

A Rhizomatic Diaspora:

Transnational Passage and the Sense of Place among Koreans in Latin America

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Transnationalism as a new form of migration has become visible since the end of the Cold War (Wimmer and Glick Schiller 2003). Accordingly, this paper explores the little examined transnational Korean communities in the South and North American countries of Argentina, Brazil, Mexico, Chile and the US. Informal estimates propose to date 50,000 Koreans in Brazil, 20,000 in Argentina, 8,000 in Mexico, 6,000 in Paraguay, and 2,000 in Chile.

Transnational theory has been developed as an alternative to the (traditional) emigration-immigration assimilation paradigm, which investigated “population movements in terms of one-way movements that result in the gradual integration of migrants into the receiving country” (Olwig 2003: 787). Initially, scholars were preoccupied with the question of what transnationalism means or entails, with reference to the nation-state. Michael Kearney maintained that “Transnational identities escape the either/or categorization” inherent in national identities (Kearney 1995: 548, 558). Now more circumspect assessment prevails. Scholars explore “the ways in which states reconfigure themselves and redefine national membership to maintain ties to and profit from their transnational constituencies” (Levitt & DeWind 2003: 568). The transnational migrants may or may not be able to overcome restrictions imposed by the nation-state.

Equally important are transnational practices, linkages, and identities, in which efforts have been made to systematically examine the extent and forms of transnational action. Both voting and remittances received much attention (Portes 2003). However, there seems to be a consensual agreement that we need to investigate transnational practices in sectors, other than political and economic ones.¹ It is my contention that “home” has been narrowly defined, referring to “homeland,” the place of origin, or “root” without much consideration of its routes.² “Networks of migrants and transnational cultural religious connections that lead to other forms of identification than national constructions are only now beginning to be examined within migration studies” (Wimmer and Glick Schiller 2003: 598). The same criticism can be applied to the notion of “identity.” When these concepts are defined or reconceptualized in a different way that transcends beyond essentialism, transnationalism may indicate a qualitatively different one.

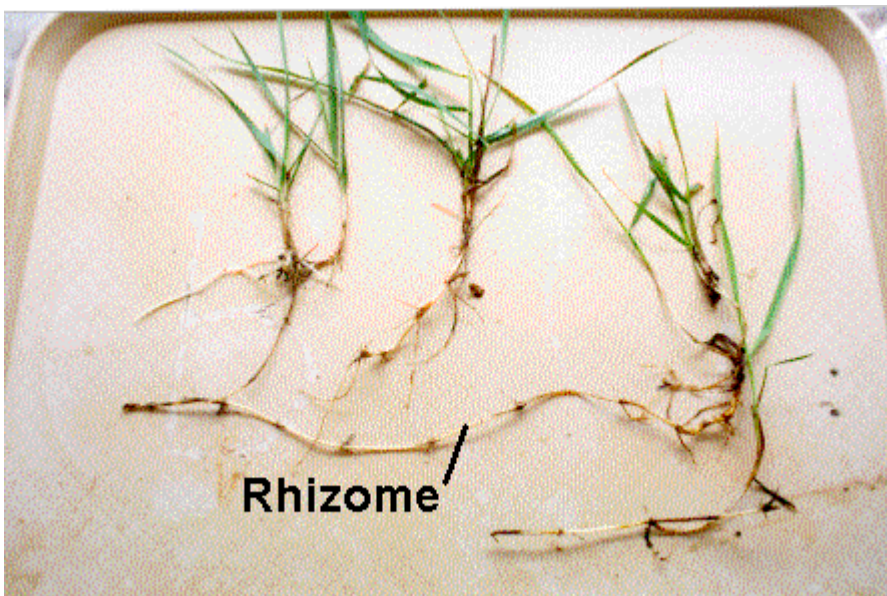
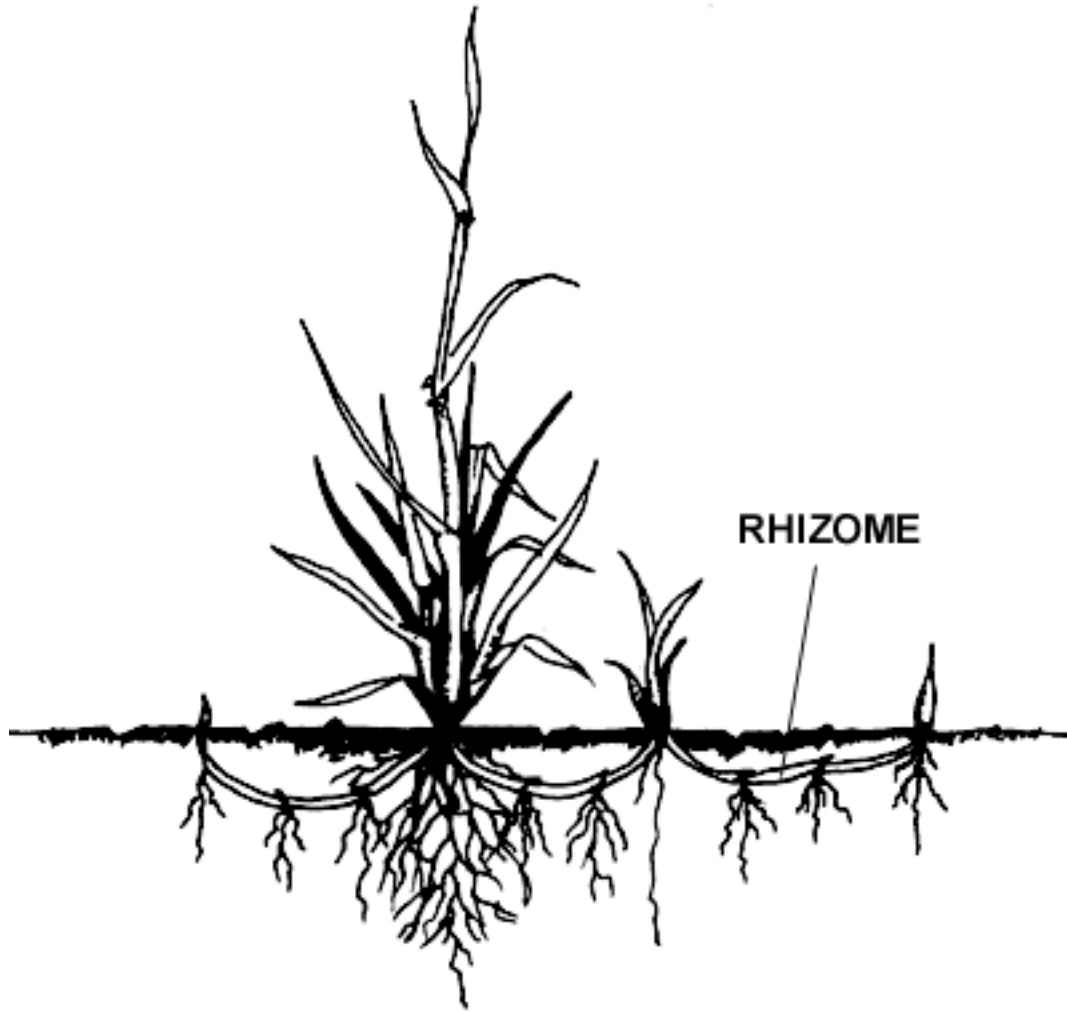
Transnational communities are varyingly conceptualized as a transnational circuit (Roger Rouse) and transnational social field (Levitt, Peggy and Nina Glick Schiller 2004). Recently, Lyn Stephen (2007) proposed Arturo Escobar’s idea of “meshworks”—interlinked, unplanned, diverse networks that operate autonomously and self-sufficiently—as a useful way to understand cross-border grassroots activities in which these communities engage (in). However, meshworks is a bit general to capture directionality or specific characteristics within transnational communities. The Korean migratory process can be explained as a type of “serial migration, what Lok Siu calls,” as “a circuitous and open-ended process that entails crossing multiple national borders over an extended period of time and often over generations as well” (2005: 86). While “serial

migration” gives the impression of something rather stable, gradual, and almost predictable, the term fails to explain the mechanics of migration/how migration works.

These South American immigrants have shown a high propensity to re-migrate to countries such as the US, Canada, South Korea, and Mexico, exhibiting tendencies of a “rhizomatic diaspora” that cover three or more bases of relocation. A rhizome is characteristically the horizontal stem of a plant (like the ginger and bamboo) that sends out roots and shoots its nodes from underground.³ My rhizomatic diaspora includes dialectical contradictions, interruption, crisis, or mutation, unlike evolutionary phenomena.

Similarly, Paul Gilroy (1993) used the metaphor of the rhizome, originally a term developed by Deleuze and Guattari (1987). Counter to the conventional metaphor of the tree and its roots as a “homeland,” he urges us to see “a set of dispersed locations of power rather than one singular all-powerful center,” highlighting the interaction among diasporic blacks in Britain, the US, and the Caribbean and the expressive culture generated by those interactions. While Deleuze and Guattari and Gilroy apply this concept of the rhizome to ideational structure and expressive culture, I am applying it to material reality, that is, how migratory process is culturally organized.

Based on 38 migration history and/or ethnographic interviews (summer 2008), including several family networks in Los Angeles, Buenos Aires or São Paulo, and Seoul, this paper examines how transnationalism is lived and experienced, while recognizing the influence of global economics and media.⁴



In addition to a migration/residential history that stretches across North and South Korea, South/Latin American America, and US/North America, I ask, how and why did Korean immigrants/migrants make migratory decision(s)?

In this way, narratives of migration map out a series of geographically dispersed “homes” of past and present and concurrently indicate diasporic Korean connection to those places via migration. As Siu put, “these narratives perform the dual roles of describing/reflecting and reinscribing/constituting a distinct collective experience” of being diasporic Korean (Siu 2005: 86). Also, what has been the relationship between these places and the individual, with reference to memory, nostalgia, and trauma? In their own analysis, how did their migratory process impact their identity; how has their identity evolved during their sojourn; and how is their relationship with the local/transnational Korean community? In addition, I explore to what extent transnationalism has preserved, intensified, eroded, or hybridized Korean identities. My interviewees were limited to Korean immigrants who have moved in-and-out of Latin American countries, lived in the US, and returned to South Korea. I have also included those who have re-migrated to other Latin American countries (e.g., Mexico) but have returned to South American countries. Others came by way of Latin American countries such as Paraguay and Chile. For comparative purposes, I included some of those who have remained in Latin American countries in spite of their immediate family members living outside their country of residence. My ethnographic interviews gave them a chance for retrospection: to reflect back on their lives and make sense of what happened.

Migratory Routes

In the 1970s, a group of Korean immigrants, those of which/whom originally immigrated to Argentina in the late 1960s, re-migrated to New York and Los Angeles on account of the Dirty War-related oppression and economic instability (Park 1999 & 2002). During Brazil's economic recession in 1980, Korean immigrants started to re-migrate to the US along with other Brazilians.

Although Korean immigration to Brazil and Argentina had started in the late 1960s, the Argentinean and Brazilian government had discontinued Korean immigration.⁵ Accordingly in the 1970s, an already good number of Korean immigrants in Argentina, came by way of Paraguay or in a few cases Chile. Since Argentinean economy was already going down the hill in the late 1970s, four times as more Koreans from Paraguay went to São Paulo, Brazil, than Buenos Aires, Argentina.

In Argentina, in the mid-1980s, there was a sudden influx of 20,000 immigrants from South Korea, who individually deposited US \$30,000 into the Argentinean National Bank (Banco de la Nacion) (Park 2008). Since the late 1980s, there have been a number of Koreans who went to Mexico via *tamchigi* (담치기- jumping over the wall). In the early 1990s, there were some Korean millionaires, who would send their children to the US for their education. In the mid-1990s, a significant portion of them obtained US green cards. After the Sept.11 attacks in 2001, it was increasingly difficult to travel in and out of the US, which made their children remain in the US. Almost half of the Korean immigrant population left the country for US and Mexico in the aftermath of the economic collapse in 2001. Los Angeles Times' foreign correspondent, Hector Tobar, reported that the middle-class disappeared in whirlpool of bank failures. People rioted and attacked bankers in the Buenos Aires financial district. He interviewed a 59-year-old

lady who had poured alcohol over her head and set fire to herself in the lobby of her bank after she lost most of her life savings (Los Angeles Times Dec. 5, 2008). As Korean immigrant entrepreneurs were heavily impacted by the economic crisis and brooded over safety issues in Buenos Aires, a good number of them packed and left in one or two years. Since 2004, however, some of them from both US and Mexico returned to Argentina. According to Reverend Pablo Na at one of the oldest Korean churches in Buenos Aires, since then Koreans became disillusioned, questioning their fantasy about the US. As Mrs. Jinoak Lee, staff at the Korea Times, Buenos Aires, informed me, a small number of them are still exploring other Latin American countries such as Ecuador, Peru, Bolivia, etc., armed with their diasporic economic niche. In the meantime, in Mexico, there has been an increasing number of Koreans, this time, from South Korea and the US. Similarly but more gradually in Brazil, since the late 1990s, there has not been many Koreans re-migrating to the US, but there has been an influx of people from South Korea. Finally, some started to wonder if this was the end of Korean-remigration to the US, as if this kind of experiment was over.

A variety of migratory patterns is observed: repeat migration, return migration, cyclic migration, secondary and tertiary migration. Various migratory trajectories have been identified. First, a good number of them re-migrated to the US, exhibiting the pattern of migration from the global south to the global north, a bit earlier from Buenos Aires to New York, Los Angeles, and Miami and later from São Paulo to Los Angeles and New York. We can consider this kind of migration as “hemispheric,” involving South American countries and the US. Secondly, it has become fairly routine for them to re-migrate to neighboring countries: more from Argentina to Brazil than the other way

around. A good number of them have immigrated, not directly from South Korea, but by way of Paraguay and to a lesser extent Chile. This is “regional” migration, involving neighboring or other Latin American countries. Thirdly, it has become a new trend to re-migrate to Mexico, indicating a “South-North American” migration. Fourth, some of them return to South Korea, “transoceanic” or “continental” migration. Lastly, a number of these repeat-migrants unexpectedly return to Latin American countries. Initially, a good number of them also came from the North Korea, by way of South Korea. Below are the various migratory trajectories that my interviewees went through:

1 Step

- South Korea-Argentina
- South Korea-Brazil

2 Steps

- North Korea –South Korea- Argentina
- North Korea –South Korea- Brazil
- South Korea-Brazil-US
- South Korea-Argentina-US
- South Korea-Chile-US
- South Korea-Argentina-Chile
- South Korea-Paraguay-Argentina
- South Korea-Paraguay-Brazil
- South Korea-Argentina-Brazil
- South Korea-Chile-Brazil

3 Steps

- North Korea –South Korea- Argentina-US
- North Korea –South Korea- Brazil-US
- North Korea –South Korea- Paraguay-Argentina
- South Korea-Brazil-US-Brazil
- South Korea-Argentina-US-Argentina
- South Korea-Paraguay-Argentina-US
- South Korea-Paraguay-Brazil-US
- South Korea-Paraguay-Chile-Brazil
- South Korea-Argentina-Mexico-Argentina
- South Korea-Argentina-South Korea-Argentina
- South Korea-Brazil-South Korea-US
- South Korea-Argentina-US-Mexico

4 Steps

- South Korea-Paraguay-Brazil-US-Brazil
- South Korea-Argentina-South Korea-US-Argentina
- North Korea –South Korea- Argentina-Brazil-Argentina

5 Steps

- South Korea-Argentina-Mexico-Argentina-US-Argentina

6 Steps or more

- South Korea-Paraguay-Argentina-Brazil-US-Mexico-US
- South Korea-Saudi Arabia-South Korea-Guam-South Korea-Australia-South Korea-Chile-Argentina-US-Argentina

Some took the first or second step, while others went further, taking the fifth or sixth steps by covering a wide range of countries. This doesn't include those whose immediate family members are currently living in or have business in other countries. If we look at the last migratory route of the six steps, my interviewee was born in South Korea and immigrated to Argentina by way of Paraguay. His first step, "transoceanic migration," was probably the most challenging one, from South Korea to South America, in both geographical and cultural senses in the late 1960s. He was nine years old when he immigrated to Paraguay. From Paraguay to Argentina, it was somewhat easy "regional migration." Since then, he grew up to be the first Korean medical doctor in Buenos Aires. After finishing his education, he married a woman of prominent Korean background in Brazil, moving to Sao Paul, which is another occurrence of regional migration. Eight years later, he moved to US to join his siblings, who re-migrated from Argentina; hemispheric and North American migration. But in a year he joined his other brother who had a company in Mexico City. When I met him in Mexico City back in 2004, he held an important position at a Mexican corporation where he shared with me his horrible kidnapping experience. He had been forced to withdraw \$30,000, cashing \$500 60 times from each ATM machine in order to be released. I came to hear that he and his family moved to New York after living in Mexico 13 years.

In the following sections, I will briefly explain the characteristics of various migratory locations. However, these sites should not be viewed as equal. In other words, Argentina, Brazil, Mexico, Chile, or Paraguay is not commanding the same world power like the US. The US is a world power with strong military and economic systems

as well as a large body of variegated media that disseminate American popular culture on a global basis (Olwig 2003: 794).

Migratory Sites⁶

USA. In studies of transnational migration, the receiving countries have been, overwhelmingly, the global north. Research on sociocultural dimensions of transnational migration therefore becomes limited to studies of constructions of national identity in relation to North American and European national ideologies (Olwig 2003: 791). Therefore scholars have been preoccupied with “the creation of new American citizens and the future development of American society rather than with exploring the nature of migratory movements, the socioeconomic relations and cultural values that they entail, and the various sources of identification that they may generate” (Olwig 2003: 792). Koreans’ re-migration to the US is typical migration to the global north. However, as some Korean transmigrants tend to return to South American countries, their assessment of the US is often critical. They sheepishly admit that they misunderstood aspects of US society. For instance, they did not know it was costly to educate their children in the states. They were also displeased with the lack of universal or national health care. They have plenty of horrible examples in which their friends or their family members were overcharged, died without receiving proper treatment, or returned to South America for more affordable medical treatment.

Argentina Argentina is the second largest country in Latin America after Brazil. Only 40 million people reside on a landmass 27 times bigger than the size of South Korea. Korean immigration to Argentina began in the 1960s when the government encouraged agricultural emigration. The country used to be viewed as one of the world’s most

affluent countries, along with their reputation of being Eurocentric. Yet, since the 1980s the economy had gone into a slump, with the nation being hit especially hard by a financial crisis in 2001. Until recently, gloomy news about a fragile economy came out of Argentina –possible declaration of moratorium, people on the streets in protest, rising number of the population below the poverty line, etc. At some point the number of Korean immigrants reached 40,000 or 50,000, but now it has been reduced to 20,000 or 15,000.

Brazil Korean immigrants in Argentina and other Latin American countries re-migrate to Brazil. Accordingly, one of my interviewees in São Paulo called Brazil as the last terminal in Latin America, in terms of Korean migratory movement. Brazil's strong and stable economy together with the image of "racial democracy" has been seen as alternative to Argentina. In addition, as Brazilian government lowered the amount of money for investment immigration, increasing the number of Koreans, including backpackers, who visit and sometimes settle down (Dr. Yunjung Im, personal communication). Last year's trade between Seoul and Brasilia stood at \$64 billion, up 64 percent from a year ago (Korea Times, Nov. 19, 2008). In 2008, Korean Air resumed flights from Incheon via Los Angeles to São Paulo, Brazil's economic center. Korean Air is the only airline providing nonstop services between Los Angeles and Brazil. With this direct service, the airline will strengthen its connection between Seoul and South America.

Paraguay Paraguay has been an important entry point for Koreans to immigrate to any Latin American country. In total, some 40,000 Koreans found homes and livelihoods in Paraguay. Since 1963, some have moved to other American countries such as Brazil,

Argentina and the US, which other have become citizens. To date there are approximately 6,000 Koreans in Paraguay.

Mexico Korean re-migrants turned to Mexico since late 1980s due to its relatively sizable economy. Although Mexico attracted many re-migrants from Argentina, Brazil, and other Latin American countries, a good number of them returned to where they came from. Korean re-migrants would bitterly complain about physical safety, robbery, kidnapping, hostility, Korean bashing, etc. Fortunately, under the new administration, Koreans have communicated that they felt much safer than before and that the environment is now more conducive to business. There has been an increasing number of investments by South Korean transnational corporations. Also increasing number of Korean Americans are conducting manufacturing and other businesses or working in Mexico, while some of them still reside in the US.

Chile Chile has a fairly small number of Korean immigrants, some spilled over by other Latin American countries such as Argentina. Since South Korea had the FTA agreement with Chile (2004), there has been a surge of people related to various South Korean transnational corporations. The nature of the Korean immigrant community in Chile is somewhat different from those in Argentina and Brazil. In some ways, we'd better see it as a Korean expatriate rather than an immigrant community. Those Koreans who have lived in Santiago, Chile, have complimented on the quality, but not necessarily affordable, educational system. However, it does not provide good business opportunities to Korean transmigrants, which inevitably has not attracted many Koreans.

South Korea

Although little has been documented, the Asian financial crisis in 1997 triggered the exodus of good number of South Koreans to South American as well as North American countries. As South Korea recovered its economy years after/after, it attracted ethnic returnees from South American countries.

Some returnees from Argentina are making names in South Korea for their Argentinean cultural competences. Myung-kyu Kong who taught taekwondo to Argentinean police forces and the Ecuadorian national squad in the early 1980s, for the past 10 years, is spreading tango culture in Korea. In 2003, the Argentine embassy in Seoul designated him as an ambassador for tango (Korea Times Aug. 13, 2007).

South Korean media touted model “Marco Lee,” a third-generation ethnic Korean from Argentina, who was featured on hit celebrity reality show in addition appearances in a number of TV commercials (Korea Herald Dec. 18, 2008). He and his family have lived in Argentina since his grandfather moved there in the early 1970s. He has lived in Korea for the past eight years. His handsome looks and sculptured physique contrasted with an inarticulate Korean accent and an uninhibited expression of his feelings, kept people, especially, women, glued to the television.

South Korea joined the Inter-American Development Bank in 2005 and the U.N. Economic Commission on Latin American and the Caribbean in 2007. Korea’s membership in the IDB and ECLAC is expected to add to the assistance program operated by the Korean International Cooperation Agency and the Korea Ex-Im Bank to the list of government-funded overseas development programs. The Korean government has initiated the establishment of bilateral resources cooperation commissions with Peru,

Chile, Argentina, Brazil and Mexico, and the South America Resources Center in Buenos Aires (Korea Herald Mar. 6, 2008).

Migratory Reasons

First of all, the most important reason for Korean immigrants to re-migrate has been due to various economic reasons: economic instability or recovery on the societal level; economic failure or success on the individual level. I would like to quickly add that economic instability has often to do with political instability. As far as Argentina is concerned, the critical turning point has been the economic collapse in 2001. Yet even before the economic collapse, regular, chronic economic slumps since the late 70s or 80s triggered Koreans' out-bound re-migration.⁷ It has been pretty routine to suffer through such economic crises, or what Koreans call, *kyeongje padong*, (경제파동-economic turbulences). One needs to prepare for such regular economic crises and also build a resilience to it. In other words, one needs to keep a certain amount of money in dollar savings. As one interviewee put it, it's like getting shots or vaccines before you would be hit by the imminent epidemic and get sick.

Even though economic instability may provide a context in which some Koreans might consider re-migration, it doesn't explain which Koreans decide to re-migrate. For instance, those Koreans who re-migrated to other countries such as USA or Mexico, can be divided into three different categories: First, there are those who had the US as their final destination, including many who immigrated to Argentina in the mid-1980s, *samgak imin* (삼각이민-triangular immigration); second, there are those who had failed in family businesses; and lastly, those who made it in Argentina, but felt uneasy about the future,

politically and economically, in Argentina or Brazil. Unlike the media report on Korean immigrants in Argentina and to a lesser extent in Brazil, not all of the Korean immigrants came to these South American countries in order to later re-migrate to the US. More importantly, it is an inaccurate generalization to say that all of the Koreans left these South American countries with the fortune that they made.⁸ It may be more applicable to those Koreans who immigrated to Argentina as part of an investment immigration in the mid-80s, but, unfortunately, left soon, due to the recession and also anti-Korean sentiment. This could have happened partly as a backlash to the sudden influx of Korean immigrants.

In the following, Mr. Song left for the US in the aftermath of recent economic collapse.⁹ Mr. Song immigrated to Argentina in 1987. He has been involved in clothing manufacturing business, typical of Korean immigrants in Argentina. He would remain successful, if he had not re-migrated to the US in 2002. His children left for the US; therefore he and his wife decided to follow them in the aftermath of an economic collapse in 2002. They came back to Argentina within in a year. In LA, he attempted a wholesale business. With his daughters getting married and no one else to help in the family business he ended up folding his investment, losing nearly half of a million dollars. They bought a house in La Crescenta, CA, making 50% down payment, but sold it in a year. He would say, “In the US, if you invest a million dollars, you would get back only ten thousand....There isn’t much to do with just several million dollars in the US. You need more than that.” He ended up returning his green card.

In the same structural context of Argentina’s recent economic collapse, some Koreans left for Mexico. Sergio, a clothing manufacturer, was 14 years old when he

immigrated to Argentina in 1970. He has sent his children to live abroad in the US. In the aftermath of the economic collapse, he became pessimistic of whether Argentina economy's would ever recover. At the same time, those Korean entrepreneurs who re-migrated to Mexico, were said to be doing well, thanks to a bigger (clothing manufacturing) market, there. He and his wife conducted their businesses in Mexico, from 2002 to 2004. Unfortunately, he was not aware that there were several wholesaling markets. At the start of his venture, business went very well. Then, the Mexican government started confiscating merchandise from him. His business establishment was robbed a total of three times. Around Christmas, one of his (Mexican) employees ran away with the day's taking, whom he had asked to deposit into the bank. Such instances have led Sergio to believe that Mexican society is nationalist and racist. He felt that even beggars would look down upon Koreans. After the business folded, in addition to all the trauma experienced, they were glad to have resumed their business, on a much smaller scale, in Buenos Aires.¹⁰ In 2006, he was bursting into tears at the lack of recovery, but in 2008, he seemed to be in a lot better shape.

In the case of Brazil, until early 1990s, it was popular to organize *kye* (계-rotating credit association) for \$10,000 or \$100,000. In 1990, due to the economic crisis, bank accounts were frozen, drastically affecting Korean businessmen. Many failed in businesses. Some Korean entrepreneurs went to the US or South Korea, for economic reason. Other Koreans re-migrated to the US mainly for two reasons: children's education and safety issue. Virtually all Koreans experienced hold-ups, though less so now. To make matters worse, once you are recognized in the community as being successful, he or she would be targeted for kidnapping.¹¹ According to Reverend

Yunchul Hwang at Oriental Mission Church in São Paulo, “since late 90s, Korean-remigration to US has virtually stopped, except (for) very struggling people....Koreans have become smarter. Some Koreans in the US are returning to São Paulo. Some children are doing worse academically or acquiring bad habits of drug use or sexual degradation in the US.”¹²

Conversely, when they return from US or Mexico to South American countries, the economic reason mattered the most, as they would fail in their business ventures. It should also be noted here that they were returning to Argentina and Brazil as these countries started their recovery process.

In addition to the economic reason, some socio-cultural reasons need to be taken into consideration. As Siu (2005) documented, many Chinese (in Panama) sent their children to the US in order to accrue cultural capital. By that same logic, Korean immigrants in South America sent their children to the US for education. It seems to be much popular for Koreans in Brazil than their counterpart in Argentina. While Korean immigrants have appreciated the quality of education provided in Argentina’s public schools (until recent decades), those in Brazil had to rely on private schools after much disappointment from its public education system. Another reason Korean immigrants sent their children to the US was to encourage the idea of higher education and aspiringly find a career outside of clothing manufacturing. At the same time it should be noted that some Korean immigrants in Argentina (and Paraguay) send their children to colleges in South Korea. Combined with educational issues, Korean immigrants in both Brazil and Argentina are worried about safety issues. Another socio-cultural reason is marriage. Brides are brought to Argentina or Brazil from South Korea or sent to the US or Brazil.

One of the most recent phenomena is that of elderly Korean immigrants from Brazil retiring or planning to retire in Paraguay. Another, increasingly important, socio-cultural reason is religion, in particular Christianity, which “has been an understudied sphere of transnational activism” (Levitt & DeWind 2003: 574). Children of Korean immigrants go to South Korea in order to receive higher education, theological education, or missionary work. Argentina is one of the leading countries in the field of art, education and culture in Latin America, which Korean immigrants may seem to miss once they re-migrate to other Latin American countries.

One can also see that some re-migrate to re-concert family ties within a given country. For instance, Cecilia, 48 year old woman, whom I was introduced at the oldest Korean church, immigrated to Argentina as investment immigrants in 1985. Her husband operated an educational institute while she herself ran a Korean restaurant, rather successfully from what I recall. The family was contemplating whether to leave Argentina because of their eldest daughter’s divorce. She stressed that her daughter gave birth to a daughter yet failed in her marriage. The matter of divorce was so stigmatized by the Korean community that her daughter would not show her face in public. They decided to leave for the US after they were strongly encouraged by a friend of her husband. They were able to re-migrate to the US via E-2 visa, for moderate amount of investment in 2006. Their younger daughter obtained F-1 visa to attend a school. When I asked Cecilia why her family chose New York, she mentioned her godson, who helped them when they initially immigrated to Argentina. In other words, although they decided to leave Argentina, considering the future of their daughter, they could do so via economic means. They ran a wholesale clothing business with their son and wholesale

shoe business with their daughter, which were both not satisfactory: “It is rich in resources, but is lonely life in the US. Here is more comfortable!” she stated. She missed her friends in Buenos Aires. She and her first daughter wanted to stay in the US, but instead decided to follow through with the decision made in their family conference. They also left some resources in New York. When they returned to Argentina, they were able to resume their life without much problem as they had kept their business alive from before. She is happy to be back to Buenos Aires. She feels it is better economically and businesswise.

A fairly recent Korean immigrant to Argentina, Joan, spent three years in Argentina, South Korea, and the US, before returning back to Argentina. She was born in 1972 and immigrated to Argentina in 1992. Her husband immigrated earlier to Argentina in 1977 at the age of seven. Her husband studied economics at UBA. Three years later she returned to South Korea in order to work for a missionary organization. In 1999 she returned to Argentina and got married. It looks like her husband’s parents planned on re-migrating to the US. They were asked to re-migrate to Los Angeles by her parent-in-law. They lived exactly three years in the US and returned to Buenos Aires.¹³

When I asked her to comment on her return to South Korea, she admitted that despite her nostalgia for her homeland, she couldn’t get along well with the people. Her friends were attending universities while she was not. Argentina was an unknown country to people. At the same time, IT industry has become too advanced that she felt culturally behind everybody else. She felt alienated from South Korean society, even though she had been gone for only three years.

In Los Angeles, her husband worked as the manager of a wholesale clothing store while she worked as an employee. After the Sept. 11 attacks, the country as a whole was in a recession, so it was difficult to open up any wholesale stores. They worked from six o'clock in the morning till nine o'clock at night. She lost 15kg within a month. Their income wasn't bad. Initially, she was disappointed that she had to live in a run-down one bedroom apartment in Koreatown. She remembers helicopters cruising through at night. In three years she thought that they were able to figure out opportunities to grow out business further in the US. Her brother-in-law from Buenos Aires, who visited them, urged them to return to Buenos Aires. He didn't like the fact that the factory they worked at, looked dirty and also the picture of Latino workers drinking while working. What's more, considering the fact that they worked almost eight times more than in Buenos Aires, he assessed, they were not receiving more reward, either. Although she felt that they would succeed in business and offer better education to their children, her husband wanted to return to Buenos Aires. Now she is really happy to be back to Argentina. She doesn't long for the US anymore. It would be good enough for her to go shopping, there. "US is an orderly place where people obeyed the traffic laws and the banks never lost your money, but when excessive, it is stressful," she stated. Since she sent her baby to a daycare center, baby would keep blinking her eyes. Her pediatrician recommended that she should quit work and stay at home with her baby. In addition to the suggestion that she should quit her job, she was also told that if the baby cries for more than 30 minutes in public, parents may be punished by law. When her baby got ill, it was hard for her to take time off of work to pick up the baby. If you go to government offices, they would be bureaucratic, legalistic, and punitive. "I felt like a

dog on a tether. In the US, you should be careful not to bother your neighbor, while your privacy is protected. In that way, it is harder to make friends with neighbors” she replied trembling. She also noticed the big gap between the rich and poor. A year ago when they visited Los Angeles, they had a traumatic experience with homeland security personnel. In an attempt to renew their green cards, they were interrogated for almost ten hours without respite/repose. Their eight month old baby got sick. Finally, they were so outraged they decided to surrender their green cards. On the contrary, she stressed, it is acceptable in Buenos Aires to stay till midnight, which is conducive to better social relationship. She didn’t like a bit rundown EZE airport. At the airport, the water faucet was out of order. Good or bad, she feels that Argentina remains more or less the same. Now she can offer golf, vocal, piano, dance, and skiing lessons to her eight-year-old daughter. She finds Argentines to be kind, although less kind than in the past, while the country itself remains a relatively comfortable place to live in. She enjoys her freedom.

From a different angle, the reasons why some Korean immigrants return from the US to these South American countries also have to do with socio-cultural factors as well as economic reasons. Mr. Lee immigrated to Argentina in 1977. Now he and his wife run a store, selling half Korean goods (quilt, china, house ware, gift items, etc) and half clothing accessories (button, zipper, rubber band, etc.). In the aftermath of the recent economic collapse, he left for Los Angeles, together with his second son in 2002. At that time, he couldn’t cash his money. If you lent money in US dollars, it would be reduced to one third, due to devaluation of Argentinean currency. Numerous (Korean) kyes, (계)-rotating credit associations) would fall apart. The price in the evening would

sometimes be different from that of the morning. Not to mention that his business slowed down. He recalls that he experienced economic turbulences three times since he immigrated to Argentina. After Guerra de las Malvinas/Guerra del Atlántico Sur (also called the Falklands Conflict/Crisis The Falklands War) (1982), there were kye defaults and the value of US dollar went up. During President Raúl Alfonsín's (1983-1989) government, he remembered suffering from high inflation.

In Los Angeles where his sister-in-law, brother-in-law, and their families live, he did all kinds of odd jobs such as pool cleaning, garment sewing, and lawn mowing. He realized that it is tough living in the US. People purchase homes or cars not by cash but by loans, unlike in Argentina. It looks like it would take at least three years to secure regular customers. As he closely observed fellow Korean re-migrants from Argentina, there were quite a few people who failed in their new endeavors. They were missing Argentina and had lived only for their children and not for themselves. They couldn't dare to return to Argentina, in order not to "lose face". At the same time, he noticed that American economy was in bad shape. He commented on people (referring to Americans including Korean Americans) as *chisahada*, (치사하다- mean or not generous). He truly appreciates the fact that here in Argentina, even though you are not doing well economically, one still has time and money to share (여유있다). He founded the Korean tennis players' association. He gave up his US green card. He returned to Argentina in nine months while his son returned in a year, due to rising educational costs.

Pedro, an hotelier, was born in 1959, and immigrated to Brazil in 1975. He has a couple of clothing manufacturing businesses in addition to a four-star hotel in Bom Retiro. He has lived in the US for a couple of years. In 2004 when he returned from an

interview seeking legal residency in the US, he somehow ended up staying here in Brazil. He had been kidnapped once, which explains why he wanted to leave for the US. In 1999, he went to the Intercontinental Hotel to meet a textile seller from Korea. He was cornered on all sides by a group of young white and black armed men. They had red eyes, perhaps on drugs, he recalled. He turned over all the money he had, but they were not satisfied. He had to call his friends, who brought \$3,000. Then they released him. To make matters worse, he was harassed by federal police over imported goods from Korea and China. His children were already studying in Los Angeles. In the US, he found the clothing manufacturing market to be enormous and fast but very competitive, and not necessarily lucrative. He applied for immigration, for the 6th category, as employee of a sausage factory. When he came back to São Paulo for interview for US residency, he realized that his business in São Paulo was doing extremely well and therefore cancelled his interview. While living in the US, 2003-2004, he came to realize that Brazil is a greater place to live.

Another interviewee, Mr. Ko, immigrated to Brazil, after staying in Paraguay for several days in 1976. He had lived in Los Angeles for 10 years on a company assignment. He had L-1 visa and in a few years changed into E-2 visa. Because of his children's education, they decided to stay longer in the US. There are a few, great, private schools in Brazil; however, the overall grade school system is inferior to that in the US, he stated. His company, unfortunately folded and he and his family had to be back to Brazil. His children couldn't adjust themselves to schools in Brazil. His daughter and other family members (mother and siblings and their families) live in Los Angeles. His son is currently studying in Korea. He is a bit uncertain which country he

will be living in the future. In terms of children's education, he thinks the US will be a better choice. His wife, who came from South Korea and lived in Brazil for nine years, somehow, never adjusted herself to the lifestyle here in Brazil and always pines for South Korea. In his analysis, she is subconsciously resisting to even learn Portuguese.

Initially, they enjoyed their new lives in the US; however, gradually they felt that they were subject to more social control and discipline. At the same time, he felt that it is not any easier to make money in the US, either. You'll have to follow the set rules; there is little way to make profit. Later they were involved in the garment business and supplied finished clothing to departmental stores or the jobber market in the textile district of Los Angeles. It was quite profitable, but later less so. In São Paulo, he feels that people are usually warm or easy going. Now he is into commodity trade by exploring mines, utilizing his geological background in his college.

Similarly, another interviewee at one of the oldest Korean immigrant churches in Buenos Aires, described his life in the US to be routine like "topni baqwi," (톱니바퀴- engaged wheels), mechanical, routine, and uninteresting. On the contrary, he stressed, "Here is 'tranquilo' (peace of mind)," which has been frequently echoed by other interviewees. Not to mention that he failed in his businesses in the US.

In other words, they appreciate certain living conditions, what is called "tranquilo" free, which they can't find either in South Korea or the US, highly disciplined and regulated countries.

Mexico's strong economy attracted good number of Korean re-migrants from Argentina; however, a substantial number of them returned to Argentina, citing both economic and socio-cultural reasons. For instance, they find the Mexican market for

clothing manufacturing industry, organized differently from Argentina. Also they are bitter about the lawlessness, crime, safety hazards, and overall anti-Korean sentiment.

Mr. Chung, a seller of threads and previously the president of the Korean Association of Argentina, immigrated to Argentina in 1968. In 1985, his wife left for New York, where her family members live. In 1989, he reluctantly joined his wife in New York. It was not suitable for him to live in the US, he stated. “Argentina allows for more freedom than any other country. On the contrary, in the US, life is pretty mechanical, lacking humanity. You can be rewarded only for what you work, not more than that.” He was only able to find menial forms of work, such as a part-time shift at a Korean dry cleaning store. Accordingly, he quit and returned to Argentina in 1991. Then circa 2002, in the aftermath of the default and economic crisis, he left for Mexico. He sent his wife to South Korea. He lost \$40,000 that year. He mentioned that under President Fox, the Mexican government adopted a protectionist policy that confiscated all goods imported from both China and South Korea. He found Mexico to be a lawless country and Mexican people to be zealous, territorial, and hostile. As for Argentina, he holds high regards: “Argentina is more or less welfare state and enforces law. It is quite charming country, resourceful, and indeed a center of the world industry.” He has paid his income tax to the US government as a US legal resident. Now, he is seriously considering returning his green card, since the rhythm really goes to pot here in Argentina.

Re-rooting

Korean immigrants relied on their family, business, and religious network, as their migratory decision was also mediated through such networks.

As reported for Chinese in Panama (Siu 2005), confronted with restrictive immigration policies by Argentinean and Brazilian governments, diasporic Koreans invented various strategies, such as the sharing of identification cards, to subvert practices of exclusion.

The Korean global diasporic family network may not be as extensive as the Chinese or Indian but has developed in recent years and sometimes overlaps with business networks. For instance, one interviewee is quite successful businessman in São Paulo, reaped \$1.7 million in 2007. His wife's family is closely linked to his business, running factories in various locations in the world: in-laws in Los Angeles, sister-in-law in Korea, another sister-in-law in Guangzhou (Canton). He exports women's intimate wear, in particular laced stuff, to the US and Italy.

In other cases, my interviewees like Cecilia, introduced earlier, couldn't think of sending her eldest daughter alone to the US so ultimately made the decision to move the entire family to the US. Belonging has closer ties to family than place. Home does not necessarily mean a sense of full belonging to a particular place; instead, for some, Argentina and Brazil have become home because it is where their families live.

In the case of Koreans' re-migration to Mexico, they were inspired by the possible business opportunities they heard through their business networks. In Mexico City, Sergio, whose re-migration story has been introduced earlier, are deeply grateful to their fellow Korean church-members. Korean immigrants not only encouraged them to re-migrate to Mexico City but also settlement in Mexico permanently. His church members

lent them an electric heater. They lent them a money chest. They sold blockbuster items such as sparkling clothes, which they imported from South Korea. They brought their homemade *kimchee* jars and other delicious side dishes and took them to pyramids. At that time there were around 20,000 Koreans in Mexico. They would recall how much they were loved by the church members at the (Korean) United church.

In the US, Korean re-migrants from South America, were able to organize their own community organizations together with the church known for, for instance, Korean re-migrants from Argentina. On the other hand, since Korean re-migrants from South America are known for their visibility in the clothing manufacturing businesses, their trade/business organization often overlaps with their social networks or golf clubs. It is safe to say that Korean business and religious networks and resources together with some family networks and to a lesser extent Korean media and community organizations, serve as major sources of social capital, as a mini Korea.

Their religious network overlaps business and family networks in terms of organizational structure. They explore new countries or cities capitalizing on their diasporic economic niche. Just as missionaries explore new country for new converts, these transmigrants move to another country where there is little competition with fellow Korean clothing manufacturers. For instance, just as Korean immigrant entrepreneurs moved their business locations within Buenos Aires, at some point they ventured out to the countryside. This process can be explained as a matter of “agglomeration” and “digglomeration” in economic geographic terms, coined by German geographer, Alfred Weber, speaking to location of certain industry.¹⁴ In other words, industry people need to form a critical mass in order to reach their consumers or their retailers. However, at

another point, if they feel saturated, considering cost and other factors, they need to disperse. This explains why Korean immigrant entrepreneurs need to form a critical mass, but then at some point they need to explore new locations in another country. What is interesting here is, Korean transmigrants take it on larger scale, beyond a city or country, partly responding to globalization. Putting into my theory of rhizomatic diaspora, a rhizome needs to continue to rebuild or else separate. The hosting plant anchors itself and later develops roots. The connecting rhizome, at some point, builds new nodes.

Only a limited number of Korean families live in the city of a certain country; they remain cohesive and close-knit compared to Korean American communities in the US. On the other hand, since they are far away from their homeland, they are naturally influenced, modified, and reconstructed by the local culture. They stress the significance of “tranquility” as well as modernity-driven economic accumulation.

Conclusion

So far transnational theoreticians tend to conceptualize the world in terms of national entities (Olwig 2003). I concur with Olwig that “migrants do not only construct or perceive places of origin in terms of their transnational character, but just as much in terms of the particular cultural values and social ties that the migrants and their families practice in relation to these places” (2003: 788). Indeed Koreans in Latin America and their migratory reasons and processes have much to do with their particular cultural values and social ties as well as economic reasons.

These South American immigrants have shown a high propensity to re-migrate to countries such as the US, Canada, South Korea, and Mexico, exhibiting tendencies of a “rhizomatic diaspora” that covers three or more bases of relocation. A rhizome is characteristically the horizontal stem of a plant that is usually found underground, often sending out roots and shooting from its nodes. They re-root from the stems with multiple networks of nodes, thus expanding their reach. Some plants have rhizomes that grow above ground or that lie at the soil surface, including some Iris species, and ferns, whose spreading stems are rhizomes. The old roots are not pulled up. It is a method of reproduction for plants. The cultural logic of “rhizomatic diaspora” serves the following functions in characterizing Korean re-migrants in Latin America: lateral move; multi-linear, chaotic, and anachronistic migratory process; return, repeat, cyclic migration; wide coverage over short time span; tenacious, resilient, and regenerative. Various migratory trajectories have been identified. First, a good number of them re-migrated to the US, “hemispheric migration,” exhibiting the pattern of migration from the global south to the global north, a bit earlier from Buenos Aires to New York, Los Angeles, and Miami and later from São Paulo to Los Angeles and New York. Secondly, it has been fairly routine for them to re-migrate to other Latin American countries such as Argentina, Brazil: “regional migration.” A good number of them have immigrated, not directly from South Korea, but by way of Paraguay and to a lesser extent Chile. This involves neighboring countries. It has been a new trend to re-migrate to Mexico, indicating a “South-North American” or “post-NAFTA” migration. Thirdly, some of them return to South Korea, transoceanic or continental migration. Lastly, a number of these repeat-migrants do

return to Latin American countries. Initially, good number of them also came from the North Korea, by way of South Korea.

Aihwa Ong's discussion of flexible citizenship resonates with these Korean transmigrants, as "strategies and effects of [transnational elites] to both circumvent and benefit from different nation-state regimes by selecting different sites for investment, work, and family relocation" (1999: 112). Thus, Chinese migrant professionals from Hong Kong, Taiwan, Singapore, and Malaysia have forged a new social contract with the "postdevelopmental" state. Similarly, Korean transmigrant petite bourgeoisie tend to diversify sites for their business, education, or family residence, but their family patriarch, instead of remaining, continue to pursue economic accumulation in another country. It is "flexible security," in that they seek to protect their capital investment from various states, through proxies. Since they are not seeking citizenship or even legal residency, I would like to call it "flexible security," in seeking legal recognition from the states as a political stakeholder. We note the state, without the nation. It applies to the businessmen in the US, China, and South Korea who have managed his clothing manufacturing businesses by his relatives as well as in Brazil. In this case, it is not a matter of the rhizome, but the epiphyte, a rootless plant. For others, their children study or work in the US, whereas they themselves conduct businesses in South America. Some are surrendering their US green cards, as they find it cumbersome to retain once they return from the US to South American countries. However, in the process, they are changed by local sensibility. They justify their return to Latin America as a matter of ideal living conditions as well as economic accumulation. Their appreciation for tranquility in South American countries indicates an important departure from South Korean sensibility: the adoption of the local

discourse. One hardly hears about tranquility in South Korea or the US. On the contrary, immigrants from South Korea find the US to be, free, slow-paced, peaceful, laid-back or mellow, coming from densely populated, hectic, and urban settings in South Korea.

In brief, this paper questions the dominant assumption in migration studies that people migrate unidirectionally from less developed nations to more developed ones, such as the US, the countries of western Europe, and Canada. The US as a cultural force, clearly remains a significant part of their lives, though. The cost of living and education in the US is much higher than it is in Latin America. Speaking English is a strategy for upward social mobility. Although the migration from the global south to global north is still visible, Koreans' migration within the global south, lateral movement, demonstrate "a set of conversations and relationships that are equally important but that have not received adequate attention in our study of global migration' (Siu 2005: 108).

The reasons why Korean immigrants continue to re-migrate to other Latin American countries have much to do with characteristics with Latin American countries. For Siu, Chinese (in Panama) serial migration is "partly an effect of geopolitical circumstances, partly a strategy of social mobility, and partly caused by accidents of history" (2005: 87). Unstable political economy on the societal level and economic success/failure on the individual level in a way compels Korean immigrants to continue displacing themselves. At the same time, their diasporic economic niche such as the clothing manufacturing business together with their linguistic and cultural competence also facilitates their re-settlement in other Latin American countries. Equally important, as good number of Korean immigrants became affluent during this period of 1990s in

these South American countries, once they return from US or Mexico, they are able to resume their business activities, as they left key resources when they re-migrated to US or Mexico. They are diversifying sites for their business, education, or family residence. In this process, Korean immigrants ‘map diasporic belonging across different locales, allowing the Americas, and the US in particular, to emerge as a significant site informing diasporic subject formation’ (Siu 2005: 88).

They were able to appreciate what these countries can offer only when they left these countries. We see Derridan “differance” effect of delayed appreciation of various places.¹⁵ South American countries are most distant countries from South Korea. So far there is no direct flight, for instance, from Seoul to Buenos Aires. Discrimination or prejudice persists on the part of non-Koreans. Meanwhile, in certain circles of non-Korean Argentineans, being Korean is not considered a positive characteristic, now arguably less so. Nonetheless, Korean immigrants view South Korea, US, Argentina, Brazil, Mexico, Chile, and Paraguay as an interconnected arena.

Today, as many scholars point out, new technologies of communication and transportation allow migrants to sustain more frequent, less expensive, and more intimate connections than before (Levitt and DeWind 2003: 569). Moreover, today migrants encounter varied social contexts that are tolerant of ethnic diversity and long-term transnational connections compared to where assimilation is more demanded strenuously. Accordingly, internal moves and transnational relations are the orders of the day (Olwig 2003: 794). The frequency of migration and the ease with which diasporic Koreans tell their stories, like Chinese in Panama, offer a view of endless migration and remigration “as an ordinary, mundane, and even expected characteristics of diasporic life” (Siu 2005;

90) or pretty normal life in this globalized world. As Pedro in São Paulo put, “These days I visit Los Angeles as if I used to visit Seoul (from Taegu) within South Korea sometime ago.”

However, it should be noted that the Korean transmigrants’ rhizomatic diaspora appears to be less rooted, attracting suspicion and resentment from the host society. “Describing immigrants as political security risks, as culturally others, as socially marginal, and as an exception to the rule of territorial confinement,” South American public discourses have reflected the nationalist image of the normal (Wimmer and Glick Schiller 2003: 599).

I maintain that there is some correspondence between transnationality and the presence of Korean institutional identity in these countries. First, Korean transnationality entails the institutional, discursive, and experiential dimensions of the Korean population out of touch with their national borders, but beyond Koreans’ physical movement over space, covering various transnational economic, religious, family/kin, or other socio-cultural practices, relationship, or ideas, via marriage, education, business, and other matters. Secondly, I demonstrate the institutional identity of the Korean community or “Koreanness” despite the inherent flimsiness of “identity” as a category of analysis. In other words, Korean community exists, in terms of the “imagined” associational community: ranging from ethnic community-based organizations, ethnic media, to ethnic Christian churches, or just a few families. Thirdly, I point out the relationship between the presence of Korean institutional identity and their transnational reach, indicating path-dependent transnational reach. Fourth, somewhat paradoxically, Koreans re-migrate to other Latin American countries where there is less competition

with fellow Korean entrepreneurs. I examined the third and fourth points, in relation to economic geographical analysis; “agglomeration” and “deglomeration.” That is, Korean immigrant entrepreneurs take over the existing or new neighborhood, dominated with one kind of industry. They would alter the type of business with clothing manufacturing, in soliciting fellow Korean entrepreneurs’ participation. When they feel that they have reached the critical mass, they move on to other countries, where there is less competition from fellow Korean entrepreneurs. Lastly, in this migratory process, Korean and Korean values are affected by local cultures. That’s why there is much talk on “tranquility,” which Korean immigrants picked it up from Argentina and other Latin American countries? Someday the cultural logic of “tranquility” may overturn Koreans’ pursuit of capital accumulation and folk entrepreneurship.

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¹Few scholars paid attention to transnational migrants themselves or their migratory movement. Scholars on Mexican migrants dealt with return or repeat migration, however, their writing was limited to the US as the country of destination.

² Thus transnational research has dealt with more or less binational experience.

³ See the images in the following page. First image is accessed at: www.rhizomesystems.com/ on June 22, 2009. Second one is accessed at: io.uwinnipeg.ca/~simmons/rhizome.htm on June 22, 2009. For many plants, the rhizome is used by farmers and gardeners to propagate the plants by a process known as vegetative reproduction. Some plants, such as bamboos, send out long underground stems that produce new plants, often at considerable distances from the original plant. Such plants can form enormous colonies of new plants within a relatively few years.

⁴ This is also part of the long term research project on Koreans in Latin America.

⁵ For overview of the Korean immigrant community in Buenos Aires, see Kyo Pum Lee (1992), Carolina Mera (1998), and Cornia Courtis (2000). For the Brazilian counterpart, see Keum Joa Choi (1991) and Kyung-soo Chun (1991).

⁶ I attempted to illuminate what these various migratory sites mean for Korean transmigrants. Shifting and comprehensive meaning of these sites is beyond the scope of this paper.

⁷ This has been already documented (Park 1999).

⁸ For instance, one of my interviewees, Mr. Cong Jin Kim was asked to respond to the following prompt during an interview by a local newspaper in Buenos Aires. “Muchos de los Coreanos se hicieron sueno Americano en la Argentina y se fueron a otros paises” (ANECDOTAS BARRIALES Diciembre de 2005).

⁹ In order to protect the privacy of my interviewees, I have used aliases, which were given by my interviewees. When I was allowed to use their real names, I indicated either their last or first name, not their full name, except for those holding public offices and those cited or quoted in newspapers. Also, I tried to follow the Korean convention in indicating their last names, but not first names, as a courtesy, unless first names were given to me.

¹⁰ His son also returned from Los Angeles to Buenos Aires.

¹¹ This is not limited to Koreans.

¹² Reverend Hwang and his wife received their doctoral degrees from the US. As I attended his Sunday worship, more than 40% of his Portuguese service attendees were non-Koreans.

¹³ When I visited her (clothing manufacturing and wholesaling) store, her store was full of non-stop retailers and other customers.

¹⁴ Agglomeration is the phenomenon of spatial clustering, or a concentration of firms in a relatively small area. The clustering and linkages allow individual firms to enjoy both internal and external economies. Auxiliary industries, specialized machine or services used only occasionally by large firms tend to be located in agglomeration areas, not just to lower costs but to serve the bigger populations. At some point, deglomeration occurs when companies and services leave because of the diseconomies of industries' excessive concentration. In other words, after reaching an optimal size, local facilities may become over-taxed, lead to an offset of initial advantages and increase. Refer to Alfred Weber at: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alfred_Weber, accessed on June 22, 2009.

¹⁵ Derrida's concept of “differance,” is referring to senses of deferral and differing as well as that of detour.