

## Predicament of Place

Predicament of Place – Yong Soon Min  
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Within the past decade, diaspora has become an established area of scholarship within academia and in cultural studies discourses and in the process expanded far beyond its early association with the Jewish diaspora. Outside of academia, however, the general public holds at best only vague impression about the meaning of diaspora. Since working on this project, I have also learned that diaspora is a relatively unknown term in Korean usage and therefore very difficult to translate into Korean language with any degree of satisfaction.

The flurry of interviews I've conducted with the media in Korea about the exhibition confirmed my apprehension that the general perception of this term in Korea is strongly associated with the notion of immigration that is always tinged with great sense of pain, loss and confusion brought about by the separation from the motherland. While this experience of immigration may be an undeniable dimension of diaspora for some, it's been difficult to promote a more nuanced and multi-faceted understanding of diaspora, especially when soundbites are the name of the game. There persists a common misunderstanding that diaspora is about a fixed binary relationship: that between the home, native, a place of origin and authenticity on the one hand and the inauthentic, homesick immigrants living abroad, on the other hand.

Inside academia, there has been an explosion of writings and theories about all facets of travel and movements of individuals and of peoples in terms of tourism, nomadism, exile, refugees, immigration, diaspora and everything in between and beyond. Travel and movements across physical boundaries and in the virtual realm for many has become an increasingly common and affordable experience for many, aided by technological advancements. Travel is perhaps the most visible and personalized, everyday, experiential facet of globalization. Some view different forms of movement as part of a non-hierarchical continuum in which the blurring or fluidity between one form to another is the most salient feature. Others place great significance in the distinction between different forms of travel, qualitative difference between individual versus groups, those that engage issues of national identity and sovereignty over those that don't.

The symposium title, "Predicament of place" is inspired by James Clifford's Predicament of Culture, a groundbreaking work in Anthropology published in 1988. Questions raised in that volume are still relevant to our focus, such as "who has the authority to speak for any group's identity and authenticity? What are the essential elements and boundaries of a culture? and How do self and "the other" clash in the encounters of ethnography, travel and modern interethnic relations.

The shift in emphasis from the category of culture to space reflects the broader spatial shift in cultural studies that has given new weight to the geographies of movement, globalization and the "production of space."

The French theorist, Henri Lefevre has been one of the key proponents of spatial shift which he sees as an attempt to bridge the gap between metaphysical and ideological considerations of the meaning of space to its experience in the everyday life. He has been critiqued for fetishizing the spatial but I propose that his work is nevertheless useful to our discussion here. I will read a long, collaged excerpt from his seminal publication of 1976, The Production of Space (so bear with me):

"The dialectic is back on the agenda. But it is no longer Marx's dialectic, just as Marx's was no longer Hegel's....The dialectic today no longer clings to historicity and historical time, or to a temporal mechanism such as "thesis-antithesis" or "affirmation-negation-negation of the negation." ...This then is what is new and paradoxical: the dialectic is no longer attached to temporality. Therefore, refutations of historical materialism or of Hegelian historicity cannot function as critiques of the dialectic. To recognize space, to recognize what "takes place" there and what it is used for, is to resume the dialectic; analysis will reveal the contradictions of space... in the route from mental to social space...[in the ] specific contradictions...between centres and peripheries...in political science, in the theory of urban reality, and in the analysis of all social and mental processes... We are not speaking of a science of space, but of a knowledge (a theory) of the production of space.... this most general of products.

In other words, Lefevre asserts that there is no unspatialized social interaction. That is to say that social reality is not just coincidentally spatial, existing in space, it is presuppositionally and ontologically spatial. He theorized concepts of lived space, conceived space, representation of space and the space of representation, ambivalence \_\_\_\_\_ both and \_\_\_\_\_ and the dialectic of the center/periphery. One of his famous quotations is "I enjoy my life between the centers and the peripheries; I am at the same time peripheral and central but I take side with the periphery," a positionality that he would term the space of radical openness. He extolled what he termed "critical ambidexterity of the resident alien:" the insider who purposely chooses to remain outside. Many have faulted him for his lack of accounting his own privileged position as a male intellectual and for the very real social and political limits that are imposed one's agency.

The centre/periphery dialectic takes on a very real resonance here in Gwangju, where the legacy of the 1980 May 18th uprising and massacre became the touchstone for democratic mobilization throughout South Korea. Gwangju had historically been a vital cultural center with a strong legacy of political opposition to the power base in Seoul but it had long suffered disenfranchisement, discrimination and marginalization. With the May 18 event, Gwangju became the mouse that roared and affected a sea change in the Korean political picture, eventually winning this prize of representing South Korea in the global contemporary art scene. The differences and the problematic fixed logic

of the center/periphery permeates so much of the consciousness in the interaction between Seoul and Gwangju.

Trinh T. Minh Ha, in her writings about the anarchy of difference develops a strategy of displacement: "without a certain work of displacement," the margins can easily recomfort the center in goodwill and liberalism. The margins are "our fighting grounds" but also "their sites of pilgrimage...while we turn around and claim them as our exclusive territory, they happily approve, for the divisions between margin and center should be preserved, and as clearly demarcated as possible, if the two positions are to remain intact in their power relations." By actively displacing and disordering difference, by insisting that there are "no master territories," one struggles to prevent "this classifying world" from exerting its ordered, binary, categorical power.

Another U.S. based scholar Gayatri Spivak repositions herself as a bricoleur, a preserver of discontinuities, an interruptive or interrupting critic of the categorical logic of colonizer- colonized, elite-subaltern, global-local, center-periphery, First world-Third world. For her, the centre is always constituted in terms of it's own marginality. However, having said that, in terms of the hegemonic historical narrative, certain peoples have always been asked to cathect the margins so others can be defined as central.... In that kind of situation the only strategic thing to do is to absolutely present oneself at the centre...

Ongoing debates and critiques of spatiality and about the relationship between diasporas and nationalisms and sovereignty abound. What is theoretically innovative, and politically crucial is the need to think beyond the narratives of originary and intitial subjectivities and to focus on those moments or processes that are produced in the articulation of cultural difference.

Globalization will no doubt be central to today's discussions and it has certainly been central to the inception of the Gwangju Biennale, part of the larger proliferation of government sponsored or sactioned international exhibitions in all parts of the world. But lingering questions remain as to whether is it a paradigm shift or whether is just more and faster accretion and power of capitalism. There is no denying the brute force of globalization: It's symptomatic of a universal crisis made possible by the postwar emergence, for the first time in history, of a single, increasingly integrated global economy that flows over , under and around the borders, laws and ideologies of nations states. Are WTOs and IMFs the "vertigo of capitalism?"

Based on demographics alone, one can readily claim that our sense of place and geography has been profoundly changed by the phenomena of diaspora of the past millennium. Korea alone, a relatively small country, roughly 1/5 the size of the state of California, constitutes the fourth largest diaspora, following the Chinese, Jewish and Italian diasporas in terms of ratio of those who left to the numbers of those who stayed. Considering that the population in South Korea is nearly 48 million (based on 2001 census), the fact that nearly 6 million are diasporic underscores the significance of the diaspora to Korea's own

understanding of itself as a nation and a people and also suggests the enormity of the phenomena on a global scale.

Signs abound of the growing anti-immigrant sentiment to be found in Europe and in the border tightening measures undertaken in the U. S. in the aftermath of 9/11 under the figleaf of fighting terrorism. There is the oft conflated notion that immigrants contribute to rise in unemployment and crime and the erosion of nativist culture.

With my exhibition project, THERE: Sites of Korean Diaspora, I wanted to disturb/trouble this fixed binary notion of diaspora by asserting that the There is not fixed in either Korea or in the diaspora and that the vantage point of the HERE by extension is also in the diaspora. Korea is as much THERE to those living in Almaty, Los Angeles, Osaka, Sao Paulo and Yanji, the five focal sites of this project. This symposium further seeks to displace the binary logic by looking at the Korean diaspora from the diasporic perspective in relation to other diasporas. In avowedly multicultural settings, there is as much or even greater movement, interaction and interdependency among multiple and diverse diasporic communities as there is among those within the same ethnicity. An interesting example of this what we learned from our research trip to Kazakhstan, that the Koreans who survived the forced relocated from Vladivostok to Kazakhstan soon excelled under the Soviet collectivized farming system and exerted a dominant influence on the other ethnic peoples in the region, such that Kurds, Kazakhs, Ukrainians, and Russians learned and spoke the Korean language.

What we learned from our research trips to the five sites is that we have more questions than answers but one overwhelming impression was that that Koreans are inventing different ways of being Korean wherever they are. One would miss out on this diversity of identities if one looks for a mirror image of a South Korean or North Korean. One could look at parts of Koreatown in Los Angeles and say that there are reminders of Seoul or that the explosion of PC bangs in Yanji were direct influence of Seoul

The complex play of identities in relation to different cultures can make all the difference. While in Japan an estimated 80% of Koreans pass for Japanese in order to minimize the effect of discrimination on their lives. In Brazil, where Japanese had early on established themselves and were regarded well by the Brazilians, it benefited early Korean immigrants to be mistaken for Japanese in order to gain easier acceptance by Brazilians. In the U.S., during the war time hysteria in which Japanese were interned in concentration camps, it was critical for Koreans to not be mistaken for Japanese. During the LA riots of 1992, some other Asians took pains to assert their non-Koreanness.

This international gathering and discussion champions intellectual interdisciplinarity and the dialectical relationship between art and the social context. We are here to discuss how various cultures intervene in the processes and places that we imagine and experience as diasporas and as diasporics. In this millennium, more than ever, in order to be a responsible local citizen, we are

required to be cultural fluent, not only of our own specificity but of the larger, global context.

I want to end on a personal is the political note: In mid March when I was here preparing for the opening, after several clear sunny days, one morning, the sun disappeared and everything seemed hazy like it often looks when my glasses are really dirty. I soon found out that it was the annual dust storm from China blanketing all of Korea. Several weeks later back in LA, I read in the LA Times about the dust storms from the Gobi dessert that were particularly fierce in recent times due to erosion and pollution, which was spreading toxins all the way to the west coast of the U.S. Typically, there was only one line in the fairly lengthy article that stated that U.S. is the world's largest polluter. There are many endless concerns about the effects of globalization, no more alarming than the increasing privatization and the exponential depletion of our finite source of drinking water. The yellow airborne particles that I breathed in that day along with the art works that I saw and handled in the gallery that traversed equal distances or more, confirmed the dramatic tangible reality of globalization. Whether one stays in place or moves around, we can never take our sense of place for granted.