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## Worship Space and Immigrant Memory: Korean Parishes in Los Angeles and New Jersey

Hansol Goo Ph.D. (cand.)  
*University of Notre Dame*

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HANSOL GOO

## Worship Space and Immigrant Memory: Korean Parishes in Los Angeles and New Jersey



**Hansol Goo** is a PhD candidate in Liturgical and Sacramental Theology at University of Notre Dame. She holds a Licentiate in History and Cultural Heritage of the Church from the Pontifical Gregorian University in Rome, Italy. Her passion for art, spirituality, and theology is explored in her Licentiate research on aesthetics and liturgical theology of Joseph Ratzinger - Pope Benedict XVI, which was published in Italian in 2021. The same passion for theology and culture led to her doctoral research in sacramental theology in the context of the immigration experience for Korean American Catholics, which she concluded in 2023. Her research area includes contemporary liturgical and sacramental theology, Asian American theology, ritual studies, and global Catholicism.

Dioceses in the US and Canada are unlike perhaps any other in the global Catholic Church. They are marked by a strong history of immigration and a rich cultural and ethnic diversity.<sup>1</sup> In the US, German and Irish Catholics Irish were among the first to arrive in the nineteenth century. Immigration continued into the twentieth century, with increase in both the number of immigrants and the diversity of origins including Italy, Poland, Croatia, Czechoslovakia and Lithuania.

Amidst the continuous growth and expansion of the twentieth century, parish life became central in the American Catholic experience. Immigrant communities formed ethnic neighborhoods that functioned as self-efficient clusters that served the needs of the community, comprised with their own parishes, schools, commercial businesses and social welfare organizations. These neighborhoods of different ethnicities existed side by side and national parishes proliferated as a space where immigrants could enjoy social exclusivity and ease with those who shared the same ethnic background.<sup>2</sup>

National parishes historically developed within the context of immigration. They are designated not by territorial boundaries but by the ethnicity of the community,<sup>3</sup> and they served an invaluable source for newly arrived immigrants for meeting

1 I use the word immigration in the legalistic sense in which an individual citizen of one nation crosses national borders into another nation. Immigrants are individuals who are displaced across national boundaries. International Organization for Migration (IOM) defines "migrant" as an umbrella term: migrant is "a person who moves away from his or her place of usual residence, whether within a country or across an international border, temporarily or permanently, and for a variety of reasons." "About Migration," International Organization for Migration, accessed September 13, 2022. <https://www.iom.int/about-migration>.

2 In the "Back of the Yards" neighborhood in Chicago, for example, eleven national parishes existed within an area of less than two square miles. Steven M. Avella, "The Immigrant Church, 1820-1908" in *The Cambridge Companion to American Catholicism*, ed. Margaret M. McGuinness and Thomas F. Rzeznik. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 38.

3 Although national parishes were once designated by a uniraical congregation with a shared ethnic background, they are increasingly multiracial. Michael O. Emerson and Karen Chai Kim, "Multiracial Congregations: An Analysis of Their Development and a Typology," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 42, no. 2 (2003): 217-27. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-5906.00174>

In contrast to national parish, "personal parish" refer to a congregation formed by shared ethnicity, or an individual's preference with regard to liturgical style, geographical location, or even the pastor's homiletic style. Tricia Colleen Bruce, *Parish and Place: Making Room for Diversity in the American Catholic Church* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2017).

people, making friends, and networking to find jobs or share advice on navigating various social systems that may be different from the immigrant's home country, such as education or banking.<sup>4</sup> An immigrant's parish is more than a church building serving as a common space to gather for worship on Sunday. In the national parish, the immigrant is not a marginalized minority or a foreigner. By belonging to one-another and forming a community based on their shared cultural roots, a parish becomes a place where the immigrant's dignity and personhood are restored and reaffirmed.

How, then, is the immigrant community's cultural identity preserved by the parish? At the outset, parish is a physical architecture, i.e., a building with physical volume and mass. European Catholic immigrants from the nineteenth century built their parishes according to the architectural style of the time that reflected their cultural origins of the 19th century Europe. European immigrants not only dedicated the church building to the patron saints of their nationality but built their parish according to the architectural style of the homeland, which functioned as a visual reminder of their cultural identity. For Korean American Catholics, however, their cultural identity cannot be easily traced in the parish building because Korean Catholic communities in the US typically occupy parish spaces that are not their own. This reality for Korean American Catholics challenges us to ask deeper questions on the relationship between parish and the preservation of cultural identity for an immigrant community.

Reflecting on this question arrives at two different hermeneutical orientations on the meaning of the parish. Historian Lindsay Jones contends that understanding the meaning of an architecture involves not only an analysis of the formal elements of a building, i.e., dimension, building material, layout, decoration, etc., but also

4 Two empirical studies on Koreans in Chicago and Los Angeles areas found that reasons for attending a church are composite. While the predominant reason is religious (i.e., worship and prayer), secondary reasons such as social (i.e., friendship, social interaction), and psychological (i.e., peace of mind) also seem to have importance. Won Moo Hurh, Hei Chu Kim, and Kwang Chung Kim, *Assimilation Patterns of Immigrants in the U.S.: A Case Study of Korean Immigrants in the Chicago Area* (Washington, D.C.: University Press of America, 1978); Won Moo Hurh and Kwang Chung Kim, "Adhesive sociocultural adaptation of Korean Immigrants," *International Migration Review* 18, no. 2 (1984): 188-217. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2545947>



the actions and behaviors of the people who occupy the building. Hermeneutics of an architecture involves not only looking at the building as an inanimate material culture but also considering the purpose, intention, and the rituals of the people who utilize the building.<sup>5</sup> There is a relational interaction between the physical space and the bodies that occupy the space, for the subject of interpretation also contributes meaning into the interpretation. The locus of meaning is not in the physical architecture nor in the imagination of the beholder “but rather in the negotiation or the interactive relation that subsumes both building and beholder—that is, in the ritual-architectural event in which buildings and human participants alike are involved.”<sup>6</sup> Following this hermeneutics is helpful for analyzing the worship space for Korean American Catholics as material culture. That the meaning of parish lives in a relational interaction between the architectural space and the human participants also allows us to turn to memory as a facilitator that preserves the cultural heritage for Korean American Catholics.

## KOREAN AMERICAN CATHOLIC COMMUNITIES

For Korean American Catholics, like many other immigrant communities, having a physical space in which Korean Catholics can celebrate Mass in their own language, share Korean food, and practice the ritual customs of traditional holidays and festivals is more than a way to keep being Korean in the diaspora. It keeps Korean Catholic immigrants connected to the homeland and to each other, as they seek to reclaim their cultural identity in the new land. Korean parishes also serve the role of passing on the cultural identity and heritage to the next generation of Korean Americans.<sup>7</sup>

5 Lindsay Jones, *The Hermeneutics of Sacred Architecture: Experience, Interpretation, Comparison* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000).

6 Lindsay Jones, “Eventfulness of Architecture: Teaching about Sacred Architecture is Teaching about Ritual,” in *Teaching Ritual*, ed. Catherine Bell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 259.

7 Studies on the importance of church in Korean immigrant communities identify that the role of church for Korean immigrants provides not only religious function and affiliation but also social. Min identifies four types of social function associated with ethnic churches: fellowship, maintenance of ethnic identity and ethnic subculture, social services, and social status and social positions. See Pyung Gap Min, “The Structure and Social Functions of Korean Immigrant Churches in

Yet, the parish building alone, as an architectural space, is not what constitutes nor contains the cultural identity for Korean American Catholics. Relying on material culture, i.e., architecture, for understanding the role of parish in preserving the cultural identity for Korean American Catholics is a complicated endeavor for two reasons. First is the fact of immigration that forged the minority status for Korean Catholic immigrants on structural as well as cultural level. Korean immigration in the US began in 1903 with the arrival of Korean laborers employed on sugar plantations in Hawai'i.<sup>8</sup> This beginning came to a temporary cease during the decades following the Japanese occupation of Korea and the Korean War. The large influx of Korean immigration began again with the reforms of the Immigration and Naturalization Act of 1965 (known also as the Hart-Celler Act) that accepted immigration not based on the individual's national origin but on qualification. Thus, a new wave of immigrants arrived including Asians and Hispanics in the second half of the twentieth century.<sup>9</sup> These newly arrived immigrant communities found themselves facing a changed reality of national parishes within the history of US immigration and American Catholicism. Unlike the earlier European Catholic immigrants, these later Catholic immigrants are restricted from building their own national parishes due to the unfavorable experiences many dioceses experienced with the European immigrants.<sup>10</sup> In the later decades of the twentieth

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the United States," *The International Migration Review* 26, no. 4 (1992): 1370-1394, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2546887>; Won Moo Hurh and Kwang Chung Kim, *Korean Immigrants in America: a Structural Analysis of Ethnic Confinement and Adhesive Adaptation* (Rutherford [N.J.]: Fairleigh Dickinson University, 1984); Bong Youn Choy, *Koreans in America* (Chicago: Nelson-Hall, 1979); Il Soo Kim, *New Urban Immigrants: the Korean Community in New York* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1981).

- 8 Won Moo Hurh and Kwang Chung Kim, *Korean Immigrants in America: A Structural Analysis of Ethnic Confinement and Adhesive Adaptation* (Rutherford [N.J.]: Fairleigh Dickinson University, 1984).
- 9 Peoples from Asian and Hispanic background have been present in North America since the 19th and the 15th centuries, respectively. The 1965 immigration reforms indicated here is rather a turning point in the recent US history that brought significant changes in the demographics of immigrants in the US.
- 10 Tricia Colleen Bruce notes that US bishops, who once emphasized territorial parishes following the nineteenth century flourishing of European immigration, pivoted again more recently with the 1983 issue of the Code of Canon Law that gave the bishops more control on establishing new personal parishes. According to Bruce, "Later immigrants encountered a very different Catholic context of reception than that which had greeted earlier arrivals. The organizational strategy of the Church had changed: its leaders urged the laity to join territorial parishes, rather than to



century many of the national parishes that were built by the earlier generation of European immigrants closed down as European immigration declined and the children of the immigrants assimilated into the wider American society. It left many dioceses with financial difficulties and emotional wounds as once-vibrant immigrant communities dissipated. Tricia Bruce states that the decline of national parishes is caused by both institutional, top-down approach taken by the U.S. bishops and the congregational, bottom-up activities and movements taken by the Catholic communities. With the issuing of the 1983 Code of Canon Law, the US bishops organize the local parishioners structurally according to territorial boundaries so as to prevent forming of new personal parishes. Yet, ethnic communities persist to congregate amongst those who share the same ethnic background.<sup>11</sup> As a result, many Asian and Hispanic immigrant communities continue to form their ethnic enclaves amidst tension in what Brett Hoover describes as “shared parish,” as they share the parish building space with the dominant group, typically white American community, and negotiate their presence sometimes even with other ethnic groups.<sup>12</sup> Korean American Catholics, similar to other ethnic minority communities, face the same reality as they share the architectural space of a parish building with a prolonged sense of disenfranchisement.<sup>13</sup>

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create new national ones. Parish petitions from newly-arrived Latino and Asian immigrants were typically denied.” Bruce, *Parish and Place*.

- 11 Tricia Bruce describes that the continued petitioning for establishing new personal parishes, which serve fragmented groups of population not only according to race and ethnicity but also by the individual preference with regard to liturgy, location, politics, doctrinal ideologies, or even the pastor’s homily style, is an example of “grassroots change beget[ting] new organizational forms.” Bruce, *Parish and Place*, 8.
- 12 Brett Hoover, *The Shared Parish: Latinos, Anglos, and the Future of U.S. Catholicism* (New York: New York University Press, 2014). Many studies examine social, cultural and power dynamics of multiethnic parishes. For example: Helen Rose Ebaugh and Janet Saltzman Chafetz, *Religion and the New Immigrants: Continuities and Adaptations in Immigrant Congregations* (Walnut Creek: Altamira Press, 2000); Michael Emerson, *People of the Dream: Multiracial Congregations in the United States* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2006); Timothy Matovina, “Latino Catholics and the National Parish Dynamic,” *American Catholic Studies Newsletter* 34, no. 1 (2007); Brett Hoover, “Power in the Parish” in *American Parishes: Remaking Local Catholicism*, ed. Gary J. Adler Jr., Tricia C. Bruce, and Brian Starks (New York: Fordham University Press, 2019).
- 13 Other ethnic minority communities share similar experiences of destabilized belonging in the shared parish space. Chinese Catholics, Hispanic, and Filipino communities, for example, occupy the same parish space as white American parishioners but never feel the parish is “theirs.” Bruce, *Parish and Place*, 108–117.



The second reason is related to the first, but it is particular to the history of Korean American Catholics: worship space for Korean American Catholics is unstable and discontinuous. The history of Korean American Catholic communities displays a typical trajectory of growth.<sup>14</sup> The first Korean Catholic communities in the US began as small groups that gathered in borrowed spaces like parish halls, libraries, or Catholic student centers at local universities. As Korean immigration to the US greatly expanded in 1980s and 1990s, many Korean Catholic communities became constituted as parishes and established themselves in more permanent parish buildings, while many others remained as “catholic centers” and “missions”. As the needs of the community would grow, the entire parish would migrate as a community from one church building to another within the diocese and the members of the community would commute to the new church building wherever the parish community would establish itself.<sup>15</sup> In many cases, the first founding Korean Catholic community would split into smaller communities when the original community would become too big and geographically too inconvenient to accommodate the Korean Catholic immigrants who spread into the surrounding suburbs.<sup>16</sup>

## CULTURAL HERITAGE AND MEMORY

In the midst of the changing environment of the physical worship space, how is the Korean cultural and catholic heritage preserved? When the physical worship space is displaced and unstable, memory preserves the history, culture, and religious tradition for Korean American Catholics. Since the influential work of

14 For more instances of Korean Catholic communities' history of growth, see Anselm Kyongsuk Min, "Korean American Catholic Communities: A Pastoral Reflection," in *Religion and Spirituality in Korean America*, ed. David K. Yoo and Ruth H. Chung (Chicago, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2008), 21–39.

15 Experiences of discrimination for minority Catholic communities, augmented by “absent personal parish status, a community may move from parish to parish to accommodate their specialized ministry.” Bruce, *Parish and Place*, 115.

16 Urban developments and the growth of Korean population in the US also contributed to the territorial expansion of Korean American Catholics, shifting their geographical location of habitation from urban city centers to suburbs and rural areas.



Pierre Nora's *lieux de mémoire*, scholars of memory have further developed theories on the function of memory in preserving the culture of a community. According to Nora, societies were no longer the carriers of collective memory; rather, history was preserved in fragmented *lieux de mémoire*, or sites of memory.<sup>17</sup> More recent scholars on memory, however, challenge the assumption that culture is a substance preserved by a society. For example, in her study of Aby Warburg, Astrid Erll points out that cultural memory moves across time and place. In this sense, "memory lives in and through its movements, and that mnemonic forms and contents are filled with new life and new meaning in changing social, temporal, local contexts."<sup>18</sup> Memory, then, preserves culture not as a substantive object contained by the society, but moves through the social interactions and rituals of the members of the community.

This development of studies on memory brings a new insight to analyzing material culture of a parish building and its relationship to the cultural identity of an immigrant community. Memory is something that lives through the people who are doing the remembering. Whereas a commemorative monument captures memory as a photograph would represent a particular moment in time, the type of memory intended here is something that becomes alive in the act of remembering. Memory is carried through the bodily actions of ritual, which is repeated and mimicked. It is passed on to the next generation through participation and instruction of the ritual. This correlation between memory and ritual allows us to rethink memory in terms of space and spatiality, which then helps us to understand the role of material culture in maintaining the cultural heritage of an immigrant community. National parishes are more than cultural minority corners in the ecclesial landscape of the US Catholicism. Understanding memory in spatial terms helps us to rethink national parishes as an existential space created by interruptive and discontinuous activities of the immigrants.

17 Pierre Nora, *Les Lieux de mémoire* (Paris: Gallimard, 1984). Also, Pierre Nora, "Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire," *Representations* (Berkeley, Calif.) 26, no. 26 (1989): 7-24.

18 Astrid Erll, "Travelling Memory," *Parallax* 17, no. 4 (November, 2011): 4-18, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13534645.2011.605570>.

In what follows, I will present two Korean Catholic communities as comparable cases in which Korean American Catholics negotiate their “parish” as a space.<sup>19</sup> St. Agnes Korean Catholic Center in Los Angeles, California demonstrates a case in which the precarious reality of a shared parish is a contested space for the Korean Catholics, as it becomes evident in the development of their physical worship space. The second case study of St. Andrew Kim Korean Catholic Church in Maplewood, New Jersey presents a different circumstance in which the community enjoys a stable physical space of a parish building that is their own, yet has to nonetheless negotiate the architectural space and the history of the building by asserting materialistic elements that express Korean cultural and devotional heritage. In both cases, material culture is the source for investigation. Materiality of the worship space functions as a “site of memory.” Yet, these sites are unstable and discontinuous for Korean American Catholics. What emerges is an “immigrant memory” that moves beyond space and time, in which the Korean cultural heritage is preserved.

## KOREAN AMERICAN CATHOLICS IN LA AND NJ

In the urban sprawls of Los Angeles, away from Hollywood and Beverly Hills, a Korean Catholic center is situated in an unknown corner of the city hidden from the public view.<sup>20</sup> On the corner of Adams Blvd and Vermont Ave, a mile north of

19 The data presented here is largely based on the research I conducted between July 2021 and September 2022. I visited St. Agnes in Los Angeles and St. Andrew Kim in Maplewood, where I conducted participant observation and interviews with the parishioners and church staff. I am first and foremost a theologian in the field of sacramental and liturgical theology. Therefore, my interests and methods used in this research are driven by my theological inquiries at the intersection of liturgy and ritual studies.

20 Although Korean Americans are one of the most prominent Asian American communities in Los Angeles, Korean American Catholics are considered as a minority for two reasons. First is the fact that the majority of Korean Americans belong to various Protestant Christian denominations. In 2016, Simon Kim noted that approximately 65% of Korean Americans belong to various Protestant Christian denominations while only 10% belonged to the Roman Catholic Church. Kim, “The Emergence of Korean American Catholics.”

A second factor is that, among Asian American Catholic communities, Koreans are relatively fewer in number in comparison to Filipinos and Vietnamese. See Won Moo Hurh and Kwang Chung Kim, “Religious Participation of Korean Immigrants in the United States,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 29, no. 1 (1990): 19–34.





Figure 1. St Agnes on Vermont Ave, Los Angeles, California. <http://stagnes-la.org>. (Accessed March 2022)

the University of Southern California (USC) campus, stands St. Agnes, a parish built in 1903.<sup>21</sup>

St. Agnes is home to one of the oldest Korean Catholic communities in the US, which began in 1978 when a small number of Korean Catholics who were international students at USC gathered to celebrate Mass in Korean for the first time in the area. Despite the fact that St. Agnes is known and loved by Korean Catholics in the area as the oldest Korean church in LA, the façade of St. Agnes on Vermont Ave does not display an indication that the parish might belong to a Korean community. The parish website is bilingual, but not in Korean. The website lists mass hours and various parish news, first in Spanish then in English. “*Bienvenidos a la Paroquia de Santa Inés*” the website welcomes the virtual visitors. So, where are the Koreans?

One needs to turn the corner on Vermont Ave into Dana Street, a small street that runs East-West with residential buildings and a school, and drive into the back lot behind St. Agnes before one is able to find any traces of the Koreans. Inside the gate marked by a sign “St. Agnes Korean Catholic Church,” there is a compound

21 *Archdiocese of Los Angeles Catholic Directory 2020–2021* (Los Angeles, California: The Tidings, 2020).



Figure 2. Satellite view of the Korean complex behind the St. Agnes Catholic Church on Vermont Avenue in Los Angeles, California. (Google Maps. Accessed April 2022.)



of four residential buildings turned into multipurpose halls that serve the various needs of the Korean St. Agnes community.

The most recent addition to the compound is a single-family house on the south-western corner of the lot that was purchased in 2010 and remodeled to be used for the youth and children’s ministries.<sup>22</sup> Across the parking lot on the north side, another residential building is situated. It consists of an apartment on the second floor where Korean religious sisters on a pastoral assignment at St. Agnes reside, and the ground floor where the seniors’ ministry and bible study groups meet during the week. On the south-eastern corner of the parking lot stands another residential building that is turned into a coffee shop, “Ignatius Café,” equipped with its own coffee bean roasters and a nicely decorated seating area. Ignatius Café is a project implemented by Fr Roberto Dae-Je Choi SJ, a Korean Jesuit priest who served as pastor at St. Agnes between 2010 and 2022. Korean parishioners who have received barista training from Fr. Roberto volunteer at the café and serve coffee to guests and parishioners. Ignatius Café is open to public. Students from USC especially enjoy the outdoor patios set in a luscious garden; “it’s an oasis in

22 St. Agnes Korean Catholic Center, *Amor: 50 Years of Gratitude and Hope* (2018), 109 (50th anniversary commemorative booklet).

downtown LA,” said a former student of USC.<sup>23</sup> The fourth residential building on the southern edge of the compound houses the parish office on the first floor and the rectory on the second.

Despite the disjointed look of the Korean St. Agnes that is situated behind St. Agnes on Vermont Avenue, St. Agnes Korean Catholic community is by no means a newcomer to the area nor an itinerant community. The fiftieth anniversary commemorative booklet for St. Agnes<sup>24</sup> records December 1978 as the beginning of St. Agnes Korean Catholic Church, when five families celebrated the first Mass in the Korean language at the USC Newman Center chapel with Fr Lawrence Lee. According to one parishioner of St. Agnes, Korean Catholic students at USC asked Fr Lawrence, who was visiting LA, to stay and be their pastor and that is how the St. Agnes community began to form.<sup>25</sup> Since this small beginning, Korean Catholics grew rapidly in number and expanded around the LA area. Today, the Directory of the Archdiocese of LA lists thirteen Korean Catholic centers in the city of Los Angeles and the surrounding areas where liturgies are celebrated in Korean.<sup>26</sup> Among the Korean Catholics in the LA area, St. Agnes is known as the community where one can find the “old timers.” St. Agnes is the “original Korean church” that many of the early generation of Korean immigrants still attend.<sup>27</sup>

23 Anonymous, interview.

24 Hereafter, I use “St. Agnes” to refer specifically to the Korean community at St. Agnes rather than the Hispanic community of San Lñes, unless otherwise indicated.

25 Anonymous, interview.

26 *Archdiocese of Los Angeles Catholic Directory 2020–2021*.

27 In the Korean Catholic vocabulary, the word “church,” or *sungdang* in Korean, refers to both “church” as in the parish community and “church” as in the building. I use “church” here in the same way; it means parish and the church building. My use of the word “church” is also intended to point out the particular characteristics and injustices that pertain to the reality of Korean American Catholics. Many Korean Catholic communities in the US are not recognized as parishes but as “centers” or just simply “communities” or “ministries.” The lack of recognition as parish, partly due to the reasons explained in this article, perpetuates the minority status of Korean American Catholics within the American Catholicism, despite the community’s fifty years of history in the US. As ethnic minority communities, Korean American Catholics carry on a rather isolated existence without much interaction with the American diocese to which they belong. Furthermore, not being recognized as parish has financial consequences as Korean Catholic communities do not receive proper resources from the American dioceses to which they belong. See, Simon C. Kim, *Memory and Honor: Cultural and Generational Ministry with Korean American Communities* (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2010).

Figure 3. Korean chapel at St. Agnes Korean Catholic Church, Los Angeles, California; Exterior, flanked at the end by the residential building that houses the parish office and the rectory. Photo by author. 2021.



One parishioner said coming to St. Agnes feels like coming home to one's mother's house. A woman coming home to her mother's house has a special meaning in the Korean cultural imagination. Korea is a patriarchal society where a woman is married into the man's family and, thereby, becomes estranged to her own family especially to her own maternal roots linked to her mother. Coming home to one's mother's house means a woman becomes connected to her own family again; it reconnects the woman back to her childhood, it is a sense of reclaiming oneself again, to be part of the real family from which the woman came to know herself as a person. The same parishioner added that she wouldn't attend the local American parish in her neighborhood, for St. Agnes is like her mother's house.<sup>28</sup>

Worship space for the Korean Catholics in LA has migrated over the years. As the number of Korean Catholics in the area increased during the 1980s–90s, the Korean Catholic community that met at the Newman Center on the USC campus began to congregate for worship at the existing American parish of St. Agnes on

<sup>28</sup> Anonymous, interview.

Vermont Avenue and they utilized the empty school building behind the church for their own parish activities. The Korean community continued to grow and take roots at St. Agnes on Vermont Avenue. Korean parishioners built a Marian shrine in 1987 in the parking lot of the parish and marked their presence at St. Agnes on Vermont. Building their own Marian shrine was a way for the Korean Catholics at St. Agnes to assert their presence in the shared parish space.<sup>29</sup> During the 1990s, the number of the Hispanic population increased in the surrounding area and they started to congregate at St. Agnes on Vermont. In 2000, the Koreans at St. Agnes celebrated an outdoor multicultural Mass in English, Spanish, and Korean. But unspoken, invisible boundaries between the three groups persisted and, along with it, the need for exclusivity in the worship space. In 2014, the Koreans built a chapel in the lot that belonged to one of the residential buildings they purchased, in order to have their own worship space for the weekday Masses, while they celebrated the Sunday Masses at St. Agnes on Vermont.<sup>30</sup>

One parishioner said this was when the Koreans began to “get pushed out by the Hispanics from the ‘real’ St. Agnes that was once [their] home.”<sup>31</sup> The same parishioner added, “then we lost the school building [behind St. Agnes on Vermont], so we bought the houses [in the back lot] and turned them into parish halls because we needed a space for our activities.”<sup>32</sup> Today, St. Agnes carries on a precarious relationship with the Hispanic community at the “real” St. Agnes church on Vermont. The Korean St. Agnes community has their own chapel and other

29 Tricia Bruce points out that ethnic minority communities often use symbols, like the Marian shrine in this case, to express their cultural identity in the contested multicultural shared parish space. Bruce, *Parish and Place*, 120-125.

30 During my visit in 2021, all Korean Masses were held in the small chapel, due to the decreased number of Mass attendees during the COVID-19 pandemic. One parishioner I interviewed noted that, once the COVID restrictions ease up and parishioners return, they will slowly return to celebrating Sunday masses in the “big church,” i.e., St. Agnes on Vermont Ave.

31 Anonymous, interview. This sentiment entitled to the parishioner I interviewed illustrates the tension between different ethnic groups that share the same parish space. This article is not intended at analyzing the social interaction between Korean and Hispanic communities in Los Angeles. However, numerous studies on Korean American communities in relation to other ethnic groups exist. For example, on the tension between Korean and African American communities in Los Angeles, see: Kyeyoung Park, “Use and Abuse of Race and Culture: Black-Korean Tension in America,” *American Anthropologist* 98, no. 3 (1996): 492-499.

32 Anonymous, interview.



buildings they use as a parish hall, rectory, and even a coffee shop, which gives them a certain autonomous existence of a parish without being given the canonical parish status. However, St. Agnes Korean Catholic Center is not recognized as a parish in the Archdiocese of LA; it is a “catholic center,” an ecclesial community, that is hosted at the St. Agnes Catholic Church on Vermont Ave. Materially speaking, the worship space for Korean Catholics at St. Agnes is a visual showcase of the community’s history. Their worship space is like a palimpsest; it exists in what can be described as the “Korean corner” in the back lot of Paroquia de Santa Iñés. Their history is a continuous seeking of footings on an unstable ground.

In New Jersey, St. Andrew Kim Korean Catholic Church demonstrates a different case of instability. If St. Agnes is a case of contestation over the shared physical space of the parish, St. Andrew Kim in Maplewood is a case in which the Koreans employ and activate the worship space in order to construct and maintain their cultural identity. While the St. Andrew Kim community is a canonically established parish, materials that express Korean culture are inserted into the existing white American architectural building of the parish. In other words, materialistic expressions of Korean culture at St. Andrew Kim rely on and utilize the non-Korean worship space in which the Korean community has planted roots.

Korean Catholics in the New Jersey area began to form their community when five families gathered at a parochial school space in 1972 to celebrate Mass in Korean for the first time with Fr Augustine Park (1935–2013; ordained Monsignor in 2000), who was in New York as an international student. Like the community in Los Angeles, New Jersey Korean Catholics started as a small group and expanded and migrated to different worship spaces during its fifty years of history. In 1980, the Korean Catholic community was established as a parish in the Archdiocese of Newark. They were given a former Christian Scientist building on 18 Cleveland Street, Orange City, which they consecrated as St. Andrew Kim Korean Catholic Church.<sup>33</sup> The weight of this significant step can be grasped from the fact that,

33 For a more comprehensive history of Korean American Catholics in the New Jersey area, see the online article written by Robert Wister: “The Archdiocese of Newark and Immigration. VI: Asia/Korea,” <http://blogs.shu.edu/archdiocese-immigration/vi-asia-korea/> (Accessed September, 2022).



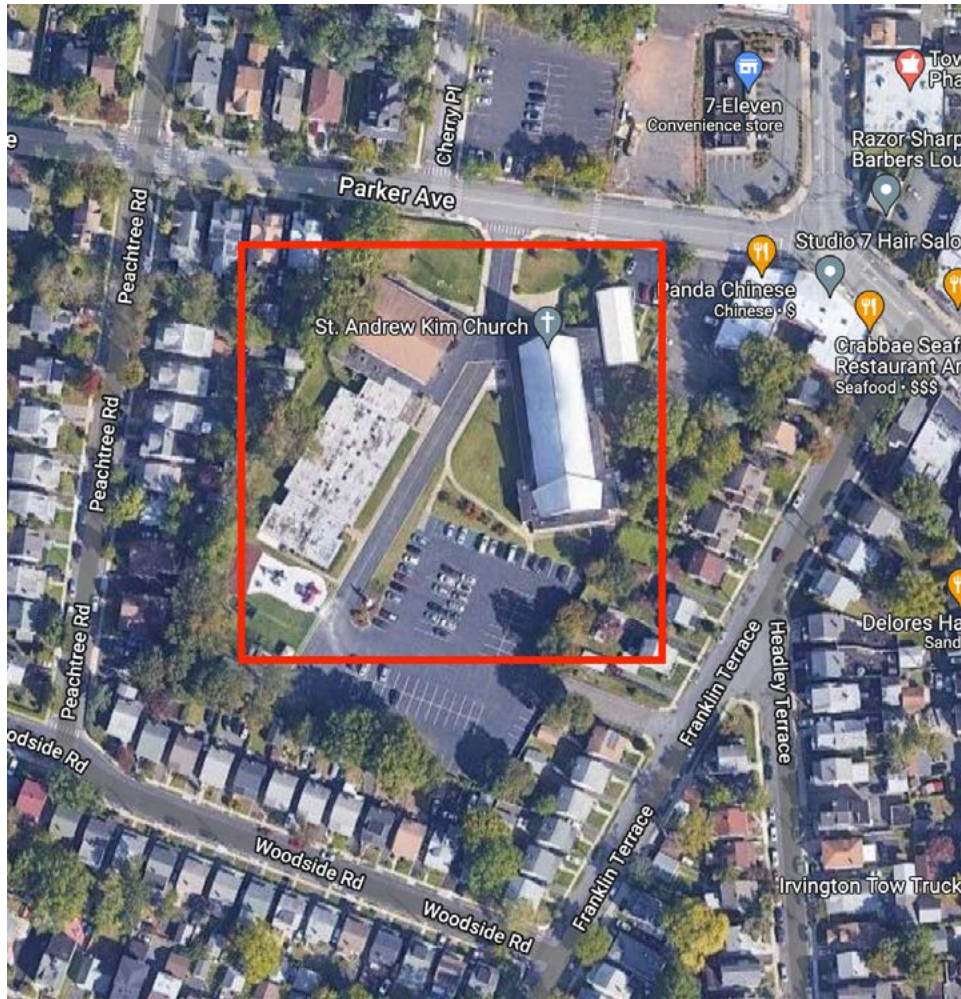


Figure 4. St. Andrew Kim Korean Catholic Church in Maplewood, New Jersey. (Google Maps. Accessed April, 2022.)

although the patron saint of the church is St. Andrew Kim, the first Korean native to be ordained priest who was martyred in 1846, the parish was known to the Koreans in the area simply as “*The New Jersey Korean Catholic Church.*” As the one and only Korean Catholic church in New Jersey at the time, the community at St. Andrew Kim took on a hierarchical and structural shape as they became a parish and moved into the church building. Since their establishment in Orange City, the community moved several times and occupied different parish buildings until they were given the current parish building compound on Parker Ave in Maplewood when the former Immaculate Heart of Mary Catholic Church closed in 2004. New Jersey Korean Catholics settled into this compound consisted of a

Figure 5. St Andrew Kim Korean Catholic Church, Maplewood, NJ; Interior. Photo by author. 2021.



church, a rectory and offices, and a former school building which is now used as a multipurpose parish hall.

The architectural style of St Andrew Kim doesn't immediately display indications of Korean culture. Built in 1954, the interior of the church is an undescriptive A-frame space with wooden beams that resembles the inside of a ship.

Long lines of oak pews fill the congregational space and point toward the sanctuary. The sanctuary consists of an elaborately carved wooden altar. Directly behind the altar is a modest-looking tabernacle, above which hangs a tall wooden crucifix against the back wall. The middle of the wall is indented with a tall strip of patterned tiles that depict Christ the King with open arms who wears a golden crown. On either side of the altar are placed statues of Jesus and Mary. During my visit in the summer of 2021 two banners with words written in Korean were hung on the wall on both sides of the altar; on the left displayed the scriptural verse "Do whatever he tells you" (John 2:5) and on the right, "In thanksgiving for the 50th





Figure 6. Sanctuary at St Andrew Kim Korean Catholic Church, Maplewood, NJ. Photo by author. 2021.

anniversary of the parish; we pray for a mature faith community and harmonious holy families . . .”<sup>34</sup>

34 Banner on the right, in Korean: “본당설립 50주년을 감사드리며 성숙한 신앙공동체와 화목한 성가정을 위하여 . . .” Translation to English author’s.



Figure 7. Memorial Chapel for Msgr. Augustine Park, St Andrew Kim Korean Catholic Church, Maplewood, NJ. Photo by author. 2021.



Other than the banners that display Korean texts, the most notable material objects that showcase Korean cultural identity and the history of the community are found in the two side chapels on either side of the sanctuary, where the parishioners built a memorial for Msgr. Augustine Park, a revered figure by Korean Catholics in the New Jersey/New York area.

Known as the “Father of New Jersey Korean Catholics” Msgr. Park was a central figure that contributed to the tremendous growth of the Korean Catholic community in the New Jersey area.<sup>35</sup> Since celebrating the first Mass in Korean with five families in New Jersey in 1972, Msgr. Park’s efforts at evangelization bore many fruits. The Korean Catholic community expanded into two parishes and five Catholic missions (called *gongso* in Korean) spread over the dioceses of Newark and Metuchen. In 1990, Msgr. Park started Andrew Ministry which is dedicated to cultivating vocations to the priesthood. By 2011 there were eleven Korean men

35 St. Andrew Kim Korean Catholic Church, *A Ggim Up Si Joo Neun Namu (A Tree that Gives without Reservation)*, 2011 (commemorative booklet prepared by the St. Andrew Kim community for the 50th Ordination Anniversary of Msgr. Augustine Park).



Figure 8. Relic of St. Andrew Kim. Maplewood, New Jersey. Photo by author.

ordained to the priesthood, three religious sisters, and two permanent deacons. Msgr. Park also actively promoted lay ecclesiastical movements among New Jersey Korean Catholics, such as the ME (Worldwide Marriage Encounter), Catholic Charismatic Renewal, Cursillo, Antioch Program (youth ministry), and Legio

Figure 9. Southern wall; image of St. Andrew Kim. Maplewood, New Jersey. Photo by author. 2021.



Figure 10. Eastern wall; image of Msgr. Augustine Park. Maplewood, New Jersey. Photo by author. 2021.



Mariae. The shrine to Msgr. Park consists of an altar on top of which stands a relic of St Andrew Kim, who was canonized by Pope John Paul II in 1984.

The image of St Andrew Kim on the right wall of the shrine and a marble plaque hangs on the frame of the chapel with the Greek letter Alpha and the text in Korean, “I am the beginning,” are inscribed. In juxtaposition, the image of Msgr. Park is displayed on the left wall while a plaque inscription of the Greek letter Omega and the text in Korean, “I am the End.”

The relic of St. Andrew Kim, the juxtaposed images of St. Andrew Kim and Msgr. Park in the shrine express the parishioners’ intention to link the New Jersey Korean Catholic community to the beginnings of Korean Catholicism in Korea. By making this link back to the Church in the homeland, the New Jersey Korean Catholic community expresses its desire to continue the history of Korean Catholicism now in the diaspora.<sup>36</sup> It is also notable that this shrine is housed at “*The Ko-*

36 That devotional shrines mark the cultural presence of a diasporic community is a well-studied phenomenon. See, particularly within the Catholic context: Thomas A. Tweed, *Our Lady of the Exile: Diasporic Religion at a Cuban Catholic Shrine in Miami* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997); Robert A. Orsi, *The Madonna of 115th Street: Faith and Community in Italian Harlem, 1880–1950*, 2nd ed. (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 2002).



rean Catholic Church of New Jersey,” which has almost become a sacred site where the history of New Jersey Korean Catholics is memorialized. The shrine makes the history of the community visible; through the shrine the community has left its mark in the history of the Archdiocese of Newark. Yet, the materialistic markers of Korean culture in the parish building of St. Andrew Kim, such as the shrines and the banners, are almost like stand-alone elements that rely on the preexisting architecture of a former Euro-American parish in order to find their stable presence in the worship space. Strictly speaking, analyzing the material culture alone cannot unsee the disconnect between the shrines that express the Korean devotional and cultural heritage and the Euro-American style architecture in which the Korean shrine is placed. In consideration of this disconnect, the materialistic elements contain a rather prescriptive expression of Korean culture.

## SPATIAL MEMORY

To find the space in which Korean American Catholics preserve their cultural identity, one must look to the space of memory. For Korean American Catholics, immigration has interrupted their history and has displaced their cultural identity. The worship space for the community, too, has been displaced through numerous relocations and, along with it, the communal history and identity has also migrated. This reality of Korean Catholics in Los Angeles and New Jersey raises a question on the functionality of material culture in relation to memory that prolongs the cultural identity of a diasporic community.

The type of memory that preserves a community’s shared cultural identity is distinctive from the individual, psychological memory. Studies on collective memory and culture began with the seminal work by French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs (1877–1945), who proposed that individual memory and remembering depended on the social structure that allowed transmission of memory between persons individually and between generations collectively. Halbwachs argued that memory is an interpretative process which an individual carries out according to the symbolic system established by the social unit to which the individual belongs. In other words, individual memory could only be formed socially, and therefore collectively.



The German art and cultural historian Aby Warburg (1866–1929), looked to the material products themselves for the transmission of memory. Analyzing art works throughout history according to themes rather than historical periods or geographical locations, Warburg could showcase memory as something continuous, and transmitted intergenerationally throughout history. Warburg emphasized particular actualizations of collective memory according to the changes of the particular time and society. By analyzing the correlation between the continuity of transmitted memory and the changes and reinterpretation of the particular societal time and place, one could arrive at a collective dimension of culture of a people. The strength of Warburg’s approach was that it starts from the material objects as agents that are capable of evoking memory and creating the cultural continuity.<sup>37</sup>

In the later part of the twentieth century, the French philosopher and cultural critic Pierre Nora’s *les lieux de mémoire* took another approach to memory. Writing in the context of the nineteenth century disintegration of the Third Republic in France, Nora argued that memory is not contained in the collective, national *cadres sociaux* as Halbwachs proposed but rather in the fragmented sites of memory. Today’s society is no longer a monolithic, stable ground of the nineteenth century but is transitional and changing. The connective tissue built by the nation-state is broken down, and the sites of memory are a sort of placeholders for the national memory that could no longer be collectively held together. Nora’s approach to collective memory is helpful for understanding the destabilized conditions of material culture wherein memory, which was once bound to the social framework of a collective group, is also destabilized. More recently, scholars on memory proposed “transnational” or “traveling memory” that becomes evident in the context of displacement caused by migration.<sup>38</sup> Memory is neither contained within a collective social environment nor transmitted from individual to another as if an object to be handed over. In this sense, one could speak of an immigrant memory that is

37 Astrid Erll, *Memory in Culture* (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).

38 Astrid Erll describes “traveling memory” in terms of “transcultural memory;” an “umbrella term for what in other academic contexts might be described with concepts of transnational, diasporic, syncretistic, postcolonial, translocal, creolized, global, or cosmopolitan.” Astrid Erll, “Travelling Memory,” 4–18.



contained neither within the material culture of the physical worship space nor within the individual's mind.

## IMMIGRANT MEMORY FOR KOREAN AMERICAN CATHOLICS

In the case of Korean American Catholics in Los Angeles and New Jersey seen above, the fact of immigration presupposes physical, psychological, and historical displacement from the cultural circumstances of the homeland that once held up a national, collective culture. Moreover, Korean American Catholic communities often migrate from one worship space to another, as they move into the existing parish buildings that are built according to the architectural style of the twentieth century American Catholicism. In this context, memory becomes a space for Korean American Catholics to exist, not apart from their cultural associations as Korean, American, and Catholic but in encompassing all of the above in a dynamic, continuous process of constructing and expressing their own particular cultural identity in the diaspora.

But if memory is a space for immigrants, what kind of space is it? Social theorist and geographer Edward Soja proposed “Thirdspace” as a hermeneutics for the realities that exist between the material and the psychological. Building on Henri Lefebvre’s concept of “production of space” and Michel Foucault’s “heterotopology,” Soja’s Thirdspace is derived from “Firstspace perspective that is focused on the ‘real’ material world and a Secondspace perspective that interprets this reality through ‘imagined’ representations of spatiality.”<sup>39</sup> Between the empirical data of the physical space and the subjective practice of the imaginary space lies a phenomenological approach to the meaning of reality. For example, Soja speaks of an exhibition at UCLA held in commemoration of the bicentennial of the French Revolution, which evoked memories of synchronic resonances between Paris and

39 Soja’s Thirdspace builds on Henry Lefebvre’s spatial theory of triad of concepts: spatial practice, representations of space, and representational spaces. Soja’s Firstspace can be described as Lefebvre’s spatial space, which is the physical, formal space; and Secondspace is what Lefebvre would call representations of space, which is imagined space that reflects one’s projected idea. Edward Soja, *Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real-and-Imagined Places* (Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell Publishing, 1996), 6.

LA in the period 1789–1989. The two physical spaces of Paris and LA exist in separate geographies but, through memory, “heteropological spaces resonate together in this real-and-imagined journey.”<sup>40</sup> Such space of memory is “heterological,” for this space is neither “real” nor “imagined.” Memory is like “a simultaneously historical-social-spatial palimpsest . . . in which inextricably intertwined temporal, social, and spatial relations are being constantly reinscribed, erased, and reinscribed again.”<sup>41</sup> Memory is a space in which physical and imagined spaces interact and overlap. It constricts time and geographical places and assign new meaning to the past events so that present and future might relate to them differently.

## KOREAN RITUALS OF REMEMBRANCE

This heteropological space of memory exists between the physical worship space and the ritual actions of remembrance. Within the worship space, ritual celebrations of traditional holidays are heterological ways through which Korean American Catholics assert their Korean cultural identity via memory. For example, calendrical dates and commemorative rituals are participatory spaces which allows the members of the group in the present to share collectively in the object of memory of the past. Christians celebrate Lent, Easter, and Advent in a cyclical continuity of time that exists apart from non-Christian time. Similarly, Koreans have their own calendar that assert communal memory as standard for telling time: June 25 for the Korean War, Chusuk (the Fall Harvest), and August 25 Independence Day. Korean Catholics in New Jersey have designated March 29 as the memorial day for Msgr. Augustine Park. These memorial celebrations take place in the parish as a means for Korean American Catholics to preserve and transmit their cultural and religious heritage.

Korean American Catholics celebrate traditional Fall Harvest festival, Chusuk, as they gather for the Eucharistic celebration at the parish. Chusuk is a celebration of the Fall harvest that falls on the fifteenth day of the ninth month of the lunar calendar. An important ritual of Chusuk is *cha-rye*, a traditional meal prepared in honor of one’s ancestors. Korean American theologian Simon Kim states that

40 Soja, *Thirdspace*, 18.

41 Soja, *Thirdspace*, 18.



Chusuk is a holiday as much as a traditional ritual that preserves family history and filial lineage, which the family members carry on through memory.<sup>42</sup> But Chusuk also carries a religious significance that originates from shamanism, as it recognizes the spirit of the ancestor present at the *cha-rye* meal.<sup>43</sup> For Korean immigrants in the US, the geographical distance makes it difficult to join their families and partake in the traditional rituals in Korea. Instead, the importance of communal meal and filial obligation to honor one's ancestor is translated in the diaspora as Korean Catholics participate in the Eucharistic celebration at church on the day of Chusuk.<sup>44</sup> By partaking in the meal at the Lord's Table during the Chusuk Mass at the parish, Korean Catholics maintain the religious undertone of Chusuk in the diasporic setting.<sup>45</sup> At the Eucharistic meal, Koreans in the diaspora not only commemorate their deceased ancestors but also their family members in Korea whom they cannot visit due to the geographical distance. These transnational traditions are particular diasporic expressions of the Korean culture through which second and third generation Korean Americans maintain a connection to their cultural heritage.<sup>46</sup>

Similarly, the importance of filial piety in Korean spirituality and liturgical practice is evident in the Korean Catholic practice of *yeondo*, a prayer for the deceased and the souls in purgatory. Although the origins of *yeondo* are unknown, it is a liturgical practice that is distinct to Korean Catholicism. *Yeondo* is prayed throughout the funerary rituals, from death of the individual, vigil, wake, to interment or cremation. When a member of the community is deceased, the community gathers typically at the surviving family member's house to pray *yeondo* all night, keeping vigil. Divided into two parts typically between men and women, *yeondo* is chanted in a responsorial form to pray to God to have mercy on the deceased and to grant them eternal peace. The melody is distinctly Korean, which arises from the traditional vocal techniques used for text chanting.<sup>47</sup>

42 Kim, *Memory and Honor*.

43 Kim, *Memory and Honor*, 96.

44 Kim, *Memory and Honor*, 96.

45 Kim, *Memory and Honor*, 97.

46 Kim, *Memory and Honor*, 96.

47 Singing and chanting are differentiated in Korean traditional music. While singing involves mul-



In the American diaspora, yeondo is not only a continuation of cultural-religious practice of the homeland but also an occasion for the Korean Catholics to gather and remember the deceased who has become like family as a fellow immigrant. Praying yeondo is a ritual act that creates a social bond between the immigrants, which is elevated to a special sense of filial obligation formed for the immigrants in the foreign land. Similar to the practice of chusuk, yeondo is a cultural and religious ritual that allows Korean Catholic immigrants to fulfill their filial duty for the ancestors and remember their own family members in Korea whom they cannot visit frequently. Paying respect to the deceased is not only a socio-cultural custom but an act of remembrance that connects the individual to the community. Theologically speaking, yeondo is an act of remembrance that brings the living into communion with the saints in heaven as well as the entire pilgrim Church on earth.

Rituals of remembrance such as the Chusuk celebration and the practice of yeondo take part in the collective cultural memory of Korean American Catholics that is not solely consisted of or contained within the material culture of worship space. As memory exists in between the material and the imagined, remembering becomes an existential “space” wherein Korean American Catholics reclaim and reconstruct their cultural identity.

## IMMIGRANT MEMORY AND MEMORY OF IMMIGRANTS

What is immigrant memory? Immigrant memory is unstable. It resides in rituals and symbols, and in the forming of Christian communities. The narrative of Korean American Catholic existence in diaspora gives us an insight into how worship space may be understood as a meta-space in which memory, as a spatial experience, embodies the Korean cultural and religious identity. Thirdspace presupposes

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multiple intonations within a syllable, chanting involves vocalization per each syllable. The practice of *yeondo* has been handed down by oral tradition for almost 200 years until, in 1992, the melody was transcribed into a standardized musical notation. Youngyeah Kang, “Consideration for Yeondo Scores in Catholic SangjangYesik,” *JKTPA* no. 42 (2020): 21–45, <http://doi.org/10.29028/JNGC.2020.42.021>. Throughout multiple revisions and editions, the core of the prayer retained, which includes chanting of psalms 129(130), 50(51), litany of saints, and doxology. See: Ju Eun Gyeong, “Yöndo Mourning Song of the Korean Catholic Funeral Ceremony,” *Journal of the Society for Korean Historico-Musicology* no.40 (2008): 589–622.



a continuous process of fragmentation, reconstruction, and reinterpretation that overcomes preconceived meanings and definitions. In this sense, memory, as a space for immigrants, is on the move. Memory is immigrant not only because it is fleeting and is vulnerable to change and forgetfulness but also because it provides an “other” way of existence. Immigrants exist in heterological ways in the foreign land as they manipulate and negotiate physical spaces through their ritual embodiment of memory. Spatial memory hovers between the physical space and imagined meaning of the space. For immigrants, treading spatial memory offers endless possibilities of creating, reshaping, recombining a myriad of meanings. In this sense, immigrant memory is distinguished from memories of immigrants. Immigrant memory is itinerant; it is memory that moves across space and time, that moves transnationally along with the immigrants who leave their home and establish a new home in the foreign land.

Immigrant memory challenges the hermeneutics of spatial interpretation for analyzing the cultural identity of a national parish because the subject of interpretation—the immigrant and the physical worship space—itsself is unstable. The interpreting subject is constantly in the process of “othering” the meaning of space and time. Such is the role of memory that contributes to the particular characteristics of the immigrant church for Korean American Catholics.

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