making with hope, struggle, joy, fear, and happiness and that refugee space must move beyond the single essentialized image, and focus instead on the unnoticed stories and art-in-actions that lead to their livability, dignity, and empowerment.

Drawing on decolonizing land-based, transnational feminist geography, and critical refugee studies (Ahmed, 2010; Anzaldua, 2012; Day, 2018; Espiritu, 2018; Grewal and Kaplan,1994; Rifkin, 2014; Saito, 2020; Tuck & Yang, 2012) this paper seeks a new orientation in understanding refugee spatiality, which foregrounds not only a prolonged affective artistic space that expresses refugee youths' ongoing struggles in a resettlement that exists behind, between, and beyond the publicized spaces, but also, more importantly, their own voices and (re)actions to make their presence, livability, and dignity visible. It highlights their relational and affective efforts to achieve transformative resettlement justice. Further, it showcases U.S. Karen tribal refugee youths' participatory, art-based praxis that engages decolonization of the existing cartography that generates settler colonial affect, stories, and habits. I explore the way that refugee girls' art in action centers their voices and experiences, and can entail (un)learning and (un)doing of the settlers' affect, habits, and values to create an oppositional geography for a liberatory potential as well as ethical and sustainable resettlement on U.S. unceded land. I also examine the nature of (post)refugee space and spatiality and how they can be (re)configured and (re)claimed through art, affect, and bodily movement with materialities. With such inquiries, this paper attempts to discuss alternative configuration of (post)refugee spatiality that is marked by affect,

movement, agency, and empowerment through artistic actions, which centers on a futuristic counter movement and counter-narrative.

The Context of a U.S. Urban Geography in Relation to Refugee Resettlement

Refugees' displacement is ongoing in an urban context in the U.S., even as some refugees arrive with citizenship, through urban regeneration, and social and geographic segregation by race, gender, and class, as well as governments' rigorous surveillance and deportation under anti-immigration. These challenges have engendered frightening experiences of marginalization while forcing refugees to assimilate into the host country. As a cost of citizenship, racial and class marginalization is an affective space where continuous fear, trauma, and feeling of unbelonging and danger are generated. As I hear often from the (post)refugee community in my study, they still feel that they are refugees and are in a refugee camp because of their limited daily trajectory within the segregated urban geographic boundaries, which makes them perceive that they are confined and restrictive—since the U.S. government assigns them to reside in certain areas, which are often ghettos or abandoned areas of the inner cities where property values are very low. However, their displacement occurs constantly because a city government's urban regeneration and real estate development perceive that the land has potential property value with multicultural assets generated from refugee communities' ethnic values and has pushed them forcefully to move to other places and continues to generate a racially and class-oriented segregated environment. In that sense, what does "(post)refugee"mean? The prefix "post" signifies "after in time"so does it mean that being a refugee has passed already? The experiences of their confined space and life appear to be on a continuum yet take different forms. Although refugee status can be changed after they arrive legally in a host country, the affective, phenomenological realities of displacement, confinement, and dehumanization do not end in their resettlement life. Then, I raised questions such as what (post)refugee status and "citizenship"entail beyond the legal discourse; what post-refugee means in relation to the sense of "home", "belonging", and "freedom" in resettlement, and in what ways we can move beyond the liberal ideas of "being rescued" and "gaining freedom"that are associated with (post)refugees. All of these questions are necessary to consider (post)refugee spatiality that extends beyond the mere physical place in which they arrive or stay temporarily as they wait to be relocated in a new host area.

An understanding of refugee geography as it is tied to borders is attributed as both sites

of conflict/surveillance, and those of resistance/transformation (Anzaldua, 2012; Schimanski & Nyman, 2021). In the case of (post)refugee space and spatiality, it is unavoidable to consider that a border is a liminal space to discuss geopolitical realities and figurations where otherness and differences are negotiated (Anzaluda, 2012). Therefore, refugee spatiality necessitates refugee narratives, as they are integral to bordering and border-crossings' processes, which foregrounds the need to negotiate borders in the public sphere and accommodate new forms of belonging and becoming.

Reconfiguring Refugee spatiality: Unsettling Colonial Miseducation, Affect, and Stories

Reconfiguring refugee spatiality through community art praxis, I first raise the following questions on what it means to be a successful refugee resettlement; how is refugee spatiality operated ethically in the North American context of the settler colonial system? In what way are refugee positionalities in settler colonial frameworks needed to think about the resettlement differently than in the existing framework? The dominant U.S. refugee resettlement education and policies have forced their language and culture to be assimilated greatly into the dominant colonial, racial, and classed systems, which anticipates the successful resettlement story of assimilation. This story is expected to be made without being conscious of, or challenging, the ongoing settler colonial racial logics and violence over Indigenous lands and people in the U.S. Refugee resettlement education has depended heavily upon (White) settler history and its states' liberal multiculturalist claim that masks and turns (White) settlers' realities that deny Indigenous populations the right to their land and resources, into the achievement of U.S. democracy. Such a nationalist fiction is designed for the purpose of settler futurity that is achieved through the narrative of "settler colonial non-encounter"with Indigenous people and land that expects no "... future demise by obscuring [settlers'] tracks and operation" (Veracini, 2011, p. 3). It is important to address this "colonial miseducation" (Saranillio, 2008, p. 259) when thinking about (post)refugee resettlement and spatiality by discerning and refusing the force of Americanization and assimilation that lures many refugees/migrants on the path to success while it masks the fact that the path to success is paved over stolen land.

In this context, refugee spatiality highlights (post)refugee livability in a transcultural context where a "deep contradiction" (Saranillio, 2008, p. 262) is highlighted by the co-presence of the major hegemonic powers—settler colonialism and imperialism. Understanding refugee resettlement and its transnational migration calls for an understanding of the complex

terrain of power dynamics in the settler colonial-imperialist geopolitical landscape. As Saranillio (2008) observed, in this landscape a transnational migration often accompanies an incommensurable challenge that demands both resistance against imperialism and subordination to settler colonial imperatives. The Karen tribal refugee has been situated in such a complex, contradictory circumstance—supporting Myanmar's resistance to the U.S.'s reluctance to provide non-lethal support, which leaves civilians vulnerable, while they are subjected forcefully to identify nationally with the U.S. As the U.S. Kanak Maoli scholar Haunnani-Kay Trask (2008) critiqued importantly, the successful story of Asian refugees/immigrants reinforces a settler regime that keeps natives landless, poor, and with limited access to social and educational institutions. This contradiction is a necessary aspect to understand the complexity of a U.S. refugee spatiality. The refugee spatiality in the making must consider and seek an ethical space of sustainable resettlement by participating in Indigenous survival and Black liberation to make the space livable.

Importantly, refugee spatiality in the making through refugee art practice also critiques the affective dynamics of the settler colony and refugee minorities. Multicultural Feminist/ Queer philosopher Sarah Ahmed's (2010) critical insight offers colonial politics of (un)happiness, in which the unhappiness of migrants of color is a necessary precondition tomake the Western philanthropic habits that graciously offer gift to make the migrants happy a good cause. This illuminates the colonial construction of the "(un)happy archive"by creating a political condition that manages and secures the moral distinction between happy and unhappy lives of the refugee by Western colonial cause and power. Building on this, the Critical Refugee Studies Collectives (Espiritu et al., 2022) problematizes the dichotomy of fear and rescue pertinent to refugees in the dominant legal narratives, which compels "... refugees to repeatedly attest to being fearful, so that the state is simultaneously coaching them to exhibit gratefulness for the space they have been allowed"(p. 58). Such a construction of underlying sentiments demonstrates the use of colonial affect and relations to ensure that the state power hierarchy and logic will prevail. Their critiques help advance the understanding and artistic and critical orientation to the refugee spatiality in the making where the communities can question and divert the colonial operation of affect, emotions, and commonsense. Such awareness of affective operation can contribute to refugee spatiality in the making as a counteraction and counter-narrative space that enables them to freely speak and make the space livable and humanized. This space illuminates Naomi Paik's (2020) vision for "abolitionist sanctuary", which renders an alternative site of community resistance and defense "... denouncing the

wall and family separation and addressing the root causes of anti-immigrant hatred, as well as building a new world where all are welcome (p. 113). This space refuses the dominant policies and scripts that make welcoming the immigrants conditional, in which a "good" immigrant is determined by the state, unlike the historic "sanctuary" movements that offer protection from unjust federal laws to all refugees and undocumented migrants. The refugee spatiality would not allow the states' power to make a distinction between "good" and "bad" immigrants and the success-oriented attitude that adheres to capitalist, neo-liberal, colonial enterprises. Thus, this art space generates a narrative for "... exposing the injustices of a raid, arrest, or deportation order to mobilize public opposition" (p. 108); refusing the system that promises safety, success, and comfortable belonging to a new host country or even a local street, for only a select few. I believe that such new geographic stories used to rethink refugee spatiality hold a possibility to speak for themselves and to revise the existing cartographic rules that organize human hierarchies in place unjustly.

Methodological Encounters

This refugee youth participatory art-based research is a collaborative endeavor with a group of Karen tribal (post)refugee (pre)teen girls who came to the U.S. in 2011. As the researcher and facilitator of the community art projects, I am very conscious of the Western colonial approach, which reduces tribal, refugee, and ethnic subjects of color unethically to the damage-centered spectacle by describing them easily (Rifkin, 2014; Tuhiwai Smith, 2021). I am aware of ethics as it is pertinent to the issue of representation, which reduces the image of young tribal (post)refugees as racially marginalized to a deficit-centered single portrait to make them more politically manageable in a settler colonial state. I also have been learning, reflecting, and seeking ethical ways to engage in decolonizing work not limited to the acknowledgment of their worldviews but also, even more importantly, neither to romanticize them nor extract nor appropriate knowledge from the communities (Tuhiwai Smith, 2021). I chose to pay critical attention to the "livedness and density of settler experience"(Rifkin, 2014, p.12) as a way to investigate and critique the settler colonial operation of place and ecology, so that I can avoid providing an unethical representation of tribal refugee people and cultures. Moving away from "ethnographic entrapment" (A. Smith, 2014, p. 207), this art-based research project employs a refugee youth participatory method to seek and create a meaningful terrain of encounter and analysis to decenter the colonizing power of disciplinary knowledge in a way in which

the girls are also youth researchers and the art process is our collaborative educational research, away from them as the object of the research to be observed. The art projects were created in an emergent, desire-based manner by prioritizing the refugee youths' curiosity, needs, and desires, rather than my pre-determined, rigid plan only for them to follow. The girls initiated the art projects' design both spontaneously and deliberatively.

Affective Refugee Spatiality as Refusal of an (Un)Happy Archive: The Refugee "Urban Wild" Art Projects

Since 2012, the refugee "Urban Wild"Art Project in the city of Buffalo, NY has organized weekly/bi-weekly art and media classes informally for and with Burmese/Karen tribal girls in a community center on the west side of Buffalo, which is known well as the hub of refugee communities. As an artist, art educator, and academic, I am the lead organizer of the community art and media program and intended to facilitate refugee youths'creative art-in-action and agency to deepen their (un)learning of the urban place and its stories for sustainable resettlement. The Karen tribal girl participants came from the asylum located on the border of Burma and Thailand and relocated to the U.S. 13 years ago. According to them, their relocation to the U.S. seemed to be a blessing, as their parents waited to be chosen to relocate to the U.S. as the host country as many other refugees desired. Upon their arrival, they were assigned to live in Buffalo, which was one of the richest cities in the early 20th century because of the steel and mill industries and declined thereafter through suburbanization and deindustrialization to become one of the poorest. The Rust Belt made the urban space desolate and became the place where refugee peoples from Southern Asia and Africa settled. In particular, the Karen tribal girls were relocated to the west side of Buffalo as their new home, a so-called refugee ghetto, where their trajectory has been limited to three places—school, home, and church, around which the refugee community centers. When I met them the first time and asked where they lived, they replied that they lived in a "refugee camp", which referred to the west side of Buffalo. Their perception of this area as a refugee camp derived from their daily encounters in the west side with predominantly refugee residents and they expressed that they had never been outside of the neighborhood in which their school and church were located in proximity. They also shared that they never walked outside and felt that they were kept locked inside because of the dangers of the urban city. This new lifestyle differed greatly from their lives in the forest of Mae la refugee camp. There, they were allowed to roam

around freely, even given the danger of Burmese military attacks. This was one of the major motivations to go out for a walk that was the initial act in our urban drift project (Bae-Dimitriadis, 2020).

Refugee Girls' Walking as New Bodily Stories of Urban Place

We did not plan in advance where to go in our walk, but allowed their senses and bodies to direct them spontaneously. As we walked and encountered a road across the other side of their neighborhood, the girls noticed the stark contrast between the scenery of affluent White neighbors and theirs. The bodily engagement in the city walk allowed them to learn about racialized, spatial inequities in the U.S., which they typically had little understanding of in school (Blanchet-Cohen et. al., 2017). This showed that U.S. resettlement education demands refugee students' assimilation into U.S. social systems without providing space to explore spatial segregation attributable to systemic racial and class inequities. Through the walk, their bodily movement through different places allowed them to explore and question their sense of (un)safety, (un)protection, and (ab)normalcy in relation to the new city landscape. Some White-dominated residential and commercial areas might make them feel safer to some extent than they did on the west side, although they felt hyper visible as uninvited and uncomfortable strangers. Further, their bodily movement balked at signs like "No trespassing", "No entering the green area", "No crossing", "No ice-skating", "no running", and "Stop,"etc. Their encounter with so many different spatial restrictions at the boundaries of a place in the name of "protection"for the owners of private properties made them question the meaning of freedom. This model of the settler colonial and racialized spatial rule did not offer seamless bodily movement from one place to another. Rather, it offered ceaseless bombardments and lines designed to keep them out and make them stop. Thus, they had to decide whether and how to cross or not and how to fit in or not, as they were being instructed constantly to follow settler colonial rules of behavior and human position in relation to the places.

In addition, as the refugee girls were traveling in the White neighborhood, they experienced White residents' surveillance, which made them feel threatened and caused them to move to the other side of the street quickly. The girls' affective experience of being surveilled while navigating a White neighborhood was indicative of the fact that they did not feel welcomed in the White space. White space, which is normally viewed as "safe" and "protected", was not "safe" for the girls. Their embodied knowledge of the place speaks

to whose safety is valued over others, what it means to be "safe" and "protected", and who protects whom. It indicates that the settler colonial spatial rule of safety and protection is to maintain one's distance from people of color and is therefore incommensurable with refugees and other minorities' aspirations for safety and protection. Instead, this rule is concerned only with White settlers' own safety to normalize their own boundaries of values and affect and engage in their habits.

Refugee Girls' Site-Specific Art as an Affective Unsettling Spatial Normalcy

During the last 12 years of the Urban Drift Project, the girls' initial walks turned into the creation of site-specific art events as they encountered and responded to certain places. Their senses provoked them to take certain artistic actions to disrupt the places' values, stories, and habits. Their site-specific art events were spontaneous, yet deliberate, and were created according to the places and their materialities. An example of their art-in-actions was at a café located on the west side refugee ghetto under the urban regeneration project, which has been known as a hub of hip, socially aware White people. The girls' unfamiliarity with the adult-oriented place drove them to select and explore it with curiosity. The café's cozy space under the dim light decorated by various vintage materialities made the space artsy and evoked the girls' nostalgia for their previous life in the camp while minimal human interaction and static, sedentary White adults' work-driven, impersonal looks resonated with "unhappy" sentiments. Their impression of it as an "unhappy place" motivated them to make it a "happy" place by crocheting bracelets and offering them to the cafe goers by tying them to their wrists. The Asian teen girls' presence was hyper visible as they sat and crocheted at the center table of the café, which was not a normal scene there, but a disruption in the predominantly White adult space. The girls' moving around the table to reach people and offer them the bracelets that they made by tying them to the peoples' wrists was a minor gesture. It led to disrupt the unhappy White space and make it happy. The café goers' reactions to the girls' offer were various, and ranged from welcoming to unwelcoming. Their affective disruption to the space was generated in a subtle, sweet, and warm manner with the intention of offering, rather than receiving and needing White people's help.

Recollecting their body-material entangled affective site-specific performance, Sarah Ahmed's (2010) note on the (un)happy politics reminded me that happiness is a "... technology of citizenship, as a way of binding migrants to a national ideal" (p. 133) by

making refugees happy. According to her, the colonial happy mission prerequires the refugee others' unhappy state as necessary. Thus, the miserable circumstances of refugee existence are conceived as the precondition for colonial philanthropic acts and will, which is viewed dominantly as a gift that cannot be refused, but relieves others from suffering. Offering the "happy formula" is the colonial "forced gift"for civilizing refugees (p. 125). The girls' site-specific performance can be viewed as a decolonial refusal of the colonial happy formula, by softly, yet confidently, occupying the White space and offering their hand-made gifts generously to White adults who are considered to be unhappy, to make them happy. However, the girls' burdenless, yet deliberate movement, was a flipped script of "White [settler] burden"(p. 124), in which they refused the imposed (un)happy archive and the duty justified by the colonial rule.

Refugee Girls' Mobile Storied Map as Re-storying the Places

Their mobile oral story of the new urban places draws first upon Audre Lorde's (2017) claim on the transformation of silence into language and action. Silence is considered a proper action/ etiquette in response to the host country's expectations of the refugee girls. Silence is a way to manage fear for survival, and is a common culture for refugee girls living in the U.S. It is uncomfortable for the girls to speak out and bring their honest and critical thoughts to their school and social life within the host country's White dominant space. However, this community-centered and informal space led the girls to unmute "... one little piece inside them that wants to be spoken out" (p. 43). Their mobile storied walk is a critical space of "self-revelation" through speaking out in language and action that had "always seemed fraught with danger" (p. 43).

Turning the girls' embodied bodily movement and sensing into stories built new stories of urban places with their views, values, and voices. This process accompanied the girls' deep listening about other stories from Indigenous and Black communities in Buffalo, which was built on the land of the Seneca and Tuscarora Nations. The U.S.'s narrative of assimilation opted out of these unnoticed stories for Asian refugee communities. This is what Saranillio (2008) referred to as "colonial miseducation", which is an Americanization project that forces assimilation on both the natives' and immigrant communities to make them submit to national identification with the U.S. The refugee resettlement-centered public education draws on the U.S. unproblematic multi-racial, multicultural stories of ethnic diversity that mask and turn settlers' realities that deny natives' right to their land and resources into the

achievement of U.S. democracy. This nationalist fiction is geared toward settler futurity that is achieved through repetitive conviction of "settler move to innocence" (Tuck & Yang, 2012, p. 10) by asserting "settler colonial non-encounter"(Veracini, 2011, p. 3) with Indigenous land and people. Learning this hard truth, our orientation to this mobile storied walking map involves undoing colonial histories and education by refusing the colonial norms, stories, and values of the land; understanding White settlers' racial formation and hierarchy; understanding their positionality in relation to the land, and seeking a way to make an ethical relation to the land.

Concluding Thoughts

Reconsidering refugee spatiality through U.S. Karen tribal (post)refugee youths' collaborative art-in-action offers an important understanding of their bodily engagement that yields a decolonial materialization that created a moment of corporeal disconnection from settler colonial, capitalist, racist, patriarchal values, habits, and commonsense. This alternative space prioritizes (post)refugees' dignity and livability; builds an equitable space with "radical welcome" (p. 113), and seeks to dismantle systemic oppression while offering relationship-building for shared liberation. Through this art research, I observed that the refugee youth make the refugee geographic stories visible significantly and create their own spatiality continuously in the midst of multiple and complex arrays of struggles with colonial and racial discourses that erase and despatialize their sense of place. Their Art practice shows an active process of transformative materialization of which their embodiment is an integral part, rather than the monotonous repetitions of dead matter. Their spatiality in the making highlights affective, spontaneous bodily (re)actions to materialities of settler places and environments that they encountered, which must be viewed as potential intersubjective interventions in their daily resettlement places for refugee livability through the process of refugee body-felt-materials. In this space, normative colonial materialities, commonsense, and habits are necessarily questioned, interrogated, and transformed into a collective force of defamiliarizing, impersonalizing transactions with the existing settler colonial, capitalist, patriarchal, racist logic and materialities. The refugee youths' action of resistance to, and disruption of the colonial migrant policies and materialities, constitutes ways of knowing and sensing necessary for refugee spatiality in the making, which is not limited to merely observing, but experiencing the space by testing the colonial materialities with their bodies. In this space, they do not

necessarily fit into the settler value, logic, affect, and commonsense. Instead, this space envisions refugee livability as the mundane, creative, and futuristic possibilities that refugee communities dreamed about yet enacted in the present on a continuum.

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Discussant Remarks

Discussant: Dr. Sunyoung Oh

By introducing the term "(post)refugee, "Michelle Bae-Dimitriadis draws attention to the persistence of structural and affective forms of oppression that endure long after legal resettlement. Legal status, she argues, does not guarantee spatial freedom or human dignity. In this regard, Bae Dimitriadis critically extends Lorenzo Veracini's concept of the "settler colonial non-encounter"—a framework in which Indigenous and migrant presences are spatially and historically segregated to legitimize territorial possession.

The act of walking, as performed by refugee girls in the city, becomes a form of sensory and political intervention. Their encounters with surveillance and regulatory signage—such as "No trespassing" or "No entering the green area"—expose how urban infrastructures discipline refugee presence and restrict movement. This intersection of body, affect, and spatial constraint leads, as Sara Ahmed suggests, to the critical question of who is allowed to feel safe, to be "happy," and to belong.

A particularly compelling scene features the girls crocheting bracelets in a predominantly white café and offering them to patrons. This quiet yet intentional gesture subtly reconfigures the spatial norms of the space and challenges the "happy formula"that casts refugees as passive beneficiaries of Western benevolence. Their presence—both gentle and disruptive—unsettles normative expectations and offers a micro-political counteraction through embodied practice.

One of the most significant yet under explored aspects of the paper is its attention to the fact that refugee resettlement frequently occurs on Indigenous land. While the author gestures toward the need for ethical resettlement, her argument invites deeper reflection on how refugee presence is perceived from Indigenous perspectives. Refugees—though victims of displacement and persecution—may also be viewed as "secondary settlers" whose arrival, however unintended, contributes to the ongoing dispossession of Indigenous territories. Thus, the ethics of hospitality cannot be understood solely through the apparatus of the nation-state. They must be grounded in Indigenous epistemologies and relational land ethics. Drawing on thinkers such as Leanne Simpson and Eve Tuck, I suggest that future alliances between refugee and Indigenous communities—particularly

through collaborative artistic and spatial practices—may offer new forms of decolonial solidarity and co-presence.

The experience of Karen refugee youth in the United States is a concrete illustration of the paper's central argument. The Karen, an ethnic minority from eastern Myanmar, fled decades of state persecution and spent extended periods in Thai refugee camps. Many were later resettled in the United States via UNHCR programs, forming one of the most visible "resettled refugee"communities. In cities such as Minneapolis, New York, and Atlanta, Karen youth navigate linguistic barriers, racialization, urban alienation, and institutional neglect. Their artistic practices—far from being mere tools for adaptation—serve as embodied interventions that reclaim space, assert agency, and reimagine urban belonging through a lived refugee lens.

Critical Reflections and Open Questions

1. How can artistic interventions avoid reinforcing settler-colonial logics when operating within state-sanctioned refugee frameworks?

2. Can refugees meaningfully participate in the restoration of Indigenous spatial sovereignty? What kinds of practices would be required to move beyond the "non-encounter"?

3. How might refugee-centered art practices not only critique multicultural integration models but also articulate multi-positional solidarities among migrants, Indigenous peoples, and other displaced or marginalized communities?

Closing Reflection (Practice-Based)

This paper deeply resonates with my own curatorial and artistic practice. Over the past decade, I have worked across Korea, Indonesia, Vietnam, and the Philippines on collaborative projects that address unsettled traces of mobility, dislocated lives, and the invisibility of communal memory. These projects often emerge in contexts shaped by urban redevelopment, ecological precarity, and regional inequalities—where the question of who is allowed to occupy space is always political, embodied, and historically charged.

In this sense, the artistic methodologies foregrounded in the paper—walking, storytelling, relational encounter—do not simply aim to restore individual agency. They strive to reweave a decolonial sensibility of shared spatial imagination. I read Bae-Dimitriadis's work not only as a critique of existing systems but as an invitation to reimagine artistic practice as a mode of ethical spatial production—one in which refugee and Indigenous futures may be shaped collectively through processes of mutual recognition, listening, and feeling.

Ultimately, the questions posed here extend well beyond issues of dwelling or access. They ask: Who gets to host? Who gets to narrate space? And critically, how might art accompany—sensorially and ethically—the rewriting of such spatial narratives? These are questions I continue to carry with me as I remain engaged with the field sites and communities that shape my practice and commitments.

Territory and Mobility: Transnational Networks and Cultural Dynamics of Asian Communities in Argentina

Carolina Mera, PhD

Abstract

In this paper, we reflect on the particularities of the Chinese and Korean communities in Latin America, understood as diasporic movements characterized by specific modes of transit and settlement in local spaces.

Our analysis focuses on the interactions these communities establish within the urban landscape, examining their economic, educational, artistic, and broader social activities. We begin with the premise that the modes of territorial inscription, sociability, circulation, and habitation of these communities -as well as their integration into both local and transnational spheres- play a crucial role in shaping their identity dynamics. These transnational organizational networks impose distinct logics on territorial life.

In the contemporary context, new patterns of behavior have emerged, increasingly shaped by a transnational dimension while maintaining particular nuances within local dynamics. These communities cultivate a strong valorization of their identities, which materializes in urban spaces, social structures, and artistic expressions. Such manifestations include performances and cultural productions either created in Latin America or inspired by traditions from their countries of origin. Languages, culinary practices, artistic expressions, and traditions are introduced into host societies, fostering new identity formation processes. These exchanges, in turn, shape the mutual representations of the different groups involved—Chinese, Koreans, and Latin Americans—sometimes giving rise to tensions and conflicts.

The cultural configurations of these diasporic communities manifest as both physical and symbolic spaces, offering new possibilities for migrants. On the one hand, these spaces provide a sense of security and an environment of trust that fosters both individual (subjective) and collective development. On the other hand, they can also give rise to subtle discriminatory tendencies as a reaction to cultural diversity.

This paper is structured as follows. First, we will outline key theoretical concepts relevant to our analysis. Second, we will examine the processes of settlement and mobility of these communities in Latin America. Third, we will explore the characteristics of communal spaces of sociability and their connections, considering them as sites of identity construction within both local and global contexts. Fourth, we will analyze the role of art and culture in facilitating dialogue with host societies, navigating the tensions between discrimination and mutual understanding. Finally, we will present a series of reflections aimed at contributing to the broader discourse on the cultural imagination of migrants and their ability to build communities that transcend traditional borders through dialogue and shared experiences.

Introduction

In the current context, transnational logics of behavior impose particular characteristics on local dynamics. These logics give rise to different migrant profiles. On the one hand, migrations that are valued positively, such as those of managers, executives, company technicians, scientists, artists, etc. On the other hand, those that are negatively valued, such as those made vulnerable by economic and environmental crises, wars, structural economic adjustment programs, the growth of poverty and social inequalities in the world, which forced migrants to leave their countries of origin.

In general, most international migrants fall into the second category, i.e. they join the low-income urban population, which finds employment in the informal and more vulnerable sector and generally tends to live in precarious or informal settlements. Other groups, on the other hand, settle in the central neighborhoods of cities, where they have greater purchasing power and the ability to plan their lives more autonomously. Each category has particular characteristics in terms of processes of integration and community formation.

In this presentation, we will focus on the Chinese and Korean communities in Argentina, which not only have been able to move and settle in the areas with greater advantages than other migrant groups, which would place them in the second category, but have also been able to generate cultural proposals that have had a positive impact on the image of their members. This is possible because they have more cultural and social capital, because they identify with the values of their countries, China and Korea, and finally

because they show greater creativity and efficiency in the configuration of new identities.

These experiences, generally bicultural, of Chinese and Korean migrants lead us to consider their cultural specificities as capacities for updating certain common elements of modernity in the same process of articulation in the global world. For this, it is necessary to take into account people's life strategies and forms of urban dialogue as socio-cultural behaviors.

We propose to address the local dynamics arising from transnational trends. The valorization of identities objectified in urban spaces of consumption and artistic performances, re-signified in Latin America, promote new cultural dialogues that positively condition the universe of representations of different groups.

Some Theoretical Concepts

We analyze the forms of urban dialogue of these migrant communities as expressions of an alternative model of migratory behavior based on the concepts of "alterity - circulation" as an alternative to the pair "identity - assimilation" (Tarrius, 2000). From this theoretical perspective, we explore new models of cultural dialogue that promote a more democratic acceptance of difference. We understand "otherness" and diversity as fundamental components of contemporary societies, where the negotiation between local and global dynamics shapes both urban space and the symbolic world of individuals (Mera, 2024). In this sense, the concepts of "territory" and "territoriality" (Massey, 2005; Sassone and Mera, 2010) are relevant, as they give meaning to the socio-spatial concentration of enclaves and ethnic neighborhoods, which we refer to as "Chinatown" and "Koreatown" in this presentation.

The presence of concentrated urban spaces with significant cultural markers drives particular processes of identity construction and migrant representation (Arfuch, 2002; Hall, 1990). This phenomenon emerges from a complex dialogue among local and national governments, cultural trends from China and Korea, migrant associations and institutions, the media, and economic actors such as chambers of commerce and intermediaries.

Families, friends, businesses, restaurants, religious institutions, among others, constitute the core of the spaces of sociability that strengthen the group's sense of belonging within specific contexts. Moreover, they recreate and activate the connection with the country of origin, transforming the dynamics of identity production through the incorporation of cultural consumption and economic ties (Mera, 2005)

Arrival and settlement in Argentina.

In 1962 there was an emigration flow from the Korean peninsula to Latin America, especially to Brazil, Paraguay and Bolivia. From the beginning it was a family migration. They settled in rural areas. However, the natural conditions of the place and the lack of infrastructure caused these people to move to the nearest cities until they finally gathered in the neighborhood that would later become the center of social life: Baek-ku. Between 1970 and 1978, a hundred families left with the same goal, but these settlements did not prosper either and eventually settled in the cities. In 1985, the Procedural Law for the Entry of Korean Immigrants to Argentina was signed, and in the first years of the 1990s, it was estimated that there were about 45,000 Korean residents. This was the peak of the community, when there were more Koreans in the country, associations and churches multiplied, and a dynamic relationship with Korea began. From the mid-1990s until the crisis of 2001, there was no influx of new migrants, but rather an exodus and re-emigration. This phenomenon was drastic for the community, which had only 15,000 inhabitants in 2003. Re-emigration went to the United States, Canada, Mexico, Guatemala, and Korea. In the following years, many families returned and the community stabilized at around 22,000 members (Mera, 1998, 2015).

Chinese migration to Argentina began between 1914 and 1949, with the arrival of individuals from the coastal provinces of southern China. These migrants, mostly single men with little capital, were motivated by political reasons, including refugees from the new communist system (Bogado Bordazar, 2003). In the early 1980s, family groups arrived from Taiwan with capital to invest and in search of a better quality of life. This migration was influenced by fears of a possible war in the region and ideological persecution. At the same time, there was a significant flow of migrants from mainland China. Most of these migrants arrived without capital, but with high expectations of economic progress. Between 1990 and 1999, migration from the Chinese mainland continued, with a predominance of people from the coastal provinces. This increase in mobility was facilitated by the relaxation of migration policies in China. Migration became predominantly family-based and was accompanied by a greater flow of equity capital, which facilitated migrants' economic integration and development. As a result, a community of more than 100,000 people was consolidated and became increasingly stable, strengthening its associative networks both nationally and transnationally. (Denardi, 2015, Pappier, 2011).

The settlement and organizational forms of these communities allow the emergence of

cultural cartographies where languages, tastes, smells, beliefs, preferences and projects converge, giving rise to the configuration of new cultural proposals. These processes take place in an urban scenario where the identity of migrant groups, their strategies of integration in Argentina and the impulses coming from China and Korea interact. The city acquires new physiognomies and gradually becomes a stage for cultural representations and rights within the framework of contemporary global capitalism.

In the Chinatown of Belgrano and the Koreatown of Bajo Flores, "Baek-ku", two different types of urban expressions appear configured, reflecting different political strategies in terms of the use, circulation and distribution of space and identification with it. (Mera, 2016) The concentration in Chinatown is a commercial area focused on the consumption of Chinese-branded products. Generally, Chinese people do not live in Chinatown, but rather in apartments above supermarkets or restaurants scattered throughout the city. Koreatown, on the other hand, is more exclusive to Koreans, they lived there, and they usually do not eat at hallyu-style Korean restaurants, as we will see.

Community Spaces and the Processes of Identity Production

Since the 1970s, the majority of the Korean population has concentrated in the textile sector, in small and medium-sized industries, and in the wholesale and retail trade of textile products (Mera, 1998, 2010). The Chinese population, on the other hand, was oriented toward the food sector and was prominent in retail trade through supermarkets and self-service stores, as well as in restaurant management (Fang, 2007). These differences in labor insertion influenced the settlement patterns of each community, which were concentrated in the Korean case and dispersed in the Chinese case. In addition, the presence of young professionals, especially doctors, lawyers, and accountants, was noted in both communities.

Currently, the Korean community is primarily concentrated in Koreatown and the commercial district along Avenida Avellaneda, both located in the neighborhood of Flores. There is a tendency to hire Korean suppliers and employees for key roles, such as cash management, operations oversight, and professional positions—including accountants and lawyers. In contrast, manual labor in workshops and customer service roles are largely carried out by workers of other backgrounds

In general, members of the Korean community are experiencing a process of upward social mobility, facilitated by the highly concentrated organizational structure in which they are supported by other fellow Koreans. A significant proportion of these small traders and their children have professional degrees in various fields, but most of them do not pursue these professions in order to devote themselves to the textile business, which is much more economically profitable.

In the years following the COVID-19 pandemic, digital platforms and the rise of the Korean Wave (Hallyu) contributed to the expansion of Korean restaurants beyond the traditional concentrations in Koreatown and along Avenida Avellaneda. The Hallyu phenomenon promotes various cultural industries, including K-pop—with iconic groups such as BTS, BLACKPINK, and EXO—K-dramas (TV series on streaming platforms), Korean cinema (films like Parasite, Oldboy, and Squid Game), K-beauty (cosmetic products and fashion trends), and K-food, which has brought dishes like kimchi, bibimbap, bulgogi, and tteokbokki to international popularity. K-pop, in particular, introduced young Argentines (non-Koreans) to Korean culture both as performers and as audiences (Bialogorski, 2015). An official website, Kpop-Argentina, was created in 2011 with the aim of 'joining forces to get closer to our favorite artists.' A core objective was also to 'spread Hallyu in the country' through a broad and ambitious cultural project.

Supermarkets and restaurants of Chinese origin are scattered throughout the city and are primarily staffed by family members or fellow nationals (Fang, 2007). In many cases, they share the produce sector with Bolivian entrepreneurs. It is currently estimated that more than 40% of supermarkets (mini-markets) in Buenos Aires—including both the federal capital and the province—are owned and operated by members of the Chinese community. Argentina ranks as the third country in Latin America with the highest number of such establishments, after Brazil and Mexico. The Chinese community entered the food retail sector relatively early, and because of the nature of this activity, their businesses are distributed across various neighborhoods of Buenos Aires.

The economic activities of these two migrant groups (Chinese and Korean) have had a significant impact on urban configurations and social relations. In recent decades, both communities have developed new cultural dialogues that continue to reshape these patterns.

In the case of the Korean community, we can speak of an "ethnic enclave"centered in the neighborhoods of Flores and along Avenida Avellaneda, where most residential and

commercial activities are concentrated. These include the textile sector as well as consumer and professional services oriented toward the Korean community (Mera, 1998, 2005). The Chinese community, in contrast, is more spatially dispersed due to its predominant focus on the food sector—specifically restaurants and self-service grocery stores.

It is important to clarify that Chinatown in Belgrano C is not an ethnic enclave, but rather a space for culinary, cultural, and wellness consumption, not typically frequented or inhabited by the majority of the city's Chinese residents

New Currents Emerging from Cultural Globalization

The greater cultural visibility of the Chinese (through Chinatown) and Koreans (through Hallyu restaurants) began in 2000 and coincided with a moment of revaluation of diversity in Argentina. As Iadevito (2020) mentions, the "Korean phenomenon" was introduced in the city at a time when there were already policies in place for cultural minorities, and he mentions the program Cruzando Culturas (2001) of the Dirección de Política Cultural y Cooperación Internacional, part of the Secretaría de Cultura de la Nación. This program aimed to "promote cultural integration with recent immigrants from Bolivia, Korea, Chile, China, Paraguay, Peru and Ukraine, among other countries, through the promotion of activities that, from an intercultural approach, contribute to the mutual appreciation of the customs and artistic productions of the indigenous population and the immigrant groups themselves". Also the implementation of the Country Weeks, with the exhibition of folkloric dances and music, plastic arts, typical costumes, academic conferences, documentaries and films, gastronomic fairs, of the migrant communities. The City Council created the Observatory of Collectivities to make visible the mosaic of identities that make up the city, which considers itself multicultural. In addition, both institutions have supported cultural programs and events, such as art and photography exhibitions, Korean cinema, K-pop, which have taken place in cultural spaces and museums in the city center.

The Korean and Chinese governments activated their presence through the Korean Cultural Center and the Confucius Institute. The former gave a great boost to the dissemination of Hallyu cultural products: cinema, food, music and Korean language education; Han film festivals, classical music concerts were held in the city's most famous theaters. K-pop became popular thanks to groups such as BTS, Super Junior, BIGBANG and Girls' Generation, BTS and BLACKPINK, who filled cinemas and halls with broadcasts of their

live shows. Dance cover events, festivals such as K-POP Latin America and concerts by Korean artists were organized.

The Confucius Institutes of UBA and UNLP promoted various cultural and Chinese language activities, art exhibitions and shows, essay contests for university students, Tai Chi Chuan and Chi Kung classes. Also music and dance activities. This changed the cultural representation of China and Korea in the country.

In the case of the Korean Wave (Hallyu) and its various components, a shift has begun in the dialogue between Koreans and non-Koreans. K-pop groups and TV dramas have also contributed to the growing popularity of what is now known as K-food. Alongside K-pop idol fan clubs, restaurants and bars have emerged in central areas of the city—such as Palermo and downtown—where Korean migrants typically do not reside. These establishments attract K-pop and K-drama fans who are eager to try Korean food, learn the language, and engage with Korean culture.

The owners of these businesses are often second- or third-generation Koreans, and in some cases, recent migrants from South Korea. They have reimagined the aesthetic of the restaurants and adapted dishes, menus, and services to suit local tastes in the spirit of the Korean Wave. At the same time, sales of K-beauty products, Korean snacks, and idol merchandise have increased.

As a result, Korean cultural products—reinterpreted in the local context—have gained new forms of circulation in film, theater, music, soap operas, and video games, all of which have become increasingly visible in the urban landscape.

In the case of "Chinatown," cultural difference is positively associated with the consumption of East Asian services such as health, beauty, and gastronomy. The area has become a tourist destination frequented by visitors from middle- and upper-class socioeconomic backgrounds. Certain Chinese cultural offerings—such as Lunar New Year celebrations, high-end restaurants, and traditional medical and beauty services—attract large numbers of non-Chinese visitors, similar to the appeal of Korean restaurants fueled by the Hallyu wave.

These offerings are presented as ready-to-consume cultural products under the brand labels of "China" and "Korea." Both Hallyu-inspired Korean restaurants and Chinatown spaces are re-aestheticized and redesigned to align with media representations rather than with the lived experiences of migrants themselves. These two expressions—Chinatown and Hallyu-wave Korean restaurants—are perceived differently by Chinese supermarket owners

and members of the Korean community in the Flores district of Baek-ku.

In the latter two cases, a more negative evaluation is observed. The meanings of territoriality—understood as the intersection between identity and geographic space—begin to shift. Stereotypes circulate that shape the popular imagination of city residents: Chinese migrants are often associated with behaviors such as poor hygiene, turning off refrigerators, and a lack of Spanish language proficiency; Koreans in Flores are commonly linked to labor exploitation and noncompliance with regulations.

By contrast, the Belgrano C Chinatown and the Korean restaurants associated with the Hallyu wave tend to receive a more positive evaluation, likely influenced by the economic success and favorable international image of China and South Korea. In many cases, these spaces are perceived as sites of sophisticated or aspirational consumption.

A critical view points out that the cultural wealth contributed by migrant groups should be valued not only for the possibility of access to diverse consumption - art, languages, food, among other marketable products - but also for the contribution of their conceptions of the world and the social, the product of particular histories and political processes. These material and symbolic presences are fundamental to the enrichment of notions of diversity in contemporary democracies.

The cultural presence of Chinatown and the Korean gastronomic scene, as staged and reified spaces, reflects folklorized representations of these countries' particularities—rendered visible and marketable within the urban landscape. However, this folklorization, which makes these cultures "consumable" (positively marked through their association withconsumption), coexists with the persistence of negative social stigmas against migrants. In this context, cultural difference is not only commodified but also mobilized as a political strategy in the construction of migrant identities.

Emerging Processes and the Valorization of Identities

Regarding the modality of urban installation, in previous studies I have proposed to analyze the Koreatown as a process of community appropriation, while the Chinese case takes on a more urban requalification modality (Mera, 2024). Each of these processes mobilizes different values and sensibilities, and establishes very different exchange links with the local population. We consider that each of these figures corresponds to different

forms of cultural dialogue.

Let us recall that the processes of requalification have been booming in the world since the 1990s and are trends towards the homogenization of urban spaces based on aesthetic and commercial proposals. They are real estate, financial and construction projects that are materializing in global cities (Sassen, 2010). They began in all continents with what were called "non-places": transit and passage spaces in the style of airports, large shopping malls, train and bus stations, etc. (Girola et all, 2011) In this sense, Chinatown, like most Chinatowns in other cities, are reified proposals and resort to the same aesthetic and design patterns, since they are trends driven by large international corporations. Sidewalks, lighting, storefronts, steel balls, etc. ..... This is not the case with Koreatown, which, although it has undergone changes to improve its aesthetics, has not succeeded in establishing itself as a space for cultural consumption like Chinatown.

The case of the Korean neighborhood "Baek-ku", which responds toa type of non-mercantilized territoriality, since it is the product of a long process of installation and circulation of these groups, with a concentration of community services and businesses (Sassone and Mera, 2010), contains the signs, the institutions and the greater circulation and residence of these migrants.

The Chinatown (located in Belgrano C) does not correspond to the settlement pattern of most Chinese migrant groups, but is the result of a commercial enterprise project of some Chinese and Taiwanese groups together with the city government. Its target customers are mainly foreign clients and consumers.

The functionality of Chinatown resulted from a coordinated effort among certain groups of Chinese and Taiwanese residents, the city government, and later, neighborhood associations, all aiming to transform the neighborhood's visual and spatial identity. This planning strategy emphasized architectural, stylistic, and landscape elements, while relegating the social dimension to a secondary role. Features such as the entrance arch on Arribeños Street, Chinese lanterns hanging from storefronts and sidewalks, and the area's pedestrian use on weekends are all part of a policy designed to construct a commercial space grounded in selectively chosen cultural attributes that mark the identity of this migrant group.

The rebranding of the district, oriented toward tourism, is widely promoted in both national and international media. In this market-driven logic, the district is framed around essentialized and folklorized symbols of "Orientality"—architecture, decorative styles,

aesthetic elements, and services that non-Asian citizens typically associate with "the Chinese," such as traditional medicine, beauty treatments, and gastronomy.

However, a disconnect exists between the representations produced in this commercialized space and the everyday lives of the Chinese migrants who work in nearby supermarkets and restaurants. These individuals—who constitute the majority of the Chinese population in Buenos Aires—are still associated with negative stereotypes, far removed from the idealized consumption of Belgrano's Chinatown.

A similar dynamic can be observed in the case of Korean Wave restaurants. These establishments are largely detached from the identities of Korean migrants living in the city, who remain primarily associated with the textile industry. Instead, the Hallyu restaurants are linked to the global phenomenon of the Korean Wave—K-pop, K-dramas, K-cinema, and other cultural exports disseminated through media screens.

On the other hand, Koreatown—as a community-based space—constitutes the very fabric of the social realm in which it finds its raison d'être. The neighborhood serves as a point of reference in the re-elaboration of a cohesive, hegemonic community identity and facilitates the development of dialogues with Argentine society. As a space built and inhabited as one's own, it provides migrants with a sense of security and belonging. Within this familiar environment, they move confidently and peacefully, revealing an important dimension of the relationship between migrants and territory.

In this case, the defining attributes are not aesthetic or folklorized symbols, but rather emotional and social ties—an environment of belonging, of safety, of familiar presences and affective landmarks—from which migrants emerge as political actors, capable of contesting both their rights and the representations that shape them.

With the popularity of the Korean Wave, younger members of the Korean community have begun to reclaim and reinterpret its cultural forms, particularly K-food and other aspects of Hallyu. One reflection of this trend in the urban landscape is Pasaje Rupino, which initially catered to young Koreans and gradually attracted neighborhood residents and friends. This process has helped restore a sense of pride in Korean identity, prompting new entrepreneurial initiatives that extend beyond Koreatown into nearby neighborhoods where many Koreans reside.

New spaces of enunciation are being created: Chinatown and Hallyu restaurants, where identities are renegotiated. Through art and staged culture, these spaces begin to reshape

the representations that Argentines hold of themselves, in a context marked by tension with discriminatory attitudes

While the sense of territoriality of Korean restaurants and Chinatown is different, we can see that there are similarities in that both are establishing new cultural dialogues with the society around them.

Final Thoughts

This paper has analyzed the ways in which Chinese and Korean communities engage in dialogue through the urban space of Buenos Aires, focusing on the tension between economic activity and patterns of territorial inscription, which in turn generate specific forms of sociability. The ways people circulate, inhabit cities, and engage in intercultural dialogue—shaped by the interplay between transnational and local forces—have a profound impact on identity formation.

Chinatown in Belgrano and the proliferation of Korean restaurants associated with the Hallyu wave serve as concentrated cultural markers of a strategically produced transnational identity. However, these spaces do not represent the core of everyday social life for the majority of Chinese and Korean residents in the city.

As demonstrated in the two cases analyzed, neighborhoods and restaurants linked to national imagery foster new cultural dialogues explicitly shaped by difference. These spaces produce positive effects both for migrant communities and for the broader urban population. They improve social relations and mutual understanding by offering migrants opportunities to maintain cultural practices, take pride in their heritage—whether personal or ancestral—and value food, leisure, aesthetic trends, and social practices that help ease the migratory experience while enriching collective identity. For the city, they provide access to cultural and social experiences that contribute to building more inclusive and democratic societies.

The visibility of the Korean Hallyu wave has notably improved Argentine receptiveness to Korean culture. Terms like K-pop have entered everyday language and public discourse, particularly among women and young people. University students, in particular, have emerged as leaders, devoting their free time to exploring Korean culture. A similar dynamic has occurred in relation to Chinatown, whose updated image and expanded

functions have generated more open and favorable attitudes among Argentines toward Chinese culture.

However, a key challenge remains: to what extent will these processes be embraced by the Chinese and Korean communities themselves? As a preliminary conclusion, we can affirm that the ways migrants adapt and reinterpret cultural initiatives from their countries of origin reflect their capacity—and that of their organizations—to forge new forms of exchange, incorporating new elements and reshaping previously defined social boundaries. Art and culture serve as facilitators of these dialogues, introducing new dynamics but also exposing tensions between discrimination and mutual understanding.

Ultimately, these communities are engaging in a robust revaluation of their identities, expressed through specific urban spaces and cultural performances. This repositioning allows them to negotiate their identities and representations in new ways within the local context, influencing how different social groups perceive and relate to one another, even amid ongoing tensions.

Our goal is to contribute to the broader scholarly debate on the potential of cultural dialogue to foster mutual understanding between migrant communities and established populations.

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Carolina Mera is a professor and researcher in the field of cultural sociology. She has worked on issues such as identities, subjectivities, intercultural dialogues and urban displacement from different perspectives. She specialises in Chinese and Korean migration to Latin America, from which she has reflected on issues of gender, family, generational differences, urban settlement, cultural consumption, economic insertion, transnational networks, among others. She has published books and articles in these research areas, supervised numerous research projects, trained undergraduate and graduate students, and contributed to the development of these studies in Argentina. She holds a Ph.D.and D.E.A. in Social Anthropology and Urban Ethnology from the Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales, Paris, France. She also holds a Ph.D. in Social Sciences and a B.A. in Sociology from the Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Buenos Aires (UBA). She is currently a professor of international migration issues at the UBA and a researcher at the National Council of Science and Technology (CONICET). She was the founder of the Association of Korean Studies in Argentina and the promoter of the Latin American Network. She has participated in national and international congresses around the world, including the World Congresses of Korean Studies, Latin American Sociological Association (ALAS), Latin American Studies Association (LASA), International Network for Comparative Analysis of Social Inequalities (INCASI), etc.

Discussant Remarks

Discussant: Daeseung Seo
Seoul National University

Hello, my name is Daeseung Seo, a research fellow at the Institute of Cross-Cultural Studies at Seoul National University. It is a privilege to contribute as a discussant to Dr. Carolina Mera's presentation, "Territory and Mobility: Transnational Networks and Cultural Dynamics of Asian Communities in Argentina." I would like to begin by briefly outlining how I understood the key arguments of this paper, and then I'll raise a few questions that came to mind while reading the paper.

I have conducted anthropological research on the Korean immigrant community in Los Angeles, United States. For this reason, I found Dr. Mera's study of the two Asian communities in Argentina particularly fascinating from a cross-cultural perspective. In South Korea, there is relatively limited public or academic awareness of Korean migrant communities in Latin American countries such as Brazil and Argentina. In this regard, Dr. Mera's research fills a significant gap in our understanding. It seems to me that the limited attention may be attributed to the comparatively small number of Korean migrants to Latin America in contrast to North America. As noted in the paper, the number of Korean immigrants in Argentina remains relatively low due to factors such as political and social instability and patterns of onward migration to the United States.

What I found particularly thought-provoking in this study is that the primary driver of 'change' identified in the Korean Argentine context is not the physical mobility of migrants, but rather the expansion of cultural influence through transnational networks, as highlighted in the presentation's title. Through these networks, new cultural landscapes—imported directly from Korea—emerge outside the boundaries of established ethnic enclaves, often independent of the historical and cultural trajectories of the earlier immigrant communities.

One particularly insightful aspect is that this consumption of modern Korean culture often coexists with persistent negative stereotypes about earlier generations of Korean immigrants. Consumers are engaging with an image of Korea as a modern, successful country—but they are not necessarily engaging with the lives or cultures of the Korean

Argentines who settled decades ago, and who may still be associated with outdated or even negative perceptions. This phenomenon reminds me of how Chinese foods – like lamb skewers or spicy hot pot(malatang) – have become popular in Korea, yet this popularity doesn't necessarily improve perceptions of Chinese migrants. Similarly, in the U.S., there's widespread enthusiasm for Asian culture, but that hasn't prevented ongoing anti-Asian sentiment. This tension between cultural admiration and social exclusion is something I think deserves closer attention.

With that understanding, I would like to raise a few questions.

First, I'd like to ask what led you to focus on the Chinese and Korean communities in particular. In the introduction, you distinguish between migrants who are positively valued by the state and those who are negatively perceived, noting that the latter are more common. Where do the Chinese and Korean communities fall within that framework in the Argentine context? As the paper notes, many second-generation Korean Argentines have entered professional sectors, suggesting upward mobility. Does this mean that, despite such socioeconomic advancement, Koreans are still largely perceived as belonging to the "negatively valued" immigrant group? If so, how does this compare to the Chinese community? Are there significant differences between the two groups in terms of their social positioning or public perception?

Second, regarding the paper's broader argument: it seems that this paper suggests recent flows of transnational capital (in the Chinese case) and culture (in the Korean case) have not significantly improved the entrenched negative perceptions of Asian immigrants. However, other scholars have argued that such developments have played a critical role in fostering a sense of ethnic pride, particularly among the second generation. This makes me wonder whether these recent transnational phenomena are entirely disconnected from the pre-existing Asian immigrant communities in Argentina. Or do they interact with them in some way, perhaps reshaping their identity or visibility?

In this context, I've been reflecting on the distinction between traditional Asian ethnic enclaves, which serve as places for long-standing immigrant residents, and the emergence of new spaces shaped by flows of capital that are detached from community roots. In the case of Koreatown in Los Angeles, for example, the original immigrant settlement area has undergone spatial transformation: as residential patterns dispersed into suburban areas, the original core evolved into a commercial hub, driven in part by transnational capital and the global popularity of Korean culture (the Korean Wave). Professor Kyeyoung Park has

referred to this transition as a shift from an ethnic enclave to an ethnic nexus. In that case, I wonder whether, in the example of Baek-ku, the Korean immigrant enclave in Argentina, we can observe changes in the character of traditional immigrant enclaves similar to those seen in the United States

Thank you once again for your insightful presentation

Session 2

Cultural Practices and Digital Narratives of Migrants

Cultural practices of migrants and the possibilities of artivism: Focusing on the case of cultural organizations in South Korea

Kim Ji Youn

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Abstract

This paper explores the possibilities of migrants' social engagement through cultural and artistic activities, and in particular, the possibility of migrants moving towards 'artivism' - political expression through art - in South Korea. It argues that migrants should not only be economic contributors but also act as subjects who can express their identity and be socially recognized, and emphasizes the important role that culture and arts can play in this regard. It focuses on the activities of the Asian Media Culture Factory (AMC Factory), a non-profit cultural organization that provides a space and social infrastructure for migrants to participate and express their culture artistically, and shows how migrants do not simply reproduce traditional culture, but also engage in various contemporary creative activities through film, music, and theater, and further engage with the issue of migration in Korean society. Through the AMC Factory, migrants are engaging in new artistic practices that transcend the cultural differences between their home countries and Korea, and in doing so, they are creating their own unique cultural expressions, breaking away from the assimilation and othering required by mainstream society. This is presented as an important way to realize the politics of recognition in the process of negotiating with mainstream society to redefine migrants' citizenship.

Introduction

In the context of Korea, the cultural practices of immigrants have been narrowly defined based on their degree of assimilation into Korean society. Firstly, culture as leisure. The concept of "good function" in leisure is of particular interest, as it pertains to the ability of migrant workers to seamlessly reproduce the labor force. Furthermore, the psychological stability of married migrants and their ability to interact smoothly with their Korean families is of significant concern. The focus on their leisure time underscores the efficacy of social infrastructure in facilitating assimilation into Korean culture. Secondly, the traditional culture of the migrants' home country must be considered. This approach operates under the assumption that culture is static and that there is a direct correlation between an individual's nationality and their cultural identity. It acknowledges that migrants can be viewed as representatives of their ethnic group or cultural traditions. In accordance with this perception, migrants are expected to introduce their traditional culture to Korea through local festivals and multicultural education programs that promote cultural diversity or multiculturalism.

The objective of this study is to shift the prevailing societal perception of migrants from being viewed as mere performers of social functions, such as labor or marriage, to recognizing them as subjects who fully express and realize their own identities. To this end, the study seeks to elucidate the cultural representations and practices of migrants. The phenomenon of migration, in which individuals or groups move from one place to another, is not merely a physical act but also a cultural exchange. In Korean society, migrants and their cultures are present and active, albeit in a variety of forms. However, there is a dearth of comprehensive representation and interpretation of these cultures, which is a crucial aspect of understanding and engaging with the multifaceted identities and practices within the Korean context. This paper aims to explore the conceptual framework and the possibilities of practical practices that can recognize migrants as individuals who pursue their own emotional triggers rather than being subject to one-sided assimilation into Korean culture. The central theme of this study is the exploration of the potential involvement of migrants in the realm of artistic creation and cultural activities, with a focus on their active engagement in issues pertaining to migration within the context of Korean society. Further explore the possibility that migrants' cultural activities can move towards artivism, which is a combination of cultural and social activism. The concept of "artivism"—a term that combines the words "art" and "activism"—has emerged as a significant tool for social engagement among migrants as social minorities. This form of

artistic expression allows individuals to convey messages that challenge the injustices perpetuated by dominant ideologies within their societies. The present study explores the potential for migrants to engage in self-expression and social interaction through artistic activities.

Cultural activities and artistic expression

In this chapter, I will briefly explore the discursive dimensions of the possibility for migrants to become active agents of aestheticization and self-expression. Mike Featherstone, an expert in postmodern consumer culture, has explored the potential for artistic activities to be integrated into everyday life through the concept of "aestheticization of everyday life" (2007). The motto "let life be a work of art" signifies the realization of diverse forms of life and the pursuit of novel tastes and sensations by transforming one's life into a work of art itself. This refers to an existential attitude or daily practice that seeks alternatives to the mass-produced commodities offered by the commodity economy. It underscores the importance of recognizing individual diversity and acknowledging differences, though it also carries the potential to result in a retreat into the private sphere of the middle class. In contrast to the aura that modernist art imbued in the work of a select group of genius artists, this approach entails deconstructing this authority and affirming the diverse cultural activities of individuals in everyday life as artistic expression.

In his 2011 work titled "Multitude," Antonio Negri explores the potential of art and aesthetics to transcend mere aestheticization of the quotidian and instead function as a medium for political expression. An Italian participatory intellectual, Negri examines the relationship between art, labor, and politics, asking how we can live art and make it our own. For the multitude, the historical subjects of contemporary society challenging the traditional political conception of "the people", the act of resistance itself can be considered an act of "creation." However, in addressing the relationship between art and the multitude, he does not specifically inquire into how those who are bound by the absolute time of labor and survival can participate in art as "surplus." The "postmodern multiplicity," as he terms it, signifies a novel form of representation, characterized by profound and often challenging transformations in their lives.

While Negri's discourse on the multitude as a subject of emancipatory art was ambiguous regarding concrete practices, the discussion of art as a social movement, or "artivism,"

provides a more comprehensive framework. The integration of art and activism is frequently termed "art activism" or, in brief, "artivism." Artivism is defined as the utilization of art as a medium for effecting change in the political and social conditions of the larger context, including the art world. The term "artivism" was first coined in a 2005 article by French journalist Jade Lindgaard. In a statement made during an anti-World Trade Organization protest, a demonstrator articulated the sentiment that the protestors were deriving greater enjoyment from the event, despite facing physical aggression from law enforcement. This assertion was subsequently employed by Lindgaard to support his argument that the objective of activism is to facilitate an environment reminiscent of a "carnival," where activists and the general public can engage in artistic, creative, experimental, and critical activities in a collaborative manner. This approach is said to contrast with the hierarchical structure and monotonous nature characteristic of conventional protests. It does so by pursuing a narrative of a transformed self after the experience of extremes and a return to normalcy through gender disguise, madness, absurdity, magical imagination, and bodily eroticism.

Artivism can be defined as a form of "creative resistance" (Jordan, 2016), which is also described as "the act of doing something meaningful through direct action while also being aesthetically pleasing and cathartic" (Fernández-Castrillo & Mantoan, 2024). Artivism is characterized by the active utilization of aesthetic expression as a tool of political resistance. The concept of "artivism" is predicated on the notion of resisting capitalism and authoritarianism. This form of artivism has focused on a variety of issues, including inequality for refugees and migrants, climate change, the identity of sexual minorities, and animal rights, among others. A review of seminal works in the field reveals two elements that are frequently identified as indispensable for the practice of artivism: collaboration and imagination. The majority of artistic endeavors, encompassing both public art and networked online performances, are characterized by the involvement of multiple participants. These individuals frequently engage in collaborative learning and co-creation processes as the artistic work unfolds. Contrary to the notion that art should serve as a mere reflection of society, it is proposed that art functions as a tool, akin to a "hammer," that shapes society (Jordan, 2016). Here, art is defined as a collective rather than individual production, which is in alignment with the principles of communism. Such art can be likened to conatus, the will to live, the activity of desire, and the construction of existence. The concept of beauty is theorized as an excess, a surplus that is constructed through collective labor. The production of beauty is also conceptualized as a labor that is liberated from power (Negri, 2011). Secondly, imagination is defined as a conceptualization of action, which is understood

to be a catalyst for the emergence of novel modes of aesthetic resistance. These resistance movements, in turn, are defined as a departure from existing paradigms and a pursuit of alternative approaches to the prevailing absurdities and conventions of reality (Lindgaard, 2005; Duncombe, 2007; Negri, 2011; Jung, 2011). For migrants and refugees, imagination has already been a productive force that has driven the desire for a better future and made possible the actual practice of cross-border mobility (Appadurai, 1997). Therefore, the practice of artivism demands that the imagination and desires of its participants be aesthetically manifested and sensually experienced throughout the process and realization of the endeavor.

Cultural Representations andPractices of Migrants in Korea

Multicultural Festivals as Spectacle and Cultural Representations of Migrants

Public events and local festivals that focus on multiculturalism or cultural diversity are the main ways in which migrants in Korea engage with mainstream society. More than 240 local governments hold such events around the International Day of May 21, and more than 200 multicultural family support centers and multicultural pilot schools across the country also hold multicultural-related festivals (Jung, Myung-hyun, 2018). These festivals are mainly organized or run by local governments, multicultural support centers, etc., and migrants mainly participate as performers representing individual countries, event booth operators, or individual spectators. The performances mainly consist of traditional performances from each country, with anemphasis on colorful and unique performances that can be used to identify each country. Initially, migrant communities organized their own amateur teams to perform, but as the demand for performers has increased due to the proliferation of events, professional performers have emerged to participate in these events. The current migration-related festivals in Korea are predominantly top-down events that prioritize the enhancement of the global status of the "our" community through a visual emphasis on the ethnic and cultural diversity of migrants. The cultural manifestation of migrants is presented in a manner consistent with the prevailing societal tendency to consume cultural expressions by migrants as a form of spectacle. In these "controlled" carnivals and festivals, the middle class utilizes the concept of otherness in a manner that facilitates the 'safe' consumption of 'grotesque' bodies and images. This process results in the aestheticization of the middle class, while the migrants' identities are anchored in "tradition."

Cultural practices of migrant arts organization AMC Factory

AMC Factory, a non-profit migrant cultural arts organization, was founded in late November 2011 and began its activities in 2012. The organization is known for its annual Seoul Migrant Art Festival, which showcases the talents and contributions of migrant communities. In addition to its event-based initiatives, the organization produces and directs films that address issues pertinent to migrants and the broader public. It also offers external lectures and media training programs, aiming to raise awareness and promote understanding among diverse audiences. Notably, Jung So-hee and Mamun, two pivotal activists, share a common professional background in the realm of film making and production. Jung's professional endeavors prior to this collaboration included work on films featuring migrants in South Korea. The initial collaboration between Jung and Mamun, who had immigrated to Korea as a migrant worker from Bangladesh, was initiated through her film making instrution. Following his marriage, he became a naturalized citizen in Korea. Despite the fact that the primary steering committee is comprised of individuals of Korean descent, as stipulated by the registration process for establishing an organization within the Republic of Korea, the actual planning and operation of the organization is carried out by migrants.

A comprehensive review of the AMC factory, complemented by in-depth interviews with its members, reveals two salient points. Firstly, the factory's operations are characterized by a production of space, a concept originally posited by Lefebvre in 1974. Secondly, the involvement of migrants as active participants is of significant importance.

Lefebvre's conceptualization of space underscores the notion that prevailing ideologies are able to sustain their hegemony by creating spaces that align with their principles. The generation of physical space proved to be a pivotal element in enabling the AMC Factory to maintain its operational capacity. It is often associated with financial constraints, but occupying a physical space is nonetheless a crucial factor in the sustainability of activities. Initially, it establishes a contact zone (Pratt, 2007) that facilitates collaboration and sustained engagement with those participating in the activity. Initially, AMC Factory was located in Hongdae, a center for artists, and later moved to Mullae Creative Village in Mullae-dong, Yeongdeungpo-gu, where other artists settled even when they had to move due to rising rents. If one were to consider only the participation of migrants, a location in the Gyeonggi region, which is overwhelmingly populated by foreigners, would have the advantage of easy access and low rents. However, the location was chosen in order to

avoid ghettoization and to ensure that cultural activists could interact with a large number of migrants from diverse backgrounds, and that participants could identify as artists rather than simply as migrants.

The nature of the interactions and emotions that transpire within this space are pivotal in shaping its unique sense of place. Sohee Jung designated the AMC Factory space "Free Port," thereby underscoring the notion that the operation of the space itself constitutes an activity. Free Port is not merely a conventional office space; it fulfills a diverse array of functions. The facility functions as a media training center, a performance practice space, a venue for various meetings and gatherings, and a temporary residence for migrants while they transition between jobs or depart the country. Jung underscores the pivotal role of the kitchen in this regard.

> "Migrant workers encounter substandard housing conditions and stigmatization, which hinders their ability to prepare home-cooked meals that are characterized by robust use of spices or to socialize with friends. Furthermore, they are tasked with the responsibility of addressing issues faced by employers and other migrant workers. Therefore, the provision of a kitchen space was deemed imperative to enable migrant workers to prepare their own meals and to congregate with their peers for social gatherings" (Jung So-hee, September 17, 2023).

The food produced in the kitchens is not just food to represent ethnicity and be sold at multicultural festivals, but a part of migrants' daily lives and a medium of nostalgia. The rooms with multiple beds also make Freeport a place of hospitality and encounter for migrants. Not everyone who stays here for a while actively participates in artistic activities. Still, it is important to provide such a physically tangible and usable space for these highly mobile migrants. Temporary communities form around these places and create connections between different migrants.

What are the possibilities for migrants as cultural actors? The migrants who participate in AMC Factory range from those who are engaging in creative activities for the first time, to those who have been involved in music or film as a hobby, to those who have been doing it for a living. In the case of amateurs, many are students, married migrants, or others with time on their hands who stumble upon an AMC Factory event or are introduced by someone they know who is already involved. However, there are not many people who

stay involved on a consistent and long-term basis. There are a number of constraints that prevent migrants from continuing their creative endeavors as artists. These include language difficulties, precarious status, and time constraints.

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At AMC Factory, migrants from a particular country are not in the majority, so activities are often centered around Korean as a way to communicate with each other. As the level of participation increases, the level of Korean communication skills becomes a greater obstacle. Since many migrants' visas expire in 2-5 years and they often change their residences depending on their workplaces, they often have to stop working on their projects when their visas expire or they change workplaces. In the case of collaborative work, such as music bands or filmmaking, it is often difficult for the team to function if one or two people leave. It is also very difficult for migrants to find "spare" time to consistently engage in artistic endeavors as they juggle jobs, studies, childcare and domestic work, as well as life in both their home country and South Korea.

> "It's not easy to make art as a migrant worker. There is very little time for personal life. I think it's almost impossible to be active, especially if you're a parent with children. It's not a lie when theysay that art is something you have to be somewhat full to do" (Mamun, interviewed June 26, 2024)."

AMC Factory does not directly help these migrants improve their circumstances so that they can devote themselves to their artistic endeavors. They cannot extend their visas or provide them with benefits beyond the power of the employer in the work permit system. Nevertheless, participating in the creation of a space for self-expression outside of the traditional media and multicultural festivals that top-down transmit the stereotypical images that mainstream society wants to see and how it wants to consume them is a form of

artistic activism in current Korean society. Therefore, it is important for both the organizers and participants of AMC Factory to lay the groundwork for migrants to enjoy the process of participation rather than evaluate the quality of the results, and the boundaries between cultural activities and everyday life overlap. At the same time, it is important to raise critical voices about migration-related issues in Korean society.

> "I visit migrant-related organizations in South Korea to perform and participate in migrant rallies. I never thought about migration issues until I became a migrant myself. Once I became a migrant, I saw the realityof migrants. I want to make many people who are 'non-migrants' who would not be interested in migration issues like I was in the past interested in the reality of migrants"(Interview with a migrant who plays in a band at AMC Factory, June 16, 2024).

The line between their artistic endeavors and social activism isn't always clear, according to the two leaders and other AMC Factory participants. Some migrants are afraid to speak out. When making films for festivals, they wrote scenarios about their own experiences of discrimination in Korea, but when the films were actually screened at festivals, they wondered, "Will Koreans be offended?" and began to self-censor and worry. In this way, migrants experience a social climate that restricts their freedom of expression to the point where they feel uncomfortable being honest about their experiences and thoughts in Korean society. AMC Factory's work to empathize with these concerns, but also to create an audience that is ready and willing to see these voices on film, is perhaps the way AMC Factory practices artivism. In this sense, AMC Factory creates a physical space and an intangible sense of community where migrants can express what they want to express in the realities of Korea.

Conclusion

Artivism is an aesthetic and political movement that uses the artistic imagination to address the social conflicts and discrimination around migration and refugees, poverty and inequality, and climate change that are intensifying in our time, and extends to the will to materialize and transform that imagination into reality. However, the aesthetic aspect is often criticized by the art world for its lack of quality and by the activist community for its lack of resistance and will to change. The nature of public art depends on the degree of

independence from capital, the participation of parties, and the possibility of multi-party collaboration. The aesthetic effect of artivism is to create a potential space to visualize or experience what has been excluded, to challenge structural inequalities, to create discord itself, and to become "the political" (Rancière, 2003).

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Discussant Remarks

Discussant: Ohnmar Lwin
(SungKongHoe University)

Introduction

This paper presents a convincing and much-needed mediation into the discourse on migrants in South Korea, particularly by challenging dominant paradigms that frame migrant identities through functionalist and assimilationist lenses. It highlights the capacity of migrants as agents of change in cultural and political space by using artistic expression and organizational participation, designates identity formation and sociopolitical engagement. The key concept is based on useful intellectual backgrounds, drawing on theories from Featherstone and Negri; it indicates that everyday cultural and artistic expression, especially when collaborative and imaginative, can serve as resistance against capitalist and authoritarian norms. AMC Factory, the empirical focus of the paper, illustrates a rich case study that demonstrates how cultural practice can progress from tokenistic performance to genuine and even radical forms of resistance and self-expression.

Migrant Culture and Artivism

The author insightfully critiques the dual approach to migrant culture in South Korea: one that either includes cultural expression under leisure and psychological assimilation, or that fossilizes it into static traditions to be consumed as exotic spectacles at multicultural festivals. In the paper, among the most powerful passages is the criticism of multicultural festivals as "controlled carnivals". The author demonstrates that these events often turn rich and complex cultural narratives into performative acts of exoticism by commercializing migrant identities and cultures for middle-class consumption. By contrast, AMC Factory's approach seeks to reframe representation as relational and dialogic rather than performative and consumable. In this context, the paper critically examines the inconsistencies within migrant artivism itself. For example, the deeply ingrained limits of

acceptable discourse are revealed by migrants' reluctance to voice critical opinions about Korean society for fear of retaliation.

While the paper is intellectually robust and empirically rich, I would like to give some reflections and constructive critiques:

On Artivism as Prefigurative Practice: The notion that artivism is not only a critique of the present but a rehearsal for alternative futures is latent throughout the text. Is it possible to theorize this more explicitly? In other words, how does artivism function as a type of prefigurative politics in the context of migrants?

On Visibility and Risk: The concern over whether critical representations of migrant life might "offend" Korean audiences opens a rich avenue for further investigation. How does self-censorship operate within migrant artivism? What kinds of audiences are being imagined, and what are the effective and political costs of catering to these audiences?

On Temporality and Sustainability: The paper provides the difficulties for maintaining migrant involvement in cultural activism due to their unstable legal and financial circumstances. For migrant artivism, how might future research explore models of sustainable infrastructure that do not rely on state patronage or precarious labor?

Given the global rise of digital platforms, does the AMC Factory or similar organizations utilize online media to extend their artivism beyond physical space? This would be especially relevant for highly mobile or time-poor migrant participants.

Conclusion

A significant contribution to cultural and migration studies is presented in this paper. To reconsider the cultural presence of migrants in South Korea—not as passive objects of integration, but as active contributors to the aesthetic and political outlines of their lives—it deftly combines theory, ethnography, and political critique. In addition to challenging us to reevaluate our interactions with immigrant culture, this paper pushes us to consider more critically the social, spatial, and symbolic structures that either facilitate or impede such engagement.

Critiquing South Korea from a Veil of Anonymity: Image Analysis of Memes from Grumpy Aliens Korea

Jiwon Yun
Yale University

Abstract

This study was inspired by the fact that the majority of studies on immigrants in South Korea are designed, conducted, and written by non-immigrant South Korean citizens. Such a research ecosystem could lead to under- and mis-representation of immigrants' authentic voices, as the presence of a Korean researcher could prompt immigrant research participants to conform to mainstream narratives about immigrants. This study turns to anonymous cultural expressions on social media platforms as one alternative that could bypass this bias. Social media platforms, like other online spaces, are characterized by accessibility and (relative) anonymity. One expectation could be that these features of social media platforms would help immigrants feel less restrained by the potential prejudice, judgement, and repercussion from native residents.

In this paper, I highlight the case study of Grumpy Aliens Korea, a Facebook Page created in 2016 by two foreigners living in South Korea, and an Instagram account by the same name. These outlets feature images that have been turned into memes by witty captions that capture the immigrant experience in South Korea. The ideas for the images and captions come from the two administrators themselves, their friends, or fans and subscribers of the Facebook Page and Instagram account. I treat these images as an artistic, albeit humorous, responses by immigrants to the host society of South Korea. I argue that these serve as online "doodles" that allow immigrants to share their honest feelings about Korean society through cultural expression.

The analysis was guided by three questions: (1) How is the portrayal of immigrant experience by Grumpy Aliens Korea different from the mainstream understanding of immigrant experience? (2) How did the COVID-19 pandemic affect cultural expressions on Grumpy Aliens Korea? (3) How did meme-making itself emerge as one way by which immigrants make sense of the Korean society? Images were divided into three different

historical periods, pre-pandemic (2016 to 2019), pandemic (2020 to 2021) and post-pandemic (2022 onwards). Treating the images themselves as a data archive, I first coded the images openly, identified emergent themes, and sought to discover relationships between these themes.

The analysis revealed seven main themes. The first set of themes explain the experiences of foreigners in South Korea: "struggling for survival," "rejected aliens," "unstable relationships," and "trapped in Korea." However, as their stay in the country lengthens, some immigrants gain insights and strategies for living in Korea. The second set of themes represent some of these strategies used by immigrants to reclaim agency in South Korea: "Koreanization," "seizing the alienating gaze," and "social commentary." The last of these point to the fact that Grumpy Aliens Korea itself serves as a platform for immigrants to critique Korean society, highlighting the importance of examining anonymous cultural expressions by immigrants.

Introduction

Since the 2000s, there has been an explosion in migration studies in South Korea, fueled by a growing interest in multiculturalism. Various quantitative studies helped portray the basic landscape of migration in South Korea (국가인권위원회 2019; 장주영 2018; 통계청 2018), while interview-based qualitative studies paved ways for us to conceptualize immigrant experience and thought processes. (김현숙·김옥녀 2017; 김윤영·조일동 2016; 임희경·안주아·신명희·황경아 2012; 한국이주민건강협회 2009). However, it still remains that the vast majority of studies on immigrants in South Korea are designed, conducted, and written by non-immigrant South Korean citizens. Such a research ecosystem could lead to under- and mis-representation of immigrants' authentic voices, as the presence of a Korean researcher could prompt immigrant research participants to conform to mainstream narratives about immigrants.

This study turns to anonymous cultural expressions on social media platforms as one alternative that could bypass this bias. Since the advent of the internet, online spaces have provided a social backstage for marginalized groups, such as immigrants, to express their voices freely. Social media platforms, like other online spaces, are characterized by accessibility and (relative) anonymity. One expectation could be that these features of social media platforms would help immigrants feel less restrained by the potential prejudice, judgement, and repercussion from native residents.

In this paper, I highlight the case study of Grumpy Aliens Korea, a Facebook Page created in 2016 by two "aliens"living in South Korea, and an Instagram account by the same name. These outlets feature images that have been turned into memes by witty captions that capture the immigrant experience in South Korea. The ideas for the images and captions come from the two administrators themselves, their friends, or fans and subscribers of the Facebook Page and Instagram account. I treat these images as an artistic, albeit humorous, responses by immigrants to the host society of South Korea. I argue that these serve as online "doodles"that allow immigrants to share their honest feelings about Korean society through cultural expression. The analysis was guided by two questions: (1) How is the portrayal of immigrant experience by Grumpy Aliens Korea different from the mainstream understanding of immigrant experience? (2) How did meme-making itself emerge as one way by which immigrants make sense of the Korean society? Treating the images themselves as a data archive, I first coded the images openly, identified emergent themes, and sought to discover relationships between these themes.

The rest of the paper is organized in the following order. First, I will explain the rationale for this study by discussing the ethics of representation in research involving minority populations. Then I will review literature the relationship between the cyberspace and minority representation. Following literature review, the paper briefly introduces the case of "Grumpy Aliens Korea," the research questions, and methods. The discoveries from the visual analysis will be discussed in two sections, "Living as an Alien in South Korea" and "Aliens as Reflective Agents." Finally, the conclusion will address the sociological significance and limitations of the study.

Ethics of Representation in Research

As a disclaimer, I emphasize that this paper is not arguing for "purely" immigrant-driven research. Young (2004) points out that both insider and outsider perspectives can be valid in racial studies, and that both insider-researchers and outsider-researchers have their own limitations and advantages. Applying this to migration studies, it is clear that both insider and outsider perspectives are necessary to strengthen our understanding of migration as a social phenomenon. Furthermore, even if one is an outsider in terms of race or nationality, long-term participant observation can overcome the limitations of being an outsider through rapport formation. However, the majority of immigrant research in Korea, whether theoretical or empirical, is designed, conducted, and evaluated from the

perspective of native-born Korean researchers.

A large volume of qualitative migration research in South Korea relies on interviews that are conducted in Korean. Moreover, these interview-based studies primarily target individuals who have already established significant interactions with Koreans, such as those at welfare centers or multicultural centers (김현숙·김옥녀 2017; 김윤영·조일동 2016). Qualitative researchers often refer to these informants as "professional interviewees," recognizing that these individuals are so used to academic interviews that they often have prepared answers for most questions. Anderson (2011) found that racial minorities tend to suppress their racial traits and display cosmopolitan tendencies when among the racial majority group. However, in spaces free from White interlocutors, they often express distrust of the majority group. In a similar vein, immigrants in South Korea may try to blend in with expectations of the native-born Korean employers, social workers, or researchers, but they may express strong complaints or criticisms of Korean society in their own spaces.

One possible solution to this issue is for immigrant researchers to conduct immigrant studies. However, in Korean academia, the number of immigrant researchers is still very small, and imposing this mandate on them would be an extra layer of "diversity taxation" on these scholars. This is where we can turn to online spaces as an alternative space to learn about unfiltered opinions of immigrants in South Korea.

Online Space as a Space of Liberation

Traditionally, social sciences have often treated "space" as a mere backdrop for human actions. In other words, space was seen a medium for social actions, that only exert its presence when constraints are imposed by the physicality of the particular space (Valentine 2009). The emergence of the internet as a medium has caused a kind of fracture or expansion in this traditional concept of space. As social interactions increasingly take place in the "virtual"world of the internet as opposed to the physical world, we have begun to apply spatial metaphors to the virtual world as well – to the point that it has now become difficult to explain online phenomena without referring to the concept of "space" (Graham 2013).

Paradoxically, the most noteworthy feature of this imagined online space is its ability to transcend the physical space (Rheingold 1994). There are two ways in which this is

achieved. First, online spaces liberate individuals from their physical bodies (Harrison 2010). In the offline world, individuals are subject to various forms of discrimination based on their physical characteristics, such as gender, race, age, disability, body type, and appearance. However, once they are online, people can leave their physical characteristics behind, as well as other social attributes such as class, education level, and occupation. This dissociation from the physical body affords individuals a unique anonymity in the online space (황경식2003). DeGloma (2023) notes that anonymity can serve two functions for individuals seeking it –protection and subversion. First, anonymity can protect social actors from repercussions of their own actions. Second, anonymity provides a space for social actors to subvert social norms and bypass judgments from the wider society. Accordingly, some scholars have theorized that the anonymity of online spaces make them a great candidate for an ideal public sphere –one in which everyone can participate equally, regardless of their physical and social attributes in the "real"physical world (Bainbridge 1999; Johnson 2001).

Second, online spaces enable interactions to transcend the spatial limitations. They allow people to participate in interactions that transcend physical distances. People do not need to be in the same space at the same time for interactions to happen. People who previously could not secure their own physical could now create their own communities (서진완·박희봉 2003). This feature leads to the accessibility of the online space. Minority social actors who are often dispersed over a wide physical space, such as sexual minorities (Harrison, 2010), immigrants (Dekker, Engbersen, and Faber 2016; Castro and Gonzales 2014; Navarrete and Huerta 2006), and travelers (Qu and Lee 2011) could now form their own online communities.

This anonymity and accessibility of the online space has allowed it to become an alternative and supplementary space for many immigrant groups (Halilovich 2013; Hiller and Franz 2004). They not only maintain ties among friends, but also create a gateway for new immigrants by providing migration-related information (Dekker, Engbersen, and Faber 2016). Korean society is no exception to this phenomenon, and many immigrants in South Korea rely on online communities to either maintain transnational networks with friends and family back in their home countries (Habarakada and Shin 2018; 김경학 2014; 서효봉·서창갑2011), or to build solidarity with immigrants from the same region but residing in other parts of Korea (김영경2015; 한건수 2014; 이정향·김영경 2013).

So far, Korean scholars have examined the relationship between migration and online space in two ways. The first group of studies looked at factors that influence access to online space (김영경 2015; 임희경·안주아·신명희·황경아2012). The second group examined how engaging in online activities affects immigrants' quality of life in Korean society (서효봉·서창갑 2011; 임지혜·최정화 2009). In contrast, there has been relatively little focus on what activities are taking place in immigrant online spaces.

Case Introduction and Research Method

This study advocates for analyzing immigrants' online communities and activities themselves. The case study used in the paper is a Facebook Page, named Grumpy Aliens Korea (GAK). GAK was created on April 25, 2016, and currently has over 31,000 followers. The introduction to the Page describes itself as follows: "Good and honest expat life story told through our fresh handcrafted content #humor #events #food #travel." Their main "content" are self-made memes. Internet memes can be defined as "cultural content that spreads its influence in online spaces and typically appears in the form of jokes" (Davison 2012). The memes on GAK mainly consist of images depicting specific situations, with captions that add a layer of Korean context. The main focus is to present the experiences of "aliens" living in Korea in a humorous and sometimes satirical manner. The name "Grumpy Aliens Korea" comes from the "Alien Registration Card" that non-Korean citizens were issued upon registering their residence in the country. This is reflected in the main image for the GAK Facebook Page (Figure 1).

Figure 1 - Grumpy Aliens Korea's Profile Image

GAK is run by two moderators, a Pakistani man and a Russian woman. In the beginning, they based the memes on their own experiences and those of their close acquaintances. However, over time, they began collecting anecdotes their followers/ commenters for inspiration. On March 10, 2019, the founders posted a meme bout leaving Korea after 12 years. After attempting to contact the founders, it was confirmed that both of them no longer reside in Korea but continue to actively post new memes. In addition to the Facebook page, the founders also operate an Instagram account under the same name, where the same memes are shared as on the Facebook page are shared.

This paper is based on a visual analysis of the memes posted on GAK. This includes all memes posted on the Facebook Page from since its inception on April 25, 2016, until March 31, 2025. Specifically, the memes were studied via visual discourse analysis. Visual discourse analysis may refer to either of two modes of analysis: an analysis of discourses embedded in the image itself or an analysis of discourses surrounding the image production process. For this study, I adopted the first approach, focusing on discourses that are being narrated by the images themselves (Rose, 2001). This mode of visual discourse analysis is effective in extracting meaning from various visual materials and allows us to examine how social realities are expressed and constructed through visual materials (Tonkiss, 2004).

Memes were analyzed over two steps. In the first round, I adopted an open-coding approach, assigning keywords to each meme based on my first impression. In the second round, I tried to aggregate the keywords into emergent themes, noting any connections between the themes. After cross-checking the results of the second round of coding, a final consensus was reached on the themes that the GAK internet memes aimed to express.

Living as an "Alien" in South Korea

Survivalism

Survivalism can be understood as a "collective mentality, morphing into a set of rules of conduct that place survival at the apex of the hierarchy of values"(Kim 2018). Hong-Jung Kim (2018) argues that this is a defining trait of South Korean modernity, with individuals valuing their own survival over any other values. Grumpy Aliens Korea demonstrates that perhaps the same is true of "alien"lives in South Korea. Of the many themes I could

discover from the analysis, the most salient theme to emerge was the idea that living in South Korea constituted a constant struggle for survival. Life in South Korea, as captured by the memes, is filled with everyday threats that make it difficult to continue the "alien"existence in the country. This is not surprising as migration as a phenomenon inherently involves significant difficulties in the form of economic, political, cultural, and linguistic barriers. What is interesting is that the difficulties of migrant living seem to be amplified by the overwhelming survivalist collective mentality of the South Korean society, leading to an almost suffocating environment for "aliens."

One of these challenges is the technological environment of Korean society. Technology is meant to make life easier and faster, but for "aliens", it can sometimes become a barrier to adapting to life in Korea. There are two reasons for this. The first is that South Korea is one of the earliest adaptors of new technologies. The rate of technological change is much faster than many countries, and older technologies become defunct very quickly. Second, South Korea has a unique ecosystem for economic activities that relies heavily on online transactions with multiple authentication steps rather than face-to-face interactions. Many online transactions require resident registration number or authentication via ARS, and online banking always requires public authentication certificate and layers of safety measures. This means that even mundane everyday activities can be full of technological challenges for "aliens"(Figures 2 and 3).

Figure 2 - Paying online can be difficult for "aliens."

Figure 3 - Online Banking for "Aliens“

Surviving in a Korean company is also a significant obstacle for "aliens" living in Korea. South Korean companies are notorious for long working hours with (often unpaid) overtime. "Aliens" also feel the weight of this when they see their paychecks are not matched by the amount of work they do. Another big issue for "aliens" is Korea's unique work culture, represented by the words, "pali pali" (빨리빨리). Even though "aliens" try hard to meet their Korean superiors' demands, they feel that it is still not done fast enough. Some "aliens" are shocked to find that even when they complete their tasks "pali pali," their "reward" ends up being more responsibilities (Figure 4).

Figure 4 - Pali pali does not set you free.

The linguistic barrier is another threat to survival in South Korea. There are a lot of memes expressing frustration at the difficulty of learning Korean language. No matter how hard you study, it is very difficult to pass the TOPIK tests required for different positions. Even with the TOPIK qualification, speaking Korean in everyday situations requires a different level of fluency (Figure 5). As result, many "aliens"resort to pretending to understand Korean at work (Figure 6).

Figure 5 - TOPIK ≠ Korean fluency

Figure 6 - 알겠습니다?

Rejection of an Alien Body

For "aliens"who have somehow solved the problem of survival, the next barrier they face is the hostile gaze of Koreans. I discovered that several memes portray the feeling of being out of place in Korea. Their bodies are different, they stand out everywhere they go, and they attract unwanted attention from others (Figure 7).

Figure 7 - Unwanted Attention on the Subway

At the same time, "aliens" can also be objects of neglect and exclusion. An "alien"body is assumed to be difficult to communicate to, due to the linguistic barrier. This creates an irony: everyone will stare at "aliens," except when "aliens"need help or service. A typical example of this is how taxi drivers treat "aliens." While Koreans also face problems with taxi drivers who refuse to give a ride, "aliens" in Korea are often rejected just for being who they are, without even having a chance to state their destination (Figure 8).

Figure 8 - Rejected by taxi drivers

There are other situations that remind "aliens" that their body does not fit in the South Korean society. For example, it can be difficult to find clothes and shoes that they fit into. Women sometimes have to buy items in the men's section. These situations remind "aliens"that they cannot really fit into the Korean society even if they want to.

Unstable Social Relationships

"Aliens" also report difficulty in forming relationships with native-born Koreans. Some people try to make Korean friends, but in most cases, these attempts end in failure. "Language exchange"could be one way to make friends, but many Koreans approach them with the secret intention of finding a foreigner to date, making it nearly impossible to form genuine friendships.

Interestingly, many "aliens" are also open to the idea of dating and eventually forming partnerships with Koreans. However, it seems that even though Koreans approach "aliens" with romantic intentions, these relationships seldom evolve into meaningful, long-term connections. Many memes reflect the fear that upon arriving in Korea, their romantic lives will disappear (Figure 9). there is a pervasive pessimism that even if they try dating in Korea, they will ultimately end up leading a single life.

Figure 9 - Dating in Korea = Dying single

For foreign nationals in Korea who have given up on making Korean friends, one of the remaining options is to maintain relationships with family and friends back home. However, it is tough to maintain such transnational relationships. The time difference means that they often have to sacrifice sleep to contact their friends back home (Figure 10).

Figure 10 - Friends abroad over sleep

As a result, many "aliens" choose to rely on non-human objects rather than people. Spending entire weekends at home watching dramas on Netflix becomes a daily routine, and you depend not on Korean friends but on Naver Maps, Google Translate, and Daiso.

Trapped in Korea

Unfortunately, despite these difficulties, "aliens"also discover that leaving Korea becomes more difficult the longer they stay in the country. One reason is that the experience gained in Korea does not help much when they try to find jobs in their home countries. Moreover, it is not easy to develop new skills in Korea, as the suffocating work culture leaves no time for self-development. Another reason is that they have already adapted too much to life in Korea. In the beginning, the peculiarities of Korean society made their adjustment uncomfortable, but now, living in Korea has become less difficult as they have adapted. Regardless of the reason, "aliens"in Korea gradually come to realize that they are trapped in Korea. Ultimately, they find themselves unable to plan for their future, neither in Korea nor back home (Figure 11).

Agency of Aliens

Koreanization

However, it would be wrong to assume that an "alien" life is only full of difficulties. "Aliens" gradually acquire the agency to lead their own lives in Korea, and many of them do become "Koreanized." As their stay in Korea lengthens, "aliens"accumulate their own skills and tips on survival in Korean society and share them with other "aliens". For instance, they devise strategies to cope with the unreasonable situations they might face in Korea. What's surprising is that these coping strategies are not much different from those used by Koreans themselves.

Figure 11 - Trapped in Korea

Commonly discussed strategies include dealing with taxis and workplace drinking culture. Figure 12 shows how to deal with taxi drivers who refuse to let passengers pay with credit cards. In this meme, a foreigner threatens to leave a bad review on Kakao Taxi for a driver who refuses to accept card payments and insists on cash-only transactions. Similarly, to survive a Korean hoesik(an office party), you need to figure out a way to pace your drinking. Figure 13 shares a tip: fill your soju glass with water when others are not looking.

Figure 12 - How to threaten a taxi driver in Korea

Figure 13 - Surviving a Korean hoesik

Other memes mock the behavior of "aliens" who have become so "Koreanized" that they look down upon other novice "aliens." Some "aliens" even apply the Korean age-hierarchies to create hierarchies among themselves.

Figure 14 - Age-hierarchies

Subversion of "Alienness"

On the other hand, there are a handful of advantages to being an "alien" in South Korea. GAK will often feature memes showing that "aliens"are not only aware of prejudices against them, but they can also use these prejudices to their advantage. For instance, one common stereotype is that "aliens" cannot speak Korean. While this stereotype often forces social isolation on to "aliens,"it can also be used cleverly to avoid extra work being imposed on them. Figure 15 shows that even when someone urgently requests help, "aliens" can often tease their way out of the situation by feigning lack of understanding.

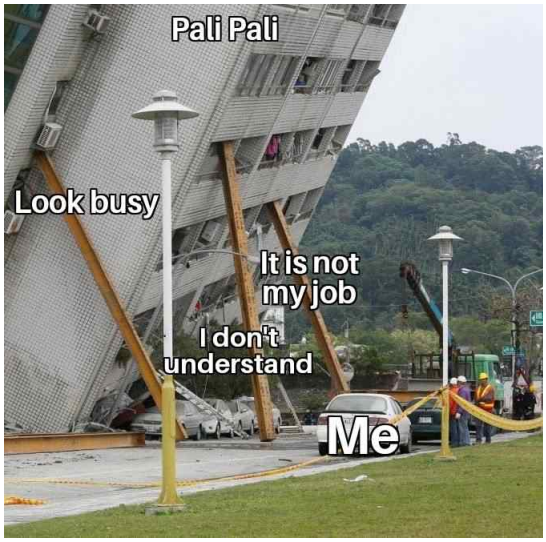


Figure 15 - Avoiding extra work as an "alien"

In fact, even "aliens" who are fluent in Korean may feign ignorance in order to avoid awkward situations or to meet the expectations of Koreans. Some Koreans may be tempted to "help" by translating Korean into English for "aliens." In such a situation, the said "alien" could correct the assumption that all "aliens" do not speak Korean. However, many "aliens" can choose to play with the stereotype and just expect the unnecessary help provided (Figure 16).

Figure 16 - Playing the "alien"

Evaluating the Host Society

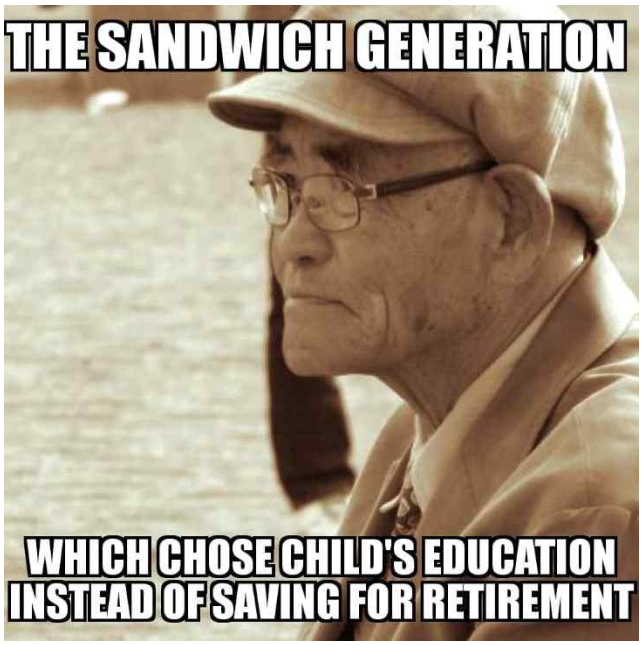
Most importantly, however, the very activity of making memes serves as evidence of GAK's agency. Every one of these memes portrays a snippet of the Korean society, serving as a reminder that "aliens" have the agency to evaluate the Korean society from their own unique perspective. They are not labor force to be managed nor victims to be helped, but own individuals with critical insight. Through these memes, GAK transforms itself from a space for mere venting of complaints to a space where "aliens"can discuss social issues as participants of the Korean society.

For instance, GAK features many humorous observations regarding the Korean "Ajoshi" (middle-aged man). Most memes adopt a negative attitude toward "Ajoshi." As seen in the meme about learning only curse words from the landlord "Ajoshi" (Figure 17), foreign nationals in Korea perceive middle-aged Korean men as individuals who frequently use vulgar language and have an aggressive personality. In particular, the memes relay the figure of a drunk "Ajoshi" as a threatening presence, who will stare at passers-by and start arguments.

Figure 17 - Learning Korean from your landlord

At the same time, GAK also recognizes that "Ajoshis" may be the loneliest group in the Korean society. In Figure 14, GAK expresses an understanding of the "sandwich generation," referring to individuals who must provide care for both their parents and

children. These individuals did not prepare for their own retirement and invested in their children's education, but they cannot be certain that their children will be able to support them. The existence of such memes reminds us that the "aliens"who run and visit GAK are members of the Korean society, too, capable and worthy of engaging in discussions about the most pressing issues of the Korean society.



Conclusion

Analyzing memes posted on the Facebook page "Grumpy Aliens Korea," this paper revealed that the lives of "aliens" living in South Korea are characterized by "survivalism," "rejection of alien bodies, " "unstable social relationships," and the feeling of being "trapped in Korea." At the same time, the "aliens" of GAK also demonstrate the ability to adapt, understand, and evaluate the South Korean society as individual participants.

This study has several important implications. First, it highlights the importance of discovering immigrant or "alien"voices that are not influenced by the research ecosystem dominated by the native-born researchers. Some issues can only be discovered by allowing "aliens"to talk among themselves their voices. For instance, while some researchers argues that digital media education is necessary to increase the social media usage rate among immigrants, this study shows that the low rate reported might be related to the difficulties

arising from the idiosyncrasies of the Korean technology ecosystem. In other words, measures such as identity verification, resident registration numbers, and public certification certificates, which are taken for granted by Korean-born citizens, could limit immigrant experience in areas such as online banking and online payments. Second, this study offers direction for future immigration policies and immigrant human rights policies. As the findings demonstrate, the most urgent issues for "aliens" living in South Korea cannot be solved by providing subsidies or resettlement.Rather, they are related to basic rights that are often neglected in South Korean daily life. While the current government is establishing new policies to attract skilled foreign talent to address the demographic decline (기획재정부 2019), it has only introduced new benefits without addressing the problems faced by existing immigrants. This study indicates that it may be more important to look inside and listen to the voices of "aliens" currently in South Korea, rather than try to spend more money to attract others – who may also leave the country after a few years due to the same barriers and obstacles.

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Jiwon Yun is a PhD candidate in Sociology at Yale University. His areas of interest include race and ethnicity, migrationand intercultural interactions. His research agenda is driven by the fundamental question: How do people work with each other across cultural boundaries when they have little in common? To answer this question, he looks at various social arrangements that make different ideas, cultures and populations come into contact with each other. His research has been published in peer-reviewed journals such as *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies, New Media and Society,* and *Mobilities*. His dissertation project explores the question of how we can bring marginalized populations to sectors that have historically been inaccessible to them. For this, he is conducting an ethnographic case study of a nonprofit that provides a tuition-free music program for students from working-class and racial minority background in the Northeastern USA. This was inspired by his earlier project on a multicultural music organization in Seoul, South Korea, where he explored how participants of a music organization grapple with cultural differences amidst the cosmopolitan atmosphere in the group. Another strand of his research looks at the use of mediated communication to bypass border controls. His recent publication has examined how YouTube vlogging transformed the experience of immobilityimposed by South Korean COVID-19 Quarantine Policies. Currently, he is also working on a collaborative project that looks at the communication network of North Korean defectors across the North Korea-China border.

Discussant Remarks

Discussant: Lee Da Eun
(National University of Singapore)

First, I would like to thank the author for sharing this fascinating study. I enjoyed reading it as someone who has followed Grumpy Aliens Korea (GAK) and enjoyed watching their memes.

Today, I would like to briefly mention how I understood the paper, what I found particularly interesting, and raise a few questions.

What I found particularly interesting about this study is that it approaches migrants' experiences through memes, a form of visual representation with its own grammar, which makes this study distinct from most migration research that primarily relies on interviews.

As I understand it, the core rationale behind this study is to attempt a new approach: moving beyond the influence of Korean researchers' presence in migrant studies and interpreting the GAK memes as migrants' honest, raw, and unfiltered responses to the host society, enabled by anonymity. This approach imbues the meme with critical potential by framing migrants, who are often viewed as marginalized minorities in Korean society, as agents who not only evaluate but also speak back to the host society. It positions them not as outsiders but as participants in Korean society, with the capacity for critique and, furthermore, the potential for resistance.

1. Immigrant or Migrant? I noticed that the author uses the word "immigrant" in the paper. This made me wonder if there is any specific reason for using that term rather than "migrant."

This is just my impression, but I have seen the terms "migrants" or "migration" used more commonly in migration studies, and "immigrant" feels somewhat unfamiliar to me.

Immigrant specifically refers to a person who moves into a foreign country with the intention of settling there permanently, often involving a change in citizenship (Douglas & Spiegel, 2019; Tataru, 2019).[1)]

The literature reviewed in the paper mostly concerns marriage migrants, Korean Chinese, and Chinese and Indian diasporas, groups that often intend to settle in Korea or have already done so. So I wondered if this is the reason the author chose to use the word "immigrant" instead of "migrant."

2. What kind of "aliens"? I am curious about what kind of "aliens" the author is referring to in this paper. I wonder whether there might be a gap between the migrant groups commonly discussed in the paper as "marginalized" and the actual users of GAK.

While the author suggests that migrants would not openly share their evaluations of Korean society, I have the impression that the GAK user base may be somewhat different from the migrants we typically imagine as most vulnerable to rejection or marginalization.

I think this distinction is hinted at in the page's own description of GAK, as cited by the author: "Good and honest expat life story told through our fresh handcrafted content." The term expat often refers to a particularly classed category of migrants, typically high-skilled, high-income professionals, often from Western countries, whose children go to international schools. In the context of GAK, this might also include international students or global freelancers with access to English-language networks and infrastructures.

Also, considering that this page assumes a basic ability to consume humor in English, mentions things like taking taxis frequently, and refers to time differences with friends abroad, I personally feel that the "aliens" here might be, perhaps, Westerners or international students. I think there is a possibility that the groups referenced in the literature, such as marriage migrants, migrant workers, or Korean Chinese, may not actually be the audience that this content reaches.

One thing I would like to suggest is this: since you mentioned that GAK also receives stories or episodes from users for inspiration, it might be helpful to get a rough sense of who these users are, such as their nationality, race, age, visa type, occupation, or place of residence, perhaps by looking at comments or follower profiles.

Additionally, I would suggest clarifying more specifically which aliens' experiences are being captured, produced, and circulated through GAK, rather than assuming that

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1) Douglas, P., Cetron, M., & Spiegel, P. (2019). Definitions matter: Migrants, immigrants, asylum seekers and refugees. *Journal of Travel Medicine, 26*(2), taz005. https://doi.org/10.1093/jtm/taz005
Tataru, G. F. (2019). Migration– An overview on terminology, causes and effects. *Geopolitics, History, and International Relations, 11*(1), 130–136. https://www.ceeol.com/search/article-detail?id=822145

immigrants are marginalized and that GAK is their direct response.

3. More specific literature review on "meme" As a suggestion, I thought it would be good to add a section only about meme, before entering the analysis of GAK. This section could provide a definition of memes and how they function as a form of exaggerated, often recursive speech and sometimes even reproduce stereotypes about certain groups (not only marginalized people but also host society). After establishing how the effects of memes operate with their own unique grammar, I think the analysis of GAK could explore more nuanced layers of meaning beyond literal representation.

The author alludes to this in the broader framing of "online space" and its liberating role for minorities. However, I think the term "online space" might be too general to adequately analyze GAK, and a more focused explanation may be needed, especially considering that the page only produces memes.

4. Can memes really be taken as an authentic voice? I sensed that there were hints that the author presents GAK as an "authentic" and "uninfluenced" voice of migrants, perhaps because the content is self-made and created without being overly conscious of Koreans. However, a meme is still a constructed representation. I would suggest adding a more layered account of what kinds of truths memes express—and what they might distort or obscure.

Thank you again for this intriguing paper. I look forward to hearing more from the author and from our discussion today.

Session3

Sensory Dimensions of Migration Korea

Visual Governance
- Theorizing the role of images in migration governance -

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Abstract

This paper introduces the concept of "visual governance," a framework for understanding how governance is enacted through visual representations such as photos, videos, and maps. It highlights the growing influence of visuals in migration governance, particularly in the digital era, where platforms like social media amplify their reach and impact. Visuals have evolved from mere tools to central agents that communicate, legitimize, or contest power structures, policies, and practices. Given the pivotal role of images in today's communicative sphere and the transformative effects of digital technologies and social media on the governance landscape, this paper proposes a framework to theorize the role of images in migration governance. This framework incorporates all layers of governance—not only policies, practices, and regulations but also representations, recognizing their integral role in shaping governance dynamics. The proposed approach is grounded in the understanding that the relationship between the visual communication sphere and governance is inherently iterative, with visuals and governance influencing one another in a dynamic interplay. Moreover, the framework includes all relevant actors involved in migration governance, spanning macro-level institutions, meso-level organizations, and micro-level individuals. By acknowledging the diverse range of actors and their varying capacities, it reflects the shifting power dynamics facilitated by digital platforms, where even individuals can significantly shape visual narratives. This conceptual model provides a comprehensive lens to analyze how images influence public perceptions, policymaking, and governance practices, advancing our understanding of migration governance in the digital age.

Keywords: Visual governance, Migration governance, Digital communication, Visual representations

Introduction

In recent years, visual elements have gained unprecedented influence in communication, reshaping how information is conveyed and perceived on a global scale. Visuals often outpace text in their ability to convey urgency, emotion, and complex narratives, marking a significant departure from traditional, text-centered communication. Since the spread of television and the circulation of images capturing distant events, scholars have long recognized and questioned the unique power of visual media to influence public perception and political outcomes on a global scale (Strobel 1996; Bleiker 2001; P. Robinson 1999). Images have the ability to make distant issues feel immediate and personal, attempting to bridge the physical and cultural divides by evoking strong emotional responses. This capacity for immediacy and emotional impact has fuelled debates about the role of visuals in shaping world politics, as images broadcast across borders have the potential to influence not only public sentiment but also policy decisions and diplomatic actions (Besco and Tolley 2018; Lemay 2019; Scott, Bunce, and Wright 2022). As visual media have continued to evolve—from television to online platforms and social media—their influence has only deepened, positioning images as central agents in the transmission of information, mobilization of opinion, and governance of transnational phenomena.

Advancements in digital technology have catapulted us into a radically transformed media landscape where images hold unprecedented power. The widespread accessibility of smartphones has democratized the ability to capture and instantly share images and videos, allowing ordinary individuals to become active participants in global communication. Visuals are now more immediate, impactful, and accessible than ever, and social media platforms like YouTube and Facebook have amplified this transformation. The events of the Arab Uprisings, for example, were broadcast worldwide through videos and posts shared by participants and witnesses on these platforms, often in real time. Platforms like Facebook, Instragram, YouTube, TikTok and Twitter (now X) allowed participants not only to document events as they unfolded but also to communicate with one another across borders, fostering a sense of solidarity and shared purpose that transcended national boundaries. In this digital era, and its communication sphere - the space in which information, ideas, and messages are exchanged and circulated within society - images have become crucial tools for advocacy, narrative control, and information (and misinformation) dissemination, transforming how society perceives and reacts to global events and adding a new dimension to the interplay between visual culture and governance.

When viewed within the context of migration, this shift toward visual dominance carries profound implications. Platforms flooded with images and videos related to migration can shape perceptions of migrant journeys, conditions, and challenges, often impacting policy responses and public opinions. In migration governance, visual content has become essential for monitoring, documenting, and framing migrant experiences, with its immediacy and emotional resonance influencing narratives that reach wide audiences. This study situates itself within this visual framework, where images are no longer secondary but have become central tools in the governance of migration, highlighting a transformation in how migration is seen, shared, and understood globally.

While it is clear that images play a role, the ways in which different actors (e.g., government institutions, international organizations, NGOs and CBOs, social media influencers, criminal groups), with different level of authority in migration governance use images strategically to reinforce/reproduce/challenge/navigate migration policies and practices remain under-theorized. Even more, the academic debate has so far missed the systematic integration of visual representations into the analysis of migration governance. There is a need to move beyond isolated studies of visuality and develop comprehensive frameworks that consider how images shape and are shaped by governance dynamics, especially in light of contemporary communication landscape. This integration is crucial for a more nuanced understanding of migration governance, which acknowledges the complex interplay between visual narratives, policy-making, and practices on the ground.

To understand the role of images in governing transnational phenomena within this drastically new communication context, a fresh theoretical framework is essential. This paper introduces a new conceptual model for examining what can be termed visual governance, a process whereby governance is enacted through visual representations—such as images, videos, maps, and other visual media—to communicate, regulate, legitimize, or challenge prevailing power structures, policies, and practices. Using the lens of migration governance, this article introduces a theoretical framework that brings images into analytical focus. Firstly, the framework enables us to incorporate the realm of discourses and representations into the dimensions of governance previously explored in migration governance literature (i.e., policies and practices). Secondly, it is based on the understanding that the role of images in migration governance should be examined through an iterative approach, considering the interplay between the visual communication sphere and the governance realm and how those two dimensions influence each other. Finally, the proposed theoretical framework is enables the inclusion of all relevant actors

in the analysis, not just traditional ones, but also those whose participation has been facilitated by the new digital communicative sphere. This includes stakeholders at both the macro level (state-based institutions such as national government and transnational entities as the European Union) and meso level (international organizations and non-governmental organizations) but also those situated at the micro level such as individuals (e.g., influencers and individuals with large following base or whose content starts to circulate wildly).

The paper is structured to progressively build an understanding of visual migration governance, beginning with an exploration of the scholarship that has focused the role of images in shaping global politics, from early debates on media influence to more recent discussions on migration governance. It then examines the ways in which visual representations of international mobility, particularly the framing of refugees, shape public perceptions and policy narratives, while emphasizing the lack of a systematic connection between visual discourses and governance structures. The discussion then shifts to the digital communication sphere, analysing how digital platforms have transformed governance by amplifying the role of visuals and allowing a wider range of actors—including institutions, organizations, but also individuals—to influence public discourse and policymaking. Following this, the paper situates migration governance within broader governance frameworks, emphasizing its elements, features and the diverse actors involved in shaping migration policies, classifications, and practices. Finally, it introduces a theoretical framework for visual migration governance.

The Role of Visuals in International Politics: Progress, Gaps, and the Need for a Comprehensive Model of Visual Governance

International Relations studies have since long time been intrigued by the idea that images could play some role in international politics. In 1996, Strobel advanced the idea that the visual representation of conflict and suffering happening in distant countries did "help foreing policy officials explain the need for U.S. intervention" (Strobel 1996, 35). He argued that by focusing the attention to one crisis (the famine in Somalia in 1992) over another one (the conflict unfolding in Southern Sudan), the CNN played a key role in "dictating"US foreign agenda. Later on Robinson (P. Robinson 1999) redefined the impact on the CNN effect showing that although it was unclear whether or not the news media had triggered military intervention, media influence on government policy was possible only when policy was still uncertain and media coverage clearly framed a situation advocating for a specific course of action.

Although scholars are still discussing the dynammics of the interaction of images in world politics, little doubt remains on the fact that visual representation do play a role in international arena. Bleiker's seminal article on the aesthetic turn (Bleiker 2001) showed how exploration of representative practices could broaden our comprehension of International Politics. Since then, International Relations studies have increasingly extended their attention to the visual world to investigate international politics (Hansen 2015; Hansen, Adler-Nissen, and Andersen 2021). Furthermore, with the increased prominence that the topic of migration has acquired over the last two decades, a growing body of scholarship has started focusing on the study of how specific visual representations of displacement contributed to shaping the public understanding of migration dynamics (Chouliaraki et al. 2017; Franko 2021; Musarò 2016; Massari 2021).

More recently, some scholars argued for a direct link between the dissemination of specific images and their political impact, illustrating how visuals can drive significant policy shifts and public responses. For example, while the dramatic photo of Alan Kurdi did not lead to a fundamental shift in broader discourses and representations of refugees (Bozdag and Smets 2017; Slovic et al. 2017) and had limited influence on migration policies overall (The Independent 2016; 2015; Burns 2015), it has nonetheless been suggested that it significantly shaped political discourse and decision-making in specific contexts. During the 2015 Canadian election, public reaction to the image drove the Liberal Party, under Justin Trudeau, to commit to accepting 25,000 Syrian refugees by the end of the year if elected (Besco, 2018). Similarly, the image influenced Germany's "politics of openness" from 2015 to 2016, prompting leaders to embrace policies of refugee acceptance in response to humanitarian concerns (Lemay, 2019).

While the importance to pay attention to (also) images to study world politics has been widely acknowledged, traditional methodological approaches for the study of international politics are yet quite limited when it comes to analysing how meaning is produced (Åhäll 2009). Poststructuralist discourse theory offers an approach able to make sense of "inclusive and negotiated ways of engaging a multiplicity of public, semi-public and private stakeholders in the collective definition of public value" (Howarth and Griggs 2015, 293) through a critical gaze over the reproduction or reshaping of practices of governance; or narrative and interpretive theory that have put at the centre of the attention the role of meaning and culture in governance (Turnbull 2016). However, these methods completely overlook the visual dimension. Other strands of more recent literature do, on the contrary, present a great variety of methods of analysis to approach migration studies (Nikielska-Sekula and Desille

2021) but have mostly focused on the use of images as research tools and, to a lesser extent, on images as data to analyse.

Despite these important contributions, the role of images in the broader context of governance dynamics, especially in the realm of migration governance, remains largely under-theorized. What remains underexplored in the literature is a conceptual model that traces the evolving relationship between visual artifacts and the governance of transnational phenomena, particularly in light of advances in digital technology and their key role in international politics. The increasing accessibility of digital devices and platforms has enabled images to circulate widely within today's communication sphere, shaping public discourse and influencing governance in a different way than before. Yet, how these visual discourses intersect with other dimensions of governance, such as policy-making and on-the-ground practices, remains unclear.

The Visuality of Migration

Important scholarly work has focused on the representation of people on the move. In a seminal article on the topic, Malkki (1996) has pointed out how photographic accounts of displacement, were consistently portraying refugees as a 'sea of humanity' contributing to the dehistoricization and depoliticization of their experience and thereby constructing a 'universal humanitarian subject'. More recently, Bleiker et al. (2013) showed how images of medium or large groups of people have prevailed in the visual depiction on people on the move, while pictures of individuals with distinguishing traits have remained relatively absent. This dehumanizing visual framing, Bleiker et al. argued, reinforced an image of refugees associated with threat and security concerns (for more on this point, see also Caballero-Vélez's article in this Special Issue).

Even when representations focus on individuals with personal histories, the humanitarian narrative often depicts them as embodying a shared universal identity of "refugeness" (Nyers 1999). According to Nyers, indeed, it is no coincidence that the cover photo a publication titled "What is it like to be a refugee?" portrays a shirt hanging outside a shelter with no human bodies or faces visible. This object represents the universal situation of the humanitarian subject and evokes feelings of loss and emptiness. This "invisibility" of the individual persists even when single people are portrayed to represent the experience or the loss of rights of an entire category. As Rajaram observed, refugees continue to be

denied the possibility to produce political narratives, while the account of their experience remains a prerogative of Western relief agencies, through which 'refugee lives become a site where Western ways of knowing are reproduced' (Rajaram 2002, 247). This is particularly interesting because the ways refugees are represented – and thus come to be known to the general public –are crucial in creating the 'conditions of possibility" for either welcoming (hospitality) or rejecting them (Bleiker, Campbell, and Hutchison 2014, 192).

Since the so-called 2015 migration crisis, a renewed interest has focused on the visuality dimension in migration and international relation studies. For example, studies on the visual politics of the Mediterranean space highlighted the complex relationship between humanitarianism and border policing in Europe, questioning the traditional view that these domains are inherently incompatible and highlighting the convergence of humanitarian efforts and border enforcement (Musarò2016, see also Lynes' contribution in this Special Issue). Looking at the broader visual landscape of those years, Hansen (2021) found that discourses of humanitarianism and border control were both in place and the ambiguity present in the EU's discourse was also present in the wider visual environment. Attention has also been devoted to invisibility. Pictures influence our perceptions and thoughts by showing selective aspects of reality, making it crucial to recognize what is omitted as well as what is included as what remains unseen in pictures is excluded from public discourse and debate. For instance, aside from the widely circulated image of Aylan Kurdi, there has been little attention to the many migrants who have perished along migration routes (Lynes et al., 2020) and migration agencies rarely depict the dangers and fatalities migrants face, omitting visuals of mortality and the perils of the journey (Massari 2024).

Even at the policy level, institutions have started devoting increasing attention to the role of images. Many institutions directly involved in migration management have developed communication strategies and toolkits that include details on the use of images (Massari 2024). Although, as we have just seen, the visual dimension of migration has been largely explored from different perspectives, it has very seldom been put in systematic connection with the governance dimension. The next section will propose a theoretical framework to integrate images into the study of migration governance.

While the literature has provided substantial insights into the representation of refugees and the visual dimensions of migration, there are significant areas that remain underexplored, particularly regarding how these visual representations influence and intersect with migration governance dynamics. Firstly, there is a notable gap in understanding the nature

of the relationship between visual representations and the formulation and implementation of migration policies. Although studies have highlighted how images shape public perceptions and narratives around migration, there is less clarity on the circumstances and dynamics by which images come to reproduce or challenge other governance actions such as policies or practices. Secondly, the existing research has not sufficiently addressed the role of images in the power dynamics between different actors involved in migration governance. Finally, clarity is needed regarding the dimension(s) of migration governance in which visual representation play a role. Are images only relevant for their role to influence our understanding of international mobility and the debate surrounding it? Or should we also consider images as one of the instruments of governance, similar to legal norms and physical structures that delineate borders among states? Perhaps it is both. Understanding the dual role of images—as influential elements shaping public perception and as active instruments in the governance process—is crucial for a comprehensive analysis of migration governance.

The contemporary communication sphere

Understadning the interplay between visuality and governance is all the important given the characteristics of today's digital communication sphere. The communication sphere refers to the space where information, ideas, and messages circulate and are exchanged within society. It includes all channels, platforms, and media—such as traditional media, social media, public forums, and interpersonal networks—that facilitate communication. Building on Habermas's concept of the public sphere (1989), the concept also takes into account how communication networks and media play a central role in the exercise of power in the digital age by shaping public opinion and social movements (Castells 2010). This digital expansion has enabled rapid, multi-channel information flow, creating new spaces for visual, audio, and interactive content.

In this context, visuals are crucial and their ability to be produced, circulate and be remediated challenges us to rethink the framework of the digital public sphere in order to account for their role. Visuals are different from text as they inherently possess the ability to circulate in an easier way. Although of course interpretation of images will always remain historically, geographically and culturally situated, images possess an inherent feature of immediacy (Hansen 2011), able to trascend linguistic barriers and have a strong potential to elicit sentiments as direct reaction to their exposure. Moreover, one of the

most widely acknowledged advantages of the digital public sphere, as opposed to the traditional one – made of "newspapers and magazines, radio and television" (Habermas, Lennox, and Lennox 1974, 49) – is its openness to a variety of actors. Indeed, a distinguishing feature of today digital public sphere is being opened to different stakeholders as contents can be easily posted online without the need of intermediaries or gatekeepers such as journalists in a traditional media environment (Schäfer 2015). A key implication of this system is its openness to bottom-up engagement, allowing actors and influencers at the individual level to participate directly in public debate. This digital public sphere challenges us to rethink governance frameworks, advancing theoretical approaches that account for the traditional actors situated at the macro and meso level as well as the new, micro-level actors—individuals and small groups who have been mostly marginalized, or altogether excluded, by the public debate. — who now contribute actively to public discourse and influence governance dynamics.

At the macro level, state institutions (and state-based institutions such as EU agencies), that have been one of the most prominent actors of the traditional public sphere, remain one of the key actors of today digital communicative sphere (Krzyzanowski 2018a; 2018b; Colombo 2018). While in 2013, the 77.7% of governments of the 193 UN member countries had a presence on Twitter (now X) (Burson-Marsteller's 2013), this figure rose to 98% in 2020 (Burson Cohn & Wolfe 2020). Not only state-level agencies, but also heads of state, EU representatives, political leaders have their social media accounts and they actively and timely comment on global issues and global events followed by millions of followers (for more on this point see also Gintova's contribution in this Special Issue).

At the meso level, International Organizations (IOs) and non-governmental organization (NGOs) began creating social media accounts in the mid-2000s to interact with the public and governments. On one hand, social media enabled these organizations to engage with millions of supporters (or potential supporters) globally: "the explosion of digital communications platforms has been a game-changing opportunity" (quotation of a Digital Engagement Director in Burson Cohn & Wolfe 2020). On the other hand, the digital public sphere enabled IOs and NGOs to use social media to directly target key decision makers as part of their advocacy activities. The European Media Director of Human Rights Watch, clearly illustrated this new sphere of opportunity outlining the crucial role of social media in three key component of the organization's mandate: "investigate, expose, change" (Stroehlein 2017).

At the micro level, the last two decades have seen the increased participation of individuals, who were previously considered merely the audience of traditional media. For example, while commentators have rightly noted that the uprising in Middle East and North Africa in the early 2010s were primarily people's movements (Khamis, Gold, and Vaughn 2012), it is notable that the Egyptian Revolution and the Syrian uprising in 2011 have been associated with Facebook (Time 2011) and You Tube respectively (CNN 2012). The power of people using social media to engage with politics is further confirmed by its nemesis: the surveillance or interruption of internet services that states have occasionally implemented during critical moments to control or disrupt public debate altogether (Duncombe 2018). Since the Arab Uprisings, social media and its visual dimension have played a transformative role in amplifying citizen-led movements and shaping global public discourse. The ability to instantly capture and share images and videos has empowered individuals to document events firsthand, a practice central to the rise of citizen journalism. Movements like Black Lives Matter and #MeToohave harnessed the visual potential of social media to bring attention to systemic injustices and mobilize support on an unprecedented scale. Visuals of police violence shared widely on platforms like Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook galvanized global support for Black Lives Matter, drawing attention to issues of racial injustice and prompting widespread calls for police reform (Kumanyika 2016; Eriksson Krutrök and Åkerlund 2023). Similarly, the #MeToo movement used personal narratives, often accompanied by images and videos, to shed light on the pervasive nature of sexual harassment and assault, sparking conversations and policy changes worldwide (O'Halloran and Cook 2024). These movements underscore how social media's visual dimension allows for a powerful, grassroots-driven approach to advocacy, enabling individuals to bypass traditional media gatekeepers and directly engage with global audiences. Visual content, from live-streamed protests to viral hashtags, has become central to people's movements, strengthening collective action and amplifying marginalized voices in ways that were previously difficult to achieve. The role of image creators in shaping these transformative visual narratives is further elaborated in Anna Fin's article, which examines the meanings photographers assign to migration and migrant photography within the broader context of visual governance (see Fin's contribution in this Special Issue).

Of course, while some of the new actors—such as individuals and small groups—now have the potential to contribute to public discourse, their actual influence can be limited by factors like visibility, audience reach, and platform algorithms. Not everyone engaging on social media has substantial reach or influence; many users have minimal followers, and

their contributions could often go unnoticed or lack engagement (Shah 2024). However, including these actors at the micro level is particularly important in light of the visual potential of today's digital public sphere. While it's true that many users have minimal visibility and limited follower counts, the nature of visual content allows even low-visibility posts to resonate more widely. Images and videos have an inherent immediacy and emotional appeal, often capturing attention quickly and spreading through shares, likes, and reposts, sometimes reaching audiences beyond the original creator's network. This makes visual content from smaller actors more likely to gain traction than text-based content alone, allowing them to contribute to the public discourse even without a large follower base.

Furthermore, visuals are easily repurposed, recontextualized, and shared across multiple platforms, enabling smaller actors to insert themselves into larger conversations. A striking image or compelling video can be picked up by more influential users or even news outlets, amplifying the original message and giving these micro-level actors a broader platform than they might achieve through textual posts. In this way, the visual nature of the digital public sphere further enables a bottom-up dynamic where smaller actors, through visual contributions, can indirectly shape public opinion and discourse. Moreover, visuals offer alternative narratives and perspectives thatcan challenge dominant viewpoints, especially when they come from marginalized voices or communities less typically represented in the communication sphere. By including these actors in theoretical frameworks, we capture a fuller, more nuanced view of the digital public sphere, recognizing how visuals enable a diverse array of participants to contribute to meaning making within governance-related discussions.

Governance and migration governance

Global governance refers to "the complex of formal and informal institutions, mechanisms, relationships and processes between and among states, markets, citizens and organizations, both inter- and non-governmental, through which collective interests on the global plane are articulated, rights and obligations are established, and differences are mediated" (Thakur and Van Langenhove 2007). While global governance was initially conceptualized in the context of global issues that needed to be addressed in the absence of an overarching government, it has since been recognized that governance takes place multiple, interconnected levels, including global, transnational, national, and local (Triandafyllidou

2017). A wide array of actors participates in this system, engaging in both collaboration and competition in complex ways. These include, of course, states, but also Intergovernmental and Non-Governmental Organizations and civil society, multinational corporations and private sector, transnational networks and epistemic communities (e.g., expert groups, think thanks), media, as well as individual activities for their leadership role in transnational advocacy (Weiss and Thakur 2010).

Migration governance, as a specific domain, reflects this broader conceptualization. It generally refers to 'norms, rules, policies, laws institutions that can be binding or non-binding norms and frameworks, at global, national or sub-national levels' (Geddes 2022, 315), and the processes or practices – understood as repeated actions or behaviors employed by the various actors involved in migration governance (Betts and Kainz 2017; Geddes 2022; Geddes et al. 2019; Panebianco 2019). Similarly to governance, also migration governance occurs at different levels (Betts 2011) and through a variety of actors, including governments private companies (Infantino 2023), international organizations (Geddes 2018), NGOs (Massari 2021),and even criminal groups (Achilli 2024).

While state interests and power dynamics play an undeniable role, the governance of migration is not solely determined by material factors such as state interests and power dynamics but is also profoundly influenced by the ideational context within which policies are formulated and implemented (Betts 2011). Ideas play a crucial role in these governance processes, shaping not just how migration is conceived but also the mechanisms through which it is managed. The effects of these ideas are both structural and practical, influencing decisions on inclusion and exclusion, determining who can move and under what conditions. Ideas, therefore, do not merely reflect migration governance; they actively shape it. Indeed, migration governance should not be solely intended as a response to migration flows; it actively shapes mobility by establishing classifications such as asylum seekers, economic migrants, or irregular migrants, which in turn shape the lived experiences of those on the move (Geddes 2022).

These ideas inform the actions a variety of actors involved in the management of migration (Geddes 2022, 311), but are also shaped by this multiplicity of actors. However, existing frameworks often prioritize the role of state actors and formal institutions, overlooking how other actors—both formal and informal—contribute to shaping migration governance through their engagement with ideas. All migration governance engage with, reinforce, or contest ideas as they navigate migration governance at different levels.

Adopting a framework that acknowledges the productive power of all actors to engage with and transform migration governance allows for a more nuanced understanding of how mobility is regulated and imagined. This is particularly relevant in contemporary governance, where global, regional, and local actors interact within complex, multi-scalar networks of influence.

Building on this, and in response to calls to de-center and pluralize understandings of migration governance (Triandafyllidou 2022), this article expands the analysis of ideas to include the visual dimension as well as a more inclusive understanding of the multiplicity of actors that contribute to meaning creation in today digital communication sphere.

Connecting the dots: The ontology of visual governance in migration

To systematically incorporate the changes introduced by advanced digital technology into the contemporary digital communication sphere and their implications for migration governance, this paper presents a step-by-step reasoning process culminating in a proposed theoretical framework. To do this we need first to understand where the visual dimension fits into existing theoretical models, outline the relationship between images and governance, and how different actors participate into it. Starting from the first point – the role of images –when one thinks about the governance of migration, traditional dimensions of governance include first of all the norms, rules, legal frameworks and processes governing international mobility. From general definition of governance as a 'the complex of formal and informal institutions, mechanisms, relationships and processes' (Thakur and Van Langenhove 2007) to more specific definitions of migration governance, policies (see for example Betts 2011; Geddes 2022) and practices (C. Robinson 2018; Geddes et al. 2019; Panebianco 2019) —understood as repeated actions or behaviors employed by the various actors involved in migration governance—have been central to the concept of migration governance. Building on this and inspired by the studies that have shown how the ideational aspect (Betts 2011; Geddes 2022)and consequent representations are critically important for their performative role in framing migration issues linguistically and ideologically (Boswell, Geddes, and Scholten 2011; De Fina and Tseng 2017; Sommer 2023), I would like to add to these two traditional dimensions that of representations, intended as the way ideas, people, or events are depicted, symbolized, or communicated, through all representational forms of expression (textual, visual but also auditive or sensory, etc). We can therefore define migration governance as the constellation of policies, practices and

representations that interactively – the three dimensions influence and respond to each other dynamically, creating a mutually dependent and ongoing exchange - contribute to the management of international mobility.

I use the concept of representation instead of discourse because it allows for a more focused examination of the distinct dimensions that contribute to the shaping of discourse. Specifically, the concept of representation highlights the various ways—and the different forms through which—reality is depicted and communicated. In contrast, discourse refers to a broader system of meaning that encompasses not only representations but also the underlying frameworks of policies and practices that collectively shape how we understand and engage with the world. Although representations are not limited to the visual, this paper focuses on visual governance, recognizing the growing significance of the visual dimension in the contemporary digital public sphere. As digital technologies create interconnected digital publics, images become powerful tools for reinforcing, contesting, or redefining migration governance, making the study of visual representations essential for understanding the evolving dynamics of governance in the digital era.

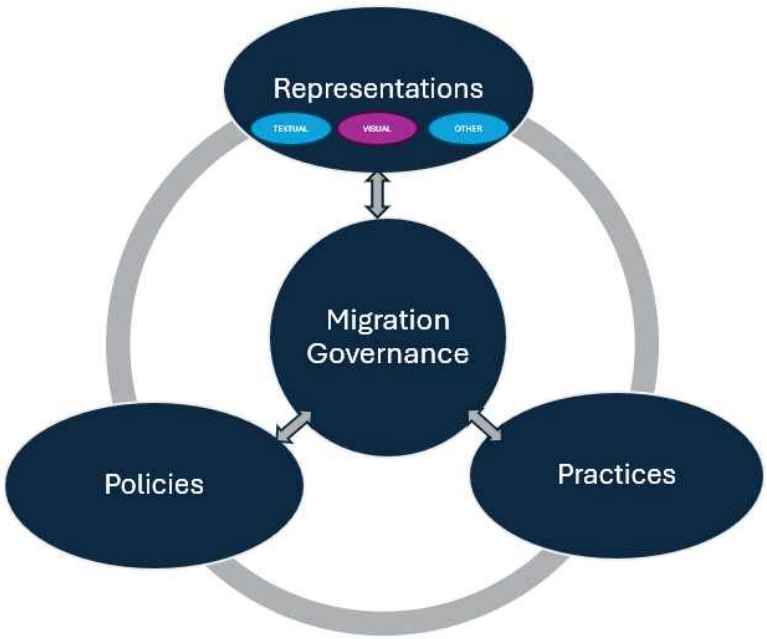

Figure 1 - Graph showing iterative process between the three dimensions of Migration Governance

Given the contextual changes of the digital communication sphere and the relevance that images have assumed within it, a second important point is about the nature of the relationship between visual representations in particular and migration governance, which is dual and iterative. It is *dual* because visual representations work both as influential elements creating meaning and shaping public perception and as tools in the governance process. It is *iterative* because visual representations serve both as inputs into the governance system and as outputs that function as governance tools. As inputs, visual representations constitute key elements that create meaning within the governance system. Images, videos, and maps depicting migration events, conditions, and experiences influence public perception and discourse. These visual inputs contribute to the shaping of narratives and opinions about migration, which in turn affect the formulation of governance strategies. Dramatically iconic photographs of overcrowded boats in the middle of the sea,the body of Alain Kurdi, people shivering in thermal blankets on the southern shores of Europe enter the governance system as key elements that inform and influence strategies, policies, and public engagement. As outputs, visual representations are strategically employed by governance actors to enact, communicate, and legitimize their agendas. Famous FRONTEX maps with huge red arrows pointing toward Europe, IOM SAFE mobile application, which points out the risks of human trafficking by means of interactive games, NGOs showing dire conditions of people on the move to raise funds are some examples of how visual representations can be used as governance tools. These tools, in turn, of course feed back into the public discourse, perpetuating the cycle. These two interconnected processes of meaning creation could mislead us toward a sort of cognitive immobility, stuck into the chicken or the egg dilemma. Should images be approached as governance tools, intended as part of the instruments that policy makers can utilize to steer actors toward specific policy outcomes? Or, on the contrary, should images be considered for their ability to contribute to discourses on migration issues which shape governance policies? The difficulty of answering these questions lays in its false premises. The question of what comes first between images and governance is misleading as the two are interconnected in a strictly hermeneutical process in which the latter shapes the former while it is also shaped by it.

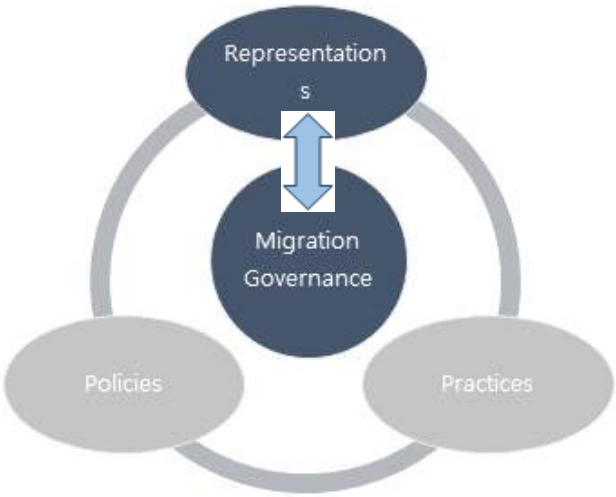

Figure 2 – Graph showing iterative relations between the Representation dimension and Migration Governance

Finally, it is important to include in the framework the images produced by the different actors that, with different capacities, participate to it. Different actors operating at different levels of governance use visual media to try to convey their policies, justify their actions, and influence/mobilize public opinion. As we have seen above, in addition to the role of state actors and state-based transnational actors (e.g., EU) situated at the macro level and the role played by international government and non-government organization at the meso level, the literature on the digital public sphere points out how also actors situated at the micro level do play a role in the way certain issues are approached. Indeed, images produced by the actors at all levels (macro, meso and micro) thanks to their instant and wide circulation contribute to the iteration between the representation and migration governance.

All different actors contribute, although with different degrees of power, to the creation of representations. Surely, images can both contribute to legitimize or reinforce regulations, as well as to contest and challenge existing power structures and migration regimes. We could go as far as hypotize that actors situated at the macro level produce accounts that are/become hegemonic, while actors located at the meso level are more likely to reproduce or challenge them and those at the micro (individual) level contest them. However, although quite interesting to test, this is probably out of the scope of this

specific paper. In this new theoretical framework, visual migration governance can therefore be defined as enactment of governance through visual representations—such as images, videos, maps, and other visual media—created by the different migration governance actors to communicate, regulate, legitimize, or contest prevailing power structures, policies, and practices related to migration.

Conclusion

Visuals have become increasingly influential in the public communication sphere. Advances in digital technology and the proliferation of platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube have amplified this trend, enabling ordinary individuals and institutions alike to produce, share, and amplify images and videos that contribute to the processes that shape public sentiment and influence policy. This shift is particularly evident in the context of migration, where visual content has also become central to documenting, framing, and influencing perceptions on migration.

This transformation has seen digital and social media platforms being increasingly utilized not only by heads of state, institutions, and politicians but also by international organizations and NGOs working on migration. Individuals have also started to actively utilize these platforms. Alongside the posts of politicians conveing their views on global mobility, we became more and more used to see relief organizations' campaigns to support people on the move, solidarity movements disseminating information from the different migration routes hotspots, artist displaying their artworks on the subject, first-hand accounts of the journey, as well as public's comments to the various posts and information disseminated. This new communication landscape enabled a broader range of voices and perspectives to be heard, especially highlighting the relevance of individuals, influencers or small groups of people in global debates over a range of interantional and transational issues, and significantly impacting the discourse around migration. Indeed, as the communication realm has become more open and inclusive, so should our explorative gaze. By looking at the different ways in which different actors contribute to shaping representations of migration which in turns influences and are influenced by migration governance decisions, we will be able to shed light on complex interrelation between visuality and migration governance.

If we exclude images from our analysis of migration governance, we risk overlooking a

critical dimension that shapes how migration is perceived, framed, and governed. Visual representations are not merely supplementary to governance; they actively contribute to meaning-making, public discourse, and policy formulation. Ignoring the role of images would lead to an incomplete understanding of the iterative processes that connect governance structures with public perceptions and narratives. Without considering images, the influence of visual inputs—such as those depicting migrant journeys, border conditions, and humanitarian crises—on shaping public opinion, policy priorities, and governance strategies would remain unexamined. Furthermore, by neglecting images, we fail to account for the strategic ways actors at different levels use visual content to navigate, reinforce, or challenge governance systems.

While acknowledging the important research conducted in the field, the article highlights the ongoing lack of a comprehensive understanding of how visual representations intersect with governance dynamics. It called for a comprehensive approach that includes the power of images to influence policy-making and public perceptions. By proposing an expanded framework that integrates the visual dimension into migration governance, the study seeks to offer a nuanced understanding of how visuals contribute to meaning-making, policy shaping, and public engagement in an era of digital communication dominance. To do so, the article introduces the concept of "visual governance" a process whereby governance is enacted through visual representations to communicate, regulate, legitimize, or challenge prevailing power structures, policies, and practices. By integrating the visual dimension alongside the traditional focus on policies and practices, the framework highlights the iterative and interconnected relationship between these elements within governance systems. Visuals are conceptualized as both inputs—shaping public perceptions and narratives—and outputs, strategically employed by governance actors to communicate, legitimize, and regulate policies and actions. This dual role positions visuals at the heart of governance processes, emphasizing their capacity to influence and be influenced within a dynamic, hermeneutical cycle. This new framework also allows to acknowledge the multi-actor nature of visual governance, incorporating a diverse array of stakeholders operating at macro, meso, and micro levels. State institutions and transnational entities at the macro level, international organizations and NGOs at the meso level, and individuals and grassroots movements at the micro level all contribute to the production and circulation of visual content.

By capturing the complexity of migration governance through this lens, the framework advances a more nuanced understanding of how visuals operate across multiple levels of

governance. It challenges the notion of a linear relationship between visuals and governance, instead presenting a dynamic, iterative process where visuals simultaneously inform and are shaped by governance structures. This approach offers a valuable tool for analyzing the role of visual representations in contemporary governance, particularly in the context of migration, and lays the groundwork for further exploration of this under-theorized dimension into the governance of other transnational phenomena.

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Alice Massari is a political scientist specializing in visuality, migration governance, and humanitarianism. She is currently a Marie Sk³odowska-Curie Global Fellow at Toronto Metropolitan University and the University of Copenhagen, leading the VIGO project, which explores the role of images in migration governance. Her expertise extends across academia and policy, with a research portfolio focusing on irregular migration, human smuggling, and transnational networks. Her contributions to migration studies have been published in journals like Comparative Migration Studies and the Journal of Immigrant & Refugee Studies, among others. She is the author of Visual Securitization: Humanitarian Representations and Migration Governance. Beyond academia, Alice has extensive practitioner experience. Since 2007, Dr. Massari has worked on migration and humanitarian aid in various capacities, including as a researcher, aid worker, and consultant. Her experience includes leading an INGO during the Syrian emergency, working as an EU expert on migration, and serving as a Humanitarian Analyst and Humanitarian Adviser for the UK Foreign Commonwealth and Development Office for the last 5 years.

Discussant Remarks

Discussant: Shin HaeRan
(Seoul National University)

Alice's paper Visual Governance – Theorizing the role of images in migration governance offers a compelling framework for understanding "visual governance" as a key mechanism in migration politics. I agree that visuals have evolved from mere tools to central agents that communicate, legitimise, or contest power structures, policies, and practices. The paper's inclusion of multi-scalar actors—from macro-level institutions to micro-level individuals—aligns with geopolitical studies of migration governance, where non-state actors (such as brokers, activists, and digital influencers) play critical roles in shaping mobility infrastructures.

I also found myself reflecting on the specific role and position of the visual, and Aliceposes a powerful open question: Should images be approached as governance tools, intended as part of the instruments that policymakers can utilise to steer actors toward specific policy outcomes? Or, on the contrary, should images be considered for their ability to contribute to discourses on migration issues, which in turn shape governance policies? From the perspective of bordering and infrastructuring, this approach is particularly valuable in revealing how visual representations construct, legitimise, and contest border regimes beyond traditional legal and institutional frameworks. The paper's recognition of visuals as central agents rather than passive tools aligns with contemporary debates on the materiality of borders—how borders are not just lines on maps but lived, performed, and continuously reimagined through media, surveillance technologies, and digital infrastructures.

What makes the concept of visual governance even more provocative is its potential linkage to mental mapping. Visuals not only shape policy; they shape the way people mentally organize and navigate the world. Mental maps—subjective representations of space and place—are continuously fed and altered by visual cues, many of which are disseminated through state-led campaigns, humanitarian media, or grassroots documentation. In my own work on North Korean defectors and South Korean mediators, I have focused on the consequential images of migration—what I consider post-migration visual governance. I would therefore encourage further exploration of visual migration

governance not only during the migration process but also after settlement, particularly in relation to adaptation and resistance so that we can rethink how power is not only enacted but seen, felt, and mapped.

[WORKING PAPER – Please do not circulate beyond this session]

Acoustic Regimes of Labour and Leisure: Soundworlds of migrant workers from Southeast Asia in Singapore

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Abstract

This paper explores the sonic dimensions of migrant worker life in Singapore, examining how sound mediates the fragile boundaries of labour and leisure in precarious transnational environments. Through a methodology of sound diaries, participatory listening, and analysis of narrowcasted internet sonorities, the study focuses on how migrant workers—particularly Filipina and Indonesian domestic workers—negotiate privacy, identity, and community through sounded practices in both physical and digital spheres. Building on and expanding the frameworks of acoustemology and listening (Feld 1996, Atkinson 2011) and affective labour (Hardt & Negri 1999), the paper argues for a rethinking of sonic agency in the underexamined sonic lives of Southeast Asia's invisibilised workforce.

Context

Singapore—a densely populated, multicultural city-state with approximately 5.9 million residents—relies significantly on migrant labour to sustain its economy and infrastructure. Nearly one million low-waged migrant workers form close to three-quarters of the country's 1.56 million-strong foreign workforce.[1] These workers, predominantly from Bangladesh, Indonesia, the Philippines, and Myanmar, undertake essential but often invisible roles across sectors such as construction, caregiving, and domestic work. Many reside within the homes of their employers or in purpose-built dormitories, operating within tightly regulated regimes that govern not only their time and labour but also their mobility, speech, rest and play.

1) https://www.mom.gov.sg/foreign-workforce-numbers, accessed May 10 2025

The lived experiences of these workers are marked by isolation, linguistic exclusion, and the frequent collapse of personal and professional boundaries. Within such a context, sound becomes a particularly powerful lens for understanding how migrant workers navigate, resist, and inhabit their environments. Sound—whether in the form of music, ambient noise, or purposeful silence—mediates the fragile line between labour and leisure, offering strategies for survival, connection, and self-articulation.

Drawing on Steve Feld's framework of acoustemology (1996)—the idea that sound is a way of knowing and engaging with the world—and building on further contributions by Sterne (2012) and Gautier (2020) in sound studies, this research foregrounds the sonic lives of migrant workers in Singapore. It pays particular attention to how music and listening practices function as tools of comfort, resistance, and identity formation. The paper traces how workers deploy mobile devices, social media, and audio apps—not merely for entertainment but as platforms for digital musicking and relational world-making.

The following sections explore these practices across domestic, public, virtual, and liminal spaces. Anchored in methods such as collaborative ethnography, sound diaries, participatory listening, and audiovisual documentation, the study identifies and analyses recurring themes —including acoustic governance, affective labour, sonic privacy, and digital authorship. At its core, the project seeks to understand how migrant workers use sound to reassert presence and agency within systems that often render them unheard.

1. Introduction: Meikhan's StarMaker and the Sonic Commons

The voice of Meikhan Sri Bandar—streaming karaoke on the StarMaker app from within a Singaporean domestic setting—cuts through the low-level background hum of air-conditioning, kitchen appliances, and distant soap operas that often define the sonic atmosphere of a migrant worker's day-to-day.[2] But Meikhan is more than her job description. In her village of ?? back in Indonesia, and among her friends and co-workers in Singapore, she is known as a singer—someone whose voice travels farther than her body ever could. Her recordings—narrowcast via social media or shared in private WhatsApp groups—are expressions of identity, pleasure, and subtle protest, performed in the liminal moments carved out of late night pre-bedtime uploadas or quick lunch breaks.

2) https://www.youtube.com/@MSBProduction71, accessed May 10 2025

These soundings aren't incidental. They reflect the ways in which migrant workers like Meikhan use digital platforms to reclaim space—auditory and emotional—in contexts that otherwise insist on silence. Singing becomes a kind of world-making—a way of articulating presence and connection, even within the confines of someone else's home.

Yet Meikhan isn't just a singer. She's also a producer and curator of her own Youtube channel and digital archive. Her videos—often featuring family members, edited on basic mobile apps, and uploaded using her employer's high-speed Wi-Fi—showcase a form of DIY sonic authorship that stretches across geographies. This cohabitation of infrastructure —where the very tools intended to manage her labour are repurposed for creative output— is layered with contradiction. It is in these contradictions that her agency finds footing.

Drawing on Tan's notion of "narrowcasting into the infinite margins" (2021: 49–53), we might read Meikhan's work as part of a broader cultural strategy among migrant workers— small-scale, low-cost, yet deeply intentional acts of creation. Her Smule duets, livestreams, and self-recorded performances blur the line between amateur content and cultural labour— between worker and artist. She has even gone so far as to compile and release her own music albums online—assembled through mobile-phone optimised sound editing tools and cross-generational collaborations with family.

This is not just digital tinkering. It is polymediality in action—where mobile technologies allow migrant workers to move fluidly across genres, platforms, and publics. From devotional singing to pop ballads and satirical skits, Meikhan's musical practice echoes what Jenkins (2006) describes as "convergence culture"—one where participation matters more than passive consumption, and where sharing becomes a form of authorship.

Her inclusion of family members in these recordings, moreover, challenges dominant narratives of separation and sacrifice. Kinship is maintained not just through remittances but through shared sonic labour—what we might call a form of affective remittance. Her music travels back home, not as money but as joy, pride, and relational visibility.

Meikhan's story demonstrates that migrant workers are not only caught within systems of extraction—they are also active cultural producers who reshape the very terms of visibility and belonging. Their digital musicking collapses the binaries of public and private, work and leisure, production and care. In voicing themselves—quietly, sometimes shakily—they claim authorship in a city that too often renders them silent.

2. Sound as Comfort and Safe Space: Sonic Bubbles

Meikhan's presence on platforms such as StarMaker and YouTube is far from the only kind of expression. Her activities are part of a wider range of sonic practices articulated by migrant workers across various live–work environments, online platforms, and intersecting communities. These deliveries often overlap—at times harmonising, at other times competing—across different linguistic, cultural, spatial and temporal configurations. In many of the domestic and urban soundscapes where migrant workers are expected to remain aurally unobtrusive, they also actively contribute to their own containment—deliberately constructing private sonic cocoons to shield themselves from external intrusion.

This idea was the sonic envelope first observed by Michael Bull in his studies of portable listening technologies such as the Sony Walkman and, later, the Apple iPod (2015). Bull argues that users of these devices engage in a process of aural privatisation—reclaiming control over space and emotion through curated listening and editing/ screening off of undesired sounds and their extrapolated meanings/consequences. By constructing such hermetically sealed auditory bubbles, individuals are able to transform public or regulated spaces into emotionally managed zones—temporarily insulated from surveillance, external interference or stress.

The portable sonic bubble, in the context of migrant worker life, functions as both refuge and resistance. Through the use of earphones plugged into mobile phones, the curation of Islamic devotional phone playlists—featuring artists such as Maher Zain or Hafiz Hamidun —and the selective playing of music during domestic tasks or relaxation/winding down after labour, workers exercise small yet meaningful forms of cognitive and emotional autonomy. For many, listening becomes a therapeutic ritual—a sonic return to memory, home, a pre-migrant lifestyle, and faith. These practices represent an embodied acoustemology, wherein sound is not only a sensory register but a way of knowing and navigating diasporic selfhood.

This form of aural self-care—practised through the use of smartphones and earbuds—allows migrant workers to shield themselves, at least temporarily, from the work repetitions, employer's naggings, linguistic exclusion, emotional fatigue, and ambient surveillance that characterise much of their working day. These moments of private listening are not merely leisurely diversions; rather, they constitute a form of survival—quietly maintaining the boundaries of the self within environments that demand continuous attentiveness to the desires and moods of others.

However, not all forms of sonic enclosure are voluntary or agentive. Outside of the domestic worker remit and in many construction sites across Singapore, for example, male Bangladeshi workers are required to wear earplugs for occupational health and safety. While these devices are ostensibly designed to protect against the noise of machinery, they also produce a form of acoustic isolation—one that mutes not only environmental sounds, proscribes 'listen-along' playlists but also opportunities for interpersonal communication. In such contexts, the sonic bubble becomes externally imposed—a disciplinary mechanism that controls the soundscape as well as the body. Compounding this enforced isolation is the frequent prohibition of mobile phone use on site, which further removes access to music, communication and digital access to the 'outside' world.

The contrast between elective and enforced sonic bubbles underscores a fundamental tension. In the former, sound becomes a self-directed modality of care, remembrance, and resistance. In the latter, it is a form of containment—one that severs social and expressive potential. These divergent experiences illustrate the broader politics of listening in migrant worker life, where the capacity to shape one's own sonic environment is unevenly distributed and heavily mediated by structures of labour, legality, and discipline.

The right—or lack thereof—to choose one's soundscape becomes a key marker of agency. The ability to select what to hear, how loudly, when and with whom, is a rarely acknowledged privilege. Thus, when migrant workers use personal audio devices during brief intervals of private time, this is not simply a recreational activity. Rather, it is a quiet assertion of presence, subjectivity, and humanity within a system that often demands silence and erasure.

3. Sonic Governance in Employers' Homes: Negotiating Liminal Spaces

The domestic soundscape of a live-in migrant worker is rarely neutral—it is a space saturated with regulation, expectation, and negotiation. Alarm tones divide the day into routinised segments, while mobile phone apps structure both religious observance, housework, supermarket chores, childcare and eldercare with vibrating reminders and silent notifications. Within these auditory constraints, workers find ways to subtly navigate overlapping duties and desires. Nengsih Suprihatin—a domestic worker from Banten, Indonesia, with nearly two decades of experience in Singapore—describes how her daily schedule is punctuated by a series of alarms: some for tasks like laundry or meal

preparation, others marking prayer times; yet others for indicating the arrival of her employers or wards. These devices do not merely divide the day—they operate as instruments of micro-governance and acoustic discipline. (Nengsih, incidentally holds several identities beyond migrant worker –she is also a singer, a religious group leader, an activist and a small-business owner and speaker of several languages and dialects).

Here, linguistic barriers (and the partial overcoming of them) further complicate the sonic landscape. Many domestic workers enter households where the primary spoken language is unfamiliar—Mandarin or Hokkien in Chinese-majority homes, for example—and where verbal instruction is limited or inconsistent. As a result, workers often learn by listening rather than speaking. What emerges is a kind of strategic silence and—conversely—a strategic form of listening. This heightened attentiveness to rhythm, inflection, vocal grain and tone leads, over time, to an embodied understanding of family dynamics, subtexts and cultural doxa within a household. Without entering into lexical modes of communication, a worker can tell if her employers are talking about "money, sex… or myself as the subject." – as Indonesian worker and theatre producer Wiwi Trinarsih tells.[3] Migrant workers in these situations develop what might be described as a new listening practice—an attuned mode of hearing that enables learning, adaptation, and survival without direct linguistic access.

This kind of listening is not limited to human language. In some cases, it extends to the subtlest and proxied forms of sound produced by personal devices. For example, many Muslim workers use smartphone apps for prayer reminders but keep their adhan (call to prayer) notifications on silent or vibration mode, so as not to disturb household members or misstep religious boundaries as affectively laboured acts of self-censorship. Over time, these workers become finely attuned to the acoustic and tactile textures of their phones. A buzzing phone left on a corian countertop rattles with a particular aural frisson, or tucked inside a polyester apron pocket, generates a distinct vibration—long pulses for prayer times, shorter beats for text messages. As Nengsih explains, "The vibrations are just for me. I can hear them because I expect them."[4] In this way, listening becomes a form of embodied knowledge—one that quietly maintains personal and religious identity within environments shaped by other people's expectations and control.

Further insight into these dynamics can be found in the example of a collaborative Sound

3) Interview, online, April 2024
4) Interview, in person, Singapore, April 2022.

Diarying Singapore project, established as part of an ongoing co-authored ethnographic exercise (Tan et al., 2021a). Over several periods—beginning in 2018 and extending through follow-up sessions in 2020, 2021, 2023, and 2024—I worked with and consulted more than 15 domestic workers who logged and recorded the sounds that structured their days. These diaries documented recurring sound events: the clink of cutlery during breakfast preparation, the mid-morning hum of the vacuum cleaner, the rankling audio of television dramas played to keep their elderly wards 'grandma and grandpa' entertained. These were not passive ambient noises but meaningful sonic markers that delineated time, work, affective labour, emotion, and activity.

Sound, in these accounts, emerges as a structuring force—one that signals when to begin tasks, when to pause, and when, if only briefly, to reclaim moments of solitude or connection. This aligns with Atkinson's (2011) observations regarding acoustic regulation—how sound in institutional or semi-institutional environments not only fills space but actively shapes behaviour, rhythm, affect and intention.

In this context, domestic sound is also communicative, often operating below the threshold of direct conversation. For Filipina worker Rema Tabangcura, a single mother who also moonlights as a poet, a particularly illustrative example is the way workers stack dishes after washing them—sometimes gently, sometimes with a pronounced clatter. These sonic gestures, while ostensibly neutral, carry emotional weight. The sharp resonance of crockery against a sink may express frustration, fatigue, or pride in a job well done. Employers, occupying overlapping yet hierarchically distinct sound-space, often pick up on these cues. Rema recalls an employer commenting, "Harsh stacking… you will break the crockery at this rate,"revealing how even minor sonic deviations are monitored, interpreted, and managed.[5)]

These exchanges illustrate how power operates through listening. Sonic cues—unlike visual gestures—are not easily hidden in shared domestic environments, where intimate spaces are never private spaces (Arnado 2003). As a result, workers are constantly modulating their auditory presence—learning when to be silent –or how to move their bodies in order to be silent; when to sound, and when to carefully tune their actions to the expectations of others. What results is an intricate negotiation of unseen work—an ongoing, unremunerated effort to manage both emotional states and the acoustic atmosphere of the home. These negotiations align closely with Hardt and Negri's (1999) framework of

5) Interview, online, April 2022

affective labour, in which workers are responsible not only for physical tasks but also for producing and sustaining emotional environments.

In such homes, sound becomes a map of power—an auditory index of who belongs, who serves, and who decides what is heard; who has to 'hide' behind silence and 'work-produced sounds'. Every tone, chime, and vibration contains a subtext that extends beyond audibility. Migrant workers must learn to read—and produce—these sounds with precision, navigating an acoustic terrain in which the boundaries of labour, obedience, and identity are constantly shifting.

4. Sonic Staking of Public and Semi-Public Spaces

The spaces in which migrant workers express themselves sonically are not confined to the homes in which they live and labour. Public and semi-public zones across Singapore—including Lucky Plaza, East Coast Park, and various void decks—become, particularly on designated days off, temporary sonic commons. These sites, usually regulated by quietude and normative expectations of Singaporean civic behaviour, are transformed through the collective presence and soundings of migrant domestic workers. Sunday – often experienced as an off-day only once enforceable by Singaporean law once a month – becomes a moment not simply of rest, but of occupation—audible, affective, and often festive.

At Lucky Plaza on Singapore's busy Orchard Road, the building's acoustic profile often precedes its visual one: its sonic footprint is larger than its architectural stake. Before one even enters, one hears the layered voices of Filipina women—speaking, laughing, singing—in Tagalog, Bisaya, Ilocano, Waray, and other regional languages. The resulting polyphony is distinct from the soundscapes of malls in the Philippines itself—where linguistic and gendered dynamics differ. Here in Singapore, the building becomes an informal diasporic archipelago of sound, shaped by both migration and gendered labour.

Within these soundscapes, conversations about remittances, relatives, frenemies, health, beauty routines, religious practice, and musical performances intermingle. The background hum includes Pinoy Pop, American 1980s rock, Korean pop, and Christian devotional tracks played on portable speakers. This sound—non-institutional, relational, and affective—temporarily redefines the space. Lucky Plaza becomes more than a commercial site; it becomes a cultural enclave sustained by sonic relationality.

Beyond malls, semi-public outdoor spaces—such as parks and waterfronts—are similarly transformed. East Coast Park, for instance, regularly becomes an outdoor gathering space for Indonesian and Filipina domestic workers who, on their rest days, stake informal claim to sections of beach, barbecue pits, and open lawns. Here, group singing, games, storytelling, shared meals, and devotional activities unfold within soundscapes marked by portable speakers, multilingual conversations, and laughter. Children's play (of Singaporean families nearby co-using the same space) and intermittent prayers blend into this sonic texture, creating layered ecologies of co-presence.

These gatherings are rarely homogenous. Conversations may flow in Tagalog, Bahasa Indonesia, Bengali, Burmese and often, English too—sometimes simultaneously. The overlapping of languages and genres produces a heterogeneous, rhizomatic sonic atmosphere that complicates any simplistic reading of migrant life as fragmented or disconnected. These are not merely communities of co-presence; they are co-sounded and co-felt collectives, assembled through sound.

Such ephemeral soundings challenge the expectations of Singapore's public order.They do not only mark the physical presence of migrant workers, but also assert an acoustic visibility. Where migrant voices are often muted or hidden during the workweek, these gatherings render them momentarily—and powerfully—audible. Sound becomes a tool for claiming space, even when that claim is brief, temporally limited, unsanctioned, or deliberately informal.

Each site carries its own sonic signature, shaped by demographic composition and cultural rhythms. Filipina workers tend to cluster around Lucky Plaza and Orchard Road; Indonesian communities are more visible at East Coast Park, City Plaza, and Geylang Serai; Bangladeshi and Indian male workers often gather near Mustafa Centre, Farrer Park, and various peripheral dormitory zones; Burmese workers frequent Peninsula Plaza. These locations are more than geographical sites—they are affective geographies of sounded life, marked by shared playlists, spoken dialects, devotional refrains, and sonic residue.

In each case, sound is not a by-product of gathering but its very condition. Migrant workers use collective listening, musicking, and speech to stake ephemeral territory—carving out temporary sanctuaries of social and emotional expression. These public and semi-public soundings constitute a mode of spatial negotiation in a city that otherwise restricts their visibility and voice. In such moments, migrant communities – now able to socialise inter-ethnically too – become acoustically legible to one another—asserting not

only presence, but also the right to relationality.

5. Musicking in Hidden Spaces: Affective Leisure as Spatial Legitimisation

While the sonic presence of migrant workers is often most visible in public and semi-public spaces, there also exist less visible but equally vital zones where musicking unfolds—hostels, mosques, and informal social clubs function as hidden yet resonant sites of communal expression and affective leisure. In these spaces, music is not merely performance or recreation; it becomes a strategy of spatial legitimisation—an embodied means of belonging, social participation, and spiritual affirmation.

Among Indonesian Muslim domestic workers in Singapore, women-only devotional chant groups have emerged over the past decade as significant sites of sonic and social practice. One such group, Nur Assyifa, uses religious idioms and performance-based gatherings to establish presence in spaces not originally designed for them. Their activities—rehearsals, communal prayers, and informal lessons—often take place in mosques that are typically dominated by Malay Singaporean Muslims. By participating in religious musicking, these workers quietly negotiate access and legitimacy within these institutions, using sound as both mode of reverence and strategy of inclusion.

The mosque, in this context, becomes more than a spiritual site. It offers practical resources rarely available to domestic workers during the workweek—clean toilets, air-conditioned prayer rooms, carpeted floors, and kitchenette facilities. These features make the mosque an attractive haven—particularly on Sundays, when shopping centres such as Lucky Plaza may feel overcrowded and noisy. Yet this spatial comfort is not automatically granted. Access must be earned—negotiated through sonic participation and alignment with the mosque's religious life.

Musicking, therefore, serves a dual function. On one hand, it is devotional practice—rooted in Islamic vocal traditions such as sholawat and qasidah. On the other hand, it is a form of space-making. Participation in group rehearsals legitimises the presence of migrant workers within mosque walls, transforming them from marginal visitors into recognised contributors to the mosque's acoustic life. As such, the act of singing is not only spiritual—it is performative occupation, a gentle yet persistent claim to space.

These rehearsals, while framed in religious terms, are never purely formal. Alongside

chants and prayers, there is laughter, shared snacks, gossip, and discussion. The prayer room becomes a hybrid environment—part sanctuary, part community centre, part rehearsal studio. The blending of sacred and social elements reflects the layered reality of migrant leisure, where distinctions between duty and rest, worship and expression, are intentionally blurred.

Moreover, these groups often operate with informal pedagogical structures. Senior members such as Neng—herself both a lead singer and informal community organiser—circulate learning materials via WhatsApp. Members are expected to practise between sessions, submit voice recordings for review, and memorise lyrics or vocal lines. This model of asynchronous learning transforms the smartphone into an instrument of musical training—rehearsal space, archive, and communication channel in one. Through this structure, musicking becomes a form of capacity building—empowering migrant women with skills, confidence, and collective identity.

The convergence of sonic, social, and spiritual labour within these spaces constitutes a form of what might be termed acoustic citizenship. Through devotionalmusic, migrant workers craft a participatory presence that is grounded not in legal recognition but in sonic contribution. They repurpose religious orthodoxy as a platform for creativity, relationship-building, and communal care. Sound, in these practices, is not ancillary to faith—it is the medium through which faith is lived, shared, and legitimised.

These hidden sonic practices challenge dominant assumptions about migrant life as passive or precarious. They reveal how affective leisure, when made audible, reshapes space and reframes belonging. Whether in mosque basements or shared hostel rooms, musicking becomes a quiet but persistent form of world-making—producing not only joy and solidarity, but also new terms of legitimacy in an urban landscape that often excludes.

6. Narrowcasting: Internet Sonorities and Rhizomic Sound Communities

The sonic lives of migrant workers in Singapore are not confined to the physical spaces in which they labour or gather. Increasingly, sound travels through digital channels—circulating within intimate, improvised, and distributed networks that operate far beyond national or diasporic borders. Through online platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, Tiktok, WhatsApp, and Smule, migrant workers engage in a form of sonic authorship that Tan (2021: 50) has described as "narrowcasting into the infinite margins"—where the

intimate becomes performative, and the private becomes relational.

These practices and pathways differ from those offered by traditional broadcasting. They are selective, often addressed to known or imagined audiences, and characterised by a sense of deliberate intimacy. They are open to all, but significantly can only be found if one knows where, or more importantly how to look for them. Through karaoke sessions, devotional songs, video tutorials, and voice notes, workers construct micro-publics that connect Singapore to Indonesia, the Philippines, Bangladesh, and beyond. These acts are not only expressive; they are pedagogical and social. Songs are used to teach, to maintain kinship, to send affective signals across time zones and class boundaries.

Long before the COVID-19 pandemic rendered digital communication a global necessity, many migrant workers had already adapted to the constraints of separation by building sophisticated practices of online musicking. With limited physical freedom—often restricted to one or two days off per month—they turned to mobile technologies and internet-based platforms and places of intimacy/privacy as tools for sustaining spiritual life, artistic practice, and familial intimacy. What might appear as fragmented or amateur content from an outside perspective is, in fact, the connective tissue of an informal yet highly structured digital cultural sphere.

This rhizomatic network of sonic exchange often includes devotional and pedagogical dimensions. For instance, in the case of chant groups such as Nur Assyifa, WhatsApp becomes a platform for distributed instruction. Group leaders send recordings of specific sholawat or qasidah verses, complete with notated lyrics and sometimes vocal guidance. Members are expected to submit voice recordings in return—creating a call-and-response structure that spans asynchronous time and disparate geographies. These exchanges are emotionally charged, often accompanied by ‘rewards’ and ‘prizes’ of stickers, emojis, and praise—signalling not only musical progress but care and encouragement.

Through such practices, the smartphone becomes more than a communication tool. It becomes a rehearsal space, a site of discipline and affirmation, and a repository of sonic memory. The pedagogical loop—sing, record, listen, revise, respond—enables learning that is rooted not only in repetition, structured living/affective leisure, but in emotional resonance. Voice messages are not merely functional—they are saturated with care, humour, and social nuance.

Importantly, these digital platforms do not only reproduce national or ethnic sonic traditions. Rather, they reveal a hidden cosmopolitanism in migrant listening practices. Workers listen to—and adapt—genres ranging from K-pop and Bollywood to Western gospel and Arabic devotional music (by way of Sweden, as is the case of Maher Zain). The discovery and sharing of such artists illustrates how global sound flows are absorbed and recontextualised within migrant sonic cultures. Devotional songs are often adapted to the melodic contours of pop ballads, or vice versa, creating new hybrids that blur the lines between sacred and secular, traditional and modern.

One particularly striking example of this convergence occurs in mosque-based rehearsals, where multiple versions of the adhan (Islamic call to prayer) may occur simultaneously. A live muezzin may recite the adhan through mosque loudspeakers (far for the course in muted fashion as epitomised by T. S. Lee 1999), while individual phones in the room produce app-generated versions—each slightly offset in time and tone. This layering creates a textured, unsynchronised soundscape in which live voice, digital echo, and vibrated notification coexist. Rather than disrupting the ritual, this sonic multiplicity becomes part of it—a sensory negotiation between personal piety and collective experience.

Such polymedial religious practices reflect a broader reconfiguration of spiritual life in transnational contexts. Vibrated adhan alerts allow workers to maintain discipline discreetly, without disrupting household routines. For some, the dijunctures in timing between the live and the app-based call becomes a moment of contemplation—an audible and poetic reminder that faith, like sound, can exist across registers and rhythms.

Such acts of digital musicking and sonic sharing exemplify what Deleuze and Guattari (1987) have described as a rhizomatic structure—multi-sited, non-hierarchical, and constantly growing through unexpected connections. Narrowcasting in this sense is not a diminished form of communication. It is a conscious strategy of relational world-making, through which migrant workers inscribe presence, solidarity (and sometimes petty rivalries), and authorship into digital and religious landscapes that might otherwise remain inaccessible or exclusionary. These practices demand recognition not only as cultural production but as forms of agency and infrastructure. They are adaptive, affective, and deeply social—anchored in resilience, creativity, care (and sometimes competition).

7. Toward a Conclusion: Sonic Citizenship, Collaborative Research and Hierarchies of Co-production

Central to the methodology underpinning this paper is the principle of collaboration—not as a supplementary gesture but as a foundational ethic. Much of the research presented here is grounded in the previously mentioned and long-running Sound Diarying Singapore project, a collaborative ethnographic initiative developed through joint authorship, co-reflection, and sustained (still ongoing) engagement with migrant worker communities. Through voice memos, structured audio journals, and collective analysis, participants such as Joralyn Fallera—a Filipina domestic worker, co-author, and conference co-presenter—have documented not only events but atmospheres, ambiences, and absences. Their sound diaries have challenged the conventional binaries between researcher and researched, subject and method, data and narrative.

These diaries invite a reconsideration of what counts as evidence. They foreground sonic subjectivity—where mood, memory, and interpretation are not incidental but central to ethnographic insight. The documentation of a single ringtone (or more likely vibration pattern), a distant hymn, or a kitchen clang, the muted flush of a toilet or ping of an elevator outside - becomes a lens through which to understand not only personal experience but also structural conditions of labour and leisure. Listening, in this mode, is not passive reception—it is co-production.

The Sound Diary project is one among several efforts to develop models of citizen research—approaches that foreground the epistemic authority of those whose lives are being studied. This mode of inquiry requires not only methodological innovation but also a rethinking of academic labour, authorship, and advocacy. Co-authorship is not always seamless. It entails negotiation—of time, intention, cultural difference, and institutional recognition. Yet, when undertaken with care, it enables the transformation of scholarship into a form of shared meaning-making.

Beyond diary-based work, performance-based initiatives have also emerged as significant sites of co-creation. One such example is the "Kitchen Percussion" project, initiated by myself but led by Wiwi Trinarsih—a domestic worker and theatre practitioner originally from central Java, Indonesia. In this initiative, everyday household tools were reimagined as musical instruments: ladles, chopping boards, saucepans-as-gongs and cleaning brushes were transformed into percussive devices. Through rehearsal and live performance, the materials of domestic servitude were recast as tools of sonic expression. In these moments,

workers asserted authorship over the very objects that typically structure their subordination. Where the kitchen and its tools were once sites of affective labour, they have now also become sites of affective leisure.

Such interventions complicate the distinction between work and art, resistance and routine. They highlight the porousness between performance and documentation, musicality and mundanity. Whether in kitchen concerts, mosque rehearsals, or WhatsApp chant groups, migrant workers engage in what may be called rhythmic forms of resistance—acts that are neither overtly oppositional nor entirely assimilative, but situated within everyday negotiations of space, sound, and identity.

Listening ethically to these sounded lives requires more than observation. It entails a willingness to be shaped by what is heard—to respond, to reconsider, and to relinquish interpretive control –or simply, control (as with the case of the Kitchen Percussion Band, which has devolved into competing devotional and rock bands, and a kitche prep group – more on this in another paper). Migrant musicking, sounding, and silence are not simply background to economic life; they are central to how identity, community, and citizenship are constructed and contested. These acoustic biographies challenge the reductive narratives that position migrant workers solely in terms of utility or vulnerability. Instead, they reveal rich and complex practices of self-articulation, cultural authorship, and relational care.

At the same time, collaboration is not without its tensions. Questions of representation, authorship, and remuneration are unavoidable. As Lassiter (2021) reminds us, any co-creative process involves asymmetries—of time, institutional access, and cultural expectation. These hierarchised tensions must be named and addressed with care, without romanticising the process or erasing its complexities. Current work by the author, including a parallel project on ethical authorship and shared production and ethnography, seeks to explore these dilemmas further, alongside the communities with whom these methods are being developed.

For the moment, this paper offers a call to rethink acoustic citizenship and citizen research—not as metaphors, but as a practice. To hear is not enough. One must listen in ways that attend to power, that amplify without appropriating, and that recognize the spaces between sound and silence as sites where migrant lives unfold.

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Nengsih Suprihatin is a domestic worker from Serang, Banten province, Indonesia. She has been working with the same family in Singapore for more than 17 years, and has been active in migrant workers' capacity-building circuits as the leader of a nasyid performance group. She is also a published poet, a writer and a singer. A frequent producer of creative content via her self- made cooking, music and picnic videos on social media, she is a well-known voice on community networks.

Shzr Ee Tan is a Reader and ethnomusicologist (with a specialism in Sinophone and Southeast Asian worlds) at Royal Holloway, University of London. As Vice Dean EDI for the School of Performing and Digital Arts, she is committed to decolonial and EDI work in music and the performing arts, with interests in how race discourses intersect problematically with class, gender and recent debates on posthuman digitalities, climate change and multispecies thinking.

Discussant Remarks

Discussant: Yuk Joo Won
(Kyungpook National University)

First and foremost, I am grateful for the opportunity to read and comment on Shzr Ee Tan's beautifully documented paper. I, too, am deeply interested in the issues of migration and citizenship, and the politics of art and culture. Moreover, having spent a year as a postdoctoral researcher at the National University of Singapore, I had the chance to witness aspects of migrant workers' lives in Singapore firsthand. Reading this paper, I felt as though the urbanscapes and I encountered then unfolded before me once again like a documentary. Thank you for that.

Tan's paper explores the sounded experiences of transient migrant workers, highlighting their agency in contrast to the dominant perception of them as merely useful tools or objects of exploitation. . In doing so, the paper treats acoustic citizenship not merely as a metaphor but as a practice, thus offering a critical and valuable intervention.

My own recent involvement in action research surrounding the controversy over the construction of an Islamic Mosque in Daegu, South Korea, has sparked my growing interest in soundscapes. Tan's work has prompted me to further reflect on the relationship between citizenship and sounded spaces. In the Daegu case, opposition from local residents has often been justified in terms of "noise and smell" -referring to the sounds of Muslim people coming and going, prayer recitations, and communal dinners held in the courtyard. While such complaints clearly stem from Islamophobic sentiment -as revealed by racist banners and other opposition activities- I was particularly struck by how these residents assert their legitimacy over the space through what I have termed a synesthetic practice of territoriality (Yuk 2023, 71). This form of spatial occupation, or bordering, is enacted not only through visualscapes but soundscapes.

The acoustic dimension of this territorial claim is palpable: from protests against the mosque to neighborhood barbeque parties and everyday verbal harassment of Muslims, the sonic environment around the mosque has markedly changed since the conflict begun in 2021. In more aggressive cases, there have even been deliberate acts of noise pollution.

Beginning in the latter half of 2022, there were multiple incidents where residents played loud Korean trot music during Muslim prayer times using portable speakers. This music, framed as part of 'joyful Korean culture', is played not only during prayer times but also at anti-mosque rallies and neighborhood pork barbecues that openly target Muslims. These sonic performances, especially when they intrude on moments of quiet prayer, serve not only to disrupt but also to reclaim the space by saturating the soundscape with what is perceived as 'Korean', thereby reinforcing symbolic ownership of the place.

In this context, I am compelled to reflect on how acoustic citizenship remains profoundly unequally distributed and is always governed in particular ways. The "sonic bubble" or "sonic staking of spaces" by Muslim students keeps being intervened and regulated by Koreans who perform bordering through sonic practices. This raises the question: can we expect the act of interpreting the sounded experiences of migrant workers as signs of resistance to meaningfully alter the structures of power? In the case of Singapore—a country with both an exploitative migrant labour regime and a lived multiculturalism—could these practices of acoustic citizenship, paradoxically, contribute to sustaining the existing migration regime? What forms of resistance, if any, does the author discern within the multicultural and hybrid sounded experiences of migrants?

In the final section of the paper, the author briefly touches upon collaborative knowledge production with research participants. While there is mention of challenges encountered in the Sound Diary Project, I would like to hear more about the nature of these difficulties and what they imply methodologically. Furthermore, given the blurred boundaries that migrant workers often navigate between their care work and everyday artistic expression—between underpaid, exploitative labour and affective labour—I wonder whether the author grappled with the tension between representing these sound diaries as art versus interpreting them as research.

Once again, I sincerely appreciate the opportunity to engage with such a thought-provoking piece of work.

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