CONTESTED SPACES: CAPTURING THE CULTURAL LAYERS OF KOREATOWN, LOS ANGELES

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By

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ABSTRACT

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This paper will act as a historical pretext to a photo documentary style project I produced showing the multi-cultural environment of Koreatown represented by three layers: 1) a historic, Korean American, ethnic enclave community; 2) a transnational and regional center where investors see an attractive investment space; 3) a multiethnic, local community composed of members from Central America, Mexico, and Bangladesh. I will take a street photography approach emphasizing both static and lyrical styles of photography to document the various overlapping and juxtaposing cultures that reside in Koreatown by walking through several of the major streets including the area’s historic borders, documenting vernacular images – images of everyday and common place life, signs, artifacts, and architecture seen from the point of view of the street and meeting people walking about on any given day.
Chapter 1

Introduction

My aim for this project was to photograph the various overlapping and juxtaposing cultures that reside in Koreatown by walking through several of the major streets including the area’s historic borders, documenting images of everyday and common place life, signs, artifacts, and architecture seen from the point of view of the street and people walking about on any given day.

I focused on the multi-cultural environment of Koreatown represented by three layers: 1) a historic, Korean American, ethnic community 2) a transnational and regional center where investors see an attractive investment space 3) a multiethnic, local community composed of residents from Central America, Mexico, and Bangladesh.

The types of images I made for this project fell under two categories of the documentary photography style, “static” and “lyrical”. Two of the motifs I focused on for my images were signs and buildings. Koreatown provides opportunities to record the various juxtaposing cultures that live and work there. Additionally, I included a survey component with accompanied portraits of the people who I met who were out and about in Koreatown. Portraits are an effective way to account for an area’s cultural makeup. For the survey component of this project, I asked the following questions: In what ways do the local, multicultural residents and workers experience Koreatown? What changes have they seen in their community for the past few decades? How do they perceive recent changes in Koreatown brought by transnational and regional investment?
Chapter 2

Literature Review

For this documentary style photography project, I focused on three layers of Koreatown’s multicultural community: 1) a historic, Korean American, ethnic enclave community; 2) a transnational and regional center where investors see an attractive investment space; 3) a multiethnic, local community composed of residents from Central America, Mexico, and Bangladesh. The following section will describe the key events of how these three layers came to be and the historic changes that have occurred in Koreatown, most notably, the ways outside investment interests have embedded into Koreatown’s local cultural mosaic.

Koreatown as a historic ethnic enclave

Passage of the 1965 immigration act was the catalyst for the population growth that helped build the Koreatown where it is located today. However, earlier immigrants began to move to Los Angeles as early as the beginning of the century. The first wave of 7,400 immigrants arrived to the states – most in Hawaii – between the years of 1903 and 1905 to work as sugar cane laborers (Kang, 2013). While most Korean immigrants came to Hawaii, some arrived in Los Angeles by 1904. These immigrants started the first Korean gathering on Magnolia Avenue near the University of Southern California to practice Christianity and learn English. By 1906, another group of Koreans started the first Korean Presbyterian church in Downtown L.A. (Kang, 2013).

Koreans began to immigrate again to the United States in 1924. Most of these immigrants represented political refugees, activists, and “picture brides” – women sent from Korea to marry single migrant workers. These activists established political
movements in the United States to protest Japanese colonization, the first organizations
starting in San Francisco would represent the first political movement for Korean
Americans (Kang, 2013). By 1930, the Korean American community had moved to Los
Angeles where there were more job opportunities (Kang, 2013).

During this period, Korean Americans began building establishments, starting
with a grocery store, a laundry, and a shoe repair shop. By the end of the decade, more
establishments were built and approximately 650 Koreans lived in the area occupying
Adams Boulevard to the north, Slauson Boulevard to the south, Western Avenue to the
west, and Vermont Avenue to the east, south of the I-10 freeway (Kang, 2013). It is
important to note why this area was occupied. The area was an older part of the city, it
was racially mixed, the rental prices were less expensive, and most importantly, race
restrictions were not as strongly enforced. This area would be the primary Korean
American settlement until the 1960s following an increase in Korean immigration and an
easing of race restrictions that would allow second generation Koreans to move out of the
community (Kang, 2013).

*The Immigration Act of 1965*

The end of the 1960s marked an enormous increase in Korean immigration.
Between 1968 and 1970, the Korean American population had doubled from 25,000 to
50,000 with 8,811 living in Los Angeles County (Kang, 2013). This rise in population is
attributed to the Immigration Act of 1965 that followed from the Civil Rights Movement,
opening the door to thousands of immigrants previously barred from entry to the United
States due to racist policies. The act favored the highly educated but most importantly, it
provided a means towards family reunification. For the framers of the Immigration Act of
1965, it was expected that since the majority of the population was White, most new immigrants would be of European descent (Chi, 2012). Much to their surprise, however, more immigrants from Asian countries made their way to the states by taking advantage of the act.

During the end of World War II, Korea was released from Japanese colonization following their defeat, and the Soviets entered Korea from the North while the U.S. entered from the South. Both sides agreed to have the United Nations conduct elections that would determine who would lead the newly independent Korea. However, neither side trusted each other, and the elections were delayed (Chi, 2012). As a result, the country was split in half at the 38th parallel. Between June 25, 1950 and July 27, 1953, the country engaged in a civil war after the North attempted to invade the South. The war ended in a stalemate leaving approximately 10 million families separated (Chi, 2012).

Due to the fortunate timing of the Immigration Act of 1965, three main groups would make up the bulk of the second wave of Korean American immigration. Harry and Bertha Holt established the Holt Adoption Program in 1956 after they had made national headlines for bringing 12 GI babies to the United States. Many GIs and GI families stationed in Korea would adopt orphans before returning home (Chi, 2012). Child abandonment was increasing and had reached its height in 1964 at 11,000. Meanwhile, back in the states, people were struggling to find white babies to adopt, so they saw Korean ethnic babies as a viable option (Chi, 2012). By 1961, The Holt foundation had overseen the adoption of 2,587 Korean babies.

After the war, U.S. bases were one of the few places of material abundance. Many women had to care for young siblings and sick and unemployed parents (Chi, 2012). At
the time, Korea was in great poverty. Military bases provided means of employment, drawing in poor women, widows, and orphans. Women separated from their families sought refuge in the military stations resulting in the immigration of 100,000 Korean wives of American GIs between the period of 1953 and the late 80s (Chi, 2012).

Finally, following a large-scale nation building program, between 1954 and 1960, the U.S. distributed approximately 2.3 billion dollars to South Korea, $60 million to go towards education programs, making it possible for 15,000 Korean students to study abroad in the United States (Chi, 2012). The programs sent American experts to help train Koreans in the fields of education, medicine, engineering, and other areas, and in turn, Koreans were allowed to enter the United States to study at American Universities. Additionally, those who chose to study in the United States were subsequently rewarded with full-time jobs as faculty in high-level administrative offices in universities and government agencies. Of that amount, less than 10 percent returned to Korea (Chi, 2012).

These three groups represented a large proportion of new Korean Americans following passage of the Immigration Act of 1965. However, not all immigrants arrived based on the provisions described above. 23.2 percent of Korean immigrants arrived under the occupation categories with an additional 11.6 percent entering as investors (Kwon and Lee, 2009). During that time, Korea was undergoing political instability. After Syngman Rhee’s government collapsed, General Chung Hee Park took control through a military coup. Under his leadership, South Korea became an export oriented economy. Despite economic growth, the number of white collar jobs did not match the number of highly educated Koreans looking for professional and managerial jobs, so many sought employment opportunities in the U.S. (Kwon and Lee, 2009).
Following the massive wave of immigration, the Los Angeles Korean American community grew to 8,811, and during this time, the original settlement began to move north towards Olympic Boulevard (Yu et al., 2004). This area became an attractive niche for new immigrants as more affluent residents and businesses began to vacate the neighborhood. By 1971, Hi-Duk Lee, a Korean American, had established the iconic Olympic Market, and few elderly Koreans remained in the old settlement south along the I-10 Freeway (Yu et al., 2004).

The 1970s marked further development of the new Korean American settlement with more grocery markets, merchandise stores, banks, restaurants, doctor’s offices, cafes, and night clubs (Yu et al., 2004). In 1973, Hi-Duk Lee and other members of the community started the Koreatown Development Association, initiating a campaign to install Korean language signs on Korean-owned stores. The following year, the organization started the first Korean Street Festival (Kang, 2013). What’s more, the area saw a growth in media organizations in magazines, radio, and television (Park and Kim, 2008). By the late 70s Koreans were operating the majority of local businesses within the boundaries of 8th Street and Hoover Street, from the North and South, and Western and Vermont, from the West and East. By the 1980s Korean immigration was at its highest, with 15,011 living in Koreatown (Yu et al, 2004).

The 1980s provided additional opportunities for business expansion and Korean American spatial identity development. In 1982, the town was successful in lobbying to install a “Koreatown” sign on the Normandie Avenue and Western Avenue entrance of the I-10 Freeway, a significant marker of Korean American spatial identity (Park and Kim, 2008). Additionally, large American corporations like Union Bank, Texaco, IBM,
and Getty Oil began moving out of the areas containing Wilshire Boulevard and Sixth Street, providing additional vacant lots for more Korean American entrepreneurs to move in (Park and Kim, 2008). During this period, immigrants from El Salvador and Guatemala began to move in to the area as well, escaping wars in their home countries in search for greater opportunities while more and more, second generation Korean Americans began moving out to suburban areas (Sanchez et al., 2012).

**Koreatown as a multicultural community**

Following the passage of the 1965 Immigration Act, the Latino population had grown by 34% between the years 1960 and 1980 (Zhou, 2009). The largest influx of Latinos came from Mexico following an economic crisis driven by income inequality. The Koreatown area also received a large influx of immigrants from Central America, which was experiencing civil wars driven by Cold War policies, most from Guatemala and El Salvador (Smith, 2003). Following their arrival, many Latino migrants became workers in Korean owned businesses, many of whom sought out undocumented migrants as affordable labor. Prior to the arrival of Latinos to the area, Korean business owners relied upon family members as a labor supply (Smith, 2003). As a result, many of the workers moved to the area to live in the affordable rental housing located near their work contributing both, to the area’s multiculturalism and also an atmosphere of class antagonism spurred by worker-owner or landlord-tenant relationships (Smith, 2003).

It is easy to believe that Koreatown is primarily a “Korean” space, evidenced by the proliferation of Hangul signage and Korean American commercial dominance. However, Koreatown is actually a multicultural, multiethnic place, consisted of a variety of cultural, ethnic groups of people. Between the years of 1990 and 2000, the Korean
population in Koreatown increased by an additional 11,922, the largest increase that area had experienced. However, Latinos also experienced a similar growth of 11,176 (Yu et al. 2004). Although, commercially dominant and growing, Korean Americans are not the majority population by residence. Between the years 1990 to 2000, the population of Latino residency had grown to 51 percent of the total by the end of the decade with Korean Americans representing approximately 20 percent (Yu et al. 2004). The observation brings to light the lack of social visibility for certain underrepresented populations juxtaposed with a seemingly homogenous environment.

Koreatown’s Southeastern most borders are geographically located adjacent to a significant Salvadorian community on Pico Boulevard and Vermont Avenue. However, many Salvadorians are spread throughout the area as well. Salvadorians arrived as early as the late 1960s with one of the first restaurants called El Migueleno opening on Vermont Avenue in 1969 (Shyong, 2012). However, the most significant population arrived in the 1980s as refugees escaping civil war in their country. The 2010 census reports a significant population of Salvadorians at 350,000 living in Los Angeles (Shyong, 2012).

When the Salvadorians arrived, they arrived to an established Mexican American community. In particular, Koreatown is home to a large community of Oaxacans, with population estimates between 60,000 and 200,000. Most of the Oaxacans living in Koreatown are Zapotecs, part of Oaxaca’s 16 Indian groups from Sierra Juarez (Quinones, 2001).

Additionally, a significant Bengali community moved to the area on a four block stretch of Third Street between Alexandria Avenue and New Hampshire Avenue during
the 1980s. This area, designated as Little Bangladesh, has about a dozen Bengali shops, restaurants, and grocery stores, while most of the stores in that area cater to Central American and Korean speakers (Abdulrahim, 2010). Although, the area of Little Bangladesh, which is still within the boundaries of Koreatown, houses only about a dozen establishments, the population of Bengalis who live and work in the area is more spread out throughout Koreatown and other areas with about 20,000 living in Los Angeles (Abdulrahim, 2010).

*The Riots*

The Los Angeles Riots were a significant event to the community, representing both symbolic change and a pretext to structural transformation to Koreatown. The riots referred to by the Korean American community as “Sa-I-Gu” – meaning 4-29, left 52 people dead, 16,000 arrested, and nearly 100 billion dollars in destroyed property. 12,545 people were arrested during six days of rioting between April 29th and May 5th, 1992, mostly in the areas of Koreatown (Chang and Diaz-Veizades, 1999). Additionally, 2,000 people were arrested and 1,000 buildings were destroyed (Kang, 2013). Many believed the riots were caused by the acquittal of four white police officers following their highly publicized beating of Rodney King. However, the event was only the spark to a bigger issue. Larger social forces of underrepresentation and spatial contest emerged from the highly publicized but misunderstood unrest.

Tangherlini argued that the riots were really about place and spatial practice. Those who participated in the riots and looting were in fact posing a direct challenge to the spatial practices of a self-defined ethnic community (1999). Koreatown had been undergoing an enormous growth in transnational capital. However, global economic
restructuring had contentious implications by promoting a singular view of Koreatown. “New kinds of networks – physical and virtual – subvert ‘traditional’ formations, deconstructing and recomposing them in more complex ways… Established forms of urban community, culture and sensibility are disrupted” (Tengherlini, 1999). The ubiquitous Korean signage served to provide a strong impression of a Korean neighborhood. By destroying the institutions that marked the area as homogenous, spatial practices became disrupted as well and by implication, its monolithic identity.

Tangherlini writes:

Immediately after the riots, large parts of Koreatown no longer bore the markers that identified area stores and businesses as predominantly Korean American owned or serving a Korean heritage clientele. Instead, landmarks had disappeared from the landscape making previous patterns of circulation and day-to-day navigation irrelevant. (1999)

The riots showed that the disruption of singularly defined establishments, the image of a solely Korean space was an implied discursive act of re-negotiation and social repositioning. What’s more, the destruction of thousands of Korean American establishments in Koreatown cleared space to allow for redevelopment. The redevelopment process was slow with no significant transformations occurring for nearly a decade following the riots (SCAG region, 2008). However, the City began to approve redevelopment plans redefining the area as a regional center.

In 1995, the City of Los Angeles created the Wilshire Center / Koreatown Redevelopment project area, a general planning framework to designate Koreatown as a regional center – meaning an area with a focus in regional commerce, and a diversity of uses such as corporate and professional offices, residential establishments, retail commercial malls, government buildings, and health and entertainment facilities (SCAG
region, 2008). The following year, three Metro Line stops opened in Koreatown. In 1998, the City Council adopted the Mixed-Use Overlay District Ordinance that would create incentives for developers to build affordable housing near transit lines. In 2000, the Metropolitan Transit Authority began operating rapid buses on Wilshire Boulevard, and the following year, the City Council adopted two major area plans for Wilshire Boulevard, Vermont Avenue, and Western Avenue (SCAG region, 2008).

Although, these changes marked many positive outcomes for Koreatown, the redevelopment process has been slow to represent the needs of other layers of overlapping cultures who are represented in the area. Many residents of Koreatown share common themes of struggle, such as poverty, gentrification and rising costs of rent, goods, and services, as well as a fear of displacement. The following section will briefly describe contemporary Koreatown as it is experienced today.

Koreatown as a transnational and regional center

Lee and Park argued that global economic restructuring and transnational practices become embedded in local situations, interacting with the networks of a local community (2008). Particularly with Koreatown, the place has served as a “social incubator” to gain experience in small business, develop ethnic networks, and accumulate capital for the express purpose of starting one’s own business when the time is right (Lee and Park, 2008). Additionally, following the riots, the City of Los Angeles began a new phase of redevelopment planning that would eventually transform the community. To this day, several parts of Koreatown are undergoing project phases by developers, both transnational and domestic, to build upscale shopping malls, multipurpose sports.
facilities, and luxury condominiums among a variety of development plans. (Oh and Chung, 2013).

Current census data shows that between the years of 2001 and 2010, Korean immigration under the provisions of “employment based preferences” surpassed the provisions of family reunification, the early provisions that were responsible for the second wave of Korean American immigration and the early settlement of Koreatown. The census data reported that 89,201 Koreans immigrated under the immigration act of 1965. Whereas, more Koreans now enter under the provisions of E-2 and EB-5 investment Visas. The 2010 census reported 110,630 Korean Americans immigrating to the United States under employment based preferences (Chung, 2013). What’s more, foreign born Koreans outnumber U.S. native Koreans by almost double, 63.7 percent versus 36.3 percent, respectively (Chung, 2013).

When South Korean transnationals make investments in community infrastructures like residential properties, restaurants, coffee shops, factories, and strip malls, they are then eligible to apply for either the E-2 or the EB-5 investment Visas, depending on how much they were willing to invest (Park and Kim, 2008). The E-2 Visa requires the applicant to have made a “substantial investment”. Earlier figures reported investments at a minimum of $150,000 to $250,000. More current figures require more than $1 million (Park and Kim, 2008). In contrast, the EB-5 Visa requires a minimum of a $500,000 investment but provides the opportunity for permanent residency. The authors report that in 2004, those with E-2 Visas brought over $600 million to the U.S. in investments, a small portion of the $40 billion total in overseas investment from South Korean companies (2008). South Koreans value global investment. However, the authors
further note that two-thirds of investments were made by large corporations, with few individual investors.

Contemporary Koreatown now houses a large variety of commercial establishments. Following the riots, Koreatown and mid-Wilshire lost much of its property value, by the end of the decade, Korean American investors owned an additional 3.5 million square feet of commercial property in mid-Wilshire (Park and Kim, 2008). Additionally, eight California-charted Korean banks reside in Koreatown along several blocks of Wilshire Avenue with combined assets totaling $9 billion from 2008 figures, representing a current growth of 295 percent (Oh and Chung, 2013). Stores and restaurants destroyed in the riots were replaced by a variety of entertainment venues: bars, cafes, pool halls, karaoke rooms, and other nightlife amenities. Local police report over 500 nightlife establishments in Koreatown. Additionally, the authors report that Koreatown has 498 liquor licenses, a 300 percent increase over Beverly Hills. Other luxury amenities create a space that provides the feel of a “mini-Seoul” such as an indoor golf course and spas with expensive membership prices. (Park and Kim, 2008).

Additionally, the Wilshire Center / Koreatown Redevelopment project area had designated for several new establishments. Between 2000 and 2006, 2,000 luxury condominiums and shopping and entertainment complexes were slated to be built in the area (SCAG region, 2008). In July, 2014, Capri Capital, based in Chicago, purchased the Vermont for $283 million, a new high-rise apartment and retail complex in Koreatown. The complex boasts a $1 million dollar chandelier and a 24-hour doorman meant to provide the feel of a high-end hotel with average rental costs between $2000 and $3000 per month. Chairmen of Capri, Quintin Primo chose the area because of its potential to
attract young professionals. “Its multiculturalism is increasingly attractive to young people who enjoy things new and different,” said Primo in a Los Angeles Times article (Vincent and Khocri, 2014). Bordering two metro transit lines, one on Western Avenue and another on Vermont Avenue, developers see the area’s potential as transit space providing access to and from other areas of Los Angeles. “Koreatown is one of the fastest-growing, transit-oriented neighborhoods in Los Angeles and proximate to all things L.A. – downtown, Hollywood, and the Miracle Mile,” said Javier Rivera, a property broker of the real estate firm that represented the builder of the Vermont, J.H. Snyder Co. (Vincent and Khocri, 2014).

Although, the recent wave of transnational and domestic investment and attention by outside developers is symbolically positive for Korean Americans as markers of progress, Kang argued that transnational capital is not necessarily sensitive to the economic needs of the multi-ethnic, multi-class community it is transforming (2013). Community residents are in fact suffering on many levels through wage theft, discrimination, lack of affordable housing, and high levels of poverty.

Sanchez et al. reported that nearly half of the Koreatown residential population (46 percent) lives below 150 percent of the Federal poverty line (adjusted for inflation). In the decade of 2001 and 2010 when transnational growth was at its highest, the percentage of working poor increased from 11 to 17 percent, and nearly 40 percent of employed workers between the ages of 25 and 64 were without health insurance (Sanchez et al., 2012).

As Koreatown has seen an increase in renovation, the property value has also increased beyond levels affordable to its residents. As developers build more affluent
housing, low-income housing declines and gentrification becomes a looming threat. The authors found that between 1997 and 2007, there had been a total of 268 apartment demolitions in Central Los Angeles including Koreatown. In contrast, there has been a steady rise in the number of permits authorized to convert apartments into condominiums. In 2002, only four permits were issued to convert apartments into condominiums. In just five years, there were 48 permits issued for conversion (Sanchez et al., 2012).

These domestic and transnationally funded renovations have nearly quadrupled the median home value in Koreatown from $100,764 in 2000 to $420,000 in 2006. Similarly, rental properties have increased in value from $176,800 in 2000 to $519,740 in 2007 (KIWA, 2009). The results of KIWA’s survey of 102 residents living in Koreatown found that 96 percent of respondents were renters, 41 percent earned less than $1000 per month, 58 percent pay half or more of their income on housing, and 47 percent live in overcrowded housing (KIWA, 2009). Additionally, the authors found that “low income residents experience extreme pressure to move as property values increase along with their rent” (KIWA, 2009).

Additionally, a study by the Korean Youth and Community Center found that a lack of parks and affordable grocery stores were two major issues for Koreatown families. Based on 2008 figures, they found that the average household income in Koreatown was about one-half of the California median income at $30,558. This number is not far off from current figures (Lopez, 2014). As of 2010, the average income was $33,448 (Oh and Chung, 2013). What’s more, the organization found that those who used
the center’s free tax preparation service made on average only $18,000 as of 2013 (Lopez, 2014).

Based on community surveys, the authors found that public parks played an important role for families as a place to congregate with friends while also providing a safe place for children to play. Currently, Koreatown has only two parks, Seoul International Park and Shatto Recreation Center. However, the two parks combined make up only 0.6 percent of the total area of Koreatown. With the area’s high density, each acre of park space serves 12,554 residents (Lopez, 2014). What’s more, with approximately 1,278 restaurants, bars, and coffee shops in Koreatown, Lopez found that very few of them provided inexpensive and healthy food for the area’s residents. During a 2.4 mile walk along Pico Boulevard from Crenshaw Boulevard to Hoover Street, she found 47 convenience stores and markets with only three of them providing a selection of fresh produce (Lopez, 2014).

The aforementioned authors have shown in contrast to the influx of new development that at the level of social conditions, many of the concerns by local residents have become secondary to the geographic restructuring by outside interests. My aim for this project was to use photography to show these various levels of Koreatown’s multicultural community.
Chapter 3

Photographic Representation

I used two modes of photography for my photo project to represent the three layers of Koreatown’s culture: the static and the lyrical. In a forward to Helen Levitt’s book *A Way of Seeing*, James Agee described both styles: the lyrical style refers to volatile images, those richest in emotion by subjects. Static photographs are “richest in meditateness, in mentality, in attentiveness to the wonder of materials and of objects and in complex multiplicity of attitudes of perception” (Agee, 1965). The following section will describe the work of several documentary style photographers who used these modes as a way to convey information and represent culture and society. One of the major problems to consider before proceeding on a project that uses photography as a means to document is the medium’s nature and its relation to human intention. I will discuss the ways the lyrical and static modes address the problems photography faces as a way to convey information and give representation to people and communities.

In a discussion about photographic representation, Allan Sekula described the camera’s usage in the context of a photographic discourse. Put simply, photographic discourse is in reference to the question, what does a picture provide in the context of a discussion? What is the discussion? He provides several assumptions about the camera’s ability to relay information. For one, he says that a picture is a form of communication. The picture implies a message, which he describes as a “metalinguistic proposition”. For example, “This snapshot represents your son”. The snap of the shutter, he describes as an “utterance” (Sekula, 1975, p. 454). If the snap of a shutter is an utterance of a message, and the discourse represents a discussion, which that message contributes to, then there is
an implication of meaning to each photograph if we assume this about all types of photographs.

The way intention becomes complicated by the entry of a discourse is in what he calls “a floating meaning”, an image that has a trivial relation to the subject that was photographed (Sekula, 1975, p. 457). One example he provides is a photograph by Alfred Stieglitz called *Steerage*. He took the image while sailing to Europe in 1907. Stieglitz shot an image of two levels of a ship. At the top level, men in blazers and hats look down at a lower level of who Stieglitz refers to as the “common people”, women and children, their clothing hanging from a makeshift clothesline. The image has polemic value as both a statement about class division as well as male patriarchy. However, Sekula argues that incidental polemic value is not enough to secure the message as part of a discourse. Sekula instead looks to statements made by Stieglitz himself about his intention for the photograph: “I longed to escape from my surroundings and join these people… I saw shapes related to each other. I saw a picture of shapes and underlying that of the feeling I had about life… Here would be a picture based on related shapes and on the deepest human feeling, a step in my own evolution, a spontaneous discovery” (Sekula, 1975, p. 464).

At an analytical level, the polemic meaning becomes stripped away by the formalistic qualities of the photograph based on the words Stieglitz provided to describe the image. The abstraction is the meaning of the photo as the catalyst for his “feeling” about the scene. This is reduced to a logical equation: “Common people equal my alienation. We have the reduced metaphorical equation: shapes equal my alienation. Finally by a process of semantic diffusion, we are left with the trivial and absurd
assertion: shapes equal feelings” (Sekula, 1975, p. 466). In this example, the meaning of the photo is “floating” between the image’s polemic value and its formalistic qualities. Sekula gives final and conclusive weight to abstraction as the meaning of the photograph, so whatever social outcome the image would have provided becomes incidental. As a staunch absolutist, Sekula adds, “The photographer of genius is possible only through a disassociation of the image maker from the social embeddedness of the image” (1975, p. 469).

Complete dissociation seems impossible and echoes many of the same contentions audiences have about the work of anthropologists who attempt to represent indigenous communities from a “neutral lens”. There is an inescapability the researcher faces with his own cultural lens. However, Sekula’s point was about form taking priority over content. I would argue that both polemics and form were represented in the image, as well as in Stieglitz’s statement, if even as a tertiary consideration. Many critics particularly of the post-modern school of thought believed the social work of Jacob Riis’ *How the Other Half Lives* ought to have been discounted by virtue of Riis’ sometimes blatant racism and classism exhibited in his texts, calling him a *faux progressive* (O’Donnell, 2004). Those who argued in his defense asked the audience to look at the social outcomes he produced during his time and the social context he was speaking from, which was much looser about derogatory racial stereotypes. However, what is truly in question is the purity of the photographer’s intention to use the image as a reliable means to a socially beneficial end as opposed to an image acting as an end in itself.

The work of Stieglitz is distinct from the work of Jacob Riis or Lewis Hine. Alfred Stieglitz was known as a pictorialist who brought photography up to an art form.
He was well regarded for the painterly qualities of his photography. Riis didn’t even describe himself as a photographer. The use of their cameras was strictly a means to an end. Similar but different, Hine had identified as a photographer and even considered photography as an art but not an art for its aesthetic outcomes but rather the photographer’s ability to interpret the everyday world. “He did not mean ‘beauty’ or ‘personal expression’. He meant how people live. He wanted his pictures to make a difference in that world, to make living in it more bearable” (Trachtenberg, 1977, p. 240). These intentions were prefaced by a clear statement of his purpose. In Hine’s project, *Men at Work*, he sought to show his audience images of workers, a response to the assumption that cities “build themselves”. He wanted to put a face on the people who work behind the scenes of great American infrastructures. His intention is stated clearly, creating an implied contract of expectation between himself and his audience. The project would provide “a very important offset to some misconceptions about industry. One is that many of our national assets, fabrics, photographs, motors, airplanes and what-not – just happen” (Trachtenberg, 1977, p. 241). Hine makes no reference to aesthetic appeals in his statement, and thus, the purity of his intentions, a polemic statement with strictly social outcomes, are emphasized and can be expected by an audience beyond the level of a “floating meaning” that shares half of its efforts to the creative projections of an “artist”.

When Hine was working on his project *Charities and the Commons*, Trachtenberg said he approached the city as a kind of survey investigator – a social worker or specialist who would comb the city to uncover facts about the ethnic composition of Pittsburgh’s workers, their housing conditions, and family life (1977, p 246). In 1906, Hine
photographed the life of steel-makers in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. The survey was key for Hine because it provided a structural form for him to work from and a point of view that would provide cohesiveness to his images. It was a reformist’s tool. Trachtenberg said the assumption is that “once the plain facts, the map of the social terrain, are clear to everyone, then change or reform will naturally follow” as had been the case for Jacob Riis who had surveyed the slums of New York. The appeal moved legislators to pass housing reforms that would improve their living conditions by challenging what was thought to be true by providing records of what was actually true (Trachtenberg, 1977, p. 247).

Lewis Hine showed that creative projection shouldn’t be the end in itself but rather, an implicit means to an end. The approach Riis and Hine took made an ethical statement that aesthetics ought to be strictly in service to polemics, that the image was simply a tool, and the true nobility of “art” was its contributions to a discussion on the human condition. Eugène Atget was another social documentary style photographer who demonstrates this point. His work has been described as possessing a particularly arresting visual quality, moodiness and tone that could be described as “art”, but Atget like Riis and Hine worked with clear intentions in mind. During the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Atget sought to make documents of the disappearing artifacts and architecture of Paris undergoing modernization. Atget’s photo documents of pre-modern Paris arrived from the perspective of preservation. By the early 1900s, preservationist groups banded to form conservation establishments for the historical districts of Paris to which Atget was associated (Westerbeck and Meyerowitz, 1994, p. 108).
Atget was said to have approached his subject matter with an “attitude”, revealed in his pictures. (Westerbeck and Meyerowitz, 1994, p. 109). Many of the old Parisian districts were emptied describing them as a “necropolis, a city from the past inhabited by ghosts” (Westerbeck and Meyerowitz, 1994, p. 110). Atget’s viewfinder camera worked with a long shutter speed that blurred the motion of subjects crossing its plane contextualized in literary terms as a “disparity between the slow times of the city” (Westerbeck and Meyerowitz, 1994, p. 110). They were considered technical flaws in the photographs that reflected his feeling of wandering old Paris, places where he once lived, with a sentimentalism and attitude that defined his work as “romantic”.

Although his work could be described extensively for its formalistic qualities, its sense of “attitude”, and “sentimentalism”, the latter going against the typical aims of social documentary style photography, his intentions were not for self-serving posterity in itself. However, as Paris was disappearing, he sought to document what would be gone forever. His own feelings of sentimentalism seep into his documents as a statement for the inescapability of the subject from the creation. This is how we can talk about formalism without straying from polemics, but Atget never considered what he was doing was for art as an end in itself. For example, he would sell an image of a lion with two serpents in its mouth to metalworkers who used the references to produce bronze replicas (Hamburg, n.d.). His approach and feeling was sentimental but his intent was to serve the collective memory of those who lived in old Paris. He described his work as documents – an artifact with the specific purpose for providing evidence for something within a discourse. The bulk of his photographs went to visual use for painters and libraries. His stated aim was to catalogue (Hamburg, n.d.).
The work of Atget was said to have a lyrical quality concerning how he captured his cityscapes, architecture, and artifacts he found roaming the streets of Paris, a quality of moodiness or romanticism that emerged from his subjects. However, his use of the term “lyricism” is distinct from Agee’s which emphasized candid moments and movement. For Agee, his lyricism was described in reference to the photographic devises he employed. The ghost like qualities that appeared from his camera’s slow shutter speeds reflected the emptiness of the old Paris’s streets. How he took his pictures made a statement about what the city was like, its lyrical qualities. Walker Evans said the value of Atget was in his ability to select details, the ones most poetic (1964, p. 108). However, Vescia notes that the documentary photographer is “literary without knowing it, because it is no more than a document of contemporary life captured at the right moment by an author capable of grasping that moment” (2014, p. 17). Put differently, when Weaver described the lyrical qualities of John Szarkowski’s subject matter, namely rural and urban landscapes, people, and architecture, she said the lyrical beauty was in “the way the light is reflected on a barn in the afternoon light, or the way the meadow looks when you walk into it, or the way the light in the sky enunciates the leaves in the trees, all offering a sense of the gorgeousness of what you can see” (Weaver, 2005). These secondary details about the subject matter point to the texture and quality of the subjects photographed as its lyrical characteristics.

Susan Sontag argued that despite the parallel movements between photography and art, the two disciplines oppose each other: the painter constructs, the photographer discloses. Her view is informed by a key assumption about photography. It is a document that discloses a fragment of the world selected by a person’s subjectivity. Thus, artistic
considerations are of secondary importance. What piece of the world the photo represents is of primary concern (1977, p. 93). She complicates the point by posing a key question: what piece of the world is it? She believed that until this question was answered, there was no expectation of knowing how to react to a photograph.

Jacob Riis aimed to produce a document to which photography was relegated to a secondary visual aid. In 1880s, Riis began photographing the Irish, Italian, and Jewish districts of the New York City slums, exposing the rundown and cramped conditions tenants were living in. He worked as a police reporter for 22 years and possessed sensitivity and understanding to the exploitation and congestion in the living situations of the people living in New York’s Lower East Side (Westerbeck and Meyerowitz, 1994, p. 241). Riis did not identify as a photographer and had no qualms about making bad images. He wanted his pictures to equal the ugliness he saw in poverty. One image for example is of a cramped crawl space described by its technical flaws.

The focus has been put in the wrong place. Refuse is clear in the foreground, while the band of petty criminals who are supposed to be the subject squat hazily beyond. Yet the photographic mistake puts the social emphasis where it belongs, on the vermin-breeding conditions in which these men live. (Westerbeck and Meyerowitz, 1994, p. 242).

Riis did not have these thoughts in mind when he photographed. He took a run and gun approach, setting his gear and flash in the shadows of the tenement he would be visiting usually without people realizing his presence, snapping off one photo and leaving before anyone got the wiser. The result was satisfying for him. “It is a bad picture but not nearly as bad as the place,” he said (Westerbeck and Meyerowitz, 1994, p. 242). The irony of his non-aesthetic is the emergence of an aesthetic that represents the polemic meaning
Riis was after, giving way for his written accounts. The approach for Riis was in service to his statement and thus the purity of his social work remains as the end in itself.

The impact of James Agee and Walker Evans’ classic *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* was through the establishment of a clear contextual discourse to which photographs would be of service to, featuring images of portraits, both individual and group, landscapes, and detail shots as a visual archive of how Alabama sharecroppers lived in the 1930s. The images are followed by a detailed account describing the experience, from the point of view of James Agee infiltrating Jim Crow era Alabama farmlands to document how the tenants there lived. The project followed from an assignment from *Fortune Magazine* and expanded to the book *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*.

Evans opens the book with his reflection on the attitude of James Agee. “The writing they induced is, among other things, the reflection of one resolute, private rebellion. Agee’s rebellion was unquenchable, self-damaging, deeply principled, infinitely costly, and ultimately priceless” (Agee and Evans, 1988, p. vii). Agee never made a call to find “the truth” about Alabama tenant farmers, instead embracing his own subjectivity to be of service to his social documents. He wanted to represent the truth of his own experience as purely and concisely as possible because his implicit style was the truth that would establish his interpretations. “Those works which I most deeply respect have about them a firm quality of the superhuman… that plane and manner are not within reach, and could only falsify what by this manner of effort may at least less hopelessly approach clarity, and truth” (Agee and Evans, 1988, p. 9). Agee was familiar with the conventions of creative projection, stating that most art transforms reality into “aesthetic reality” in a forward he wrote for Helen Levitt’s book *A Way of Seeing*, but the kind of
images he said photographers should make ought to reflect and record, not transform. He placed the emphasis on developing perception as a way to make an “undisturbed and faithful record” (Agee, 1965). The book reflects the images she made in the 1940s recording life on the streets of New York.

Evans shared the same sentiments. “Photography should have the courage to present itself as what it is, which is a graphic composition produced by a machine and an eye and then some chemicals and paper. Technically, it has nothing to do with painting” (Katz, 1971, p. 364). Evans made the distinction that documentary has a use. In its most literal usage, for example, a police photo of a murder scene may serve as evidence for a crime. He said art in itself is useless. However, he’s also reticent in saying that what he makes is strictly “documentary” preferring to say that he makes art in “documentary style” (Katz, 1971, p. 364).

Agee recognized that even words and documents have a limitation. He would have rather pulled from the roots of the Alabama farmlands a piece of the earth so his readers may come to feel what it was like. “If I could do it, I’d do no writing at all here. It would be photographs; the rest would be fragments of cloth, bits of cotton, lumps of earth, records of speech, pieces of wood and iron, phials of odors, plates of food and of excrement” (Agee and Evans, 1988, p. 10). This was truth for Agee. He wanted his readers to experience the roots of Southern farmland, so people could feel what it was like. Ultimately, the intent of the duo was to inspire a self-reflection in his readers to the things they may take for granted and the people who had no access to the same liberties. “In the hope that the reader will be edified, and may feel kindly disposed toward any well-thought-out liberal efforts to rectify the unpleasant situation down South and will
somewhat better and more guiltily appreciate the next good meal he eats” (Agee and Evans, 1988, p. 12).

Susan Sontag acknowledged that photographers had often enlisted the help of writers to “spell out the truth to which photographs testify – as James Agee did in the texts he wrote to accompany Walker Evans’s photographs in Let Us Now Praise Famous Men” (1977, p. 108). It was the hope of the moralist’s written word that Sontag felt may save photography from the slipperiness of context. She said, “Photography can only say, ‘how beautiful.’ … It has succeeded in turning abject poverty itself, by handling it in a modish, technically perfect way, into an object of enjoyment” (1977, p. 107). The moralists demand that a picture speaks, and it is the caption that tries to provide the missing voice. Sontag acknowledged a commonality between the photograph and the poem. She said, “Poetry’s commitment to concreteness and to the autonomy of the poem’s language parallels photography’s commitment to pure seeing. Both imply discontinuity, disarticulated forms and compensatory unity: wrenching things from their context (to see them in a fresh way), bringing things together elliptically, according to the imperious but often arbitrary demands of subjectivity” (1977, p. 96).

The structure of Let Us Now Praise Famous Men and the way the reader must interact with it serves an important polemic function described in the sonata form – a musical convention juxtaposing two musical themes where the second theme is in a different key from the first. The meaning of the song structure is enriched and modified by the second theme thus broadening the range and understanding of the message (Lucaites, 1997). Lucaites argued that the juxtaposition of captionless images that begin the book to a section on Agee’s politics creates a tension that requires an active
participation and engagement by the reader. The reader is invited to engage and evaluate the three tenant families who are introduced in the first chapter. Afterwards, the assumptions the reader makes are enriched by Agee’s discourse. Agee’s aim was to decontextualize the experience of poverty as an object of enjoyment. Instead, the images and text work in tandem, fulfilling the shortcomings of the other and addressing the assumptions of the viewer. “The implication here is that Evan’s photographs will serve as a visual, restraining corrective to Agee’s prose, and thus provide a clear balance to the ambiguities of verbal representation” (Lucaites, 1997).

Many of Walker Evans’s images are consistent with the static mode of photography. One specific example is from a project called Signs. Evans’ series focused on the various signs and advertisements that pervaded the buildings of New York, among other places, during the early and mid-twentieth century. He described America during that time as a place invaded by lettering in every nook and cranny and even in the skylines. One image for example shows three large signs juxtaposed in vertical layers, glowing signs for Lucky Strike, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, and the REV. The choice of cropping cuts the lettering in half to fit a portrait style frame that reads like “concrete poetry”, expressing a “conscious opposition to whatever ‘meaning’ the signs themselves were intended to communicate” (Keller, 1998). The signs are thus re-contextualized beyond the advertisement’s original purposes to convey a polemic statement about the pervasiveness of consumerism. His intent was to challenge an optimism, “urging people to partake in the constant overproduction of goods” during a social context of depression stricken America (Keller, 1998).
Robert Frank shot the common symbols of American life in his photo documentary project *The Americans*, photographing the culture in America during the 1950s. Two of his leitmotifs were the automobile and the American flag. “The automobile, in whose backseat the Americans of the fifties often had their first sexual experience, becomes a vehicle for Frank’s reflections on love American-style” (Westerbeck and Meyerowitz, 1994, p. 356). The automobile was an outsider’s response to American symbols that responded to a sentimentalism that pervaded popular thinking about photography.

All but one of the seven pictures that end *The Americans* are of cars (or, in one instance, a motorcycle). Passing from teenagers petting amid parked cars to newlyweds in Reno, a dejected black couple astride a Harley Davidson, and finally Frank’s wife and kids in the Ford, this closing run of pictures has traced a kind of American romance from courtship through marriage to disillusionment and, in the end, the numbness of family life. (Westerbeck and Meyerowitz, 1994, p. 356)

Frank takes the theme of the American automobile to its narrative conclusion as he saw through a type of poetic anthology that contrasted the common image. “Editorially, the shots… disclose a warped objectivity that gives this book its major limitation,” writes one critic (Westerbeck and Meyerowitz, 1994, p. 354).

Howard Becker argued that what makes a photograph “documentary” (or social science or photojournalism) is full context, yet he regards the work of Frank as part of this vein, despite its lack of captions or any statements he makes from *The Americans* because “the images themselves, sequenced, repetitive, variations on a set of themes, provide their own context, teach viewers what they need to know in order to arrive, by their own reasoning, at some conclusions about what they are looking at” (Becker, 1995).
Context in some form of presentation is necessary for an image to be documentary otherwise, he said, viewers will provide their own meaning from their own resources.

For Frank, the polemic statement was implicit and imbedded in his presentation, the types of photographs he chose, sticking closely to thematic motifs like cars, politicians, jukeboxes, and various presentations of the American flag. Frank’s message, the conclusions his photographs made, worked in the form of sequences building from one another.

We learn that a big man is a powerful man (as in Frank’s ‘Bar – Gallup, New Mexico,’ in which a large man in jeans and a cowboy hat dominates a crowded bar), and that a well-dressed big man is a rich and powerful man (‘Hotel Lobby – Miami Beach,’ in which a large middle aged man is accompanied by a woman wearing what seems to be an expensive fur)... We learn that politicians are big, thus powerful, men... We are looking at how the powerful work in some unspecified way. (Becker, 1995).

Becker concludes that had Frank gone farther to expand on his analysis, the images would have functioned more along the lines of visual sociology, leading to a statement about the nature of American politics, among other leitmotifs (1995).

When Tully described the lyrical qualities of Robert Frank’s work from *The Americans*, she said he experimented with devises such as gesture, movement, light and shadow to capture scenes of back alleys, bus stations, post offices, luncheonette counters, and a variety of other common place establishments and artifacts (Tully, 2009, p. 43). Additionally, Frank also photographed various candid images of people he encountered during his travels who fit the themes he was trying to represent. In a way, Frank was responding with his camera to reactions he would feel from the subjects he would photograph. In an interview for *Art in America* magazine, Frank described how the lyrical style fit into his own approach to documenting *The Americans*. “In my photographs what
I wanted to photograph was not really what was in front of my eyes but what was inside. That was what made me want to pick up a camera” (Wallis, 1996).

Jon Wagner said invention is part of the tool kit of empirical inquiry and that investigators and reporters exercise some form of inventiveness. The concern is about inventions that bring the viewer closer to or farther away from the truth, inventions, he said, that “get it right” (Wagner, 2004). He adds, “Our choice, in so far as we have one, is not between fact and fiction, but between good and bad fiction” (2004). This is not to say that ethnographic work or the work of documentary style photographers like Frank is untrue. His concern is in reference to invention by the photographer, stating that it’s important to make clear between photographs that mirror the subject and those that reveal the photographer.

The photographers discussed in this section reveal the different issues that can arise in the attempt at representing culture and the human experience. Alfred Stieglitz showed that meaning of an image can float between polemic statements and formalistic concerns, remaining to some, ambiguously represented as either an observation or a creative projection. Lewis Hine’s photographic meaning emerged through the use of a survey component in addition to the photographs he would take. Atget sought to create a catalogue of the artifacts of old Paris that served as a reference for painters and sculptors seeking to create replicas for posterity. He applied the lyrical mode of photography through the use of a slow shutter speed to catch the emptiness of the streets of pre-modern Paris’s cityscapes and architecture. Although, he approached the work with a sense of sentimentality that informed his framing, those considerations were in service to his primary aim of creating records of a disappearing culture. Jacob Riis too used
aesthetics to represent his polemic statement. He was sated by an anti-aesthetic and poor composition that served as an after the fact metaphor for the conditions of the slums he photographed. Evans used the static mode of photography to show the way signs had invaded human spaces. His aim was to challenge optimism about consumer culture. Similarly, the work of Robert Frank revealed that a polemic statement could be made by the presentation of photographs in a thematic series. He used the lyrical mode of photography to capture candid scenes of social artifacts and people, many of them in “in-between” moments, seeking to capture some of the isolation he felt pervaded American culture but was seldom addressed.

It was my aim to use photography to show what Koreatown is like and to add to the discussion about its environment as a multiethnic, multiclass part of Los Angeles undergoing a transformation that affects the residents and workers who live there. The following section will describe my process in creating this documentary style project as well as the ways I use the static and lyrical modes of photography.
Chapter 4

Methods

The static and lyrical modes of photography inform my visual approach to show the contrast between the three layers of cultures that co-exist in Koreatown: the historic, Korean American enclave; the transnational and regional center investment interests; and the multietnic, local community composed of members from Central America, Mexico, and Bangladesh.

Most of the photographs I took were of buildings, storefronts, signs, advertisements, and people representing the various overlapping and juxtaposing cultures that reside in Koreatown. I made several trips over the course of three months walking through several of the major streets. My focus was specifically on the area of Koreatown in Los Angeles defined by its historic boundaries from Olympic Boulevard to the South where many of Koreatown’s oldest establishments still operate; Third Street to the North that welcomes a small Bengali community who share space with residents from Central America; Beverly Boulevard representing the official Northern border of Koreatown where mostly Central American businesses, markets, and papusa restaurants can be seen east of Alexandria Street up to the Metro Station; Western Avenue to the West where pedestrians can experience a wide variety of mixed use, mixed generation, Korean and Hispanic establishments; and Vermont Avenue to the East representing Koreatown’s eastern most border with both a historic Korean American presence and a Central American and community.

I used the static mode to represent the various signs and advertisements that are displayed along several of Koreatown’s streets. Signs and advertisements show the contrast between the various multicultural and multiclass groups in Koreatown. Many of
the signs I photographed were bilingual or trilingual catering to Koreatown’s diversity. Other signs and advertisements showed the diverse class groups who live together in the area. Some images I took of business establishments also follow the static approach. For these photographs, I wanted to show how certain cultures are juxtaposed with one another in some of Koreatown’s commercial areas. Additionally, I used the static approach to take portraits of the different people I met for the survey portion of my project. I took the majority of my portraits with a three quarter crop framing to show the articles of clothing they were wearing as well as some background details showing the environment.

Along with the portraits I photographed, I also asked survey questions: In what ways do the local, multicultural residents and workers experience Koreatown? What changes have they seen in their community for the past few decades? How do they perceive recent changes in Koreatown brought by transnational and regional investment? Most people were open to the idea of having their picture taken in exchange for a copy of it through email or a print I sent them in the mail. Approaching each person to ask for a portrait gave me the opportunity to explain what my project was about and to have a conversation about their experience living in Koreatown and their perception of the cultural and environmental changes to the area. Each of the interviews was informal lasting anywhere from 10 minutes to a half an hour producing a variety of responses. Language barrier was an issue for certain residents I approached who either declined my request for a portrait or gave a short response to my survey questions.

I used the lyrical mode to capture candid images of people on the move while walking through Koreatown. Street life is often vibrant depending on the time of the day. Each of the streets I chose are well populated and commercially dominant areas in
Koreatown. During the day, people can be seen walking to school, work, church, or to visit friends or go shopping. In the evenings when nightlife establishments are open, more people can be seen walking to and from various bars and restaurants in the area. The three Metro Lines in Koreatown, one on Western Avenue with two on Vermont Avenue are usually always busy with foot traffic. These are major connecting points to other areas of Los Angeles transporting people to and from the area. Additionally, I had the opportunity to photograph Koreatown during the Korean Festival held each year at the Seoul International Park. This is a historically significant, cultural event that brings hundreds of people to the corner of Olympic Boulevard and Normandie Avenue to visit rows of food and product vendors, see K-pop and Korean traditional performers on a large stage, and watch the parade that travels from Vermont Avenue to just short of Western Avenue on Olympic Boulevard.

Most of my visits occurred between the middle of September to the end of November giving me about three months to photograph and meet people there. I took nearly 3,000 images during this period, which I had edited down to about 100 images presented on a photo gallery website. I traveled to Koreatown on average three to four times a week to walk through the various streets, attend events, and visit the various shops, restaurants and religious institutions, making multiple trips to each street throughout that period. The streets I chose were regularly busy, usually during the later parts of the day because they are commercial areas lined with storefronts, establishments, and people walking to and from various locations.

The equipment I used consisted of a Canon 6D DSLR camera and a 24-105mm lens capable of taking both wide angle cityscapes and tight portrait photographs and a pen
and notepad to record the responses of each of the people I met following our interviews.

I edited each of the photos on my laptop using Photoshop. I edited the photos in a combination of color and black and white images. I chose to edit most the static images in black and white to emphasize the textual elements and eliminate the color elements that do not contribute to the overall meaning of the photograph. I kept certain images in color where color played a role in showing the culture.
Chapter 5

Photo Gallery

I presented my edited images to a photo web gallery. The static images I made were a combination of portraits of different people I met while walking through Koreatown, signs, multiuse buildings, and storefronts signifying the presence of Koreatown’s different overlapping cultural communities. I also took lyrical images of people walking to and from work, school, or shopping trips as well as images from events I went to. I separated the images I made from the five streets I chose into three themes presented on the website: 1) ethnic enclave; 2) multicultural space; 3) transnational and regional space. These themes represent three of Koreatown’s overlapping historical cultures. Each of the images presented in the gallery contain a caption indicating what cross streets the photo was taken from or the survey responses from each of the people I took a portrait of.

Ethnic Enclave

My aim for the ethnic enclave section was to show some of the historic sites and the older areas of Koreatown, the area’s characteristics as an enclave. There are a variety of areas especially along Olympic Boulevard that contain some of the oldest buildings in Koreatown including the Chung Ki Wa Plaza, the Na Sung Plaza, the old V.I.P Palace that was redesigned as an Oaxacan restaurant, and the V.I.P. Plaza shopping center across the street on Olympic Boulevard and Normandie Avenue.

Many of the buildings are multi-purpose buildings that cater specifically to Korean speakers, some housing a dozen different independent businesses. Many of the signs advertising goods and services on display are in Hangul catering to the first generation of Korean Americans, most of whom arrived during the late 1960s and the
1970s. The 1970s marked significant progress for the Korean American community with the further development of grocery markets, merchandise stores, banks, restaurants, doctor’s offices, cafes, and night clubs.

I took a static approach when documenting the signs and buildings there. I shot many of the signs tightly to place the emphasis on the Hangul writing displayed on the numerous business placards and advertisements. Certain areas of Koreatown show numerous rows of business placards displayed along the parking lots of shopping centers and strip malls lining the streets. From a bystander’s point of view, there is a wealth of different messages in a variety of fonts and colors that can be read almost like a poem in a different language. I thought of an approach similar to Walker Evan’s *Signs* project, juxtaposing different signs in images of numerous layers, vertically and horizontally, that he read like short poems pulled from their physical context. Additionally, many of the advertisements showed graffiti, adding additional layers to read with the juxtaposition of Hangul and English text, unknown authors adding stanzas to an open poem.

My opening image of this section was also in the static form. The photo was taken at the 42nd annual Korean Festival held each year at the Seoul International Park. It was from the opening ceremony. Members of the Korean Marine Corp. lead both the Korean and American National Anthems. In the background, a large digital screen shows both the Korean flag and American flag, and in the center foreground, a Korean soldier raises a military flag, cutting the frame in half. I read the image as a representation of a community between two places, an allegiance to a new place and an old place, a country of origin and adoption and a tribute to the Korean War, the historical pretext to the immigration act that would help create the enclave of Koreatown.
I shot most of the portraits for this section with tight, three quarter portrait framing, showing details on the clothing each person was wearing as well as some of the environmental details in the background. Additionally, I shot a couple of environmental portraits. One portrait was of a Buddhist meditation master from the Korean Buddhist Cultural Center, one of the oldest Buddhist churches in Koreatown. The Center opened in 1970 when the community was still defined as an enclave. The background of the image shows three golden statues of the Buddha displayed above rows of candles, the ceilings covered with paper lanterns. The image represented a colorful portrayal of traditional cultural iconography in Koreatown.

The survey component yielded a variety of responses. Many of the people did not speak English and therefore, could not understand my request for a moment for a portrait and a conversation about their experience living in Koreatown, and unfortunately, I do not speak or understand Korean. However, many of the people I met who I could communicate with were happy to share their point of view with me. One insightful response came from a 20 year old, second generation Korean American. She said she wanted to see more recreation centers because she felt many young people, including herself, would have difficulty finding things to do in Koreatown. Other young people I met expressed a similar feeling. She explained that many of the young people sneak in to bars or spend most of their day at PC bangs, which are internet cafes to play computer games.

In addition to photographing architecture, storefronts provided another opportunity to show other elements of tradition that have followed the time span of Koreatown as an enclave. I spent some time photographing storefronts because I wanted
to show some of the fashions on display in Koreatown. Many shops display both modern and traditional outfits for both casual and formal wear. Numerous shops in Koreatown sell wedding gowns for both Korean and Western weddings. It is common for people to have both a Korean wedding as well as a Western style wedding.

I used a lyrical approach for many of the street views I photographed, showing my experimentations with slow shutter speeds, complimentary color schemes, and moodier lighting. The Korean Festival provided many opportunities to document the movements of traditional cultural performances, the vendors providing samples to patrons in the shaded outdoor markets that line Irolo Street, the parade showing participants from various community groups that traveled through Olympic Boulevard, and the waves of people walking through the park during the four day event.

*Multicultural space*

My aim for this section was to show the various ethnic groups who live and work in Koreatown. I wanted to provide the view that Koreatown represented a diverse population showing the establishments, advertisements, and a broad cross section of people who live in the area. Most of the images I used for this section were taken on 3rd Street, Vermont Avenue, Western Avenue, and a small area of Olympic Boulevard showing a popular Oaxacan restaurant that was once a prominent Korean establishment.

The 1980s marked Koreatown’s dramatic transformation to becoming a multicultural space. During this period, a large influx of Central Americans, Mexican Americans, and Bengali Americans began to move in to the area. These groups were present in Koreatown earlier, since the late 60s, but particularly with the Hispanic community, civil wars drove many Central Americans to come to the United States while
economic instability drove many Mexican Americans to move. For someone unfamiliar, it is easy to believe Koreatown is a solely Korean space. However, Koreatown is actually a majority Hispanic population. Additionally, small pockets of other ethnic communities are present as well. There is a small Bengali designation on 3rd Street called Little Bangladesh, and on Vermont Avenue between Beverly Boulevard and 3rd Street, there is a small Filipino community with two grocery stores and a handful of restaurants.

When I thought about how to photograph signs that represent Koreatown’s multiculturalism, I thought about juxtaposition, both within the elements I captured in my images as well as the way I wanted to present them. Many communities overlap and are in close proximity to one another. For example, Most of the people who live in or near Little Bangladesh are actually from Central America. There are only about a dozen Bengali establishments there. Signs, placards, and advertisements are common themes found in Koreatown, and some of the images I chose show different ethnic signs juxtaposed in close proximity to one another. One image, for example, shows a large billboard advertising a Spanish soap opera displayed above a sign for a Vietnamese restaurant. Other advertisements are trilingual catering to Hispanic, Korean, and English speakers.

When deciding on the presentation, I thought about Robert Frank and how he composed *The Americans*, a thematic series of recurring symbols, the car for example set in various circumstances at one level a vehicle for people’s first sexual encounters, at another level, a symbol of isolation. My intentions for this section are neither about symbolism nor misanthropy. However, Frank showed that the juxtaposition of images can make a statement. I wanted to show the multiculturalism of Koreatown through the
The portraits follow a static approach, most similar to the portraits I present in the ethnic enclave gallery: medium tight, three quarter shots showing some environmental elements in a portrait framing. I thought about Hine’s approach to surveys, the role of the photographer as a survey investigator, collecting a small and random sampling of Koreatown’s population. I met a wide spectrum of people when I was searching for portraits. Most of them were from Central America. I found most of the Hispanic people I met were very welcoming, easy to approach and open to the idea of having a portrait taken as well as a conversation, especially about the changes they wanted to see in Koreatown, additionally, welcoming the idea of me sending them a copy of the portrait I took. Many people I spoke with expressed that Koreatown needed more jobs available for people as well as smaller issues like more parking or repairing the sidewalks, but they weren’t unhappy living there. Several people expressed they were happy to be in a place that was both diverse and close to their cultures of origin.

Transnational and regional space

The images in this section show more of the recent additions to Koreatown’s environment. My aim was to show images that represented Koreatown’s multiple class groups as well as the qualities that make the area a transnational and regional center. Many of the photographs I include portray newer buildings. I also wanted to show that there was a cross section of people who lived in poverty as this is an issue that is
inadequately addressed. Most of the images for this section were taken along Wilshire Boulevard and some areas on Western Avenue and Vermont Avenue nearest to the Metro Lines.

In 1995, the City of Los Angeles created the Wilshire Center / Koreatown Redevelopment project area, a general planning framework to designate Koreatown as a regional center – meaning an area with an emphasis on regional commerce with the hope of attracting more regional developers and transnational investment. The plan followed from the 1992 Los Angeles riots. Many of the establishments in Koreatown and along Wilshire Boulevard were targeted during the rioting. Although, it took nearly a decade for developers to rebuild from the damage, redefining the area as a regional center was the catalyst for many of the transformations residents see in Koreatown today. The redevelopment plan included the opening of three Metro Line stops, the adoption of district ordinances that would provide incentives for developers to build affordable housing near the transit lines, and major development plans particularly for the areas of Western Avenue, Vermont Avenue, and Wilshire Boulevard.

Many of these changes were the catalyst for further transnational investment and development. By 2000, more Korean immigrants began to arrive under the provisions of “employment based preferences”, but now, most Korean transnationals arrive as investors. Between 2000 and 2010, Korean American investors acquired 3.5 million square feet of commercial property along Mid-Wilshire including nine California chartered Korean banks with assets totaling $9 billion according to 2008 estimates.

I photographed several bank buildings along Wilshire Boulevard during various times of the day, but usually during the late afternoon when the setting sun begins to cast
long shadows on to the cityscapes. I thought of Atget and Szarkowski in my approach to photographing some of the high rises. Several of the buildings Atget photographed in old Paris were isolated from other elements such as bystanders or vehicles and shot with an emphasis on tone and mood that delivers a feeling of reflection on the subject. Szarkowski photographed several barns and farmlands throughout the United States. Many of his images are shot at the wide to medium focal length, few with people, emphasizing a contemplative serenity of, for example, the way a tree looks walking out of a barn and how the textures and light contrast between differing exposures within the frame.

Similar to their styles, I shot most of my high rises and cityscapes from the ground level or an elevated platform with a wide to medium focal length. There are several high rises along the Wilshire Boulevard corridor, some lording over the city. For some of the buildings, I wanted to show the scale of some of the new developments. I show the Vermont condominium complex, for example, towering over many of the buildings behind it vanishing into the horizon line. My second image shows a tightly composed dyptic of three Korean banks, one shot at night and the other shot during the late afternoon. I chose them because I felt the tone of the dyptic provided a contemplative feel about the environment.

Most of the people I took portraits of were commuters who either lived in Koreatown and worked somewhere else or lived somewhere else and worked in Koreatown. I shot most of the portraits with a tight, three quarter portrait framing, showing details of their attire and some details of environment in the background. Many of the people I spoke with chose the area because of its access to Metro Lines, its
proximity to other areas in Los Angeles, and the diversity of cultures that make up the population, which, several expressed, were attractive qualities about the area. These portraits reflect Koreatown’s regional appeal.

Others I met were transnationals. One man I met on 3rd Street was from Bangladesh. He explained that he was educated in his home country as an engineer and came to the United States to find a job in his field. He had been living in the States for 6 months but was struggling to find an engineering job. In the meantime, he works at a Bengali corner store market to make some money while he waits for a position to open. His experience is similar to many of the early Korean settlers who also received advanced degrees in Korea but ended up working in independent businesses in the enclave because they couldn’t find work in their fields.

Another transnational person I met was a Korean college student from a university in Jin Ju, South Korea during the 40th annual Korean Festival held each year at Seoul International Park. Each year, the park sets up rows of booths along Irolo Street and Normandie Avenue where local and transnational vendors can sell various food items during the four day event held during the end of September. The student who I met was with two classmates participating in a business incubation program, a school program where students studying marketing and business can travel to another country to practice selling products to an overseas market. At the end of the term, the students travel again to an exhibition where they share with their peers what they learned about salesmanship.

Additionally, I included static images of some of the signs displayed near the regional development areas, representing them in a tightly framed format to emphasize the layers of text. One image shows billboards advertising two of the prominent banks in
Koreatown displayed above a gas station. Below the billboards is a sign welcoming EBT recipients. The image shows two layers of Koreatown’s multiclass population physically presented in close proximity.

A few of the images portray some of the homeless who live in Koreatown. My opening image shows a homeless man extending his feet while napping along the side of a building. His socks are worn and covering his feet is a fedora. I felt the image was a good representation about the class differences that are present in Koreatown. Despite most of the redevelopment and transnational investment that goes on there, the response to poverty has been slow. 2010 census data reports the average income of residents is about one half of the average of Los Angeles at just over $30,000 a year. Data collected by the Korean Youth and Community Center’s free tax preparation program show some residents who earn about a third less than that. I wanted to juxtapose some images of the homeless community alongside the context of the transnational investment and regional development that goes in Koreatown.
Chapter 6

Final Remark

Koreatown still has its roots as a cultural enclave catering to Korean Americans. Many of the original establishments when the community first developed during the 70s still exist, but it has also become a cultural space for a large population of Mexican Americans, Central Americans from Guatemala and El Salvador, and Bengali Americans. More recently, the City has made efforts to redefine Koreatown as a regional center, an investment and living space catering to commuters seeking to live in a diverse and convenient cultural space that’s geographically near many other areas of Los Angeles, namely Downtown to the East and Hollywood to the West. At the same time, it is also a transnational space catering to the demands of investors seeking to emulate the modern social and cultural environment of South Korea. My documentary style photo project shows these different overlapping cultures through various galleries divided by well-known streets within Koreatown’s historic boundaries. The images show the juxtaposition of these various cultural layers, and each of the galleries described provides a series of portraits with captions by local workers and residents who shared their thoughts and feelings about the way they had experienced Koreatown, the changes they had seen or experienced, and the things they felt would better improve their community. The galleries can be viewed at the following website:

www.contestedspaceslosangeles.com
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