Lady of Labour? Co-constructed storying of a Korean-Canadian homemaker

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I took a women's studies course as an elective during my undergraduate studies and at the time I never thought I would find myself so deeply immersed in the words of Sara Ahmed, Audre Lorde, and bell hooks, to name a few. I felt that this was the kind of work that inspired me most in articulating the ways I live as a woman and the ways my mother has always lived her seemingly simple and leisurely, but truthfully complex life. As I began to think more deeply about my relations with race, gender, and family in an academic context, I had difficulty finding space to converse about readings that spoke more specifically to my lived reality. During my Masters, I was able to spend time on guided readings with my supervisor, Dr. Lisbeth Berbary. I was able to bring Korean scholarship (in a North American context), and Confucian philosophy into the classroom which have all shaped and inspired who I think with and what theories would help me understand the relations around me and my existence in a liminal space. Perhaps this is an overplayed thought, but it is true that as a Korean-Canadian, I am neither one nor the other.

In my personal life, often when I am asked about my ethnicity, I experience a particular type of storying surrounding the glamours of Korean culture. Korean boyband *BTS*, for example, has demonstrated its global popularity by achieving the title of most streamed music group on Spotify in 2021 alongside globally known, North American artists such as Taylor Swift and Drake (Shim 2021). *Squid Game*, a Korean TV series, also showed global interest, as Netflix's top-watched show by hour in its first 28 days since its release (Spangler 2021). Finally, Korean beauty has built to be a $ 10 billion industry, with its products flooding the shelves of stores across the North American market (Kim and Denyer 2019). Despite this fascination and arguable appreciation for Korean culture, my associations as a 2.5-generation immigrant are rather dark and have been built upon the tension both within and outside of my home life.

Not only are Koreans projected to be one of the fastest-growing visible minority groups in Canada through 2031 (Noh, Kim, & Noh, 2012), but since the 1990s, the 'Korean Wave', or *Hallyu*, has marked a deep rise in popularity amongst North Americans around Korean culture (Jin 2014). However, while we are seeing both this rise in population and cultural influence, leisure studies, even when it tends to explore Peoples of Colour, neglects Asians as a vast, complex group of multiple ethnicities (Tirone and Pedlar 2000). Searching through the top journals in leisure, *Leisure/Loisir* for example, 'Korean Identity' is relevant in 24 articles and of those 24, only about 3 discuss Korean identity in specificity, while in others it is merely mentioned as part of a broader grouping of immigrant peoples. Unfortunately, this erasure in much of euro-us-centric society and research fails to acknowledge the deep contributions and uniqueness of Korean culture and Korean lived experiences in a North American context.

I grew up in a relatively traditional Korean household, with my mom, dad, older brother, and paternal grandparents. This was always normal to me as it is for many immigrant families. I always thought of the home as a peaceful place for respite but what I did not know was that the walls of our home were the foundation of deep-rooted discomfort and tension for the only person in the house who performed intense amounts of care labour within it - my mother. With homemaking came the burden of being watched from Foucault's panopticon (Foucault 1977) by her in-laws, in-laws whose mindsets, despite social and technological advancements in Korea,

continue to remain trapped by oppressive tradition and misogyny since their immigration to Canada in 70s.

Recognizing this erasure of Korean specificity in leisure research, this conceptual paper focuses on Korean immigrant housewife experiences in relation to their navigation of feminine identity and labour. Additionally, this piece continues to be a work in progress as I write about what I am currently living through. As Delgado so beautifully wrote I "dare to inject narrative, perspective, and feeling" into otherwise scholarly work. Though I emphasize my own experience, specifically as a Korean woman in Canada, I urge you to reflect upon sex-gender systems, white supremacy, and notions of family in your life.

What my work will do:

1. *Fill a gap in current cultural understandings – by exposing Korean culture beyond its popularity of what has been merely commodified.*
2. *Continue conversation around gender, race, and labour – by deeply considering what constitutes labour (homemaker, unpaid care work) with the added burden of race, gender, culture, and feelings of living in liminality.*
3. *Challenge systems/spaces of oppression – by contributing to existing understandings in qualitative inquiry which demonstrates the necessity and impacts of narrative inquiry.*

CONTEXT

Confucianism explains much of the dynamics within the Korean family household, the space in which the homemaker might consider to be their place of work. Korean family structure is often role-based, where the mother is the homemaker and has historically held a tight-knit relationship with her children, while the father demonstrates the typical gender-based role as a breadwinner (Koh 2008). In this case, the Korean homemaker would be expected to sacrifice for their family. More specifically, we can understand the complex meaning of selfhood and one's identities or existences through an anti-essentialist lens, according to Xiang (2019): "This assumption of human agency also means that the Confucian understanding of hierarchy is social as opposed to ontological and that difference between people are understood to be a result of culture-custom variation" (p. 11). As Korean people have been strongly influenced by Confucian philosophy, Confucian societies tend to be interdependent, and favour collectivism over individuality: "*chemyon* maintains the harmony of interpersonal relations and becomes the means or goal of strengthening the relationships" (Choi and Lee 2002, 333). *Chemyon* is a concept known as 'the social face' and arguably a significant aspect of Korean culture to consider. In essence, the self is neglected in favour of the group (Cha and Kim 2013). The idea of *chemyon* can be applied to the Korean immigrant housewife, either in ways that it is resisted or played out in a Canadian context.

THEORY

I read an article from the Boston Review on Identity Politics to my mother while hanging out together at home. The article, written by Olúfẹmi *Táíwò*, critiques the concept, explaining its misconceptions and misuse. *Táíwò* explained that Identity Politics is "deployed by political, social, and economic elites in the service of their own interests, rather than in the service of the vulnerable people they often claim to represent". I proceeded to go on a rant on feminism, the lack of shared politics amongst women, broader ideas of what it means to be a woman, and the lack of support I have witnessed amongst those who travel under its sign (Ahmed 2017). Social justice reduces itself to merely a buzzword and its acts often come across as performative. I noticed a sense of frustration in my mother. While I was reading and speaking out loud in my own thoughts, she told me "I couldn't really listen to you, whatever it is that you're trying to read, and understand, and think about…I am experiencing it, I am experiencing this lack of support because people simply do not get it". I couldn't wrap my head around the idea until this moment of coming into my research through inter-action but rather intra-action as Barad (2007) explained as a constitution of entangled agencies. This is what we are living, and in my mother's case, her existences materialize through and with the space, gender and age hierarchies that make up our Korean family home and her role as a homemaker, mother, wife, and daughter-in-law.

Sandra Harding (2009) affirmed that in "hierarchically organized societies, the daily activities and experiences of oppressed groups enable insights about how the society functions that are not available or at least not easily available from the perspective of dominant group activity" (p. 195). The importance of multiplicities needs to be highlighted, as it specifically demonstrates the necessity of social research in leisure as we "[fail] to take into account the organizing practices of humanism which distribute powers inequitably." (Berbary 2020, 5). For example, feminism itself cannot be essentialized as I once thought – Heidegger's concept of *Dasein*, or human existence, informs us of the importance of context and time. More specifically, I am engaging with the notion of racial formations "a sociohistorical process by which racial categories are created, inhabited, transformed and destroyed" explained by Omi and Winant (1994), and conceptualizations of women's care as a means of meaning-making (Crotty 1998; Jaggar 1989). This approach will allow space to write in a way that is partial and tentative, allowing the inclusion of my voice as a researcher.

As such, I work towards:

1) A transformative outcome – as hooks (1991) stated "Theory is not inherently healing, liberatory, or revolutionary. It fulfills this function only when we ask that it do so and direct our theorizing towards this end" (hooks 1991, 2) and

2) meaningful and affective representation.

METHODOLOGY

This work utilizes narratives as a representational format to provide relational, intergenerational, and cross-cultural narratives of the lived experiences of a Korean housewife. As Delgado (1989) explained, the cure to oppression finds its potential in storytelling as "stories build consensus, a common culture of shared understandings, and deeper, more vital ethics" (p. 2414). Therefore, I pull from multiple theoretical ways of knowing that situate the narrative not simply in a Western, linear format but also one that is non-linear and co-constructed within the relationality of both the researcher and the researched. I will use improvisational methods and narrative approaches to anchor myself as I engage relationally with my mother, a Korean immigrant woman whose job has always been a homemaker. This co-construction of narrative pulls from concepts of improvisational methodologies of collaborative narrative refraction (Berbary and Boles, 2014) to show how through engaging with *theorypracticing* (Berbary 2020), our experiences and interactions become refracted through oneself and the previous generation. The narratives used to represent this data, therefore, not only represent the current moment but also the history and social engagements that have shaped my mother's generation, which has ultimately shaped my own.

I recognize that there are dangers that come with singular narratives, such as tokenization and generalizations. Further, Bamberg discussed the thought that a narrator may underplay lived moments in the ways that they are sensed, but rather counts moments that "add up to a meaningful temporal plot configuration".

I would argue that singular narratives may also become a powerful tool to deconstruct our perceptions of lived experience. Additionally, these narratives may challenge social expectations, reflect culture and better explain how social ideologies dictate the way we perform. In my lived experience, my mother has been subjugated by social expectations, based on gender, race, and culture both within the home and outside.

In contrast, we could consider counter-narratives as a method to push up against the taken-for-granted, social expectations built by white, heteronormative patriarchal ways of knowing. How might the narrative change if we consider that perhaps my mother conformed as a strategy for survival? Perhaps early in her marriage, she made a bargain with three devils: she acquiesced to being a servant in her own home, so long as my brother and I were treated well and enjoyed a privileged life.

STORYING

From a very young age, I recall coming home from school or my extracurricular activities to my mother cooking – at around 4 pm she would prepare a healthy meal for me and my brother while simultaneously cooking a traditional Korean dinner for my paternal grandparents (i.e. Kimchi stew, fried leek pancakes, octopus stir-fry, dumpling soup, to name a few dishes) many of which are time-consuming to prepare and would fill the house with a strong smell. Close to midnight, my mother would typically prepare a third dinner for my father who would rarely eat a 'regular' hour. In the evenings, my mother would prepare school lunches for me and my brother

and for my grandparents and father. I recall one day in my teens; my mother had prepared a pasta casserole for the entire family rather than three separate dinners. My father came home and said, "You're trying to feed my parents shit", enraged that my mother did not cook my grandparents a traditional Korean meal.

I recall the scent of "Murphy's Oil" floor cleaner in the house since I was a child. I witnessed my mother deep-cleaning our hardwood floors regularly. When my brother and I became teens, we would help our mother clean the floors. She uses the same product/process to clean the floors to this day.

As children, she cared for my brother and me physically and emotionally. My father did not share or participate in caring for us as children, as it was his opinion that that was not his role in the house.

She strategically hid that our dad has been a long-time drug and alcohol abuser. We weren't aware of the regular beatings and verbal abuse she suffered while we were asleep or away. All the while, my grandparents instructed their son not to leave any marks on my mom's body. In exchange for being a servant in her own home, my mother had carefully manicured an 'idealistic' life for my brother and me to enjoy growing up.

SO WHAT?

More recently, in 2021, Canada enacted several changes to family law by expanding meanings of abuse beyond the physical, such as financial, verbal, and psychological. This is arguably impactful when considering meanings of labour within spaces where leisure takes place, and power is at the forefront. It is without a doubt that academic writings contain information, arguments and opinions that are needed for new policies and laws to take place. Books of authority, according to Bastarache (1999) are no longer limited to case law as the Court increasingly recognizes the importance of academic writing in judicial decision-making. Consider the psychology writings of Lenore Walker, for example, who brought to the forefront the notion of battered women's syndrome as a relevant factor in determining the outcomes of women acting in self-defence. It is my hope that academic social sciences, where narrative inquiry can be put to use, continues to be an invaluable component of making our society a more just place.

Drawing from Barad's notion of intra-action and Berbary's notion of *theorypracticing*, I am taking into consideration the idea that "intra-active entanglement of theorypractice reinforces that theory and practice should, and truthfully always have, been one and must be valued equally and engaged simultaneously to move us toward the most useful action" (Berbary 2020, 911). In other words, theory and practice cannot be separate, we make meaning rather than existing simply as separate entities as individuals, and so, I have urged myself to think otherwise and perhaps even reject a "positioning of myself" altogether.

Through improvisational methodologies, which can offer more accessible representations, and by pulling from notions of racial formations and gendered labour, I offer a transformative outcome through this work by daring to bring the personal in my writing. In doing so, I hope to illuminate the lived experiences of a Korean homemaker in a Canadian context, imploring listeners to think differently and consider otherwise.

"[…] and when we speak we are afraid

our words will not be heard

nor welcomed

but when we are silent

we are still afraid

So it is better to speak

Remembering

we were never meant to survive."

(Lorde 1978)

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