5 Signs of transnationalism from above and below

The previous chapter explored the social and semiotic function of landscapes for migrants involved in mapping a sense of connection and belonging in relation to place. This chapter shifts the focus more specifically to visible signs in public places that indicate or anticipate the presence of individuals from more than one language community. Whether viewed from a distance or in close proximity, these signs create an impression. They elicit some type of immediate response. In certain contexts, the public appearance of multilingual signs unavoidably interrupts prior assumptions of homogeneity, opening them to diverse interpretations or recontextualizations. Public signs have a social and interactional function; they ‘signify’ beyond the particular groups they reference. And like all signifiers there can be gaps between their intention and their interpretation. In some cases, particularly where there is insufficient understanding of what or whom they represent, their indexical or symbolic functions can easily be obscured.

Languages in translation on view in public settings function as a welcome relief for some; for others they are an unwelcome blemish on a presumed monolingual space. Signs that display (un)recognizable scripts simultaneously carry a message of exclusivity and inclusivity depending on the viewer and the context. The appearance of a translated signpost, billboard, notice on a place of worship or storefront, etc. in a particular language can shift the ‘outsider’ status from one group to another, reinforce the target group’s ‘otherness’ within a community, and mark that place with reference to its newest inhabitants. In multicultural cities, untranslated signs or signs in multiple languages are as likely to provoke indifference in urban residents or passersby as to stir pride in their diversity, given the multiplicity of visual and aural stimuli they take in on a regular basis.\(^1\)

Translated signs found on official buildings, public transportation, instructions for use, warnings, public address announcements, voicemails, and so on, appear primarily as inter-lingual messages that more or less replicate the same information for a general public. These are the types of translation presented in written form (no smoking/no fumar) or where an option is given to hear information in another language on the telephone as in the phrase commonly heard in the US, “para continuar en español
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[oprima, marque, or diga] el dos.” Many other translated signs are inter-semiotic in kind, sometimes involving written text with an accompanying visual referent, for example, “La Iglesia En El Camino” in front of a building indicating its status as a church. For a native Spanish speaker, this would not be read as a translation, it is a monolingual sign; it is the non-Spanish speaking person for whom some additional information would be required to make sense of it, involving some sort of translation, including the building itself. With inter-semiotic signs like those in Figure 5.1 that appear outside the British Museum in London, a mecca for tourists from across the globe, the assumption is that either the pictorial images or the English texts, “Do not sit on the steps” and “Emergency escape,” or both, will be understood. Failing this, of course, the other option available to visitors is simply to ‘interpret’ the actions of others.

There are certain instances when the need for translation comes to a halt, as when visual signs in another language are incorporated into the local or national lexicon. English, given its current standing as a lingua franca, is most often associated with this phenomenon, but it occurs with other languages as well. For example, many New York City residents will commonly refer to their neighborhood corner grocery store as a bodega where no such sign is posted and where the owner is neither Spanish-speaking nor from a

Figure 5.1 Inter-semiotic signs at the British Museum, London. Photograph: author’s own
Spanish-speaking community. Paradoxically, to understand its use as a name for a corner store would require more effort by some so-called native Spanish speakers, especially first-time visitors to New York, than for non-Spanish speaking inhabitants of that city. For many Spanish speakers, for example, the word *bodega* is more commonly understood to refer to a wine cellar or, if encountered on a sign in front of an establishment open in the evening, either a shop selling wine and champagne or a wine bar. A secondary meaning would be the hold of a ship or an airplane where items are stored.

In New York City, the term *bodega* suggests a specific type of place to buy certain things; it requires no translation for most urban residents, only local knowledge. Figures 5.2 and 5.3 are examples of such establishments. Although the signs read, respectively, (in yellow and red) “Villa Fundacion DELI GROCERY CORP.”, and (in green and yellow) “Burj Khaleefa Deli” (an apparent ironic reference to the luxury skyscraper in Dubai, now the tallest building in the world), only one of these shop signs, “Villa Fundacion,” indicates a Spanish-speaking proprietor probably with links to the town of La Fundación, Dominican Republic, yet both are likely to be called *bodegas* by most residents of New York City.

Jake Dobkin, a New York native, took to his blog to explain the meaning of *bodega* to a reader who asks: “What is the difference between a

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*Figure 5.2 Villa Fundacion, New York. Photograph by Milica Bogetic and Stephanie Kaplan*
bodega, a deli, and a corner grocer? Are they all different terms for the same thing?"

Dear Curious:

Some natives might tell you that these are all expressions for what other Americans call “convenience stores,” but this is wrong. The words we New Yorkers use to describe our metropolis are freighted with subtle meaning and reflect our city’s long and ethnically diverse history. Allow me to explain!

Bodega is the Spanish word for “warehouse.” When Spanish-speaking people began arriving in New York in large numbers during the first half of the twentieth century, they brought this word with them to describe small stores selling a variety of items including packaged food, beverages, cigarettes, newspapers, and candy. When prohibition was
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repealed, these stores also began stocking beer; some also sold fresh and prepared food like sandwiches, produce, milk, flowers, and eggs. As the Spanish-speaking population of New York continued to expand, the word bodega began to be used outside Hispanic communities, where it was used interchangeably with other terms, including ones that referred to a store by what it sold (“candy store,” “newsstand,” “optimo,” etc.)

But critically, when a New Yorker hears the word “bodega” he also pictures a specific style of store design. This includes red and yellow awnings (“cold cuts and cold beer”), a variety of window ads, and a small sign advertising the presence of an ATM in back. The stores are usually small and often (but not always) on a corner. Inside we are not surprised to find a resident cat, slightly dusty groceries, and a few neighborhood guys bullshitting about current events. The proprietor is often behind the register, but is no longer always Puerto Rican. In bodegas with Muslim owners, beer is usually not sold, and instead you find a wider selection of non-alcoholic beverages.

Deli is short for “delicatessen”, which is a German word (borrowed from France), meaning “delicacies.” Originally used to refer to the food itself, it began to be used to describe the stores selling the food. It arrived in New York with the German immigrants after the Civil War, and reached its fullest expression when used by Yiddish-speaking Jews to describe restaurants selling corned-beef and pastrami sandwiches, among other items. These are now referred to by New Yorkers as “Jewish Delicatessens” or “Kosher Delis.” Katz’s and The 2nd Avenue Deli are prime examples.

As Yiddish and German speaking New Yorkers filtered out of the Lower East Side and into other neighborhoods, the word “deli” also began to be used to describe any place that sold sandwiches or similar grab-and-go foods. If a store consists mainly of a long counter behind which people are making sandwiches, with a beverage case off to the side and possibly a few tables, it will often be called a deli, but if a bodega has a small sandwich counter, and mainly sells groceries, it will usually still be called a bodega. If the deli mainly sells food from a single ethnic tradition, New Yorkers will often refer to it by that designation (the “Mexican place,” “The Chinese place”) even if you can also get sandwiches there.

This account illustrates the organic means by which lexical signs attached to a particular language and culture can be reconfigured and reintroduced into a different space over time to become part of a new local lexicon and culture. Words like these that enter a lexicon enrich an existing set of possible signs by adding variation, eclipsing those already established, or adding new ones. The new meanings that emerge are uncoupled from a previously
established sign/meaning through repeated encounters with new groups of individuals in new contexts, making its translation no longer necessary, as it becomes reimagined and absorbed into their daily life in similar enough ways. These are not merely loan words, which signify borrowing, nor does it imply, in the case of bodega, that a Spanish concept has become ‘assimilated’ into the English lexicon in the pejorative sense of this term. What is most significant is not the words themselves, but the micro-processes by which they come to possess new referents by their use by a specific community of users. In both smaller and larger global spaces – official policies notwithstanding – contact among diverse linguistic and cultural practices and the communities with which they are associated tends to occur over time and to varying degrees as firm boundary lines are gradually perceived as open border crossings for any number of reasons. Though in cases of heightened animosity or physical conflict this can become a volatile space, many if not most multicultural spaces involve frequent enough exchange and encounters among their inhabitants to ensure that a certain mutual assimilation of interests is attempted and achieved.

Two decades of sociolinguistic research on the semiotics of public multilingual signage has advanced the notion of the “linguistic landscape” first introduced by Landry and Bourhis (1997) as a site in which to explore questions concerning language variety, ethnic identity, and mobility, particularly in cities characterized by their ‘superdiversity,’ with a particular interest in assessing the relative power and status of a particular linguistic community in a given, usually urban, setting. The notion has spawned a rich and varied investigative field of research in which a number of sociolinguistic phenomena are addressed, resulting in an impressive body of literature. Though the specific focus of each study varies, most share the view that visible multilingual signs in public places reveal something about the organization of social relationships among members of a society and also serve as significant markers of ethnic and linguistic identity.

Though much of the research on linguistic landscapes has focused on major urban centers, multilingual taskscapes are of course a feature of remote and rural areas as well. Moreover, they are not limited to communities with a migrant presence, but are also common wherever a minority–majority language dynamic has been established as a consequence of history, migration, and/or conflict – the continent of Africa for example. In both types of communities, the translation of particular signs can indicate the degree to which the use of more than one language is perceived as a priority or even a right, as well as the expected or assumed levels of competency regarding the languages in use within that community. The languages that are selected for translation, and the overall quality of the materials or the translations themselves, can underscore the real or perceived relative power or significance of one language or one group over another. Alternatively, the refusal to translate a sign can, though not always, signal a preference for greater insularity, a way of intentionally marking the borders of a community.
The research on linguistic landscapes takes these signs as examples of multilingual writing or multilingualism, which differentiates it somewhat from the approach taken here where multilingual signage, as well as the same signs in different languages, are examined and discussed as instances of translation in all its forms. Viewing such signs primarily as examples of multilingualism tends to accentuate the juxtaposition of different languages and cultures, presenting them as separate and, in some cases, not so equal material artifacts situated in the landscape. Understanding them as examples of translation, in contrast, gives greater prominence to their relational aspects and to the interpretive processes involved in reading these signs, highlighting their intrinsic dialogism. By translation, I am not referring to the task of interpreting their cultural or linguistic meanings, though this is a part of the process. I refer to the more complex task of comprehending the dynamic between the signs given and signs given off through a combination of intellectual and instinctive behavior—a task that activates reflexive responses within a particular environment by assorted individuals or groups, some of whom may even reside outside its presumed boundaries. In other words, there is a presumption of a dialogue between signs and their producers, their multiple viewers, and the settings where individuals come together—sometimes from a distance, sometimes not—to engage in the quotidian activities of social life.

What I have in mind here is elegantly illustrated in the intensive intellectual and aesthetic exchange of over one thousand letters beginning in March 1950 between the poets Charles Olson and Robert Creeley, during which both also moved several times, writing from different landscapes within and outside the United States. Olson moved from Washington to Yucatan, to Black Mountain College in North Carolina, and Creeley from New Hampshire to southern France, to Mallorca, and eventually to New Mexico (Butterick 1980: xiv–xv). The two corresponded for four years, knowing very little about each other until meeting in person in 1954 when Creeley arrived to teach at Black Mountain College.

Olson named Creeley the “Figure of Outward” in dedicating his first volume of The Maximus Poems (1960) and referred to Creeley once again in this way in this note to himself toward the end of his life (ibid.: ix).

The Figure of Outward means way out way out

there: the
‘World,’ I’m sure, otherwise
why was the pt. then to like write to Creeley
daily? to make that whole thing
double, to
objectify the extension of an
‘outward’? a[n] opposite to a
personality which so completely does (did)
stay at home?
In his editor’s introduction to the first volume of *Charles Olson & Robert Creeley: The Complete Correspondence*, George Butterick writes (ibid.: xi):

Each man allowed the other his head, took what came, and found of interest (or at least discussible) each other’s preoccupations. Sometimes a dialogue ensued, other times one generously allowed himself to be used as a sounding board for the other’s necessities. Together they hammered out a poetics – both the specialized craft of the wordsmith, but also the larger issue of how a man of language must live in the world.

For Olson, in his retrospective reflection on their correspondence, the dialogue was two-faceted, but crucially also one that opened onto the world – prospectively onto new terrain, both aesthetic and material.

In the dialogues that are instigated by more public forms of communication, an opening on to the world is also offered. Minimally, public signs can trigger a fleeting awareness of a community’s diversity, creating an opportunity for some type of recognition, if not inclusion, between its members to occur. Maximally, they precipitate an enhanced mindfulness of one another, providing a means toward the (re)consideration of prior understandings and the implementation of new ones. These contexts allow us see how different forms of language are focused dialogically on an ‘I’ and an ‘us’ who simultaneously constitute one another’s “out there.” They are thus integral to the interaction order, and an important component of its evolution.

**The taskscapes of Koreatown, LA**

Koreatown is one of Los Angeles’ largest districts; its current population numbers about 130,000, the majority of whom are relatively recent migrants who began to settle in the area in the mid-1960s. Though English is the official language of the state, most of the residents of Koreatown regularly use additional languages in everyday discourse. Despite its name, Koreatown is currently home to a multiplicity of ethnic groups, the largest of whom are Latin Americans who make up around 58 percent of its population, and the majority of these are Mexican. Korean Americans make up only about 22 percent, while the rest include relatively small numbers of Asians (including a growing Bangladeshi community who currently make up 9 percent of the total population) and Pacific Islanders, White, African American, and other Black inhabitants.

Koreans were among the first migrants to settle there after 1965 when new US immigration legislation phased out the national origins quota system in favor of family reunification. The majority of these immigrants came not directly from Korea, but via Germany and Brazil. In 1992, Koreatown found itself at the center of violent conflicts that would leave an enduring
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Over half of the businesses in Koreatown were burned and looted during the Los Angeles riots (known as Sa-I-Gu in Korean, which translates as April 29) in response to the brutal beating of an African American man, Rodney King, and the subsequent acquittal of the four policemen responsible. This precipitated a Korean American exodus out of the city and into the suburbs, leaving room for Latin American families to move in due to its proximity to public transportation and the sudden availability of low rent apartments (Eui-Young et al 2004: 31). However, Koreatown still represents the largest concentration of Koreans outside of Korea (Sanchez et al 2012: 4).

Despite the relatively small numbers of Korean Americans in relation to Mexicans, Central and South Americans, Koreatown’s commercial areas are awash with Korean signs on small businesses, which sometimes appear alongside signs in English and increasingly in Spanish. In some cases, Korean, English, and Spanish appear together on one sign or on signs in close proximity. The majority of Korean American small-business owners in Koreatown are first and second-generation immigrants who arrived in the second half of the twentieth century. Their shop signs – which are exemplified below – tend to reflect their lower socioeconomic status relative to more recent immigrant-owned businesses and the increasing number of enterprises in this district that are heavily financed by overseas Korean transnational capital; to a more recent Korean visitor, they are reminiscent of pre-1990s street signs in Korea. The majority in this block also represent the colors of the Korean flag, red and blue. In the following commentary on these signs, the intended purpose behind any of the decisions taken in the creation of these particular signs is unknown. I nevertheless consider a number of likely possibilities given the context.

Figure 5.4 is a sign for a tire and auto mechanic shop that brings these three languages together on one sign; the information provided is similar though not exactly the same. The name of the establishment SMOG, written in white against a light blue background, is untranslated, followed by the Spanish LLANTAS [TIRES] and next to that the Korean words 모든 [ALL] 타이어 [TIRES] 취급 [CARRY/DEAL IN]. A close translation would be “we carry all tires,” with “types and sizes” being implied. This is followed by the Spanish NUEVAS Y USADAS (NEW AND USED). The next phrase repeats this information in English NEW AND USED TIRE (with tire in the singular) followed by COMPLETE AUTO REPAIR, which is translated only into Korean 합 [GENERAL/COMPREHENSIVE] 정비 [REPAIR/FIX] 센터 [CENTER/PLACE]. A close translation would be “general repair center,” with “car” implied. The vertical signs below the sign provide the additional information CATALYTIC MUFFLER in English only.

In this example, though SMOG is not translated, given its reference to LA’s characteristic haze of polluted air, the term would be familiar to its residents. Although COMPLETE AUTO REPAIR is not translated into
Spanish, the English cognates make this intelligible for a Spanish speaker. And although the Korean description of tires is less specific than in either the Spanish or English version, the references to “all tires” suggests that both types are likely to be available.

Figure 5.5 is a typical scene observed across Koreatown’s major streets: these particular signs go along Western Ave., a main thoroughfare which runs north to south. From right to left the writing on the vertical signs read as follows: (1) Korean in blue on the top half 한국병원 [Hanmi Medical Clinic] and in red on the bottom half 수퍼약국 [Super Pharmacy] with the words SUPER MARKET written in English vertically on the bottom half to the left and the word PHARMACY to the right both in blue; (2) Korean in blue 동양 [East/Orient] 건재 [Herbal Medicine] 한의원 [Oriental Medical Clinic] with English at the bottom ORIENTAL HERBS ACUPUNCTURE in red; (3) English only “Party Divine” in light blue and black; (4) Korean in blue 라이프 의료기구 [Life Medical Equipment] with English at the top LIFE MEDICAL SUPPLY in red and Spanish at the bottom SE HABLA ESPANOL – no tilde, in red. The four lines of text that appear in Korean over the Spanish words read 건강식품 [Health Foods], 건강서적 [Health Books], 운동기구 [Exercise Equipment], and 미용재료 [Beauty Supply], in blue; and finally (5) Spanish-only in red and blue, MATERIAL DE LIMPIEZA PAPEL QUÍMICOS BOLSAS, ETC. [Cleaning Material, Paper, Chemicals, Bags, etc.] SE HABLA ESPAÑOL.
[Spanish Spoken] MAQUINARIA VENTA REPARACIÓN RENTA [Machines (for) Sale Repair Rent] in red and blue. A horizontal sign below in English reads IDEAL MAINT EQUIP. INC. in red, and underneath SALES•REPAIR•RENTAL in blue and red.

The horizontal sign to the far right has Korean writing on the top 해피 북 서점 and “Happy Book Store” in English on the front of the green awning, both in white. There is an additional sign in Korean only 약전 녹용•동방 침구 [Medicinal Antlers•Eastern Acupuncture] in red on a light green painted storefront right before “Party Divine.” All the other horizontal signs to the left of the bookstore correspond to the Korean in the signs above, repeating all the informational words: SUPER MARKET and PHARMACY in English in blue and the additional information HANMI MEDICAL CENTER in white. The name Hanmi is formed by the combination of two Korean words meaning Korean American.

At first appearance, some of the signs in this block of Western Ave. function differently from the one sign/multilingual approach – two of them, one in English, one in Korean. Why this is the case is unclear, yet it should not be read as an indication that these businesses do not seek to reach out to more than their own communities. The “Party Divine” website’s publicity statement, for example, specifically mentions both “quinceaneras,” the Latin American tradition of celebrating fifteen-year-old girls’ birthdays...
and “dohl,” a reference to the tradition of celebrating Korean babies’ first birthdays with lavish parties.

What’s a birthday celebration without balloons? Are you celebrating a sweet sixteen, bar/bat mitzvah or quinceanera? Create the most amazing décor for your milestone with balloons from Party Divine. A necessity for dohl Korean first birthdays, balloons will set the tone of your event.6

It is also significant that in Figure 5.6, which is the front view of sign (5) described above, another mention about Spanish being spoken in this establishment appears in larger letters in blue SE HABLA ESPAÑOL – with tilde. Taken together with the visible window displays, at least some of the additional information regarding the products available that appears only in written Korean or English becomes accessible to a Spanish speaker.

In contrast, the sign in Figure 5.7 marks its relation to a specific language and culture in a more pronounced way. The restaurant on the corner displays its name in Korean script written in bold black characters. The name 제부도 JAE BU DO refers to an island on the west coast of Korea – frequented by Koreans from the capital Seoul which is about two hours away – that is known for its clams and eels. Additional information is given only in Korean as well. To the left of the restaurant’s name in red is written
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Charcoal Fire, and to the right, in fine characters, “live” is written in Chinese characters 生 along with more detail about the menu: 조개구이 [Clam Roast], 바다장어 [Sea Eels], and 꼬장어 [Conger Eels]. To the far right in bolder characters the word 전문 “specialty” is added. There are, however, at least three pieces of information provided not in Korean: One in English WE ARE OPEN and the other two through visual imagery, one of a crab that lights up at night and the other of photos of clams in the front windows. The visual signs that are not in Korean can be read as an indication that the restaurant specializes in seafood and that you needn’t be (or read or speak) Korean to feel welcome. The signs in Korean only, as well as the references to places and dishes more likely to be recognized by the Korean American population, can be read as an indicator of the presence of something especially Korean in their Los Angeles community.

The signs above are situated adjacent to one another on Western Ave.; the actual businesses referred to are located just to the left of the signs in Figure 5.8. The sign at the top advertises in bold black lettering the name of a business in Korean only, 사랑의 [Love’s] 한의원 [Oriental Medical Clinic]. In the accompanying English text, however, the two main services provided by the clinic are conveyed – SLIM DIET CLINIC and PAIN CARE CLINIC. Below these, across the bottom of the sign also in English, is a list of the specific treatments available – Acupuncture, Herbal Rx, Body Wrap, Detox, Skin Care, Massage. The photo of the torso of a young
Figure 5.8 Multimodal signs, Koreatown, Los Angeles. Photograph by Roger Hewitt

Figure 5.9 Multimodal signs, Koreatown, Los Angeles. Photograph by Roger Hewitt
woman measuring her waist illustrates the weight loss objective suggested in the words ‘slim’ and ‘diet’. To the right of this, the sign in Figure 5.9 advertises the same clinic in English and Korean only. The words Slim Diet Clinic are repeated in a different font with the name of the clinic directly underneath, once again written only in Korean, but with the English word “Acupuncture” added. Like the other signs examined, the decisions about what information to provide and in what language seems to presume some knowledge about the communities targeted. For example, it is most likely taken for granted that the clinic’s name itself would indicate to a Korean viewer the services and treatments available. Thus the detail is given in English only. The relevance of the similarities of the English and Spanish words is less clear in this case (only some are cognates) in understanding why there is no Spanish information provided.

Of the three signs in which Spanish does appear, no Korean is included. The large green and yellow sign on the left for the well-known money transfer kiosk business NEXXO is repeated in a smaller version on the right. Neither of these signs translates ENVIOS DE DINERO into English [Money Transfers], though PAGO DE CUENTAS is translated as BILL PAY in the larger of the two. A second sign in Spanish, TRANSPORTES “Mi Gente,” includes the words CARGO EXPRESS, a common general reference found in many companies in the business of courier or delivery services. The third sign in Spanish, ESCUELA DE TRAFICO (with the accent in tráfico omitted) appears together with the words ROYAL’S EN ESPANOL, signaling its relationship to the sign directly above for “Royal’s Driving School.” (This same wording appears in front of the actual business located just yards away.) The most interesting of these three examples is the last one where the additional signage provided in Spanish, ESCUELA DE TRAFICO, refers to a very specific service of the driving school: the traffic schools that are available to individuals who have received one or more traffic tickets and want them dismissed to be eligible for a discount on car insurance or to avoid having points added to their driving record.

Taken together, it seems clear that in all of these businesses the sign owners or producers adopt a strategic pragmatic approach to the presentation and translation of the information on the signs based on their sense of what counts as relevant to a particular audience and of how to target certain audiences with specific information. This requires an explicit awareness of the different cultures and languages in use within this community and beyond. It also suggests both prior knowledge and experience on the part of the business owners or managers that are used to assess which languages and forms of language to prioritize (e.g. written or pictorial). The fact that different languages are often used in tandem suggests that all the language users involved – buyers, sellers, and passersby – recognize and accept as the norm that some negotiation about the meaning of the signs may be required to benefit from the products and services being offered and to gain maximal visibility for the product(s) advertised.
At the same time, some signs appear to be designed explicitly to operate more at the symbolic level. In his 2009 study of Korean signage in Oakland, California, an ethnically and linguistically diverse area that is home to the largest Korean community in the San Francisco Bay area, David Malinowski interviewed twelve small business owners about the relationship between the Korean and English languages displayed on their shop signs. Although more than half of the shop owners reported that they had played little or no role in their sign design, either because they had inherited the business and made no changes to the sign or had left most of the decisions to a local sign company, over half of those interviewed claimed that the reason for the appearance of English on a sign was “the self-evident fact that ‘This is America.’ ” (Malinowski 2009: 114). They also gave varied reasons for the Korean that appeared, including the acknowledgement of its symbolic function. In an interview with the owner of a gift shop called Boa Gifts, for example, the author asks why, given that other local Japanese and Thai businesses only wrote their names in English, she had used Korean on her sign including the name Boa, which can be read in Korean 보 (bo) and 아 (a) as “to look.” At first the owner’s sister interjects, “Didn’t you write it, the Korean, for people like, like the old folks around here who can’t read English?” to which the owner replies, “Noo… Korean is… you know, even for the people who can speak English really well, if you put Korean up in the sign, they feel a close connection with the shop right away, since there’s Korean. […] When you’re in America, and you’re passing by and you see Korean right there, you think, ‘Oh, there’s some Korean.’ You already feel some connection with the place” (ibid.).

“Seeing Korean” is understood here to have an important (symbolic) meta-function; the translation work it performs is not primarily informational, as the sister suggests. The sign serves as an important means toward self-recognition in a still unfamiliar space; it is mostly about translating oneself into place. In the same conversation with the author, the shop owner uses an analogy to help him understand what she means. She says, “like if you’re in Korea, right, and you pass by someone on the street who’s from America, who speaks English well, and their face looks just like someone from America, do you feel some connection, or not? When you’re in a foreign country?” (ibid.).

Not everyone shared this shop owner’s sentiment, however. The owner of a Korean grocery store interviewed in Malinowski’s research had this to say about the significance of the Korean language both inside and outside his store:

So the owner is Korean and it’s a Korean market but, like I said before, like with the idea of being “international,” this is in America, where the Korean community is together with the American community, I don’t think it’s right to talk about it as if it’s all about being Korean-this or Korean-that.

(ibid.: 123)
Ultimately, how any viewer will translate a particular sign is not so easy to predict where signs given and signs given off are in play. For example, the shop owner of Boa Gifts reported that she was repeatedly asked by Korean-speaking potential customers if she sold merchandise associated with the internationally successful Korean singer Kwon Bo Ah, known as the queen of Korean pop, whose stage name is BoA (ibid.: 117).

**Buenos días – Ahn-nyung-hah-seh-yo – Good morning**

In LA’s Koreatown, many if not most of the local businesses draw their employees and customers from the multi-ethnic local resident population, as well as the surrounding areas. The relationship is such that some Korean business owners, in addition to English, are learning Spanish – and many Latino workers are learning Korean in addition to English. Though English remains the official language of state and local governance and education, it is often the second or third language of choice for immigrants in their daily lives. In 2007, Miriam Jordan reported on the emergent Spanish–Korean language pairing in the *Wall Street Journal*:

At the Galleria, a large Korean supermarket here, store manager Yoonah Yoon greets Hispanic cashiers and bag boys each morning with a hearty ‘buenos días’ – ‘good morning’ in Spanish. The Latino workers, who make up more than half the store’s 162 employees, answer him with the equivalent greeting in Korean: ‘Ahn-nyung-hah-seh-yo.’

Many of these Korean American businesses don’t necessarily require English language skills to run them, and their owners want to be able to communicate with their Spanish-speaking employees, who in turn pick up Korean on the job. The growing demand for Spanish has prompted Korean churches, community centers, and language schools to offer inexpensive classes for beginner and more advanced speakers. In addition to employing Latin Americans, their economic potential as consumers is also recognized. In addition to including the notice “se habla español,” some business owners have created ties with this community by giving stores, bars, and restaurants distinctively Spanish language names, and by gearing them toward the needs of the Latino community. Adopting more of a fusion approach, the highly popular enterprise Kogi Korean BBQ, whose menu was created by the celebrated Korean American chef Roy Choi, innovatively combines Korean and Mexican cuisine to create dishes such as Korean tacos, bulgogi (marinated beef) burritos, and kimchi (fermented chili peppers and vegetables) quesadillas. Born in Seoul but raised in LA and southern California since the age of one, the food Choi creates, he suggests, has “evolved into a socio-cultural thing for me, my vision of L.A. in one bite.” Choi is also considered one of the founders of the food truck movement. Using internet technology, especially Twitter, to provide information about its menu and
locations, Kogi operates as a fleet of five mobile food trucks that effectively become mobile signs of the population diversity within the city.\textsuperscript{10} (In 2016 Kogi debuted its first brick and mortar location in Palms, an area considered one of the most diverse neighborhoods in Los Angeles.)

\textit{The upside downside of transnationalism}

In an article in \textit{LA Weekly} in 2012, “60 Korean Dishes Every Angeleno Should Know,” the well-known LA food critic Jonathan Gold described Koreatown as “functionally a distant district of Seoul – in capital as well as in culture, in both commerce and cuisine,” due to the numbers of spas, nightclubs, karaoke bars, and restaurants that attract local and increasingly city-wide Los Angeles residents. One of the sixty dishes singled out for praise is the aforementioned barbecued clams at Jeh Bu Do. Another is the “Grand Prix pizza” from Mr. Pizza Factory, a popular Seoul-based chain that opened there in 1990. Koreatown’s, which Gold writes about with his usual enthusiasm, was the first in the United States in 2008.

Have you ever seen the Grand Prix pizza at The Pizza Factory? Because even in a culinary crossroads such as Los Angeles, the Grand Prix is a remarkable object. This weighty, doughy construction, swirled like a creamy hypnodisc, so completely warps perceptions of what a pizza might be that it threatens to dent the space-time continuum itself.\textsuperscript{11}

The mix of Seoul-based chains and smaller local establishments included in the list not only highlights Koreatown’s burgeoning reputation for multi-ethnic culinary and cultural cool, it is the type of transnational investment that is designed to underscore the ties between Seoul and Koreatown. The influx of such intra-ethnic capital into the United States has had as much of an impact on the residents of Koreatown as the inter-ethnic ties that developed within their community in the same period. But while much has been made since then of the favorable cultural and economic impact of increased ties between migrants and their countries of origin, along with an assumed ease of mobility, declaring the positive effects of transnationalism on migrants has come at the expense of more careful attention to the real or potential negative consequences, particularly for the socioeconomically poor and less well-off within these communities. In general, the widespread emphasis on the politics of identity over the past several decades has failed to sufficiently acknowledge or address the politics of social class and of class culture, and the question of differential access to the benefits of transnational economics for members of the same ethnic group.

In her multimedia dissertation project on Koreatown, Kristy Kang (2013) reports on how members of the working-class community of Koreatown “struggle with the very real possibility of forced mobility, of displacement
due to transnational real estate investment and the subsequent change in housing affordability in their neighborhood” (ibid.: 7).

She adds that:

“for middle class and wealthy Koreans, Koreatown is a consumer space, replicating the kinds of spas, coffee houses, clubs, and restaurants that one would find in Seoul. These spaces and the people they attract are largely segregated from the daily practices of other Koreatown residents who are part of the working-class poor.”

(Sociologist and professor emeritus Eui-Young Yu, interviewed for Kang’s study, expresses his concern about the degree of control that South Korean politics and capital have over the local economy and culture of Koreatown, through policies that, as presently constituted, are neither particularly beneficial nor mindful of the issues that Korean Americans face in relation to other ethnic minority groups within Koreatown and the wider LA community. Eui-Young also points to South Korea’s disproportionate influence over the circulation of Korean media (print, television, and radio) in this community and over the local Korean political leadership which, he suggests, is largely controlled by the South Korea Consulate in Los Angeles."

Kyonghwan Park discusses this same trend as an attempt by the Korean government to “reterritorialize[s] its ‘deterritorialized’ national territory beyond its geographic, physical limits.” (2009: 158). He points to the Overseas Koreans Foundation (OKF) (ibid.: 155), which was set up by the South Korean government after the 1997 financial crisis for the purpose of attracting and facilitating the influx of overseas Korean capital into the national economy. An additional component of what he calls the “transnational nation-state apparatus” (ibid.: 146) is the cultural exchanges between and within Korean diasporic communities organized by the Education Department and the Cultural Affairs Department, among others. Although these programs claim to be for the purpose of “help[ing]” overseas Korean communities, second-generation Korean immigrants, and adopted Koreans by providing a variety of opportunities to learn the Korean language and traditions, Park suggests their actual motive is to “discursively produce Korean subjects, create national imaginations, and ethnic solidarity” (ibid.: 155) in order to ensure their interest in and commitment to the economic well-being of the “motherland.”

In an earlier paper, Youngmin Lee and Kyonghwan Park (2008) discuss how this intersection of the economic and the cultural has worked in practice against many working-class Korean Americans who live and work in Koreatown. Rather than creating a united intra-ethnic transnational utopia of the kind envisioned by the cultural wing of the OKF, the authors note a number of significant changes that have taken place in Koreatown since the 1990s that has made it “more fragmented, internally heterogeneous, and complicated in terms of investment, Korean and Latino transmigrants,
Signs of transnationalism and economic growth” (ibid.: 251). One resident cited in the article who received her permanent residency after years of living undocumented gives voice to these changes.

Immigrants coming before the 80s had a really hard time, but their situation was widely shared within the Korean community where most were poor and similarly working hard in sewing and garment factories, small restaurants, small business shops, etc. But now, new immigrants called the Well-Off, who are really strange to me, are coming into Koreatown... the IMF crisis caused some wealthy Korean people to move here and enjoy the good life as soon as they arrived. The IMF crisis also pushed totally ruined Koreans to here. [Because of being undocumented] the best places they could work, live, and hide in the United States is this K-town. So, some legally fly here with lots of money, while others run away from Korea to illegally cross into the United States. All these Koreans flock together and meet right here in K-town.

(ibid.: 254)

The situation “Mrs. L” describes seems to have done very little in the way of creating “ethnic solidarity” within the community. On the contrary, it has contributed to the current economic pyramid that Lee and Park use to characterize Koreatown’s social structure – with transnational and local investors, property owners, developers, local politicians, and large business owners at the top, followed by the smaller retail business owners who due to supply and demand are forced to pay above-market price for their rents (ibid.: 252). On the bottom two tiers, they situate the Koreans and Latinos – some undocumented – who are employed by Korean-owned small businesses. Latinos, who according to the authors form the backbone of the local economy (ibid.: 259), are placed at the very bottom given the physical, hazardous type of work they tend to do.

The workplace in Koreatown, however, has consistently been an important site where inter-ethnic solidarity has developed around the shared issue of workers’ rights. The Koreatown Immigrant Workers Alliance or KIWA was formed in 1992 by 1.5 and second-generation Korean Americans and was originally called the Korean Immigrant Workers Advocates. It has grown into a multi-ethnic immigrant worker civil rights organization operated by Korean Americans, with a growing Latin American membership. Though the word Mac-Jaak, a negative and derogatory stereotype to refer to Latinos, is still used by some Koreans, according to Mr. Y, a Korean undocumented worker, working together has created more opportunities for the two communities to interact and develop mutual respect.

I work at a Korean-owned hotel. My partner is a Mac-Jaak. When I first came here, I looked at them contemptuously as did other Koreans
who call them Mac-Jaak, not Latinos. I don’t know the exact meaning of the word, but that’s what they’re called. I know it is used as a contemptuous expression to Latinos as a group. Working with them, however, I feel they work hard. They hold two jobs to support their large families. My partner has been working and living like that for 13 years with the hotel… The hotel bosses cannot help but to employ this guy because they won’t be able to find another competent worker who would accept such small payment.

(ibid.: 256)

Since the earliest period of their migration to the United States, Korean Americans, like many migrants before them, have treated their first arrival point, in this case, Koreatown, as a place to settle temporarily as first and second-generation migrants before moving further out of the city, into the suburbs, or to other parts of California. What makes contemporary Korean migration different is that very few of the more well-off migrants ever live in Koreatown. They are often advised in South Korea against obtaining housing there, though they are encouraged to invest in businesses given its location (ibid.: 254). Although it is the case that those who do invest in Koreatown provide jobs for many of the residents, these are mostly unskilled jobs that do not pay the workers enough to advance economically. If they move out of Koreatown it is due to gentrification, unlike the voluntary exodus available to previous generations. This works against the creation of a community in which something is or appears to be “widely shared.” When the owner of Boa wondered in her interview – “If you pass by someone on the street in Korea who’s from America, who speaks English well, and their face looks just like someone from America, do you feel some connection, or not? When you’re in a foreign country?,” she clearly expected the response she was given – “Yes, sure.” In the streets of Koreatown, transnationalism from above is making the answer to her question far less certain for the Koreans and Korean Americans who live there.

Yuhaksaeng and iminja in Toronto, Canada

Affluent Koreans do not just invest in properties, there is also a widespread practice of wealthy Koreans taking their children to English-speaking countries (often the mothers and children only) to live, learn English, and invest in their pre-college education. Hyunjung Shin has studied the encounters between some of these Korean visa students (yuhaksaeng) and 1.5 and second-generation Korean Canadians (iminja) in the city of Toronto (Shin 2012). Specifically, she examined how language and culture are used as “stylistic resources” by the Korean yuhaksaeng who are there on pre-college-age study-abroad programs (jogi yubak) to assert a global cosmopolitan ‘cool,’ with varying results. Shin found that the young students attempt this together with their families in a number of ways,
often involving conspicuous consumption, “investing in activities such as shopping, golfing, skiing, horse-back riding; and receiving private tutoring,” using Korean internet slang that includes codeswitching into English, distancing themselves from Toronto’s Koreatown where the older and poorer immigrants tend to reside, and by generalizing Korean Canadians as “uneducated, culturally unsophisticated, and lacking in taste.” The response from the Korean Canadians *iminja*, according to Shin, is to view *jogi yuhak* students as “FOBs” (Fresh Off the Boats) who fail to adapt to local culture and society and speak ‘poor’ English (ibid.: 189).

Shin interprets the *yuhaksaeng* wish to distinguish themselves by foregrounding the wealthy, modern, and cosmopolitan aspects of Korean language and culture as a defensive response to other negative experiences as transnational migrants. In Canada, she suggests, it is one way of countering the FOB image and forms of racialized discourse such as ‘Asian Nerd’ imposed on them from the local population, including the established Korean immigrant community. However, she also notes the irony in the fact that their attempts at “indexing globality through cool registers of Korean” (ibid.: 185) do not necessarily meet with much success, particularly among the members of the local population who do not recognize them as the prestigious forms of cultural or linguistic capital that they are. In the following exchange two visiting students, the sisters Su-bin and Yu-ri compare their experience with wealthy Thai *yuhaksaeng* students in New Zealand with first and second-generation Korean Canadians in this regard. The researcher begins the interview asking the girls why they mostly hung out with *yuhaksaeng*.

RESEARCHER: Is it because it’s different when you interact with *iminja* friends and *yuhaksaeng* friends?
SU-BIN: Among *iminja* (. ) well (. ) not everyone, but I feel different from some of them.
RESEARCHER: What’s the difference?
SU-BIN: Um (...) just (. ) I don’t know (. ) something is different (*small laugh*). There is something invisible […] For example, some *iminja* have lived here for a very long time you know, and they don’t understand when we say “Oh, I really want to go to Korea.” […] It’s like this. When I first went on *yuhak* I felt *iminja* were a bit *dabdab* [old-fashioned] and I didn’t like them […]
RESEARCHER: What do you mean by *dabdab*?
SU-BIN: […] for example, like language, when we talk, they don’t know things like [youth] slang [*eun-eo*] or they are not trendy [*seryeondoije anheun*]. I feel they are not up to date […] I don’t remember any specific examples, but you know, when we talk about [Korean television] programs or Korean issues, there are kids who ask “what’s that?”

YU-RI: [In my school in New Zealand], there were a lot of foreign students. One of the students from Thailand told me that the Thai students
who went there were all REALLY rich [...] Boy, those students from Thailand really wanted to look like Korean kids. If I told them, “hey, you look Korean”, they really liked it. And they really went all out to imitate Korean students!

RESEARCHER: You mean stuff like clothing?

YU-RI: That’s right, and hairstyle. If Korean students dyed their hair, they all copied them [...] (smiling) I benefited a lot from hallyu. If I said for example “iri wa” (come here), they would understand it! And they kept asking me about stuff like Korean television programs I had never even heard of.¹⁴

(ibid.: 190–191)

The girls’ comments indicate another potential paradox of one of the assumed benefits of transnationalism: a borderless inter-connectivity among communities of the same ethnicity. In the privileged arena of pre-college study-abroad programs, it is the wealthy Thai students who understand the cosmopolitan cool status of hallyu and the Korean aesthetics that go with it, and who value the Korean girls as style setters: people that they want to look like. In contrast, their co-ethnic Korean Canadians who are unexposed to or uninterested in accessing the trendy and prestigious cultural capital of their families’ country of origin are considered old-fashioned (dabdab). The yubaksaeng girls see this as especially true of the “iminja [who] have lived here for a very long time,” second-generation Korean Canadians whose families left a rather different Korea behind. This is not of course a new phenomenon. Historically it has often been the case that more fractures than connections begin to appear between generations (of the same or different ages) due to differences in status, wealth, opportunity, and as a result of personal and cultural changes that occur over time. The impact of migration on intra-ethnic relations may not be quite as different as is often assumed; the virtual nature of modern connectivity may simply do more to mask the fissures.

Programs like jogi yuhak, however, bring intra-cultural gaps and incompatibilities to the attention of members of diasporic communities as they play themselves out in local settings. Although Shin does not share any data from the point of view of the iminja, she does report that the yubaksaeng felt ignored by the White students and Korean Canadians whom they complained did not invite them into their social circles. As an example of this, she relates a story Yu-ri told the researchers about wanting to run for president of the Korean club “as she believed it would look good on her college admission applications” but decided to give up the idea because the current president, a Korean Canadian, wanted to remain in that position (ibid.: 190). Although it is difficult to say precisely how this particular situation unfolded, taken at face value, it does seem to be an odd example of an intrinsically exclusionary practice. Given the stated animosity between the two groups, the apparent disparity in their class status, and
the mainly opportunistic reasons Yu-ri states for wanting to serve as president of the club, it is possible to interpret the matter as a conflict between a student who had a vested interest in local school politics and one more concerned with global educational currency. This emphasis on different forms of symbolic capital gives rise to an additional paradox, however. For many of the *yuhaksaeng*, the sought-after linguistic capital of English was not necessarily achieved as “both spoke little English at school, did not participate in class discussions, and interacted minimally with school teachers or ‘Canadian’ peers” (ibid.: 196). This is in part because:

[...]

Shin views this positioning of the *yuhaksaeng* as ‘illegitimate’ speakers of English as compared with Canadians or Korean Canadians as reproducing social inequality based on racialized linguistic stigmatization in the Canadian market. While this may be the case, it is also significant that the *yuhaksaeng* and their families view the study abroad experience from the perspective of the ‘global’ rather than the ‘local.’ Given their positioning in the global market as elite cosmopolitans, the potential for local stigmatization may be less salient than Shin suggests. The actual substance of a more cosmopolitan ethics remains uncertain however. Indeed, co-ethnicity may no longer be a primary space from which they understand and experience the value of certain forms of symbolic capital, including language and culture, and even shared ethnic identity.

All categories of migration and all types of migrants contribute to the redistribution of sensibilities necessary for a cosmopolitan vision that is oriented not only toward those who migrate, but all individuals within diverse societies. The formation of a critical cosmopolitanism – that is, one aimed at reformulating global and local sensibilities to include ideas and perceptions not already privileged in the global order – is central to this project. And language in all its forms contributes significantly to the process of expanding the ever adaptable interaction order.

When George Butterick wrote of Olson and Creeley that their larger task was to help one another work out “how a man of language must live in the world,” their dialogue, their endeavor to hammer out a poetics, and the persistence that entailed was a way of thinking about their relationship
as writers to the world. It was about how to put themselves on the page in a way that reflected or grew out of that orientation to the world – how to, through poetry, project ‘signs given,’ to make a specific impress on the page. For these two men in the 1950s, that meant starting anew, building on some previous poets’ work, but imagining themselves making something new from first principles or new ways of writing in relation to, for example, constructing rhythm in poetry, deciding what should determine the length of a line – the breath of the poet – or what kind of language can be part of a poem (Olson 1950). Rather than focus on things like beauty or elegance, they reflected on the energy and physicality constructed through words on the page, even including scientific prose. Their orientation to the ‘Real’ in poetry led them toward the relevance of history and space: the ocean and the plains as well as the space on the page, the field on which poetry and language are constructed.

Olson and Creeley’s dialogic exploration of language and poetics generated a deeper understanding of signs in space and history. The geography of signs on and of the urban landscapes in places like New York City and Koreatown announce a parallel encounter. These signs create a dialogic space between shifting populations and the social and physical world. Like the railroads and the canals of the nineteenth century, urban linguistic landscapes comprise powerful traces of different groups who are new and present to one another in a space that will connect them through history. In this sense, they too can be understood as “taskscapes” – records of and testimonies to the lives and labor of their inhabitants and places where their historical and cultural significance will endure.

Notes
1 Though the recognized norm in considering translation is inter-lingual translations, this is not the most common form of translation routinely encountered in the public domain. Inter-semiotic translations are present in many different texts and media that people engage with regularly, including subtitled films, film soundtracks, cartoons and graphic novels, advertisements, song translations, and different types of visual art. Intra-lingual translations are also everywhere apparent in different written and spoken texts, the latter demonstrated perfectly in the comedy sketches of President Obama’s “anger translator” Luther by the writers Keegan Michael Key and Jordan Peele (e.g. www.youtube.com/watch?v=eX8tL3PMj7o). (Accessed April 2016).
2 http://gothamist.com/2014/05/02/ask_a_native_new_yorker_whats_the_d.php (Accessed May 2016).
3 See for example, Zabrodskaja and Milani (2014), Blommaert (2013), Jaworski and Thurlow (2010), Shohamy et al (2010), Shohamy and Gorter (2009), Stroud and Mpendukana (2009), and Scollen and Scollen (2003).
4 Although Koreatown’s boundaries were not actually made official until 2010, ‘Koreatown’ signs began to be posted on the highway and on the streets surrounding the neighborhood in 1982. The current official boundaries only came about because of a proposal in 2009 to designate a space for another
Signs of transnationalism

An ethnic community within the boundaries of Koreatown to be named ‘Little Bangladesh’ in recognition of the growth of this community. Members representing the Korean and Bangladeshi communities worked with the City Council to negotiate the new official boundaries (Kang 2013: 16).

Lee and Park (2008) note that although Korean immigrants in the United States may be willing to identify themselves broadly as Korean or Korean American, many prefer to use sub-categories that differentiate them from other Koreans, for example, Korean Chinese (Cho-sun-jok), Korean Latin American, Chinese Korean (Hwa-gyo), or as North Korean defectors.

There are a number of possible explanations for the use of Chinese characters here. Practically, the idea of “live” or “raw” seafood in Korean would require four as opposed to one character, and thus would take up more space. Traditionally, Chinese characters have been used in Korea to designate certain enterprises as more ‘high end,’ though since the 1990s this practice has become far less the norm.

In recent history, African American politicians have held many of the district, city, and state government offices that represent the four City Council districts in which Koreatown is currently situated. In 2015, however, David Ryu, a 1.5-generation immigrant, became the first Korean American to hold one of these Council seats. The State Assemblyman currently representing Koreatown is Miguel Santiago, a second-generation Latin American.

Yu-ri’s statement about hallyu is a reference to ‘the Korean wave’ of popular culture, including television dramas, music, film and the celebrities and fashion associated with them, that is currently popular in China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong (see Lin and Tong 2008 and Lee 2008 for interesting discussions on the differentiated forms of reception, responses, and re-appropriation of the Korean wave across East and Southeast Asian societies).

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