
Korean Immigrants in Text and Talk: A Discourse-centered Approach to the Social Processing of Korean Immigration in Argentina

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Abstract: This article examines the hegemonic trend in the social treatment and processing of Korean immigration in Buenos Aires, Argentina. It is suggested that Korean immigrants gained visibility –especially during the ‘90s– through the circulation of public and private discourses that articulated biology, culture and class in a shadowy operation of local racism: the ethnicization of class conflict. A *corpus* of contemporary everyday discourses on Korean immigrants –namely news stories published in the main national newspapers and informal interviews with non-Korean residents– is therefore analyzed against the specific background of Argentina’s ethnic formation, its migration history, and the political and economic context informing discursive production.

Taking discourse as a situated social practice, this article attempts to contribute not only to the study of racist phenomena, but also to a facet of Korean studies that has lately attracted academic interest: that of the Korean diaspora in Latin America.

Key words: Korean immigration in Argentina, national diversity formation, ethnicization of class conflict, everyday discourse

I. Introduction

Albeit not without debate, the life of Korean immigrants in different parts of the globe has definitely become a topic for Korean studies. While an extensive literature on the main locations of the diaspora –here understood following the more inclusive definitions of the term– is already available, studies on the Korean immigration in less common destinations are still scarce, and usually do not reach the international arena. This is the case with the Korean immigration in South American countries, which has lately attracted increasing academic interest.

The comparative spirit inherent to the study of a Nation’s diaspora calls for attention not only to similarities across different destinations but, most importantly, to the specific contexts that shape immigrants’ lives. As Østergaard-Nielsen (2001) points out, besides the agency of “sending countries”, the societal and political-institutional context in the “receiving country”¹ impinge on political, economic, sociocultural or religious transnational practices of migrants and the extent and modalities of identification with the homeland. From a relational perspective, the ways in which immigrants are perceived, the roles attributed to them, and the spaces they are allowed/expected to occupy in the “host” social structure, that is, how they are *socially processed* in the context of a particular destination, constitute an unavoidable issue that requires the exploration of specific historical and situational variables.

By focusing on the Korean immigration in Buenos Aires, Argentina, this is precisely the task I undertake in the following pages.

1. I find the concepts of sending and receiving or host country problematic. On the one hand, not all countries “send” their nationals abroad; on the other, the idea of “reception” conveys positive connotations (that of welcome, for example) that do not always match the actual situation of migrants. I prefer the terms country of origin and country of arrival or destination.

Because the local social processing of this immigration takes place largely in and through discourse, the empirical basis of this study is a *corpus* of written and oral everyday discourses about Korean immigrants², in which a hegemonic “othering” device can be identified: the ethnicization of class conflict. The written *corpus* comprises over twenty news stories published between 1988 and 2000 in a series of major national newspapers whose target-readers are not completely identical³. The oral *corpus* includes fifteen interviews with Argentine nationals of non-Korean descent I conducted, recorded and transcribed between 1996 and 1997. In accordance to the qualitative nature of the study, the criterion used to guide the collection of this material was a loose classification of interviewees based on whether they did or did not maintain everyday face-to-face interactions with Korean immigrants. Following van Dijk (1987:18), I assumed in-depth, informal, non-structured interviews on the topic “Korean immigrants” to be “sufficiently similar to spontaneous conversations to warrant conclusions about the nature of everyday talk about ethnic minority groups”. The study does not intend to cover the whole universe of forms in which Korean immigrants are portrayed in text and talk, nor does it have quantitative pretensions. Rather, I attempt an exploratory approach to certain discursive mechanisms in actual circulation. However, the fact that the explored discursive features have been selected precisely due to their salience, claiming a certain degree of representativeness is not altogether unreasonable.

Advocating a pragmatic stance, the analysis is set against the specific background of Argentina’s ethnic formation, its migration history, and the political and economic context informing discursive production.

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2. This *corpus* is extensively analyzed in Courtis, 2000. The translations used in this paper are mine.
 3. These include: *Ambito Financiero*, *Clarín*, *La Nación*, *La Prensa*, and *Página*. Additionally, I considered other publications such as the history magazine *Revista Todo es Historia*.

II. Korean Immigration in Argentina

1. Outline of the immigration process

According to an authoritative narrative of the Korean community ⁴ in Buenos Aires, the Korean immigration to Argentina dates back to the mid-1960s. Pioneer immigrants arrived by ship from the Republic of Korea, fleeing from poverty and political-military instability brought about by the 1950-53 War, and -after settling precariously in one of the largest slums in the capital city- were relocated to rural areas in the provinces of Buenos Aires, Rio Negro, Santa Fe and Santiago del Estero, on lands acquired by the Korea Overseas Development Corporation (KODCO) ⁵.

However, a few immigrants remained in the city of Buenos Aires, residing mainly in the humblest area of the southern district of Flores. Reinforcing the trend which led to the capital city becoming the principal destination for Korean migrants who reached the country, during the 1970s, 200 Korean families arrived in Buenos Aires. They were mostly property-owners, professionals and students of a rising middle-class who escaped heightened military tension between North and South of the peninsula as well as totalitarian government policies. In addition, they sought a higher standard of living and better opportunities for their children's education. This migration coincided with South Korea's rapid economic growth, and two of its correlating factors: the drastic increase of its urban population, and the structural intensification of regionalism (Dong, 1995).

4. Although I retrieve the social category of "community", widely used by actors to refer to immigration collectives, I reject its essentialist implications, namely those of given defined contours, unity and absence of conflict.

5. In October 1956 and May 1957, two reduced contingents of North Korean military ex-prisoners reached Argentina. However, it is the arrival of 13 families in October 1965 that the local Korean community considers the landmark of the Korean immigration process in Argentina.

The bulk of the Korean immigration to Argentina arrived during the 1980s, migrants –mostly in family groups– reaching the country by plane from an already industrialized Korea, where competition was perceived as an obstacle to the development and social mobility of the younger generations. Rather than a rural-bound migration partially assisted by the Korean government, this “wave” involved people with the financial capacity to invest in small and middle-size businesses, who ventured on migration stimulated by bilateral economic agreements signed between both countries⁶. This immigration peaked between 1985 and 1989, and its settlement pattern show preference for more central areas of Buenos Aires and certain districts of the metropolitan periphery, instead of circumscription to Lower Flores. By 1996, according to community estimations, the Korean presence in Argentina amounted to 32.000 people⁷.

Korean immigration to Argentina has gradually fallen off in the past decade. Along with the reduction of the general flow of South Korean immigrants, growing rates of return and remigration, in particular among young people, have been observed⁸.

6. Acts of Procedure of Korean Immigrants’ Entry to Argentina, dated April 1985, and Resolution n° 2340 of the National Direction of Migrations, dated June 26th of the same year. By this regulation, a deposit of US\$ 30,000 per family was established as a condition for being allowed in the country -a condition that also aimed to encourage Korean migrants to obtain legal residency. It is worth noting that a number of immigrants did not meet the legal requirements to become permanent residents or where not aware of them. Most of these, entered Argentina from bordering countries as tourists and remained in irregular conditions until they sought to establish legal residency.

7. These figures were quoted in the homepage of the Korean Embassy in Buenos Aires <http://www.embcorea.int.ar>. They include “second generation” Koreans.

8. According to late estimations by the Korean community in Buenos Aires, after the local December 2001 crisis, the number of Koreans in Buenos Aires dropped to 15.000. The main re-migration destinations included the United States, Mexico and Australia. However, it should be noted that widespread news about Argentina’s “recovery” has recently attracted some returnees and re-migrants back to the country.

The process of immigration to Argentina has taken place predominantly through chains composed of nuclear families related by kinship or acquaintance. Economically speaking, the adoption of strategies such as the family business has allowed many Korean immigrants insertion in independent niches, primarily the small and middle-size clothing industry, gross and retail sale of food, and the import business. Bialogorski and Bargman (1994:6), have noted that intra and inter family solidarity networks have resulted in the preservation of “an ample zone of in-group exchange, especially regarding patterns of marriage, commensality, sociability and linguistic competence”.

Contact with sectors of the society of destination and with other migration collectives has been, so far, more intense in the area of labor relations. Not infrequently, family businesses hire migrants from the interior of Argentina and immigrants from neighboring countries (for the most part Bolivian and Peruvian) in their small garment factories and stores. These businesses compete directly with the retail clothing industry of sectors of the Jewish community targeted toward low and middle-income consumers in the “porteño”⁹ neighborhoods of Once and Flores. For younger generations (including those born in Korea and raised in the migration context¹⁰ as well as those born in Argentina), educational institutions constitute the main contact zone for interaction with people of non-Korean descent.

As opposed to its demographic impact –which is, indeed, low–, Korean immigration in Buenos Aires became highly visible, particularly during the ‘90s. Such visibility was accomplished through the circulation of public and private discourses that articulated dimensions of biology, culture and class in a singular operation of local racism I here explore: the ethnicization of class conflict.

9. Genitive for those born in the city of Buenos Aires. Literally, it means “from the port”.

10. As is the case with other communities of the Korean diaspora, these are identified as 1,5 generation. Such denomination, however, is rare in the migration lexical repertoire of Argentina.

2. Argentina as migration context

The social treatment and processing of the Korean immigration in the Argentine context can be better grasped in the light of Argentina's specific ethnic formation, and, concomitantly, its migration history.

2.1. Ethnic Formation in Argentina

Discursive racializing operations on diversity in contemporary Argentina derive their logic from a matrix of alterities historically woven into the hegemonic national narrative that accompanied its building as a Nation-State.

In Argentina, the consolidation of the Nation-State was, to a large extent, the result of an explicit project of the 19th century political and intellectual elite in founding a modern republic. Based on widely held ideas that linked race, culture, and progress, the Argentine moral elite was convinced that the construction of a civilized and modern country, its economic growth and its social, political and institutional foundation (following the American and European examples) required the application of political strategies designed to modify quantitatively and qualitatively its "semi-barbarian" population. Thus, confidence in a sort of social engineering with eugenic goals resulted in diverse actions of extermination (as was the case with the indigenous peoples), invisibilization (as was the case with the population of African descent), transplantation (through massive European immigration) and homogenization carried out by a State that sought to implement experience-unifying mechanisms to suppress diversity.

As claimed by Segato in her analysis of the Argentine ethnic formation, "[here] the national State, facing the original breach capital/provinces, and the contingents of European immigrants that were added [...], pressed for the nation to behave as an ethnic unit having a singular homogenous and recognizable culture of its own". In their search for an ontology of the nation, the elites opted for an "essential and indivisible pattern of the ethnic applied to the whole of the national society" (1997:11). The invention of a national identity

entailed the cultural homogenization of the inhabitants throughout the national territory, so that the nation was instituted as “the great antagonist of minorities”¹¹.

The explicit aim of this historical pattern of population processing was the cultural cleansing of the various contingents brought together in the formation of the Argentine nation. The Argentine State adopted the role of an efficient “difference-leveling machine”: “all ethnically marked persons, due to their belonging be it to a defeated people, be it to an immigration group, were pressed to move on from their categories of origin to be able, only then, to exercise full citizenship comfortably” (Segato, 1997: 17). Thus, spurred by a certain panic about diversity –or “ethnic terror”–, a set of top-down and bottom-up, formal and informal mechanisms of cultural vigilance were instituted that combined strategic cultural insensitivity with the pejorative exposure of differences at macro and micro levels. The school, the public health system and the (compulsory) military service turned into key components of this neutralizing plan.

The hegemonic narrative of the nation operated as a standard for the diagnosis and subsequent leveling of differences. Its main enunciator –the “white and civilized” male– became the reference for marking those “others” who were simultaneously included in the nation (meaning peoplehood) and excluded as legitimate enunciators from its political dimension (the republic).

The narrative of the transition from barbarism to civilization was displayed in the two poles of the “Indian” and the European

11. Segato follows Balibar in this point: “The example of the French nation (as has been described by Etienne Balibar) adequately represents the Argentine case, for which the notion of ‘fictitious ethnicity’, in the sense of ‘invented’, remains valid. [...] The nation was conceived of and formulated as a big artificial ethnic group, invented in the laboratory of the 1880 generation, and reproduced through the school system by means of a refined cloning technique. The anguish vis-a-vis diversity that affected the Argentine *intelligentsia* is, however, understandable in a country whose capital city had, for several decades, a foreign population larger than its native one” (Segato 1997: 11 y 17).

immigrant. The interplay of these opposed archetypes is the obligatory starting point for understanding ethnic formation in Argentina. The national narrative provided the hegemonic common sense with a logic for the configuration and classification of new alterities throughout the last century. In this line, classifying someone as “other” is, in a way, classifying him/her as barbarian and defining him/her as an object of intervention by the education, health-care and/or correctional systems. Moreover, not only does this logic generate a static order but it also sets the limits of what the “other” will or will never be able to become, defining this potential predominantly along class lines. Such logic is still at work, even in a context of increasingly positive recognition of diversity seemingly brought about by the import of a globalized model of multiculturalism. It is in the light of this historically rooted logic that the processing of the Korean immigration in Argentina needs be understood. In the same diachronic vein, however, it is also relevant to situate Korean immigration in the framework of Argentine migration history.

2.2. Argentine Migration History

Let’s here recall three migration dynamics that, stemming from different political projects, have contributed in very different ways to the narrative of an Argentine national identity. Outlining the country’s migration history is also a useful means to illustrate the –usually de-emphasized– constitutive nature of social notions of race and culture vis-a-vis class formation in Argentina.

Much has been written about the essential role attributed to European immigration throughout the period of consolidation of the modern Argentine State (see Rofman and Romero, 1973; Halperin Donghi, 1987). Warrant of an expanding accumulation model based on agro-export, the incipient State took up the task of “populating” its territory with the twofold aim of providing independent rural labor and, as mentioned above, of backing up the “civilizing” process of the local population with direct European –ideally, Anglo-Saxon– influence. Consequently, between the second half of the 19th century

and the first decades of the 20th, the country witnessed the arrival of large contingents of European immigrants –chiefly Italian and Spanish– who had a major impact in Argentine demographic and cultural history.

Although, in practice, this migration did not respond to the desired ideal, in time, the figure of the European immigrant became inexorably linked to national growth. Its incorporation as a fundamental character in the political narrative of national modernization and progress helped contain local xenophobic attitudes. The legislation explicitly stated preference for Europeans, attesting to the importance granted to the “honorable and diligent” transatlantic immigration. Accordingly, even the Argentine National Charter of 1853 included an article obliging the federal government to foster European immigration –which, notably, remained unmodified in the late 1994 constitutional reforms.

The second migration movement associated with the construction of a national identity developed by the hand of the import-substitution economic model implemented in the 1930s. Industrial development and workforce demand encouraged interior rural-urban migration, while a new political narrative gave workers a leading role in a nationalist project. The incorporation of these migrants –a population resulting from various forms of miscegenation that involve Indo-American and African heritages–, in their character of working class, as subjects of the political scene provoked racist reactions from local oligarchic sectors and factions of a blooming middle-class mainly composed of the descendants of European immigrants.

In the last decades, neo-liberal politics focused on the flow of South American immigrants to the city of Buenos Aires –especially those from bordering countries (Bolivia, Paraguay, Chile, Brazil and Uruguay) and Peru– to expiate the evils caused by its market-policies. In a context of growing poverty, high unemployment and implementation of harsh labor reforms that did away with rights long acquired by national workers, guaranteeing workforce was hardly a specific goal of the State. However, by means of a legislation that

hampered the obtainment of legal residency in the country, regional immigrants were placed in a vulnerable position that facilitated the precarization of the conditions under which they could sell their workforce¹². As opposed to the protagonists of the massive immigration that took place at beginning of the 20th century, “Latin American” migrants came to represent the figure of the undesirable foreigner.

Together with a contingent of Central and Eastern Europeans who arrived during the ‘90s attracted by a special migration agreement, and with an increasing number of (continental and insular) Chinese immigrants, the Korean immigration also forms part of the so-called “recent immigration”. Nonetheless, the economic status attained in a relatively short time by many Korean immigrants –in contrast to the rapid pauperization of local middle-class sectors–, the benefit of bilateral migration agreements, and the veil of exotism through which the Argentine society looks at Koreans, have all rendered this immigration particularly visible and turned it into a primary target of ethnic-racial prejudice.

III. Processing Korean Immigration within the National Ethnic Formation: Korean Immigrants in Text and Talk

The type of visibility I here refer to has been mainly accomplished in and through everyday discourse. Therefore I will explore the productivity of two phenomenally relevant types of discourse, namely news stories and informal conversations, in the construction of stereotypical images of the Korean immigration in Buenos Aires. The

12. Even though the migration law I refer to was passed in 1981, under a military dictatorship, it has remained in force for two decades of democratic government. Only in December 2003, did the Parliament pass a new migration law that – although not free from the imprint of national security doctrine– is overall respectful of the international Human Rights Treaties enjoying constitutional hierarchy in the local normative framework.

analysis assumes that discourse about Korean immigrants not only refers to “them” –as a symbolic/referential theoretical framework would emphasize–, but is itself a social practice of “othering” with strong performative effects on identity formation and *subject-ification* processes.

1. Korean immigrants in the media: an analysis of news stories

As is the case for other migratory categories -principally, the so called “Latin American immigrants” –Korean immigrants have been most frequently thematized as deviant vis-a-vis the legal norm. Newspaper articles concerning Korean immigrants in Argentina demonstrate a preference for topics such as tax evasion, illegal association, and the employment of immigrants from neighboring countries under illegal labor regimes or, as the press puts it, exploitation and slavery.

Placing the focus on the topic of exploitation constitutes a doubly powerful mechanism of racist discourse. By bringing together Asian and “Latin American” immigrants, the widespread news about *Koreans as exploiters of illegal immigrants from neighboring countries* not only introduces a criminalizing version of Asian immigration but also activates an implicit criminalizing version of the regional migration. Likewise, the asymmetrical counterpoint exploiter-exploited introduces a ranking of deviant behavior that links “enslaving” to becoming “illegal”, turning into “cheap labor” and “taking our jobs”. In this way, the news delineates a hierarchical classification of both these migratory presences, articulating them so that one term of the equation serves to justify the rejection of the other (Bialogorski, 1996): “*Most Koreans involved in the clothing industry get themselves illegal immigrants, whom they hire for low wages*” (*Ambito Financiero*, 7/19/93).

Associating the notion of exploitation with the Korean immigration has a pragmatic significance in the context of structural

transformations tending to the imposition of the so-called labor flexibilization¹³. It is in this sense that the press displaces class conflict into an ethnic domain. By focusing on the ethnic landscape, the role of domestic employers in the irregular employment of the migrant labor force goes unquestioned, while the issue of exploitation among “Argentines” is dodged and other forms of labor abuse that do not take place on ethnic grounds –indeed, the most frequent ones– are obscured. Moreover, exploitation –now incarnated in the figure of the Korean immigrant– is presented implicitly as the paradigm of amorality against which the evils inflicted on the majority of the Argentine population by neo-liberal labor rules can be perceived as only relative.

The possibility of this kind of ethnicization “from outside” rests on two pillars. On the one hand, there is the presentation of the collective of Korean immigrants as a monolithic block, composed of identical subjects with common ends, that stands in tension with the national society. On the other hand, deviance is postulated not only as legal but also as cultural –culture being understood in its objectivist sense–, and the use(s) of space, patterns of sociability and commensality, linguistic practices, working and leisure habits, etc., are keyed in terms of extreme cultural difference. It is through discourse that a number of fixed images of Korean immigrants in Buenos Aires acquires facticity, namely that “Koreans” *eat dog, rat and cat*, that they *speak no Spanish*, and are *overly competitive*, that “*their*” *women are dreadfully submissive*, and that they have transformed a part of the city into a *Koreatown*. Stereotyping and hyper-exotization are, thus, “othering” practices that are central to the local discursive treatment of the Korean immigration.

13. I understand “flexibilization” as a common term used to refer to neo-liberal labor policies aiming at reducing job security, labor benefits and wages, while granting company owners increasing power to impose their terms on productive processes, in order to meet the demands of competitiveness.

1.1. Stereotyping

According to a classical definition, the action of stereotyping performs a twofold move: (ultra)generalizing on the basis of individual cases (Heller, 1970), and making predictions about individual cases on the basis of a set of features attributed to a putative homogenous “whole”. In the discourses about “Koreans”, the construction of homogeneity has a specific value: that of a closed and excluding community that creates –usually implicit– tension with an open and inclusive national society. Highlighting the Korean origin of the subjects whose actions are considered worth informing is a common means of carrying out this discursive task. However, there are more subtle ways of achieving similar effects. Managing thematic organization is one of them.

1.1.1. Thematic Structures: Cohesion and Circularity

News stories about Korean immigrants in the local press do not appear regularly, but rather in sporadic short series which tend to display a cohesive structure grounded on permanent intertextual references to previous series of articles. This favors thematic development in quasi-narrative terms, shifting from a hypothetical presentation of events to their confirmation: *“It was verified there are exploitive Koreans. Slavery: the denigrating condition in which hundreds of illegal immigrants exploited by Koreans live has been officially verified in the enforcement operative that followed yesterday’s publication by La Nacion” (La Nacion, 4/21/93)*. A closed structure like this one is likely to function iconically connoting a putative cohesive nature of the collective of Korean immigrants.

If we now focus on the news story rather than on the news series, we can observe a peculiar thematic organization that circularly ties references to legal and cultural deviance. News stories about Korean immigrants display a recurring thematic structure in which the main topic triggers secondary themes that have been developed in previous news series, thus demarcating a bundle of associated selective features

that should be interpreted as part of a “group essence”. Not infrequently, “cultural” issues are brought up in a story whose main topic has no necessary connection with “culture”. In the following example, the main topic “*Undocumented foreigners on sale in Southern Flores [...]*” triggers the topic of distinctive spatial use: “*The location known as ‘Korean neighborhood or Chinese neighborhood’ is characterized by the abundance of stores that display signboards written with Oriental characters*” (*La Nacion*, 4/20/93).

1.1.2. Agentivity

In relation to deviance, it is worth exploring the issue of agentivity: who is/are shown as responsible for the actions described. The analysis of headlines referring to “Koreans” allows us to infer that, overall, immigrants are likely to be presented explicitly as agents – under the grammatical form of the subject– when what is attributed to them is negative actions: “*A group of Koreans offended the national patrimony*” (*La Prensa*, 8/1/97). By highlighting a certain intentionality in the actions of “Koreans” the idea of collective and organized action is conveyed.

1.2. Hyper-exotization

If every discourse on the “other” appeals to a certain operation of exotization, the Korean immigration has been placed discursively, against the background of the specific diversity formation of Argentina, at the pole of extreme exotism. Perception of the exotic is expressed linguistically in such a way that the unknown receives a vivid descriptive treatment. Rhetorical tropes that work in this direction include sensory images –“*The yellow mirror*” (*Página 30*, 7/92)– and contrast –“*typically porteno streets invaded by Korean signboards*” (*Todo es Historia*, 1/91)–. This sense of the exotic, that of the ungraspable and its mystery, may be even made explicit:

“Nobody knows how many they are, but everybody knows they are here. They have newspapers, magazines, and

even their own TV channel. They open stores, compete with other communities and win. They arrived with many dollars and reproduce them in an astonishing way. For them, there is no crisis. Instead, there is a culture of effort that is not just words, and attitudes that provoke a predictable dose of xenophobia. The Korean mystery has arrived; whether to stay in this 'enolmous' country, no one knows " (Pagina 12, 10/9/88).

An additional sense of exotism is molded as distance: hyper-exotization entails maximum distance. It is worth noting those denominative forms by which such a move is achieved. Frequently used, the pronoun "they" –third person excluded from the I/you of the enunciation act and, according to Benveniste (1977), a non-person–takes specific distancing nuances. It may, for example, place "Koreans" under more generic categories, such as "Asians" and "Orientals", that extend the polarization Korean-Argentinian to intercontinental and planetary orders, thus implying multiple oppositions: geographic, historical, cultural.

Similarly, one should note the permutation of denominative terms within a same newspaper article: "Korean" is easily replaceable by "Chinese". Conveying the idea that "they are all the same" –since the difference between them is hardly understandable–, the association of Korean immigrants with this other collective also perceived as exotic may be explicit, as is evident in the article entitled "*Koreans made in Argentina*"¹⁴, where the author jumps from "Koreans" to "Chinese" without solution of continuity: "*Much less numerous than Koreans, the Chinese also try to assimilate*" (*Clarín*, 7/23/95), or in the headline "*Police operation in the 'Chinese neighborhood' in search of exploitive Koreans*" (*Clarín*, 4/21/93).

Manipulation of reported speech may also become a device of

14. Note the objectifying/dehumanizing effect achieved by intertextuality with the phrase "made in Korea".

hyper-exotization. Korean voices are neither absent in the common portrait of the Korean immigrant who speaks no Spanish nor in the depiction of problematic communicative situations between immigrants and the local population -although they are generally introduced when reporting immigrants' complaints against the "host society". In such cases, the use of free indirect style discloses and emphasizes, through imitation and parody, the limited competence in Spanish widely attributed to Korean immigrants. Thus modalized, the Korean voice is ridiculed and the articulated complaint, neutralized. Ultimately, this is one way of representing the "other" by depriving him of his voice: *"My son, my daughter, Argentinian. Work? Nooooo. Study. Better study. Mi wife angry. Many newspaper come and speaks badly, and says all Korean bad"* (*La Nacion* 3/16/97).

Concurrently, news stories about "Koreans" introduce the voice of Argentine neighbors. Legitimizing its function of "reflecting the truth", the press generally reports negative comments by local neighbors that emphasize the alien nature of Korean immigrants. These are usually quoted directly so that the "objective" enunciator of the news article distances him/herself from the quoted utterance and -in a silent disclaimer- puts prejudice in the mouth of "ordinary people":

"You can't give them a house because they'll destroy it. They dry fish in the tub. They hang sheets and divide the house as if they were in Korea. The country is small, they build everywhere, they have no grass and the cows have nothing to feed on, and they eat cats and rats" (*La Nación*, 3/16/97).

Of course, the newspapers here analyzed do not represent a unified front; moreover: press discourse on the "other" tends to become a field for ideological struggle among different newspapers and even among sections of a publication. In the case of "Koreans", the dispute centers, *grosso modo*, around the emphasis on one or another aspect of the imputed deviance -legal, for the more conservative print

media; cultural, for those papers that present themselves as progressive— rather than in alternative definitions that take Korean immigrants out of the realm of ethnicity and conceive of them not as illegitimate interlocutors or mere objects of discourse but as a fully dialoguing social subject.

2. Everyday conversations on Korean immigrants

The production of images of East Asian immigrants and their Argentina-born children also takes place in everyday conversations. These follow the hegemonic trace in the selection of topics through which Koreans are thematized as juridically and culturally deviant subjects. Yet, restrictions associated with the positive presentation of the *self* in verbal interaction print a few particularities on these conversations (van Dijk, 1987).

First, we can find topics of positive exotization such as *Koreans are hard-working people or Korean students are good and intelligent*. These themes, that echo the (North)American commonplace of Koreans as a model minority, are, however, easily negativized since they can be readily replaced by the notions of excess and unfair competition, especially in matters of economic success and school vacancies in the most prestigious public schools of Buenos Aires.

Other topics included in everyday conversations about Koreans in Argentina refer to the immigrant's body and smell. Garlic, fish, seaweed are directly associated to smell as a diacritic of "otherness". It is not difficult to find extensive descriptions of that "invasive stench" that signals the presence of Koreans: "*smell of fish/ very strong/ but of rotten urine/ it was a horrible thing*"; one can even find phrases such as "smell pollution", that reflect an interesting use of the environmental discourse. At the same time, linked to the semantic field of dirtiness and ugliness, smell is tied to body topics. Skin color, slant eyes, and facial shape seem to have turned Asian immigrants' bodies into a noted marking target.

Second, mainly in personal experience narratives, everyday

conversations about Korean immigrants activate the creative display of a battery of linguistic resources. In this type of tactically elaborated discourse, the dimension of *performance*¹⁵ (Bauman, 1993) comes to life: focus on the form of the message becomes evident and the non-referential functions of language, in particular the poetic function¹⁶, is in full play. Thus keyed, the discursive operations of stereotyping and hyper-exotization may be understood in the light of what I have come to call the *poetics of racism*.

Denominations are fertile ground for this poetics. Generically applied to East Asian immigrants, for example, “nochi” and “ponja” – alterations of “chino” (Chinese) and “Japon” (Japan)– turn to the syllabic inversion typical of *lunfardo*, the argot of Buenos Aires, for a humorous outcome. Also word play on proper names work within this poetic economy. A narrative I recorded during my research¹⁷, for example, features one Korean protagonist whose name is, however, given in seven different versions: 1) Win-Chin-Fau, 2) Wim-Chm-Fn, 3) Wn-Chn-Fn, 4) Wan-Chin-Sin, 5) Wan-Chin-Kon, 6) Wan-Chin-Knu, 7) Wan-Chin-Fun. Reformulated with cumulative effect

15. Bauman defines performance as a “metacommunicative act whose essence resides in assuming responsibility, before an audience, for a display of communicative competence, thus highlighting the way in which verbal communication is carried out, above and beyond its referential content” (Bauman, 1993:182).

16. The poetic function of language is here conceived of in a broad sense, not necessarily implying an artistic purpose. Rather, it draws on Jakobson’s notion of “poetry of grammar” (Jakobson, 1960).

17. The narrative I refer to emerged from a spontaneous conversation I maintained with A, a young middle-class progressive professional belonging to my personal reserve who has no frequent contact with Korean immigrants. The conversation took place during lunch at A’s house in April 1996. At a certain point of the conversation –an update on our respective activities–, A suddenly remembered a personal experience he considered relevant for my research on “Koreans”: he had been asked by the police to act as witness during the detention of a Korean immigrant accused of exploiting a Paraguayan worker. Together with A’s evaluation of the potential scientific relevance of the narrative, the fact that I asked his permission to tape the narrative placed the conversation within the discursive frame of an interview.

throughout the story, this playful work on name variations condenses ideas of insurmountable cultural distance, confusion and mystery into a caricature prosodically reinforced by syllable marking and volume increase. A subtler analysis in terms of harmony shows that vocalic change in the character's name apparently follows an ordering pattern in correspondence with the sequence in which Spanish vowels are taught/learned, thus resulting in the primarization or infantilization of the Korean protagonist of the story.

The poetics of racism woven into the discourse on the Korean immigration in Buenos Aires becomes most clear in the profusion of figures of speech that enhance a widespread metaphor, that of "the invasion". Use of the semantic field of war, parallelism, repetitions, strategic use of verbal aspect so as to emphasize the notion of progress, onomatopoeias, inclusion of terms implying addition or additive consequences, and even personification of the so-called Koreatown, all converge in this metaphoric effort. The following conversation with a Koreatown neighbor is clarifying ¹⁸:

"Look, suddenly there's an old house in the neighborhood and psss!: Koreans who move in, no matter the state of the house [...] Suddenly, there's an empty store and tac!: Korean retailers [...] And then they close down the store, vanish for a while and tac!: another Korean, greengrocery [...] And you have the impression they go moving forward and once they have arrived in a place they don't let go their grip (laughter) [...] And there comes more and more and more and more and more of them each time (laughter) and this bothers people more each time [...] The problem with Koreatown is that it is not circumscribed to a sector; where I live, it has like

18. From interview to P, a middle-class woman in her fifties who lives with her family in Flores Sur, close to the so called Korean neighborhood. P has a background in social science, and this interview was requested to her as collaborative task with my research on the Korean immigration in Buenos Aires. The interview took over an hour and was taped at a bar near P's house.

tentacles, you know [...] Something that starts advancing and becomes encysted”.

Finally, we should note that positive self-presentation strategies in discourse about the Korean immigration coexist, in a *continuum*, with the assumption of responsibility for overt racist attitudes. Thus, we can find intermediate tactics of impression management such as the displacement of prejudice not to the “general society” (van Dijk, 1987) but to members of the speaker’s personal reserve (Goffman, 1956): “*Now, if you want to ask my husband, he says he would kill them all. He is a racist*”–, and with phrases such as “*I am racist against Koreans*”, “*Koreans, I would kill them all*” or “*I hate Koreans*”.

IV. Conclusion

Analyzing everyday discourse on the Korean immigration in Buenos Aires is a pertinent way to approach the question of how this social collective has been processed within the framework of the Argentine ethnic formation since, to a large extent, the ethnicizing effort materializes in and through discourse. Evidently, the fact that such processing takes place mainly in discursive forms¹⁹ rather than being anchored, for example, in physical violence cannot be equated with a lack of a regulatory and coercive effect on migration identities. Yet, discourses of alterity like the ones I have focused on here -usually vivid and taken as humorous- are rarely challenged as discriminatory or racist in Argentina.

One reason for this may be that, in the local context, public awareness of racism as a social problem is only incipient, and anti-

19. Police enforcement operatives in *Koreatown* and State-ordered detentions have been, however, common correlates of discourse on the Korean immigration in Buenos Aires.

racist discourses have relative power of interpellation. In addition, at least among “porteños”, the threshold of what can be said about others in a “light” mood without being considered offensive or seriously affecting one’s image is quite lax. This “lightness”, probably associated to a devaluation of public speech, can be seen as a specific trait of racist discourse in Argentina. Moreover, if there is a norm of correctness informing discourse on Korean immigrants, it is seemingly not grounded on objectified racial issues. And here we return to the intersection of ethnicity and class that is the focus of this paper.

In view of the local predominant subordination of notions of race to those of class and culture (Margulis and Urresti, 1998; Pacecca, 1995), and considering the conjunction of a long national history of struggle for workers’ rights, a situation characterized by economic difficulties, and the self-sufficient economic insertion achieved by some East Asian immigrants, the negative portrayal of Korean immigrants may be driven by a contextually more significant norm of correctness: one that rather disapproves of inferiorizing “others” by alleging reasons of class. When the image of Koreans as *exploiters of illegal immigrants from neighboring countries* is taken for granted, then, admitting racism against them in solidarity with the *exploited* not only seems, in the local perspective, morally justified/able but, ultimately, may even be interpreted by all actors –including those who are the object of prejudice–, as a particular modality of non racism.

The pragmatics of the social processing of the Korean immigration that I have attempted to describe for the case of Argentina can contribute to the study of the situated production of a certain modality of Korean ethnicity, fertile for comparative ends. It can also offer elements to set the backdrop for a future description and analysis of Korean migrants’ transnational practices and the (re)production or challenge of identification with their homeland. The panorama here presented illustrates the need to carefully weigh the specificities of contextual –historical and situational– variables relevant in each destination society in order to achieve a deeper understanding of diasporic Korea.

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