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(Re-)defining Boundaries: Expressions of Identity in the Work of Visual Artist Suyeon Na

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(Re-)defining Boundaries:
Expressions of Identity in the Work of Visual Artist Suyeon Na

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Table of Content

Introduction **1**

Chapter 1: Transnational Korean Communities **6**

1.1 Home and Abroad: Diaspora and the Nation-state **6**

1.1.1 Relationships between Home and Abroad 7

1.1.2 Diaspora as Extension of the Nation-State 8

1.2 Identity within diasporic communities **10**

1.2.1 Ethnic and Collective Identity 10

1.2.2 The significance of experience and subjectivities 11

Chapter 2: Korean Diaspora in Japan and the United States, Identities of Displacement and Belonging **13**

2.1 Historical overview of Migration to Japan and the United States **13**

2.1.1 Migration to Japan 13

2.1.2 Migration to the United States 14

2.1.3 Globally shared characteristics of Korean diaspora 15

2.2(Re)creating boundaries: hybridity and intersectionality in the Korean Japanese and Korean American diaspora. **16**

2.2.1 Zainichi Discourse: binary identity, hybridity and the "third space" 16

2.2.2 Collective minority identity: Asian-Americanism 19

Chapter 3: The Search for Identity in Korean Diasporic Art **21**

3.1 Art and Identity Politics **21**

3.2 The importance of Subjectivities **22**

3.2.1 Serving the "otherized gaze" 23

3.2.2 Generational differences 23

3.3 Diasporic Art as Paradox **24**

Chapter 4: Contemporary Korean Diasporic artist Suyeon Na **26**

4.1 Introduction **26**

4.1.1 Using Multimedia 27

4.2 Search for the Self through multimedia visual art 28

4.2.1 Visualizing human psychology: discussing themes, and prominent figures 28

4.2.2 Visualizing Identity: a Discussion of Three Works 31

4.3 (Re-)defining boundaries: a 'harmonious and unique cultural hybrid' 35

Conclusion 37

Bibliography 39

Sources for Illustrations 44

Introduction

Around the turn of the twentieth century, Korean diasporic communities started to emerge, resulting from the modernization process on the Korean peninsula. Currently, approximately seven million Koreans, consisting of multiple generations, are living in Korean diasporic communities. The complexity of the migration processes in terms of social, cultural, and national boundaries within the Korean diaspora is demonstrated by the quick growth of the Korean diasporic community over the last century. During processes of immigration and changes of cultural environments, Korean immigrants seek to create new identities and relationships with their (Korean) identity.

Within a global network of nation-states, diasporas are the one of the connecting factors between nation-states. Placed at the social borders of these regions, they are places in which identities are constantly negotiated and formed. The diasporic relation with identity is complex and, like the diasporic communities themselves, ever changing. Searching for and defining one's identities is a process of constant development for minority groups like diasporic Koreans. Natural to this development is finding a way to reflect on and communicate what that identity means. In this, diasporic art can be very helpful. Lucy Lippard states that art carries both social and aesthetic meanings, and therefore creating art can be instrumental for minority groups in the United States in connecting to their identities.[1] Similarly, Griselda Pollock argues that art as a social practice reflects on, constructs, and redefines definitions, identities and views of the world one may hold.[2] For instance, feminist artists are able to address through art the aspects and experiences of women's lives.[3] According to Elliot Eisner, art can become a way of knowing and understanding the world

[1] L. R. Lippards, *Mixed Blessings: New Art in a Multicultural America* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1990).

[2] Griselda Pollock, *Vision and Difference: Feminism, Femininity and the Histories of Art* (London and New York: Routledge, 1988).

[3] Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock, *Old Mistresses: Women, Art and Ideology* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1981).

around us.[4] Art allows both the artist and the audience a means to question various cultural values and practices in order to uncover ideological structures that lay at their foundation.[5]

Diasporic art can help us understand the realities of living within diaspora by visualizing difficult-to-explain concepts, and questioning those (national) networks of power.

Frequently, the perspectives and experiences of people from minority groups are excluded from or underrepresented in global (Western) art history. Specifically female artists from minority backgrounds. The limited space for them in social life and the art world often downplays either their cultural identity or gender identity for the other.

It is, however, particularly their intersectionality, the fact that they identify with both cultural and gender identity simultaneously, that presents their crucial role in representing their environment through art. As Parker and Pollock state, "To discover the history of women and art is in part to account for the way art history is written. To expose its underlying values, its assumptions, its silences and its prejudices is also to understand that the way women artists are recorded and described is crucial to the definition of art and the artist in our society.[6]"

Framework, Research Question and Methodology

Because art allows us to see, interpret and interact with the world around us, and our place in it, it stands at the crossroad between 'the individual' and 'the collective.' This is relevant when looking at artistic expressions of identification. Similar to identification processes, art is made, experienced, and discussed in our interactions with our environment.

This thesis, then, investigates how Korean contemporary and diasporic women artists express these identification processes in their work. As such the thesis will include different and complex layers of identity and their expression through artistic practices. With regard to identification processes, the thesis draws from a theoretical framework introduced by Richard Jenkins in his book *Social Identity*[7]. Building on the works of (mainly) George H. Mead, Erving Goffman, and Fredrik Barth, Jenkins argues that the human world can be understood as three 'orders' that offer different perspectives for looking at the same realities of the human world: "humans and their work." These perspectives are: the individual order, which looks at

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[4] Elliot W. Eisner, *The Arts and the Creation of Mind* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2002); Hwa Young Choi Caruso, "Art as a Political Act," (2005): 77.

[5] Parker and Pollock, *Old Mistresses: Women, Art and Ideology*.

[6] Parker and Pollock, 3.

[7] Richard Jenkins, *Social Identity* (London and New York: Routledge, 2014).

the human world as a collection of embodied individuals, the interaction order, which centers on the relationships between individuals, and the institution order, the human world as constituted in patterns and organizations. Instead of emphasizing a dichotomy between the individual and the collective[8], this approach emphasizes the similarity and interlinkage between individual and collective identification processes as they both take place in interactions.[9] The emphasis on the difference in perspective, rather than the difference in nature of such interactions, offers a less rigid and clearer way for understanding the complexity of artistic expressions of identity.

Within interactive and transcultural settings, artworks are part of a network of relationships, in which the specific social and historical conditions influence the reception and experiencing of the artwork.[10] Sociological art theories argue that interactions between people, objects and institutions in daily life are fundamental in writing history and can influence the meaning and reception of artworks. As Nicholas Thomas states: “objects are not what they were made to be, but what they become.”[11]

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[8]See also, M. Billig et al., *Ideological Dilemmas: A Social Psychology of Everyday Thinking* (London: SAGE publications, 1988); Richard Jenkins, *Foundations of Sociology: Toward a Better Understanding of the Human World* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 27–28; Michael Suk-Young Chwe, *Rational Ritual:Culture, Coordination and Common Knowledge* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001); Jenkins, *Social Identity*, 39.

[9] See for example, Peter J. Burke and Jan E. Stets, *Identity Theory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009); Marilynn Bolt Brewer and Miles J. Hewstone, eds., *Self and Social Identity* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2004); Dora Capozza and Rupert Brown, eds., *Social Identity Processes* (London: SAGE publications, 2000); N. Ellemers and S A Haslam, “Social Identity Theory,” in *Handbook of Theories of Social Psychology*, ed. Paul A.M. van Lange, Arie W. Kruglanski, and E. Tory Higgngs (Thousand Oaks: SAGE publications, 2012); Dominic Abrams and Michael A. Hogg, *Social Identifications: A Social Psychology of Intergroup Relations and Group Processes* (London: Routledge, 1988); W. P. Robinson, ed., *Social Groups and Identities: Developing the Theory of Henri Tajfel* (London: Butterworth Heinemann, 1996); Jonathan Potter, *Representing Reality: Discourse, Rhetoric and Social Construction* (London: SAGE publications, 1996); Jonathan Potter and Margaret Wetherell, *Discourse and Social Psychology* (London: SAGE publications, 1987).

[10] Hijoo Son and Jooyeon Rhee, “Introduction to "diasporic Art and Korean Identity ",” *Cross-Currents: East Asian History and Cultural Review* 29, no. 1 (2018): 6–7, https://cross-currents.berkeley.edu/e-journal/issue-29/son-rhee.

[11] Nicholas Thomas, Entangled Objects: Exchange, Material, and Colonialism in the Pacific (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991), 4; Son and Rhee, 7.

After laying out the issues surrounding identity within a diasporic context, this thesis turns to the work of Suyeon Na, a Korean-born contemporary artist who lives in the Korean American and Korean Japanese diaspora. The artworks of Na are valuable subjects of investigation because they convey the various layers of social and cultural issues in a Korean diasporic environment. By reflecting the artists experiences as a Korean woman who migrated across the Korean diaspora, her art presents an interesting case study for the expression of identification processes in a diasporic community. The research questions this thesis aims to answer is the following:

How does the art of diasporic Korean women artists express their identity?

The questions below will guide the research in answering the main research question.

How is identity constituted in diasporic communities?

What is the connection between art and identity expression for Korean diasporic women artists?

How are identification processes expressed in the work of Suyeon Na?

This thesis takes on a qualitative approach, and draws from literature, primary sources, and interviews with Suyeon Na. Aiming to bridge collective and individual experiences of these female artists across the Korean diaspora, this thesis contextualizes the experiences and artworks of Korean contemporary visual artist Suyeon Na within identity politics of Korean diasporic communities in Japan and the United States.

A semi-structured interview with Suyeon Na served as the foundation for resources on the artist, but additionally information from her personal website (suyeonna.com) has been used as well. Conducted online due to the COVID-pandemic, the interview lasted about forty-five minutes. In order to allow the artist to speak as comfortably as possible about these personal topics, all of the prepared questions were formulated in the Korean language. However, the rest of the interview used a mixture English and Korean. Allowing the Suyeon Na to speak freely in whatever of the two languages she preferred was important to me as a researcher, to accurately portray concepts and thoughts that are also shaped by the linguistic characteristics of each language. The interview followed a chronological structure, focusing

on her personal experiences and artistic production growing up in South-Korea, moving to the United States and lastly living in Japan.
Following the interview, Suyeon Na answered some follow-up questions to clear up some of the information discussed in the interview, or provide concrete examples on the same topics. Apart from the interview, the case study also consists of a visual analysis on some of Na's artworks. The artworks were chosen from among those displayed on her site and discussed in the interview, to represent an overview of Na's artistic production, and the visualization of her thoughts on being a female Korean immigrant and artist.

The thesis is divided into four chapters. Chapter one provides a background on identification processes that are relevant when discussing Korean diaspora, and its relation to the nation-state. Because diasporas stand at the periphery of nation-states, national narratives are more likely to discuss diasporas as extensions of the homeland. As a result, these narratives often take away agency from those living in the diasporic communities. Therefore, chapter two focuses on the internal discourse on identity politics within the Korean diasporic communities in the US and Japan, to highlight the diversity and complex relationships people in these environments have with identity.

Chapter three focuses on the connection between art and identity, and how this constitutes for Korean diasporic female artists. Building on the context presented in chapter three, chapter four then turns to the work of Suyeon Na. Through interviews and a visual analysis of a selection of works, this chapter highlights how she creates a blend of various cultural products, art styles and imagery. Questioning issues of Korean diasporic identity, she creates and continues to develop a fluid identity, in line with her experiences as a Korean diasporic female immigrant and artist.

Chapter 1: Transnational Korean Communities

One of the first large migratory movements out of the Korean peninsula was around the mid-nineteenth century, when Koreans started to move north, to Manchuria and the Maritime province of what would later become Russian territory. From here, many were forced to relocate to Central Asia in 1937, with 95,256 people sent to Kazakhstan, and 76,525 people to Uzbekistan.[12]
Around the beginning of the twentieth century, between 1903 and 1905, more than seven thousand Koreans started migrating to Hawaii. Furthermore, the Japanese colonial occupation of the Korean peninsula between 1910 and 1945 was directly responsible for migration of Koreans from the Korean peninsula to Japan. Additionally, during and after the Korean war, children and Korean wives of American military personnel migrated to North America to be united with their families in US or Canada.[13] Since the second half of the twentieth century, many South Koreans have migrated all over the world, primarily for professional, educational, business, or economic reasons.[14]

With such a wide variety of contexts, it is no surprise that the Korean diaspora is as complex and diverse as each of its individuals. At the same time, its diversity is also what makes it such an interesting place for discussing identity. This chapter offers a framework from which to approach identity by discussing the intersection between the collective and, thereby laying the theoretical groundwork on which chapter two will build by focusing on the Korean diaspora in Japan and the United States.

1.1 Home and Abroad: Diaspora and the Nation-state

Diasporas are placed outside, at the boundaries of more formally recognized (institutional) territories, such as nation-states. Yet they are referred to in terms of national (or ethnic)

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[12] In Jin Yoon, “Migration and the Korean Diaspora: A Comparative Description of Five Cases,” *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 38, no. 3 (2012): 420, https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2012.658545.

[13] Ji-Yeon Yuh, *Beyond the Shadow of Camptown : Korean Military Brides in America* (London and New York: New York University Press, 2002); Yoon, “Migration and the Korean Diaspora: A Comparative Description of Five Cases,” 415.

[14] Takeyuki Tsuda and Changzoo Song, *Diasporic Returns to the Ethnic Homeland : The Korean Diaspora in Comparative Perspective* (Cham: Springer International Publishing AG, 2018), 3, https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-90763-5.

relations. This makes diasporas interesting places to question what constitutes such national identities, and how its identification processes work.

The focus on transnational interaction and the complexity of diasporic belonging and identity could help question the fixed nature of identity that ethnicity seems to enforce. On the other hand, however, because the notion of diaspora invokes the notion of a 'homeland,' in reality, diasporic communities are also inclined to think and live within this fixed idea of ethnicity.[15]

Intrinsic to the notion of diaspora is the relationship between the home(land) and abroad, which are heavily tied to a nation-centric approach of cultural and/or ethnic identity. This approach opens up the possibility to questioning of belonging or loyalty to either the 'homeland' or the 'nation of residence' -- which forms an easy tool for political marginalization and racialization.[16]

1.1.1 Relationships between Home and Abroad

There is a difference, though, in terms of what notion ethnicity and diaspora center around in terms of the nature of identification. Ethnicity not only reinforces the legitimacy of the nation-state as the domain in which social boundaries are made, the politics and organizational structures of the nation-state often determine and establish the space in which ethnicity exists. Diaspora, on the other hand, eludes a different perspective, by turning away from the boundaries of a single nation-state, and highlighting the complex multiplicity of regions, and the never-ending nature of interactions between various 'homes and abroads'[17].
Diasporas do not consist only of migration out of the homeland. Migratory movements are not just processes of dispersion to a new nation-state, where lasting settlement and assimilation to the host country are the inevitable 'goal'.[18] Instead, diasporas are places of constant

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[15] Floya Anthias, "Evaluating `Diaspora': Beyond Ethnicity?," *Sociology* 32, no. 3 (1998): 567–69; Virinder S. Kalra, Raminder Kaur, and John Hutnyk, *Diaspora and Hybridity* (London, Thousand Oaks, and New Delhi: SAGE publications, 2005), 16–17.

[16] Kalra, Kaur, and Hutnyk, *Diaspora and Hybridity*, 11–15.

[17] Kalra, Kaur, and Hutnyk, 11–15.

[18] Rainer K. Silbereisen and Peter F. Titzmann, "Introduction: Migration and Societal Integration: Background and Design of a Large-Scale Research Endeavor," in *The Challenges of Diaspora Migration: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Israel and Germany* (Routledge, 2016), 3–24; Fran Markowitz and Anders H. Stefansson, eds., "Homecomings to the Future: From Diasporic Mythographies to Social Projects of Return," in *Homecomings: Unsettling Paths of Return* (Lexington Books, 2004), 5;

(transnational or cross-national) movement. Most diasporic communities are characterized heavily by interplay between moving out of the homeland, and migration returns to the original homeland[19], as well as even further migration to other nation-states.[20] As such, diasporic communities are as complex as the intricacies of the transnational cultural and social connections, relationships and identities that happen because of migratory movements.

The Korean diaspora has, and continues to heavily influence Korea itself, specifically South Korea since transnational movement is more prominent there. For example, Korean Japanese and Korean Americans frequently travel to South Korea as tourists, or to stay short term. But there is also a significant number of Korean Chinese and former Soviet Koreans that move back to South Korea to stay long term.[21]

Looking at diaspora from a global perspective, the terms 'home and abroad' then become unstable categories. As Kalra et al. state in their book Diaspora and Hybridity: "When exploring the relationship between 'home' and 'away', there is a need not only to consider relationships between individual actors or members of diasporic groups; there are also legislative state frameworks, alongside the working of markets which enable or disable the creation of ongoing relationships.[22]"

1.1.2 Diaspora as Extension of the Nation-State

Hijoo Son argues that one of the main topics within the discourse of on diasporic Korean communities with regard to identity is based on South Korean mainstream view of Korea as a homogenous society.[23] These "master narratives of the ethnic nation"[24] on Korean migration stem from twentieth century public discourse on Korean national and cultural identity. According to these notions, diasporic Korean communities are part of a larger Korean collective identity that has been a stable cultural and ethnic unit for over 5000 years, denoted by the term *minjok*.

Takeyuki Tsuda, *Diasporic Homecomings: Ethnic Return Migration in Comparative Perspective* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2009), 7–9.

[19] Tsuda, *Diasporic Homecomings*, 11.

[20] Tsuda and Song, 7.

[21] Tsuda and Song, 4.

[22] Kalra, Kaur, and Hutnyk, *Diaspora and Hybridity*, 17–18.

[23] Hijoo Son, "Paradox of Diasporic Art from There: Antidote to Master Narrative of the Nation?," *Journal of Korean Studies* 17, no. 1 (2012): 154–56, https://doi.org/10.1353/jks.2012.0003.

[24] Son.

The term tanil minjok for example, was used by Yi Pyŏngdo in 1946 to oppose the role of foreign forces in the shaping of the Korean nation.[25] His definition of *minjok* as a community of people who share "specific cultural features" (t'ŭksu munhwa naeyong), like shared customs and beliefs, language, and other cultural expressions. According to Yi, these shared features allow *minjok* to be more than a synonym for a group of people within the political and legal bounds of one nation-state. *Minjok*, then, with its uniquely shared qualities, would have been the reason for the Korean peninsula to have withstood suffering and external attacks.[26]

Where Yi focused on shared cultural features, others have ascribed this idea of a Korean homogenous society to the pureness of its bloodline, dating back to Korea's mythical founder of Old Chosŏn in 2333 BCE, Tan'gun. For example, in 1914, Kim Kyohŏn, who was a follower of the Taejonggyo religion that centered around the worship of Tan'gun[27], described the ancient ancestors associated with Tan'gun as *paedal minjok*[28] (the people whose ancestors were splendid), despite there being no historical evidence for the use of this term before this time.[29] This term was then later used by Yi Kwanggyu in his work commemorating the fiftieth anniversary of Korea's independence. This series was called Segye ŭi Han Minjok (Koreans of the world)[30], and was contributed to overseas Koreans. Thus, Yi used the term to link these people to a larger Korean community, showcasing the national perspective of diasporic communities as an extension of the homeland, potentially allowing for the development of South Korea's national power overseas.[31]

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[25] Pyŏngdo Yi, "Chosŏn Minjok Ŭi Tanilsŏng [The Homogeneity of the Korean People]," 1946, 8–15.

[26] Son,156–57.

[27] Don Baker, "Imagining Ancient Korean Religion: Sŏndo, Tan'gun, and the Earth Goddess," in *Invented Traditions in North and South Korea*, ed. Andrew David Jackson et al. (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2021), 116.

[28] In Nationalism and the Construction of Korean Identity, Pai and Tangherlini also mention the word paedal can be read as "the delivered race," that were "chosen people […], saved from Japanese efforts at racial eradication and assimilation by the Tan'gun spirit of Independence." This view however, seems to skip about 5000 years in time to be specifically targeted towards the Japanese colonial occupation at the first half of the twentieth century. See, Hyung-il Pai and Timothy R Tangherlini, eds., *Nationalism and the Construction of Korean Identity* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1998), 3–4; Son, 157.

[29] Son, 157.

[30] Kwanggyu Yi, *Segye Ŭi Han Minjok [Koreans of the World]*, 1995.

[31] Son, 157–58.

Because such widely held beliefs on the homogeneity of Korean cultural, social and racial features, there is little room for alternative expressions, and a lot of scholarship on Korea is immediately classified under racial history (*minjoksa*)[32]. These narratives of social and ethnic homogeneity reinforces the idea of a Korean history of progress to overcome a history of suffering (*sunan ŭi yŏksa*).[33]

This (South) Korean-centric perspective views the Korean diasporic communities as an extension of the nation-state, linked through their ethnic and cultural commonalities. The acquiring and claiming of identities within power relations between nation-state and diaspora show how classification of individuals and populations is integral to modern bureaucratic and governmental stratagems and control. By centering the nation-state through the notion of "finding nation outside the nation"[34] , this narrative takes agency away from those in the diasporic communities to question, (re)discover and (re)define their own identification processes. By focusing on the diasporic communities themselves instead, the complexity of being part of a diasporic community can become the topic of conversation.[35]

1.2 Identity within diasporic communities

1.2.1 Ethnic and Collective Identity

In Fredrik Barth's 1969 model of ethnic and collective identification, he argues that one of the prerequisites for acquiring an identity is its acceptance by others significant to us. As a result, the negotiation process of identification takes place where the internal and external meet: at the boundaries of that identity.[36] On an individual level the interactions we have with our environment often happen through our body.[37] We experience the world around us through our senses and thoughts, and our environment interacts with us through our bodies. Occupying space is thus an important aspect of identification processes.

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[32] Hyung-il Pai and Timothy R Tangherlini, *Nationalism and the Construction of Korean Identity* (Berkeley: Institute of East Asian Studies, 1998), 4.

[33] Son, 156.

[34] Son, 158.

[35] Son, 158.

[36] Fredrik Barth, *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries: The Social Organisation of Culture Difference* (Illinois: Waveland, 1969); Fredrik Barth, *Process and Form in Social Life: Selected Essays of Frederik Barth, Vol. 1* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981); Jenkins, *Social Identity*, 45.

[37] Jenkins, *Social Identity*, 50.

With regard to group identification, this negotiation and construction often happen across the group boundary, when interacting with others outside of that boundary. During these interactions, there is a continuous adjustment and stabilizing of group identification and external categorization. For example, when people migrate out of Korea, they interact with their new environment. Through these interactions the understanding of shared, or similar experiences with other migrants develops. At the same time, there are also others that do not share these experiences, resulting in a disconnect between the two. For example, many Koreans migrating to the US are confronted with language barriers, cultural differences, and a change in social status as a result of their ethnicity within American society. Consequently, they tend to quickly develop an awareness and understanding of belonging to an ethnic minority. This may lead them to feeling closer connected to other Asian immigrants.[38]

However, the continuous movement of people within and beyond a specific diasporic setting, by migrating away or forming strong relationships with others outside of that group boundary, shows how such boundaries are not always so clear cut. In a way, this group identity is thus imagined, rather than physical, because this boundary perseveres despite people moving through it.[39]

Diasporic group identities however, are also grounded in the physicality of territories. Although similar experiences may be shared among different Korean diasporas, each diasporic context also leads to characteristics shared among those in same diaspora. Collective identification is thus inherently linked to the perspective that comes from being situated within specific territories or areas.[40]

1.2.2 The significance of experience and subjectivities

Because identities are fluid and plenty, they can overlap. A crucial factor to consider is intersectionality[41]: the specific combination of various forms of identity (e.g. gender and ethnicity) can lead to an experience commonly shared by those that share this combination of

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[38] K. Y. Park, The Korean American Dream (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997); Hwa Young Choi Caruso, “Art As A Political Act," (2004), 54.

[39] Barth, *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries*; Anthony Cohen, *Symbolic Construction of Community* (London and New York: Routledge, 1985); Jenkins, *Social Identity*, 46.

[40] Jenkins, *Social Identity*, 50.

[41] Stemming from US Black feminist legal theory in the 1980s. the term was first introduced by by Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989. See, Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Discrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Practice,” *University of Chicago Legal Forum* 1989, no. 1 (1989): 138–67.

identities. Since the network of power relations is central to these experiences, intersectionality is commonly used in social movements and academics with regard to discrimination and oppression.[42]. J. Song found that for those growing up in the Korean American diaspora, they often experience discrimination based on gender, class, sexuality, age, nationality, race and ethnicity when visiting South Korea. For example, there are different social standards for young Korean and Korean American women compared to older Korean women.[43]

Similar to Barth's model that differentiates boundary from content, a distinction can be made between nominal identity and virtual identity (the name versus the experience). The same nominal identity can be experienced very differently between individuals.[44] Similarly, the consequences of having or taking on a certain identity, one's virtual identity, are not set in stone. For example, what it means to be Korean American or Zainichi Korean in Japan can differ a great deal depending on one's life experiences.[45] Additionally, the nominal identity might change completely over time, while the experience might stay more or less the same. Chapter two will discuss this more in depth, showcasing the crucial role that one's experiences play in discussing identity, even for members of the same collective identity.[46]

[42] Sirma Bilge and Ann Denis, "Introduction: Women, Intersectionality and Diasporas," *Journal of Intercultural Studies* 31, no. 1 (2010): 4, https://doi.org/10.1080/07256860903487653.

[43] Jee Eun Regina Song, "A Double-Edged Sword: Gender and Intersectionality of Korean American Ethnic Return Migration," *Asian Studies Review* 44, no. 4 (2020): 579–96, https://doi.org/10.1080/10357823.2020.1790501.

[44] Barth, *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries*.

[45] Jenkins, *Social Identity*, 46.

[46] Jenkins, 46.

Chapter 2: Korean Diaspora in Japan and the United States, Identities of Displacement and Belonging

This chapter offers a comparative approach to the Korean Japanese and Korean American diasporic communities, the two Korean diasporic contexts relevant to Suyeon Na's experiences. After giving a brief historical overview on the emergence of each of the two diasporas, section 2.2 then offers two examples of the internal discourse on their diasporic identity. This serves to deepen and contextualize the theoretical approaches from chapter one in two different nation-states, while simultaneously highlighting the complexity and fluid nature of identification processes within these diasporic contexts.

2.1 Historical overview of Migration to Japan and the United States

Migration out of the Korean peninsula happened in various waves to different areas. Each of the migration waves was the result of the combination of historical factors on the Korean peninsula and in the host countries. Therefore, each migratory wave is also characterized by different reasoning and characteristics.[47] The following sections focuses specifically on migration movements to Japan and the US.

2.1.1 Migration to Japan

Large migratory movements to Japan took place mainly during the Japanese colonial occupation of the Korean peninsula. As part of this growing colonial empire, the Japanese government would systematically mobilize millions of its subjects to execute the expansion of the Japanese empire all the way through East and Southeast Asia. For Koreans, this meant that large numbers of them were mobilized to serve the Japanese empire, and many were forced to move out of the Korean peninsula. They were assembled to serve the Japanese colonial empire as soldiers, laborers, as well as "comfort women" in Japanese military brothels. With more and more Japanese men recruited into the Japanese military, shortages of labors were to be filled by students, women and foreign workers. The recruitment of foreign laborers, many of which came from Korea, slowly turned into a process of forced labor. Estimates show that between 1939 and 1945, approximately 700,000 Koreans were working

[47] Yoon, "Migration and the Korean Diaspora: A Comparative Description of Five Cases," 430.

in Japan[48], many of which were working in the coalmine and manufacturing industries, or part of Japanese military facilities[49]. The rapid increase of Koreans in Japan reached its peak in 1945, with 2.3 million people. The almost 600,000 Koreans that remained in Japan then formed the foundation of the contemporary Zainichi (resident in Japan).[50]

2.1.2 Migration to the United States

The first migration from Korea to the US started in the early 1900s, when Korean laborers moved to Hawaii and Mexico to work on coconut, pineapple and sugarcane plantations.[51] Koreans were only part of the total of 400,000 laborers from Japan, China, India, the Philippines, Russia, Portugal, Puerto Rico that had moved there to accommodate the high demand for cheap labor.[52] Many later moved on to urban areas on the mainland, between 1903 and 1910.[53] Many of the Koreans that lived in the US were actively involved in Korea's independence movement during the colonial occupation by Japan.[54]

The end of this Japanese colonial occupation of Korea also marks the time a large wave of Korean family members of US military personnel moved to the US. In total, over 100,000 Korean women, who had married American GIs, migrated to the US.[55]

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[48] Tessa Morris-Suzuki, "Letters to the Dead: Grassroots Historical Dialogue in East Asia's Borderlands," in *East Asia Beyond the History Wars: Confronting the Ghosts of Violence*, ed. T. Morris-Suzuki et al. (London and New York: Routledge, 2013), 88.

[49] Codruța Sîntionean, "The Role of Historical Memory in Japan - South Korea Relations," *European Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies* 12, no. 1 (2020): 54–55, https://doi.org/http://doi.org/10.24818/ejis.2020.04.

[50] M. W. Lee, *The Koreans in the World: Japan.* (Seoul: Korean Ministry of National Unification, 1996), 66–70; Yoon, "Migration and the Korean Diaspora: A Comparative Description of Five Cases."

[51] R. Chang and W. Patterson, *The Koreans in Hawaii: A Pictorial History* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2003).

[52] R. Takaki, *Pau Hana: Plantation Life and Labor in Hawaii, 1835–1920* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 19983); W. Patterson, *The Korean Frontier in America: Immigration to Hawaii* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1988).

[53] W. Patterson, *The Ilse: First Generation Korean Immigrants in Hawaii, 1903–1973* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2000).

[54] Shawn Shen, "Historical and Contemporary Korean Emigration: A Comparative Analysis of Ten Waves of Korean Migration," *Journal of International Migration and Integration* 20, no. 1 (2019): 43–44, https://doi.org/10.1007/s12134-018-0599-4.

[55] Yuh, *Beyond the Shadow of Camptown : Korean Military Brides in America*.

Simultaneously, between 1945 and 1962, many orphans were adopted into American (and European) families.[56]

In 1962, the South Korean government implemented a specific emigration policy in the hopes of reducing the economic hardships. As a result of this policy, many Korean laborers immigrated to the US for the duration of their signed contracts. Since the American immigration law would no longer consider race and national origin from 1965 onwards, it had opened the door to one of the largest waves of Korean migrating to the US. As of the beginning of the twenty-first century about 80 percent of Korean Americans are born outside of the US.[57]

2.1.3 Globally shared characteristics of Korean diaspora

Generally, though, there is a distinction between older and newer generations of immigrants in these diasporic communities. In a comparative depiction of five large Korean diasporic communities, In Jin Yoon states that many old migrants had lower-class origins and moved mainly to host countries in the vicinity of the Korean peninsula, where they would often only stay temporarily. On the contrary, new immigrants are often higher educated from urban areas, who move primarily to countries that offer more educational opportunities or higher living standards (for future generations). They are thus often looking to stay permanently in their new home.[58] Despite these differences between various generations of migrants, a number of characteristics is shared among the Korean diasporic community globally. It is very common for many of the Korean migrants to experience disadvantages and discrimination in the early phase of adaptation to their new home. In general, they then tend to settle in job markets that are relatively free from social discrimination and political involvement, such as self-employment (in niche markets), starting their own business, or pursue academic studies.[59]

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[56] Shen, "Historical and Contemporary Korean Emigration: A Comparative Analysis of Ten Waves of Korean Migration," 33.

[57] Edward Chang, "The Post-Los Angeles Riot Korean American Community: Challenges and Prospects," *Korean American Studies Bulletin*, no. 10 (1999): 6–26; Karen D. Pyke and Denise L. Johnson, "Asian American Women and Racialized Femininities: 'Doing' Gender across Cultural Worlds," *Gender and Society* 17, no. 1 (2003): 37, https://doi.org/10.1177/0891243202238977.

[58] Yoon, "Migration and the Korean Diaspora: A Comparative Description of Five Cases," 413.

[59] Yoon, 430–32.

Strategies for survival and upward social mobility are usually urbanization, having a strong work ethic, and investing in the education of children and future generations.[60] In the contemporary world globalization can help increase socio-economic status through the upkeep of transnational networks between Korea and the diaspora.[61] With regard to identity, diasporic Koreans often take on a dual identity that on one hand highlights their Korean ethnicity and cultural background, while also emphasizing shared experiences of living in the diaspora. The preservation of a strong ethnic identity is generally in response to social discrimination and distinctions by external forces.[62]

2.2 (Re)creating boundaries: hybridity and intersectionality in the Korean Japanese and Korean American diaspora.

In the book *Self-Referentiality of Cognition and (de)Formation of Ethnic Boundaries*, Oleg Pakhomov contrasts the different experiences between Koreans in the US and those in Japan with regard to ethnicity. He states that despite both communities of diasporic Koreans in the US and Japan living in capitalist societies, they represent contradictory patterns of ethnicity boundaries.[63] On the one hand, Koreans in the US generally experience a development in ethnic boundaries as the result of a 'successful upwards economic mobility', tied to the pursuit of their own "American dream".[64]

For Koreans in Japan, on the other hand, the development of ethnic boundaries is based on morality, as a result of their economic and social exclusion. The subsequent discontent among Zainichi Koreans then, allows for easy protest mobilization of the Korean community, which often lead to negative responses in broader Japanese society.[65]

2.2.1 Zainichi Discourse: binary identity, hybridity and the "third space"

Even though the Zainichi identity is a complex concept influenced by a variety of factors, the development of the discourse on Zainichi identity has seen a considerable shift from the

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[60] Yoon, 432.

[61] Yoon, 432.

[62] Yoon, 432.

[63] Oleg Pakhomov, "Korean Diaspora and Capitalist Modernization in the United States and Japan," in *Self-Referentiality of Cognition and (de)Formation of Ethnic Boundaries: A Comparative Study on Korean Diaspora in Russia, China, the United States and Japan* (Springer Singapore Pte. Limited, 2017), 81–156.

[64] Pakhomov, 82–117.

[65] Pakhomov, 117–56.

1970s onwards. In David Chapman's The Third Way and Beyond, he argues that the shift in power and politics from older (Korean-born) generations to younger (Japan-born) generations form the foundation for this development.[66] A large influence on this powershift has been the increasing amount of Japanese-born Zainichi. Whereas the amount of Japanese-born within the Zainichi community was 49.9% in 1950, by 1974, this percentage had gone up to 74.6%[67]. And by 1993, about 90% of the Zainichi community was born in Japan.[68]

For many of the Korean-born Zainichi, living in Japan meant an assimilation process characterized by the loss of their Korean cultural and kinship traditions.[69] This resulted in a general rejection of Japanese identity, and loyalty to either one of the Korean nation-states.

For the later generations though, living in Japan and speaking Japanese is most natural to them. Compared to previous generations, these people do not share the vision of an eventual return to the homeland. They have no reason to because their notion of homeland has shifted. In Korea they often do not speak the language nor are culturally literate the same way older generations of Zainichi are. This formed a pivotal moment in Zainichi discourse, because for the first time, eternal residence in Japan was discussed publicly.[70]

Additionally, the newer generations of Zainichi reject the binary way of thinking prevalent among the Korean-born generation, according to which the choice is either to be Korean or Japanese. The emergence of the 'third way' in 1979, highlights the recognition of

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[66] David Chapman, "The Third Way and beyond: Zainichi Korean Identity and the Politics of Belonging," *Japanese Studies* 24, no. 1 (2004): 29, https://doi.org/10.1080/10371390410001684697.

[67] Jae Eun Kang, "Sengo San Jū Roku Nen Me No Zainichi Chōsenjin' (Resident Koreans after 36 Years since the End of the Second World War)," in *Zainichi Kankoku Chōsenjin: Sono Nihon Ni Okeru Sonzaikachi (Resident Koreans: The Value of Their Existence in Japan).*, ed. J. Iinuma (Tokyo: Kaifūsha, 1988), 104–6.

[68] Sonia Ryang, "Nationalist Inclusion or Emancipatory Identity? North Korean Women in Japan," Women's Studies International Forum 21, no. 6 (1998): 582; Chapman, "The Third Way and beyond," 31.

[69] Chapman, "The Third Way and beyond," 33–34.

[70] Norma Field, "Beyond Envy, Boredom, and Suffering: Toward an Emancipatory Politics for Resident Koreans and Other Japanese," Positions: East Asia Culture Critique 1, no. 3 (1993): 647; Il Park, Zainichi to Iu Ikikata: Sai to Byō Dō No Jirenma [The Lives of Resident Koreans: The Dilemma with Difference and Equality] (Tokyo: Sanichi Shobo, 1979), 26–27; Melissa Wender, "Mothers Write Ikaino," in Koreans in Japan: Critical Voices from the Margin, ed. Sonia Ryang (London: Routledge, 2000), 74–102; Chapman, "The Third Way and beyond," 36.

their complex Zainichi identity. It challenges the diasporic notion of Minzoku[71] in the Zainichi context, with its strong connection to Korean nationality and solidarity. These notions of being Korean were based on 'traditional' views of cultural and racial features. [72]

The introduction of the third way opened up possibilities to discuss living in Japan, without becoming a naturalized Japanese. The post diasporic usage of Minzoku became "A new generation's way of thinking which sees the Zainichi population as a distinct ethnic Korean group aware and proud of their ethnicity. Who live permanently in Japan and possess rights as citizens without having to take the step of naturalizing as Japanese".[73] Chapman compares the third way to Homi Bhabha's notion of hybridity, that "displaces the histories that constitute it, and sets up new structures of authority, new political initiatives, which are inadequately understood through received wisdom".[74] This provides space in which identities can be continuously discussed and reshaped.

This third way, however, has also received critique. One of its main issues is that by again offering two options – either joining this new collective identity or assimilating – it had turned from an anti-essentialist movement into an essentialist one. The third way offered no space for anyone whose experience differed from the three main identities. Any representation of naturalized Zainichi, mixed people, women and children, and others with multiple identities was absent, and all these groups were excluded.[75]

Although not without flaws, the third way was an important factor for the internal debate on mutually exclusive identities. It was the first of many perspectives that challenged the rigid boundaries of identity within the Zainichi community. Later visions have continued

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[71] This term is difficult to translate into English, but has been compared to the word Volk, in German. See also, Tessa Morris-Suzuki, *Re-Inventing Japan : Nation, Culture, Identity* (New York, NY: Routledge, 1998), 32. Although often linked to the term ethnicity in English, Minzoku is used in the Zainichi context to refer to a variety of collective identity and belonging, based on factors such as ethnicity, national identity, and political alliance.

[72] Park, *Zainichi to Iu Ikikata: Sai to Byō Dō No Jirenma [The Lives of Resident Koreans: The Dilemma with Difference and Equality]*, 100.

[73] Park, 100; Chapman, "The Third Way and beyond," 37.

[74] The Third Space: Interview with Homi Bhabha, n.d., 211; Chapman, "The Third Way and beyond," 39.

[75] Tae Young Kim, Aidentiti Porotokusu o Koete [Beyond Identity Politics) (Kyōto: Sekai Shisōsha, 1999), 124–29; Chapman, "The Third Way and beyond," 38.

this legacy of challenging the existing structures of identity politics, thus exposing the limitations of binary pure identities.[76]

2.2.2 Collective minority identity: Asian-Americanism

In the US, the discourse surrounding Asian American panethnicity highlights how national and ethnic collective identities can overlap. The various collective ethnic boundaries are not complete binaries, and individuals may take on multiple identities, for example from Korean, to Korean American, to Asian American. In *Korean Ethnicity and Asian American Panethnicity*, Ann H. Kim discusses the complexity of Korean American identity within the broader context of a shared Asian American panethnicity. The debate around pan-Asian identity shows the different ways it is interpreted. While some argue that the term downplays the specific experiences of individual groups, others view it as an umbrella term that allows these groups to form an alliance to work towards shared interests. Kim argues that it's important to recognize both the experiences and struggles of such individual groups, despite there being shared experiences among Asian Americans.[77]

For example, the language usage of second generation Koreans in the US seems to reflect their 'third space' or hybrid position between Korean and American.[78] While fluency in Korean is frequently considered to symbolize their ethnic identity, even those who have low proficiency still feel connected to their Korean identity.[79] However, on the other hand feelings of exclusion also often lead to taking on an Asian American identity. This exclusion can be both from Korean networks, due to language and cultural barriers for those with low proficiency in Korean, or, from the experiences of feeling racially foreign in American

[76] Paul Gilroy, *Between Camps: Race, Identity and Nationalism at the End of the Colour Line* (London: Allen Lane, 2000), 105; Chapman, "The Third Way and beyond," 34–35, 39–41.

[77] Ann H Kim, "Korean Ethnicity and Asian American Panethnicity," in *A Companion to Korean American Studies*, ed. Rachael Miyung Joo and Shelley Sang-Hee Lee (Brill, 2018), 333–55, https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004335332.

[78] Hye-young Jo, "Heritage' Language Learning and Ethnic Identity: Korean Americans' Struggle with Language Authorities," *Language, Culture and Curriculum* 14, no. 1 (2001): 26–41; Hyun-Sook Kang, "Korean American College Students' Language Practices and Identity Positioning: Not Korean, but Not American," *Journal of Language, Identity & Education* 12 (2013): 248–61; Kim, "Korean Ethnicity and Asian American Panethnicity," 335.

[79] Joann Hong and Pyong Gap Min, "Ethnic Attachment Among Second Generation Korean Adolescents," *Amerasia Journal* 25, no. 1 (1999): 165–78; Kim, "Korean Ethnicity and Asian American Panethnicity," 339.

society. In this case though, these people explained that their Asian American identity did not fully replace the Korean (American) identity but rather complimented it.[80] Studies on this collective Asian panethnicity specifically would focus on the connection between such ethnic or racialized identities and political organization, highlighting its institutional nature.[81]

Current research however, moves beyond this link to political alliance, referring to the broadening of social identity boundaries, from ethnic group identification to a collective multi-level identity on a larger scale.[82] Unlike the binary identities that formed the foundation for the third way in the Zainichi discourse, this situation in the US shows a combination of national and ethnic collective identity, that at times, may overlap.

[80] Linda S. Park, "Contextual Influences on Ethnic Identity Formation: A Case Study of Second-Generation Korean Americans Baby Boomers in Midlife," *Journal of Cross Cultural Gerontology* 30 (2015): 87–105; Kim, "Korean Ethnicity and Asian American Panethnicity," 339–40.

[81] David Lopez and Yen Espiritu, "Panethnicity in the United States: A Theoretical Framework," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 13, no. 2 (1990): 198; Kim, "Korean Ethnicity," 335.

[82] Yen Espiritu, "Race and US Panethnic Formation," in *The Oxford Handbook of American Immigration and Ethnicity*, ed. Ronald H. Bayor (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 213; Kim, "Korean Ethnicity," 335.

Chapter 3: The Search for Identity in Korean Diasporic Art

According to Elliot Eisner, art provide a shift in our view. It can become a way of knowing and understanding the world around us.[83] Through art, both the artist and the audience can question cultural values and practices to uncover the ideological structures that lay at their foundation.[84] Through its engagement with our worldview and cultural values, art becomes political in consequence. Art not only contains a narrative, but holds the power of rhetoric, which becomes consequential when aimed at our values and beliefs. When the political consequences of art are recognized, its most upsetting forms question the beliefs and values of its audience.[85] In the words of Leon Trotsky: "[…]Art, it is said, is not a mirror, but a hammer: it does not reflect, it shapes. But at the present even the handling of a hammer is taught with the help of a mirror, a sensitive film which records all the movements.[86]"

Additionally, Griselda Pollock argues that art as a social practice reflects on, constructs, and redefines definitions, identities and views of the world one may hold.[87] For instance, feminist artists are able to address aspects and experiences of women's lives through art.[88] Art thus becomes a powerful subversive tool of our consciousness.[89]

This chapter focuses on the role of the artist and art in identity politics within a diasporic context. Especially female artists from minority backgrounds can help voice the issues they deal with in daily life that are often left out of the mainstream and "high" artworld.

3.1 Art and Identity Politics

Searching for and defining one's cultural and personal identity is a process of constant development for diasporic Koreans. Lucy Lippard argues that creating art can be instrumental

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[83] Elliot W. Eisner, *The Arts and the Creation of Mind* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2002); Caruso, "Art as a Political Act," (2005), 77.

[84] Parker and Pollock, *Old Mistresses: Women, Art and Ideology*.

[85] Arthur C. Danto, *Beyond the Brillo Box: The Visual Arts in Post-Historical Perspective* (University of California Press, 1998); Caruso, "Art As A Political Act," (2005) 73.

[86] Leon Trotsky cited in Francis Frascina, Charles Harrison, and Deirdre Paul, *Modern Art and Modernism: A Critical Anthology* (SAGE publications, 1982), 209.

[87] Pollock, *Vision and Difference: Feminism, Femininity and the Histories of Art*.

[88] Parker and Pollock, *Old Mistresses: Women, Art and Ideology*.

[89] Eisner, *The Arts and the Creation of Mind*; Caruso, "Art as a Political Act," (2005) 77.

for minority groups in the US in connecting to their identities, because art carries both social and aesthetic meanings.[90]

For example, Asian American artists use their art to explore their own life experiences and use this for their artistic vision. Visual artist allow for the resurface of images that may have been banned or forgotten, consequently highlighting aspects of identity that feed their pride and self-esteem. By drawing from their own beliefs and values, personal memory, and cultural history, their art can help them shape their identity. The social and aesthetic meaning of art allow the artists to connect their own life experiences to larger cultural values. This way their art enables them to connect to who they are, how they express themselves, and provide pride and a feeling of accomplishment. [91]

Furthermore, hybrid experiences can also influence the aesthetics of an art piece, although the influence of power relations in such a case cannot be ignored. Even in cases where the aesthetics of a certain cultural background are damaged by the dominant culture of the society in which the artist lives, the artist is often still able to create a sense of belonging to either culture, if not somewhere in between.[92]

3.2 The importance of Subjectivities

In Korean art history, it is often the types of works associated with women that are excluded from the Korean art canon. In *Questioning Women's Place in the Canon of Korean Art History*, Charlotte Horlyck explains that this is partly caused by art historians favoring the 'higher' named artist over the 'lower' unnamed artist. The named artists were usually men; thus, men's artistic production has always taken precedence in art historical writings over that of women.[93] For instance, most embroidery and textile work, which are often made by a woman's hand, are excluded from the canon of Korean art history. This exclusion of traditionally female works highlights the contrast between works created in domestic spheres and those created by professionally trained artists. Social circumstances have led to these hierarchical distinctions between various art styles, and they keep influencing our understanding of Korean cultural practices.[94]

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[90] Lippards, *Mixed Blessings: New Art in a Multicultural America*.

[91] Lippards; Caruso, “Art As A Political Act,” (2004), 65-66.

[92] Lippards; Caruso, (2004), 66.

[93] Charlotte Horlyck, “Questioning Women’s Place in the Canon of Korean Art History,” in *Gender, Continuity, and the Shaping of Modernity in the Arts of East Asia, 16th–20th Centuries*, 2017, 243.

[94] Horlyck, 245.

3.2.1 Serving the "otherized gaze"

Yvonne Low argues how the position of women artists is crucial to recover their subjectivities, histories, and contributions to art histories. The creation of the category 'women's art' leads to a divergence from male-centered discourse in art history, while also challenging it. By serving the otherized or female gaze, these artists subvert the male gaze and redefine femininity in their works of art.[95]

Some female Korean diasporic artists, in particular those living in the US, have been the focus of various research projects about the artistic expression of identity. For example, Hwa Young Choi Caruso's research compared the artworks of Korean and Korean American female artists Suk Nam Yun (Yun Sŏk-nam) and Yong Soon Min (Min Yŏng-sun) in terms of their expressions of cultural, self- and gender identity.[96] The artworks of these women, she argues, are fundamentally political. Both women aim to start a discussion on the issues they (and many others like them) face as Korean women in Korean and American society. By addressing the various power relations in their artworks, and participating in political activism, these women have gained a platform on which to speak out for others who cannot do the same.

3.2.2 Generational differences

There is also a correlation between the generation of the artist, and the subject of their art. For example, in Yookyoung Choi's dissertation on globalization and ethnic identity, she argues that there is an enormous difference between the art of Theresa Hak Kyung Cha and Yoon Soon Min on the one hand, and Nikki S. Lee on the other. The first two women were born in de early 1950s and immigrated from South Korea to the US as young children in the early 1960s. The extreme economic conditions and political turmoil in Korea after the Korean war being the main motivators for their immigration. While dealing with discrimination in the US, both of them were drawn to the civil rights movement, and they started to address their concerns about the position of female and ethnic identity in a white-centric patriarchal society. A common characteristic shared between both their artworks then, are the expressions

[95] Yvonne Low, "Troubling the Gaze: The Writers and Zhiyin of 'Women's Art,'" *Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art* 6, no. 1 (2019): 97.

[96] Caruso, "Art As A Political Act,"(2004).

of fear, pain and loss associated with their traumatic experiences as immigrants, and the collective trauma of Korean society in the twentieth century.[97]

Nikki S. Lee on the other hand, is born in South Korea some twenty years later in 1970. Unlike Cha and Min, Lee's generation did not experience the trauma of colonial occupation and the Korean war first hand. Instead, they experienced the benefits of economic growth and globalization. Lee also immigrated to the US at twenty four, and has taken to challenge the notion of settling in American society as an immigrant. Instead, Lee's art expresses her desire to position herself as a transnational Asian immigrant, who can freely move and maintain ties across national borders. Instead of expressing pain and loss, her work tends to celebrate her fluid identity.[98]

3.3 Diasporic Art as Paradox

Through their art, diasporic artist can visualize and share the day-to-day reality of living in diasporic communities. This way, their art questions binary worldviews, and allows us to look beyond such simplistic narratives. For example, the experiences and illustrative accounts of Korean diasporic artists serve to question the efforts of North and South Korean national efforts to manage cultural collective belonging that have led to the notion of a homogenous Korean identity.[99]

In general, a common characteristic of Korean diasporic art is the artists' exploration of a shared (national) history of trauma, suffering and displacement. Through the reconstruction of memories of these events, Korean diasporic art can often approach these topics from a nostalgic point of view. Thus, paradoxically both undermining nation-centered narratives, and emphasizing notions of national culture and belonging for those living in diasporic communities.[100] In *Paradox of diasporic art from there: Antidote to master narrative of the nation,* Hijoo Son discusses an exhibition on Korean diasporic art held at the Kwangju Biennale in 2002. The exhibition featured twenty-four artists from five Korean diasporic communities. Through an analysis of their works, Son found that the work of the diasporic artists in the exhibition present as a paradox: they tend to portray concepts of

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[97] Yookyoung Choi, "Globalization And Ethnic Identity In The Art Of Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, Yong Soon Min, And Nikki S. Lee" (University of Maryland, 2012), 210–12.

[98] Choi, 212–13.

[99] Son and Rhee, "Introduction to "diasporic Art and Korean Identity ""

[100] Son, 154.

national culture, cultural and national belonging, while simultaneously undermining the dominant national narrative that views the diaspora as an extension of the homeland.[101]

For example, some of the artists from the Japanese Korean artist association Areum (Arŭm) that participated in the 2002 Kwangju Biennale address themes of Zainichi intergenerational tensions in their artworks. Hijoo Son argues that many of the artists, as active members of the association, deal with identity in a context of dominant ideology. Therefore, commonly reinforcing narratives of national suffering, and longing to return to the homeland, despite different personal views between the older and younger generations.[102]

Key here, is the notion of hybrid or flexible identification that comes from both the physical and psychological distance between 'the homeland' and 'the diaspora.' This perspective allows these artists to reflect on social and political in the homeland. Similar to a South Korean national historical perspective on migration however, this type of narrative is very much still nation-centered, with the diasporic community considered to be an extension of the homeland.[103] Instead of taking agency away from those living in diasporic communities by viewing them as migrants loyal to the homeland, and helping to develop Korea from abroad, a shift in focus is needed. This focus places the Korean diasporic community at its center. To identify what it means to be part of this community; the complexity of these identification processes needs to be addressed. This is where the work of diasporic artists is extremely helpful, since they can convey the range of identification processes and issues diasporic residents face in their daily life.[104]

[101] Son, 153–200.

[102] Son, 179–83.

[103] A term that Hijoo Son translates to '*finding nation outside the nation'*, Son, 158.

[104] Son, 158.

Chapter 4: Contemporary Korean Diasporic artist Suyeon Na

Suyeon Na is a Korean-born visual artist who currently lives and works in New York and Tokyo. In the artist statement on her website, she explains that through her artwork she explores the psychology of the self and the intricate world around her. Inspired by imagery of mythology, Korean folklore and her own experiences in the contemporary world, she has experimented with various materials such as magazine images, elaborate coloring and textures to create (often female) figures that reflect on social issues of love, gender, migration and cultural changes[105]. The centrality of personal, cultural and gender identity in Na's work exemplifies how she is actively involved with contemporary social, cultural and political issues. Her art becomes a space to reflects on her experiences as a female Korean immigrant and artist within the Korean diaspora in the US and Japan. She has participated in numerous exhibitions within South Korea, the Unites States, Japan and India.

4.1 Introduction

Suyeon Na was born in Seoul, South Korea in 1980, where she lived until she was 26. Na told me that she liked to draw manga style figures when she was young, and decided early on to pursue art by attending an art high school. And after finishing high school she attended Seoul National University, where she majored in Korean painting, and received a BFA in 2003.

In 2006, she moved to New York City to study painting at Pratt Institute, receiving an MFA two years later. After graduation, Na continued to live in New York for the next ten years. After graduating she had many plans for her future career but she experienced a discrepancy between the possibilities and the reality of her situation. In reality, she struggled with understanding living in this new society, and communicating with others because she did not share the cultural and linguistic literacy of those born and raised in the US. Consequently, she experienced difficulty in receiving funding and work opportunities. In the interview, she explained that these struggles actually made her try to stay in New York even harder. And she continued to live and work in the city for over a decade in total, before moving to Japan in 2019.

She is currently living in Tokyo with her husband and child, where the consequences of Korea's colonial history with Japan still influence her relationships with Japanese people.

[105] Suyeon Na, "Suyeon Na: About the Artist," 2021, http://www.suyeonna.com/resume.

For the most part, she explained to me, similar to how she did not feel fully "Korean" in Korean society, most of her friends do not feel fully "Japanese". This, she concluded, was also the reason why the majority of them felt more at home in the US, where they did not have to identify with one of two cultures.

Ultimately though, she reflects back on her time in the US and her life in Japan by acceptance of that fluid middle ground: "But I think now I [am] kind of happy […] just being a foreigner […] wherever I live."

4.1.1 Using Multimedia

Though specialized in painting, Na is a multimedia visual artist, and she has tried out various forms of creation. She has created installation projects using embroidery and textiles, such as Comradeship, City of Fata Morgana and Life is Everywhere[106]. In these works she plays with the different textures and colors of the fabric, and the light and perspective to create a specific narrative and ambiance. In one of her projects called Clothes of Memory[107], for example, she painted images of people on hanbok, a Korean style of clothing, made from rice paper. She visited various places in New York City, and would take photos wearing the piece. Because the fabric is very prone to crinkling, all of the folds and crinkles that the hanbok got over time during this project, has become part of the piece.

One of the biggest changes she experienced while living and working in the US was letting go of "authenticity" invoked through materials from Korea, stating "I know some Korean artists who majored in Korean painting and lived in New York still use traditional materials., through ordering and shipping from Korea or visiting and bring them in person. But it didn't make sense to me. I couldn't find the reason I should stick to the material to maintain the concept of "Korean painting". I've experimented various kinds of materials to suit my taste so far, and the process itself was very enjoyable."[108]

Even when working on paintings, Na prefers to use a variety of materials and techniques. She incorporates pieces of fabric, cut-outs from magazines and newspapers, and parts of photos in her work. In such collages she redefines the boundaries between what are often considered different forms of art. Like mentioned in chapter 3, textile is often thought of as "women's crafts" , and categorized differently from "high art": paintings. These different

[106] Suyeon Na, "Installation," accessed May 7, 2023, http://www.suyeonna.com/life-is-everywhere-installation.

[107] Suyeon Na, "Clothes of Memory," accessed May 10, 2023, http://www.suyeonna.com/clothes-of-memories.

[108] Quote from my interview with Suyeon Na (2022).

fabrics also come from various cultures, thus turning her work into a literal blend of different cultural and social products.

4.2 Search for the Self through multimedia visual art

The following section discusses major themes found in Na's work. Section 4.2.2 then turns to a selection of three artworks, and offers a visual analysis of these pieces, illustrating these themes and other characteristics in Na's work. The selection of artworks from 2013 to 2022 are based on their representation of all major themes found throughout Na's work. They're discussed in chronological order, to highlight the changes in Na's perspective throughout the last decade,.

4.2.1 Visualizing human psychology: discussing themes, and prominent figures

Na characterizes her work as an exploration of psychology of the self in the contemporary world. This way, she combines various aspects, memories, and experiences from her personal life to question what it is like to be human. She is mostly influenced by her environment and personal experiences. Therefore, as her own experiences and perspective shifts and changes, this is reflected in her work.

Whereas much of her earlier work is centered around societal expectations and beauty standards for women, a gradual shift in her work can be seen throughout the years. In recent years she includes more images of a mother and child, and incorporated body parts, such as breasts, as decorative and playful patterns. Generally, the female body in her work has gone from the visual subject challenging the viewer to question the impact of social beauty standards, to taking up a more supportive role to sustain and take care of a new generation.

Additionally, Na draws inspiration from folktales and mythological stories. The way these manifest in her work is usually drawn from her childhood memories. She explains that "If something in my life happens, it often connects my imagination and the stories I heard when I was young. When I make art, I just follow images that comes to mind."[109]

These memories, mixed in with current life experiences, lead to an interesting blend that showcases the fluid nature of the borders between what is "real" and what is "imagined". Lastly, Na draws from different environments. The combination of urban structures and Islamic-inspired geometrical shapes on the one hand, and animals, plants, and natural shapes

[109] Quote from my interview with Suyeon Na (2022).

on the other hand makes for an interesting visual representation of how these (different) worlds can work together and each serve to make the other stand out more.

Figure 1. Suyeon Na, *Welcome!*, 2013, Acrylic on 12x18" wooden panels.

Figure 2. Suyeon Na, *Seventh Day*, 2016, 39x58", watercolor, gouache, sequin, collage of paper and fabric on paper.

4.2.2 Visualizing Identity: a Discussion of Three Works

Welcome (2013)

Welcome (figure 1) consists of three rows with five wooden panels each. On each panel, a doll-like female figure is portrayed naked in front of a bright pink background. The figures consist of a variety of different hair styles and colors, skin colors, and accessories, suggesting their "image" to consist of factors both to do with personal preferences and ethnic or cultural background. Despite their differences, all of the figures have two things in common: they all appear to have suffered injuries. And they are all naked, exposed to the viewer, who can now see the wounds that they have tried to bandage. Perhaps because their wounds are still fresh, or maybe the bandages serve as a way to cover up their wounds, not wanting to show them to the viewer despite it being impossible to hide them completely. It is unclear how they got their wounds. Are these injuries inflicted by another party, or are they perhaps self-inflicted?

This collection of figures comments on the strict social beauty standard for women, which gives us a glimpse in the possible reason behind their injuries. It seems reasonable to assume they obtained their injuries in an attempt to conform to these beauty standards.

In seeing these female figures, we cannot help but see them through their bodies. In a way they have been reduced to their naked-form. We as the viewers do not know what specific society these figures represent, but they all seem to have a similar body-type, completely hairless apart from the hair on their head, which seems to have been carefully styled, conforming to social beauty standards. Despite their apparent "beauty" though, it is clear that these figures have not stayed unscathed from these standards. Against the single color pink background, they become object of the viewer's gaze, consequently also leading to a questioning of their individual stylistic choices as a result of social beauty standards.

Seventh day (2016)

Seventh day (figure 3) shows a female and male figure wearing very elaborately decorated purple and blue hanbok respectively. The male figure on the left stands with his back turned towards the viewer, and the female figure on the right looks right past the viewer while sniffing a lotus flower. With her left hand she tilts a gourd filled with water, and waves full of orange carps flow into the distance behind her, separating the two human characters from each other. On her left is a pair of ducks, the same ones also found in *I found my happiness in a strange place* (figure 5), symbolizing a married couple. The painting is characterized by its abundance of different colors, and patterns.

In the interview, Na explains that this piece was inspired by her experience being in a long-distance relationship: "[…] my situation somehow reminded me of the Ch'ilsŏk story[110], the folk tale I heard when I was young. I was thinking of the story while I was drawing all the mystical animals and characters in *Seventh Day*. But I found out later that the real story of Ch'ilsŏk was very different from what I remembered. The animals and the characters I drew were very different from the original one. I was surprised that many of them didn't exist in the original story."[111]

Seventh Day showcases how memories and imagination can blend together to visualize a narrative relevant to the artist's life living abroad. And this work also touches upon one of the aspects central to diaspora; a network of long-distance relations that transcend national borders. While such transnational connections allowing for more freedom to travel and connect to different areas and cultures, this piece shows that it can also be difficult to connect to and meet up with acquaintances, friends, and loved ones when they live so far away. This is an increasingly relevant topic, since global and transnational connections and relationships are more and more common as a result of globalization. While the internet may allow people to talk more frequently, it cannot (as of yet) replace the feeling of meeting in the same physical space. So, this piece asks us the important question: "how do we deal with that as humans?" Leaving the question open for viewers to interpret, we can see the undertones of sadness in *Seventh Day*, because the characters have not found a solution yet either.

[110] Ch'ilsŏk is a Korean folktale about a couple that was only allowed to see each other on the seventh day of the seventh month.

[111] Quote from my interview with Suyeon Na (2022).

Figure 5. Suyeon Na, *I found my happiness in a strange place*, 2022, 14x21", watercolor, gouache, color pencil, collage on paper.

I found my happiness in a strange place (2022)

In this piece, two adult ducks are sleeping on the second floor of a small house filled with children's toys. In front of them lies a little duckling, fast asleep. The house is surrounded by yellow blooming flowers in the front, and large pink cherry blossom trees in the back, under a dark sky full of stars. The picture suggests a calm and happy little family, sleeping soundly at night. Except, are they? Despite the peaceful house, the dark night sky and the two enormous cracks in the ground below the house suggest danger and darkness lurking in the background, perhaps ready to destroy the tranquility of the duck-family and their house at any time. Though the ground is held together by pieces of rope, it does not imply a sturdiness that will prevent the cracks from opening up even further when the next earthquake strikes.

Na explains that this piece is inspired by the frequent earthquakes she experienced in Japan, and the anxiety she feels for raising her child in such an potentially dangerous environment. Yet, it is also this same place where she has found her happiness, living with her family. This is the place where both positive and negative experiences take place, showing the complexity of her daily life living in Japan. She is happy but also anxious about the earthquakes, aware of the fragile nature of the peace she has found. Thus, the house with its family of ducks and the pretty surroundings represent both the physical space in which Na is living, as well as a visual manifestation of how she feels: her imagined space. As viewers, we know that the peace in this work will never be destroyed, yet the uneasiness we feel knowing that it might is perhaps the most unsettling. Is it the world around us, or our own fears and imaginations about its potential that can do the most harm? With this question, Na bridges the gap between her inner most feelings and her surroundings, her loved ones and the environment in which they live.

4.3 (Re-)defining boundaries: a 'harmonious and unique cultural hybrid'

The works discussed above showcase a combination of different types of materials and art forms. Visually, each work consists of a blend of different painting styles as well, from symmetric and stylistic shapes to more realistic looking and detailed figures. The chronological order highlights their thematic changes in line with Na's perceptual shift and change in her daily life and environment over the last decade.

Like other diasporic artist, Na uses her work to explore her own psychology and identity, while also questioning existing structures, such as beauty standards, and power relations, highlighting the influences of her experiences as both a Korean-born artist and woman. Through her art, Na actively engages with these questions, and explores how different forms of identities can come together to form what she refers to as a "harmonious and unique cultural hybrid.[112]"

Na's work shows how her perspective, and therefore her memory, is shaped through her interaction with the world around her. The fact that Na has drawn inspiration from various mythologies, cultural backgrounds and products, shows how she has positioned herself between various cultural identities. Notions of traveling and movement that come with this fluid identity also align with diaspora and transnational connections, highlighted by visual reminders such as suitcases.

Na's own experiences living in South Korea, and the Korean diaspora in the US and Japan shows how Na transcends the boundaries of binary and rigid national identities. As an artist and immigrant living within transcultural settings, she presents through her work acceptance and exploration of identity that questions such rigid boundaries and embraces fluidity and connection.

Her work bridges the individual and collective, constituted in the interactions with her (social) environment. She explores the nature of humanity through her own personal experiences, combined with folktales and mythology. At the same time, she questions networks of power and the consequences of labels and expectations defined by others.

Na shows us through her work how complex diasporic relations with identity are, emphasizing the impact of connections with those around us, and how they can help us redefine and shape our own identities. By investigating her own psychology she explores what shapes us as humans in our contemporary world. Ultimately, especially in a globalizing

[112] Suyeon Na, "Statement about the Artist," Suyeon Na: visual artist, accessed November 11, 2021, http://www.suyeonna.com/statement.

world, identities do not stand on their own, but are interwoven in a comprehensive web of connections. By visualizing her own experiences as a Korean woman and visual artist who migrated across the Korean diaspora, she shows us her exploration of this complex network of relations. Through her artwork, both Suyeon Na and her audience are able to question the upholding of nation-centered cultural values of authenticity, and social gender roles that affect what it means to be a female artist in the Korean diaspora. This perspective identifies what it means to be part of this community. Artists living in the diaspora, such as Suyeon Na, are important, to convey the range of identification processes and issues diasporic residents face in their daily life.

Conclusion

This thesis has investigated how Korean contemporary and diasporic women artists express identification processes in their work. With regard to identification processes, the thesis has drawn from Richard Jenkins's three-ordered identity theory that looks at humans and their world. The individual order, which looks at the human world as a collection of embodied individuals, the interaction order, which centers on the relationships between individuals, and the institution order, the human world as constituted in patterns and organizations emphasize the similarity and interlinkage between individual and collective identification processes. The emphasis on the difference in perspective offers a less rigid framework for understanding the complexity of artistic expressions of identity.

Sociological art theories argue that interactions between people, objects and institutions in daily life are fundamental in writing history and can influence the meaning and reception of artworks. Within interactive and transcultural settings then, artworks are part of a network of relationships, in which the specific social and historical conditions influence the reception and experiencing of the artwork.

Chapter one and two have provided a background on identification processes that are relevant when discussing Korean diaspora, in particular the Korean American and Korean Japanese Diasporas. Because diasporas stand at the boundaries of nation-states, national narratives are more likely to discuss diasporas as extensions of the homeland. As a result, these narratives often take away agency from those living in the diasporic communities. However, the fact that diasporas are placed at the boundaries of nation-states, also means they are crucial places for discussing (national/ethnic) identities.

After setting out the multi-layered relations between diaspora and identity, this thesis contextualizes the experiences and artworks of Korean contemporary visual artist Suyeon Na within identity politics of Korean diasporic communities in Japan and the United States. Suyeon Na expresses a fluid identity that expands beyond national borders, which is also a common characteristic found in her artwork. She explores the human psychology through her own experiences and imagination. An analysis of five of Na's artworks shows that her shift in perception on life throughout her own life is reflected in the themes she addresses in her artwork. Additionally, by including different materials and patterns from various cultural backgrounds, and by including different art practices a characteristic of Na's work is the redefining of boundaries.

Na's work showcases how there are way more factors playing into the identity of diasporic communities than just the binary "home(land) and away". Each wave of immigration is characterized by different motivations and historical settings, resulting in a variety of perspectives on life in the diaspora, depending mostly on each generation. But the society these diasporic communities live in also heavily influence day-to-day life. Consequently, these differences between contexts also lead to a variety of perspectives on identity within diasporic communities.

The diasporic relation with identity is thus complex and constantly changing. Diasporic artists can help us understand the reality of this complex diasporic identity through visualization of difficult concepts and the exploration of their own relation with diaspora and identity. In our contemporary world where nation-states are the norm, diasporas form and especially interesting context for discussions on identity, because they are places that Barth characterizes as boundaries (as opposed to the center). These are the places where identities are discussed and formed. Seeing diasporas as an extension of the homeland not only underestimates the complex nature of identity processes in these diasporas, but also takes away agency from the diasporic communities by reducing them simply to national subjects that have settled out of the homeland but are still very much connected to it. Instead, focusing on the internal discourse of diasporic communities can help us understand the complex nature of identification processes and daily life in these diasporic communities.

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