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Mary Bohn May 8, 2020

Telling and Selling Your Story: Rightful Citizenship, Profit, and Belonging in the North Korean Migrant Community

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Abstract

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This thesis explores how North Korean migrants craft and publicly present their stories of "escape" from North Korea and discuss their backgrounds as "escapees" (*t'albukcha)* in South Korea. South Korean public perception of the over 33,000 North Korean migrants living in South Korea as of April 2020 defines migrants as ideologically significant, at-times foreboding and at-times intriguing, "Others." While existing scholarship explores how South Koreans perceive and represent migrants in society and popular culture, little attention has been paid to how North Korean migrants have gone about the work of self-representation within their unique societal context. This thesis uncovers how migrants work within and outside of South Korean conventions and expectations to publicly tell and sell their stories. I approach this issue through analysis of migrants' self-representations in YouTube videos and ethnographic fieldwork. Each of the thesis's chapters explores one of three prominent physical and virtual "spaces" in order to demonstrates how historical and social context as well as the medium of representation affect migrants' personal narratives. The first chapter explores migrants' testimonials in evangelical churches where migrants' testimonies have been used to demonstrate South Korea's superiority over North Korea for decades. The second chapter analyzes the variety television show *Now on My Way to Meet You* (2011—present) that encourages migrants to propagate South Korean "multiculturalism" and "tolerance." The third chapter explores popular YouTube channels (mid-2010s—present) where migrants commodify their North Koreanness for South Korean audiences.

My findings demonstrate that migrants' self-representations result from a negotiation between South Korean actors and influences and migrants' own goals. I argue that North Korean migrants work within hegemonic nationalism and citizenship to argue for their right to traverse borders of nation and class. Through publicly sharing their stories, migrants position themselves as mobile agents and bearers of cultural and monetary capital. This thesis suggests that digital media provides migrants new spaces to not just reproduce, but also disrupt South Korean nativist hegemony as they tell and profit from the stories about themselves that they want to tell and find ways to move themselves upward through stratified social structures.

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Introduction

Stories provides us a powerful avenue to imagine and virtually encounter unfamiliar "Others." My first encounters with the "Other" of North Korea were through the stories of those who had "escaped" (*t'albuk*) it: North Korean migrants. [1] In 2014, I heard the heart-wrenching testimony of Park Yeonmi through a video posted on YouTube.[2] In October of 2014, Park Yeonmi delivered the speech, "Escaping from North Korea in search of freedom," to the UK-based non-profit advocacy organization for global human rights issues. With a combined total of 5.3 million views on YouTube and 2 million views on Facebook, Park's story quickly became one of the most popular representations of North Korea across the globe and Park became one of the most visible North Korean migrants. After wiping her tears, Park shakily begins her story:

> I have to do this because this is not me speaking, this is the people who want to tell the world what they want to say. North Korea is an unimaginable country. There is only one channel on TV, there is no internet, we aren't free to sing, say, wear, or think what we want.

In Park's story, North Korea is an evil dictatorship devoid of all conceivable "human rights." North Koreans are "desperately seeking and dying for freedom." Park pleads for her listeners to advocate and have sympathy towards North Korean "refugees."

[1] Throughout this thesis, I use the term "North Korean migrants" to refer to members of the community of individuals who were born North Korea but are now living in South Korea as South Korean citizens. This is because it is the term with the least political connotations to refer to the community. It must be noted that the majority of the North Korean migrants I met in Seoul refer to themselves in Korean as "escaped North Korean migrants," or *t'alkbuk yijumin,* or "escaped North Korean person," *t'albukcha.* I do not use these translated terms because of their length relative to "North Korean migrant" or "migrant."

[2] Park Yeonmi's story can be found at this link on YouTube: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ufhKWfPSQOw

The picture of North Korea that Park's story paints is clear and without nuance: North Korea is run by a ruthless dictator and North Korean people are either brainwashed cadres or "refugees" who were enlightened enough to leave for South Korea. Hearing Park's tearful testimony, I wondered how such a portrayal affected the growing population of North Koreans living in South Korea. According to South Korea's Ministry of Unification, there are currently over 33,000 North Korean migrants in South Korea (MOU 2020).[3] Was Park Yeonmi, an individual who claimed to represent an entire population of North Korean people, a fair representative of these individuals who would have to respond to the comments of their South Korean coworkers, family members, and church friends who had seen Park's story? As I furthered my research, I found that there are, in fact, many other North Korean migrants who publicly share their stories using different platforms such as their churches, television programs, and YouTube. These stories provide insight into how migrants approach the work of self-representation from their extraordinary societal context. North Korean migrants are not only members of a cultural minority group, but also individuals who many perceive as representatives of a distant and elusive national "Other," North Korea.

This thesis explores how North Korean migrants approach self-representation through telling their "testimonies," the personal narratives of their North Korean background and migration to South Korea, in public spaces. I view these personal narratives as tools for migrants as well as for South Koreans who solicit these narratives to draw boundaries around the South Korean nation and define who belongs within it. Benedict Anderson (1983) observed that the nation is a community imagined into existence through individuals' production and consumption

3 This information was retrieved from the Ministry of Unification's website on March 6th, 2020. https://www.unikorea.go.kr/unikorea/business/NKDefectorsPolicy/status/lately/.

of media that alerts them that they live in the same place, time, and "community" as others. Products such as newspapers, national anthems, and oral and written histories create stories of same-ness and shared experience that produce national consciousness among otherwise disparate individuals. As the nation demands the formation of national consciousness among those who belong, it also entails defining who is "Other" (Ahmed 2002). Stories demarcate national borders as well as define who is and is not a rightful subject within these borders. By writing and publicly sharing their narratives of migration, North Korean migrants can sever or strengthen ties with their homeland and redraw the lines of the South Korean nation to include migrants. When South Koreans consume these stories, they confront another group's subjective re-imagining of the nation. In addition, South Koreans virtually "meet" North Korean migrants through consuming these stories, thus emotionally connecting with individuals who many South Koreans consider "Others."

North Korean migrants do not publicly share their personal narratives into a vacuum; rather, migrants deliver these stories into a multitude of knowledge paradigms around North Korea that dominate their public representation and perception. Factors ranging from legacies of Cold War-era ideological division, to North Korea's international status as the elusive "hermit kingdom" and an "axis of evil," to South Korea's incorporation of minority groups into "multicultural society" (*tamunhwa sahoe*) have affected South Korea's imagination of migrants and the nation from which they came.[4] This thesis seeks to answer the questions: how have North Korean migrants worked within and outside of these paradigms of knowledge to assert themselves as agentive subjects in South Korea? How does the context of migrants' public

[4] Throughout this thesis, I use the McCune-Reischauer romanization system to romanize Korean terms. However, I defer to standard spellings of names or places that may not correspond to the McCune-Reischauer system.

storytelling, including national politics, government agendas, migrants' platforms for representation, and the various actors associated with these platforms, constrict or enable migrants' agency to tell their stories on their own terms? Finally, how does migrants' publicly "telling their stories" affect their position as a marginalized minority group living in South Korea?

I approach these questions through analyzing the personal narratives of North Korean migrants in three representative physical and virtual spaces: South Korean churches, the popular variety television show *Now on My Way to Meet You,* and YouTube. These spaces are significant both because they are recognizable to the many members of the migrant community and because they demonstrate how social and spatial contexts mediate migrants' testimonies. Drawing on analysis of migrants' self-representations published on YouTube as well as interviews and participant-observations I conducted in Seoul over one month of fieldwork during June 2019, I argue that North Korean migrants' representation is a constant negotiation between North and South Korean actors, agendas, and paradigms regarding North Korea. Migrants' personal narratives are not monolithic products of South Korean nationalist discourse; rather, they are the result of North Korean migrants creatively working within and outside of existing discourses to assert themselves as subjective agents and rightful citizens in South Korea. I draw on the work of Michel Foucault (1978) to understand migrants' use of South Korean constructions of nationalism and deployment of "Otherness" for their own benefit as a form of resistance against South Korean hegemony. According to Foucault, "Where there is power, there is resistance, and yet… this resistance is never in a position of exteriority to power" (Foucault 1978, 95). Rather than a centralized force of oppression, power and agency flow between individuals and institutions. Because power exists in relations between people and discourses, the "subjugated"

can resist hegemonic power at the same time as they affirm it. Resistance does not always come in the form of revolutions or upheaval, rather in "mobile and transitory points of resistance [that] produce cleavages in a society that shift about, fracturing unities and effecting regroupings… Just as the network of power relations ends by forming a dense web that passes through apparatuses and institutions, without being exactly localized in them, so too the swarm of points of resistance traverses social stratifications and individual unities" (1978, 96). North Koreans work within stratified structures of nationalism and knowledge to argue for their right to traverse borders of nation and class. Migrants do not overturn notions of South Korea's national superiority, but rather use their voices to orient themselves within this national body. Through publicly sharing the stories about themselves that they want to tell, migrants define their relationships with their South Korean audience and position themselves as mobile agents and bearers of cultural capital.

An Introduction to North Korean Migrants' Public Representation

In order to analyze North Korean migrants' public self-representation, it is essential to understand the sociocultural and historical factors that have influenced North Korean migrants' reception and perception in South Korean society. This section contextualizes my analysis within the South Korean government's policy response to North Korean migrants, the shifting demographics of migrants entering South Korea, and changing demographics in South Korean society. These changes represent a greater transformation of South Korean society's perception of North Korean migrants from ethnic brethren, to victimized refugees, and finally to economic migrants.

In the decades leading up to 2011, South Korean media images of North Korean migrants underwent major transformations alongside political and social change on the peninsula. Before the 1990s, the Korean government received North Korean migrants as decorated "heroes" returning to the legitimate Korean nation, or *kwisunja* (Chung 2008, 8). Migrants received substantial financial support and admiration upon their arrival in South Korea; meanwhile, the South Korean government broadcast their testimonies condemning North Korea and propagating anti-communism across the nation. "Hero" migrants who arrived in South Korea in the 1960s and 70s delivered on average between four to eight thousand public lectures per person until the 1990s (Jung 2014, 149. For migrant "heroes," lecturing was a main source of income as well as "an almost mandatory national duty to compensate for the support of the South Korean state" (Jung 2014, 149). These migrants, scarce in numbers and mostly male, were at once heroes, experts of North Korean society, and proof of South Korea's ideological superiority over its Northern neighbor. The testimonies of these "heroes" were especially significant during the Cold War era, as South Korea's understanding of North Korea as an impoverished and developmentally "behind" had not developed. The two Koreas were competitors in terms of national development. North and South Korea's economic situation did not become distinctly unequal until the 1970s, and North Korea even achieved a higher growth rate than South Korea in the immediate post-war period (Armstrong 2006). The South Korean government and media highlighted North Korean migrants' decision to abandon North Korea to live in South Korea as indisputable evidence of communism's ideological failings. At the same time, North Korean migrants' public testimonies became "a specific genre that South Korean audiences became familiar with and that North Korean border crossers were expected to perform before an audience" (Jung 2014, 150).

However, this ideological perception of North Korean migration transformed during the 1990s. The rising numbers of North Korean migrants during the Great Famine (1994-1998) alongside the South Korean government's shifting stance towards North Korea shaped a new perception of migrants as pitiful "escapees from the North" (*t'albukcha),* an impoverished nation (Lankov 2004). South Koreans were duty-bound to support these "escapees" due to humanitarian obligations, ethnic ties, and the South Korean government's desire for unification with the North. Economic crises and natural disaster caused North Korea to face a devastating famine between 1994 and 1998; as a result, the number of North Koreans crossing the border into China and eventually South Korea exponentially increased (Choi 2018, 84). Whereas fewer than ten "heroes" arrived each year before 1993, hundreds of "escapees" were arriving per year by 1997 (Chung 2008, 9). Rather than the mostly-male "heroes" who defected due to ideological disagreements with communism, these migrants were mostly women and came with stories of starvation, hardship, and death caused by the famine.[5] In response to the rising number of North Korean migrants and their traumatic backgrounds, the South Korean government passed legislation to facilitate migrants' successful resettlement by providing financial assistance, housing, and social adaption programs (Choi 2018, 81). At the same time, the presidential administration of South Korean President Kim Dae Jung (1998-2003) advocated for increased contact with North Korea with the goal of national unification. As the Kim government stated, "the settlement of the issue of escapees from North Korea would be the government's touchstone that shows the government's will and capability for unification of Korea" (MOU 2001, 157); in

[5] As the number of North Koreans leaving North Korea to seek relief from the famine increased, women began to dominate the population of escaped migrants. North Korean men are required to enter the military for 10 years of service after adolescence and work jobs officially registered with Democratic People's Republic (DPRK). government. North Korean women, on the other hand, often leave the official workforce to be "housewives" who engage in unregistered economic activities (such as black-market trading). As a result, North Korean women are often more capable of leaving North Korea while avoiding government detection than men (Lankov 2013).

order to encourage South Koreans' compliance with this agenda, the Kim government emphasized North and South Koreans' shared heritage (Choi 2018, Son 2016). Kim urged South Koreans to perceive North Koreans as "brothers and sisters" who were naturally deserving of South Korean citizenship (Son 2016). Instead of Cold War-era rivals, migrants were vulnerable co-ethnics whom South Koreans were obligated to accept in order to pave the way for successful Korean reunification.

During the presidencies of Kim Dae Jung (in office from 1998 to 2003) and Roh Moo Hyun (in office from 2003 to 2008), South Koreans' perception of North Korean migrants began to evolve from ethnic "brothers and sisters" fleeing starvation towards burdensome beneficiaries of social well-fare (Lankov 2006). This period signaled a greater shift in South Koreans' perceptions of migrants; instead of co-ethnics, migrants were becoming cultural and social "Others" (Son 2016). The number of North Korean migrants in South Korea rose each year between 1998 and 2009, and these migrants had significantly more difficult resettlement experiences than the "heroes" who arrived before the Famine. Post-Famine migrants were of lower socioeconomic status in North Korea than the pre-Famine elite "heroes"; whereas "heroes" found jobs as informants of North Korean politics, post-Famine migrants faced difficulty finding suitable livelihoods (Lankov 2006). Moreover, the cultural and linguistic differences between migrants and native South Koreans grew increasingly apparent as the number of migrants rose. South Koreans began to perceive North Koreans as burdensome well-fare recipients, and migrants faced high levels of discrimination from South Koreans (Lankov 2006, Chung 2008). As a solution to migrants' mounting resettlement issues, many South Koreans encouraged migrants to shed their North Korean traits in order to assimilate (Choo 2006). These assimilation imperatives root from a developmental understanding of the relationship between North and

South Korea: while South Korea represents successful capitalism, modernity, and development, North Korea represents failed communism, cultural "backwardness," and underdevelopment.

Whereas the governments of Kim Dae Jung and Roh Moo Hyun encouraged South Koreans to accept North Koreans as co-ethnics whose resettlement laid the foundation for unification, the conservative government of President Lee Myung Bak (in office from 2008 to 2013) abandoned plans for unification to instead criticize North Korea's human rights abuses. The Lee administration framed North Korean migrants as "refugees" escaping the backwards North Korean regime, and this framing only further solidified South Koreans' perception of North Koreans as "Others." The Lee administration condemned the Democratic People's Republic (DPRK) for human rights abuses, stating that South Korea would "[take] a humanitarian approach [and] protect the human rights of North Korean refugees and assist their entry into the ROK" (Son 2016, 178). Instead of calling for South Koreans to accept North Korean migrants due to their shared Korean heritage, Lee argued that South Koreans must accept North Koreans "'on humanitarian grounds,'" or because they were refugees (Son 2016, 197). Receiving these "refugees" demonstrated South Korea's adherence to international standards of good governance according to UN regulations, thus demonstrating South Korea's status as a "developed" and "modern" nation. By 2012, North Korea's public image was solidified as inhumane and underdeveloped; North Korean migrants were asylum-seekers and "refugees." This image of North Korea directly contrasted the image of South Korea the government projected: a "developed" and democratic place of refuge.

South Korean policies that promote the formation of a "multicultural society" (*tamunhwa sahoe)* have further complicated the position and perception of North Korean migrants. In the 2000s, the South Korean government began initiatives to support the education and societal

integration of “multicultural” families. These “multicultural” families include South Korean men and female marriage migrants from China, the Philippines, Vietnam, Uzbekistan, Mongolia, and Cambodia (J. Kim 2011). In 2012, South Korea’s Presidential Committee on Social Cohesion suggested that the ROK government combine North Korean migrants’ support services with services for multicultural families because both groups face similar social integration and settlement issues (Son 2016, 179). This perspective does not focus on North Korean migrants’ ethnic heritage or refugee status; rather, “multiculturalism” recognizes migrants’ distinct backgrounds and issues in acculturation and integration as they adjust to life in South Korea. Incorporating North Korean migrants into “multicultural” policy codifies migrants as a minority group whose culture, customs, and language are distinct from those of South Koreans. Moreover, Joon K. Kim (2011) pointed out that South Korean multiculturalism categorizes minority groups onto a hierarchical totem-pole of acceptability relative to a normative standard of South Korean hegemony. Multicultural policy seeks to assimilate minorities by encouraging them to “become” more South Korean while also retaining the “exotic," non-threatening aspects of their cultural difference (J. Kim 2011). In South Korean multiculturalism, minority cultures can be “cute” and commodifiable for South Korean visual consumption, but they are still clearly inferior to South Korean culture. As government policy and mainstream media treat North Koreans within the “multicultural” framework, the image of North Koreans as non-threatening, developmentally “behind” cultural “Others” has gained prominence.

North Koreans’ incorporation into multicultural policy highlights the inconsistency in South Koreans’ treatment of migrants as developmental subjects, cultural “Others,” and co-ethnics. Despite migrants’ recent incorporation into multicultural policy, the ROK constitution as well as private institutions such as churches still highlight North Korean migrants’ distinction

from other minority groups. Unlike any other foreign-born group, North Koreans automatically receive South Korean citizenship upon entering South Korea as well as government stipends, temporary living support, and civic education (Chung 2008). Moreover, South Korean match-making companies and popular media promote the image of North Korean women as "authentically Korean" and "traditional," thus attractive potential mates to South Korean men (Cho 2018, Kim 2016). These descriptions fetishize migrants' North Korean identity, asserting that migrants have an "authentic," pre-modern Korean-ness of that South Korean women have lost. At the same time, suspicion regarding North Koreans has not eroded; during the 2000s, a few highly publicized cases of exposed North Koreans spies in South Korea broke light, prompting the public's general suspicion of North Koreans in South Korea (Son 2016). This suspicion against North Koreans combined with South Korean hegemonic multicultural policy encouraged North Koreans to exert significant effort to "pass" as South Koreans to avoid negative sentiment against them, minimizing external indicators of their North Korean backgrounds in order to fully "become" South Korean (Choo 2006, Choo 2014, Jung 2015). Thus, South Koreans' perception of North Korean migrants has overall shifted towards viewing migrants as members of a cultural minority group; however, North Koreans still inhabit liminal, marginalized identities as co-ethnics, cultural "Others," representatives of a backwards and suspicious regime, bearers of pre-modern "authentic" Koreanness, pitiable refugees, and beneficiaries of social welfare.

Literature Review

The scholarship of Hae Yeon Choo (2006, 2014) and Jin Hyeon Jung (2010, 2014) are pivotal to enhancing my understanding of the liminal, "Other"-ed identities that North Korean

migrants inhabit as well as South Korean actors' hierarchical paradigms around North Korean migrants. Hae Yeon Choo (2006, 2014) explored how South Koreans who regularly interact with North Korean migrants in churches and non-profit organizations--the two principal kinds of organization that reach out to migrants after they leave their three-month stay at the Hanawon Resettlement Center—frame migrants within hegemonic and hierarchical discourses of citizenship and modernity. South Koreans encourage migrants to assimilate by shedding their "backwards" North Korean traits to become "modernized" South Korean citizens (Choo 2006). These include migrants' North Korean accents, mannerisms, "underdeveloped work ethic," and habits (Choo 2014, Jung 2014). At the same time, these leaders along with the South Korean government point to South and North Koreans' shared ethnic identity as the basis for migrants' right to South Korean citizenship. Jin Hyeon Jung (2012, 2014) pointed out that South Koreans frequently request North Koreans to present their "testimonies" of escaping North Korea in churches, human rights groups, and media interviews; these testimonies invariably frame North Korea as a land of human rights abuse, under-development, and suffering. For North Korean migrants, telling these "testimonies" that condemn North Korea and affirm South Korea's superiority is an expectation and essential condition for being a part of communities in South Korea.

While Hae Yeon Choo and Jin Hyeon Jung focused on the connection between migrants' social reception and South Korean hegemony in migrant communities, scholars such as Theodore Hughes (2008), Stephen Epstein (2009, 2013), Christopher Green (2013), and Eun Ah Cho (2018) explored the relationship between nationalist discourse and the shifting portrayals of North Koreans in South Korean media. Theodore Hughes (2008) pointed out that South Korean film and literature before the presidency of Kim Dae Jung (1998-2003) represented North

Koreans as embodiments of the DPRK, thus representatives of communist threat and anticapitalism (99). However, popular South Korean images of North Koreans in the 2000s depict a separation of North Koreans from North Korea; these images showed North Koreans as mobile subjects who can abandon North Korea (Hughes 2008, 115-116). Stephen Epstein (2009) argued that South Korean media in the 2000s reflected a shift towards representing North Koreans as ethnic and national "Others" as opposed to long-lost ethnic brethren. This is because, if North Korea is South Korea's long-lost other half, then issues related to North Korea should be portrayed with grave seriousness. However, during the 2000s, media portrayals of North Korea began to favor comedy, irony and farce; Epstein argues that this is a strategy to deal with a "growing sense of heterogeneity on the Korean peninsula" (Epstein 2009, 1). Further, Stephen Epstein and Christopher Green (2013) and Eun Ah Cho (2018) demonstrated how South Korean variety shows that feature North Korean migrants present highly gendered, developmental images of North Koreans. These scholars argue that variety shows approach the North-South divide by reifying notions of South Korea's national superiority as the masculine, patriarchal, "developed" half of the peninsula and North Korea as the feminized, backwards, "under-developed" half. These shows both commodify and thus reinforce migrants' "Otherness" and portray North Korean migrants as passive objects whose experiences of trauma in the North or success in the South evidence South Korea's superiority.

Hae Yeon Choo (2006, 2014), Jin Hyeon Jung (2010, 2014), Theodore Hughes (2008), Stephan Epstein (2009, 2013), Christopher Green (2013), and Eun Ah Cho (2018) provide insight into North Korean migrants' liminal identities and struggles as well as how South Korean media has depicted North Koreans over the past decades. However, existing scholarship has neglected to understand how North Korean migrants have worked within hegemonic discourses

to craft, tell, and commodify their stories for their own purposes. In contrast to academic literature that has focused on the external factors that affect migrants' representation and how these representations perpetuate migrants' disenfranchisement, I hope to highlight migrants' agency as they approach the work of self-representation.

Pivotal to my interpretation of migrants' self-representation as agentive is the scholarship of Caren Freeman (2011) in her ethnographic study of ethnic Korean brides' marriage migration to the South Korean countryside, *Making and Faking Kinship: Marriage and Labor Migration between South Korea and China.* In chapter 3, "Chosonjok Maidens and Farmer Bachelors," Freeman highlights how ethnic Korean migrant brides from China use marriage migration to South Korea for their socioeconomic advancement, leveraging their skills and identities for their and their family's upward mobility (2011, 68). While marriage migrants use their migration for their own benefit, Freeman also points out that their migration fits into South Korea's agenda to revitalize rural bachelors' masculinity and foster national development through incorporating foreign brides into the patriarchal nation-state (2011, 68). The complex, and ambivalent contours of marriage migrants' agency within greater hierarchal, disempowering societal structures mirrors the situation of North Korean migrants in this study. North Korean migrants' movement into South Korea is framed by discourses that have shaped South Koreans' perception of migrants as "backwards" and representative of an "Other" fraught by years of national and ideological division and teleological developmental discourses. In the same way that the marriage migrants achieve their goals while working within exploitative and patriarchal structures, North Korean migrants tell their stories and argue for their upward mobility and right to South Korean citizenship through teleological discourses of development and nationhood. Moreover, I view that even migrants' act of publicly telling and at times commodifying their

stories, while agentive, cannot be separated from the disempowering circumstances that compel migrants to "tell their stories." Migrants tell their stories to South Korean audiences hungry for representations of the "Other," North Korea, and expecting that North Koreans will satisfy this curiosity.

Research Methods

This thesis relies on a combination of media analysis through YouTube and research I conducted during my fieldwork in Seoul during June 2019. I had two major areas of interest when I began preparing for this project in the spring 2019: *Now on My Way to Meet You* and migrants' media interviews. Firstly, I wanted to understand how North Korean migrants frame their background, experiences, and identities in interviews with South Korean media representatives and non-governmental organizations. I planned to conduct interviews with North Korean migrants through a non-profit organization with which I volunteered while studying in Seoul during spring 2018, Teach North Korean Refugees (TNKR). These interviews would assess migrants' strategies for discussing their background and experiences in testimonies, interviews, and casual conversations. From these interviews, I wanted to understand the process of creating "escape stories;" did migrants consciously frame their experiences through narratives of escape and salvation, or did South Korean actors impose this framework by asking questions that assumed this model? Did migrants feel compelled to publicly recount their experiences as a part of their ability to gain acceptance into South Korean communities? I developed interview questions centered around this goal.

However, when I arrived in Seoul, I discovered the monetary cost of interviewing migrants through non-profit organizations was far outside of my budget (approximately $100/two hours). I revised my fieldwork to primarily focus on *Now on My Way to Meet You* and

migrants' perceptions of the show. Though TNKR was unable to find any migrants willing to meet me without monetary incentives, my conversations with the organization's two executive directors provided me with an invaluable perspective on the migrant community and their media representations. I learned how often migrants receive requests for interviews, media representatives' persistence in contacting migrants to hear their "escape stories" and insights on the North Korean government and inter-Korean relations (about which most migrants, as common individuals, know little), and how few migrants actively respond to requests for interviews from outside their immediate communities. My conversations with TNKR's directors complicated my perspective on the migrant community, helped me to redirect my project towards more plausible avenues, and provided me with areas of important future research.

While in Seoul, I reconnected with a migrant friend I met during my time at Yonsei University during spring of 2018, Oksim. I recorded my conversations with Oksim over the course of my fieldwork. Our conversations echoed my conversations with TNKR's directors as well as provided me insight into avenues of research I had not previously considered: "escape testimonies" in churches and migrant-run YouTube channels. As a devout Christian, Oksim had given her own escape testimony on multiple occasions; after seeing how interested I was in migrants' media representations, she recommended that I watch YouTube videos run by North Korean migrants. I am deeply grateful to Oksim for this guidance during the early stages of my project.

The final and most influential aspect of my fieldwork was visiting the television network Channel A that produces *Now on My Way to Meet You* to observe the live taping of episode 393 on June 21st, 2019. Before and after visiting Channel A, I had multiple conversations with the show's Executive Producer Kong Hyosoon and Lead Writer Jang Hee Jeong regarding the

show's production, how the show recruits migrants, how episodes are planned, how the script for the show is written, and the show's process of editing 5 hours of footage to produce hour-long episodes. These conversations also gave me insight into how the show has evolved since 2011 in response to political shifts and viewer demands. On the day of taping, I arrived at the studio an hour before taping and recorded notes of how the migrant panelists prepared their clothing and make-up. During taping, I recorded how the South Korean director and producer guided migrants to behave on camera and migrants' discussions during taping. Simultaneously, I recorded how migrants behaved and which topics migrants tended to discuss, paying attention to differences between migrants of different genders and ages. I also took note of which topics the directors encouraged migrants to avoid. I took pictures during taping in order to analyze the construction of the show's set, the stylistic choices of the set designers, and the symbolism of the set's design. After returning from Seoul, I watched the edited version of episode 393 to see what was included and excluded and which interactions the editors emphasized.

After returning from Seoul and sorting through my notes, I quickly realized that my observations demanded that I take my analysis in a different direction than I had anticipated. I began this research planning to focus on the patriarchal and exclusionary constructions of nationhood that mainstream media projects; however, I realized that my notes continually pointed out how migrants find ways to use media and representation for their own purposes. Since summer 2019, I have combed through many hours of variety television, vlogs (video-logs), and religious testimonies through YouTube to arrive at conclusions that support this argument. After returning from Seoul, I began to explore migrants' "escape testimonies" on YouTube. South Korean churches publish these "escape testimonies" onto their YouTube channels. I watched as many of these "escape testimonies" as I could locate and narrowed my analysis to

three testimonies that exemplified major themes in the "escape testimonies." I paid attention to the structure of these testimonies, how these testimonies conflate North-South migration with religious doctrine, as well as the ways in which migrants describe North Korea, experience of "escape," and how migrants describe South Korea.

Finally, reflecting on my conversations with Oksim, I delved into YouTube content created by North Korean migrants. After searching through the many migrant-run channels on YouTube, I decided to focus on personality-driven content created by "escapee YouTubers" (*t'albukcha yut'ubŏ).* In the third chapter of this thesis, I provide an overview of the "escapee YouTuber" genre of content as well as a close analysis of the content migrants choose to publish, how they edit their videos, how they talk about their North Korean backgrounds, and their strategies for attracting viewers.

All of the translations from Korean to English in this thesis are my own.

Overview of Thesis

I divide this thesis into three chapters that each represent a platform through which North Korean migrants share their personal narratives: migrant "escape testimonies" in South Korean churches, the popular variety television show *Now on My Way to Meet You* (2001—present), and migrant-run YouTube channels. As I discovered during my fieldwork, these are some of the most familiar platforms of migrants' representation to both native South Koreans and migrants themselves. Moreover, these platforms demonstrate how different factors such as social context, audience, space, and level of South Korean input influence migrants' representation.

In the first chapter, I explore the most common form of migrants' representations, which is also the most reflective of South Korean nationalism and ideological hegemony: South Korean

church testimonies. Reflective of any conventional Christian testimony, these "escape testimonies" follow a clear script of religious enlightenment. North Korea is conflated with religious darkness and South Korea is not only a more-developed democratic haven, but also a country blessed by God. On one hand, migrants must follow this hegemonic religious and nationalist script in order to belong within the church community, the main public community for many migrants in South Korea. From another perspective, I argue that telling "escape testimonies" is a tool for migrants to position themselves as insiders within the church community. Through telling these "escape testimonies," migrants draw upon religious logic to assert their right to exist in South Korea. Migrants argue for their national and class mobility within these religious frameworks, even challenging negative stereotypes against the migrant community.

In the second chapter, I turn to another prominent representation of North Korean migrants in South Korea, the variety television show *Now on My Way to Meet You* (2011—present). In contrast to religious "escape testimonies," *Now on My Way to Meet You* aims to entertain its South Korean audience and "[eradicate] stereotypes [regarding North Koreans] and fostering cross-cultural understanding."[6] The show features a cast of migrants who chat with two South Korean hosts and a panel of South Korean celebrities in unstructured interviews, at times venturing into comedic skits and gags, musical performances, and even heart-wrenching "escape stories" (*t'albuk sŭt'ori).* The "North Korea" that the show's cast describes is not necessarily evil and miserable, but rather poor and under-developed, representative of a Korea temporally distant from Seoul's modern landscapes. In these stories, migrants abandoned North Korea to pursue "better lives" with more economic opportunities in South Korea. *Now on My Way to Meet You* is

6 As I will explain in the "methodology" section, I gathered this information from my interview with the show's Executive Producer Kong Hyosoon in summer of 2019.

not free from political messaging; on the contrary, the show promotes South Korea's vision of a "multicultural society" (*tamunhwa sahoe*), or a society that seeks to incorporate minority groups into South Korea's patriarchal and ethno-nationalist societal fabric (Kim 2011, Epstein and Green 2013, Choo 2018). The South Korean producers of the show strategically edit migrants' voices so that these voices will fit within the show's goals of entertainment and multiculturalism. However, I argue that even within these restrictions *Now My Way to Meet You* has become a space for migrants to express their voices and assert their transnational subjectivity. This is a result of the affective relationships built between the show's South Korean producers and North Korean migrant cast.

Migrants' "escape testimonies" and *Now on My Way to Meet You* represent spaces of negotiation and mediation between North and South Korean voices and agendas. In the final chapter of this thesis, I analyze a form of media that represents a space theoretically free from South Korean input: migrant-run YouTube channels. On YouTube, individuals can film, edit, and upload content for millions of viewers across the world to consume. Over the past five years, several North Korean migrants have turned to YouTube to upload videos related to North Korea and create online followings of hundreds of thousands of viewers. These "escapee YouTubers" (*t'albukcha yut'ubŏ*) use their North Koreanness as their most marketable traits, creating content that plays upon South Korea's fascination with "the hermit kingdom" for "clicks," "likes," and monetary income. In a space ostensibly under North Korean migrants' control, reductive stereotypes and South Korean hegemonic nationalism are still apparent. At the same time, this chapter shows that migrants' strategic deployment of their North Korean background poses "North Koreanness" not as shameful, but rather as a marketable form of cultural capital. Moreover, YouTube has provided a platform for North Korean migrants of diverse backgrounds,

opinions, and agendas to represent themselves. The multiplicity and diversity of these voices function as a powerful tool that combats South Korean hegemony over migrants' representation.

As media forms have expanded and more individuals gain access to creating media, the ability of diverse actors to use media to assert their worldviews and identities has expanded as well. Stories are tools through which nations and national alliances are imagined; as stories multiply, constructions of nationhood and belonging become more easily contestable. Additionally, my findings affirm a nuanced perspective on agency within transnational and multicultural spaces. Instead of passive objects, members of marginalized communities such as North Korean migrants function as agentive subjects even within the hegemony of more powerful groups. Through these micro acts of resistance, marginalized individuals can rewrite relations of power within their spheres of influence. In conclusion, I offer final thoughts on voice and testimony as an area in which North Korean migrants "confront, contest, reproduce, and rework understandings of national belonging… and their place within the shifting global order" (Freeman 2011, 27).

Chapter 1: Narrating Salvation, Upward Mobility, and Righteous Belonging in Migrants' Church Testimonials

I first met Oksim, a migrant in her mid-thirties who had lived in Seoul for over fifteen years, in spring of 2018 as her English tutor through the non-profit organization Teach North Korean Refugees (TNKR). When I met Oksim again during my fieldwork in the summer of 2019, though I was thrilled she agreed to tell me about her experiences, at the time I thought my project would focus on migrant celebrities who gained popularity by marketing their "escape stories" (*t'albuk sŭt'ori*) on variety TV-shows such as *Now on My Way to Meet You*.[7] I assumed that Oksim, a nursing graduate student and busy new mother, would not have experience with migrant celebrities or public escape stories. After about thirty minutes of chatting about *Now on My Way to Meet You*, I asked Oksim if she had ever publicly shared her escape story. She seemed confused and responded, "In a formal setting? I don't think so…" However, as our conversation continued, I realized that Oksim had in fact publicly shared her escape story. However, rather than an "escape story" told on variety TV-shows, Oksim shared her "North Korean-escapee testimony" (*t'albukcha kanjŭng*) on multiple occasions with church communities in and around Seoul.

For Oksim and many other North Korean migrants, the church is a familiar stage for recounting stories of "escape" from North Korea, facing trials and tribulations in China, and finally reaching safety and salvation in South Korea (Choo 2014, Jung 2010, Jung 2014). Jin Hyeon Jung (2010, 2014) showed that, in the South Korean church space, church leaders and migrants alike invoke narratives of suffering and salvation to frame migrant testimonies of "escaping" North Korea. These narratives draw clear boundaries between the backwards, evil

[7] I refer to *t'albuk sŭt'ori* as "escape stories." The *t'albuk sŭt'ori* is a name widely known among Korean-language speakers familiar with North Korean migrants that refers to migrants' stories of "escaping" (*t'albuk*) North Korea.

North Korean nation and the righteous and prosperous South Korean nation. Thus, these narratives strengthen a hierarchical Cold-War divide between the two Koreas with South Korea reigning morally and materially superior (Jung 2010). This biblically-inspired framework claims that South Korea is a blessed "land of promise," that South Koreans are individuals already "saved" by Jesus Christ and capable of sharing salvation with North Koreans, and that North Korea is the wilderness that migrants must abandon (Jung 2010).[8] Thus, migrants' "escape testimonies" position North Korean traits and identity as not only inferior to those of South Koreans, but also morally reprehensible.

While Choo (2006, 2014), Han (2013), and Jung (2010, 2014) demonstrated the salvation framework's problematic incrimination of North Korean traits and identity, their works also largely considers migrants and their testimonies objects that South Korean national and evangelical discourses shape. While Jin Hyeon Jung pointed out that migrants' "performance of salvation" allows them to gain the social and financial benefits from the church, his analysis does not recognize how migrants use the content of testimonials for their own benefit (2010, 141). This undermines migrants' agency in creating, internalizing, and using church testimonials to reimagine the South Korean nation to include migrants as rightful subjects. This chapter argues that migrants tell their "escapee testimonies" through evangelical discourses of prosperity and salvation in order to vie for their upward mobility. Migrants frame themselves as equal to native South Koreans by asserting that migrants can be even "better Christians" than native South Koreans. Thus, migrants flip the understanding of North Koreans as "backwards" and South Koreans as "modern" citizens on its head. Moreover, migrants adhere to the evangelical

[8] According to the Christian Bible, people are "lost" before they decide to follow the teachings of Jesus Christ and are "found" after they convert to Christianity (*Bible*, Luke 15:1-5). In theology, the "promise land" that is metaphorically a space of blessing and abundance reserved for those who have received salvation. By contrast, those who have not received salvation dwell within the "wilderness," a space of trials and tribulations.

paradigm of "God's kingdom," a nation that transcends national borders. By invoking "God's kingdom" and claiming to be dutiful "followers of God" before all else, migrants find a new nation for them to belong.

I first provide an overview of my research methods and theoretical framework in this chapter. After this, I explain the South Korean churches' significant role within the North Korean migrant community in South Korea. Then, I shift my focus towards the role of "testimony" in North Korean migrants' religious experiences, demonstrating that "testimony" is a constitutive performance wherein migrants "talk themselves into being," defining themselves as refugees, redeemed sufferers, and South Korean citizens (Gubrium and Holstein 2000, 101). I then focus on three migrant testimonials published on YouTube as case studies that reveal migrants' use of the evangelical framework to equalize North and South Koreans as fellow "brothers and sisters" subject to equal standards of conduct under the eyes of God. Such assertions contradict prevalent South Korean stereotypes regarding North Korean migrants as "lazy," "untrustworthy," and morally deficit (Choo 2014, 126-127; Jung 2014, 144-155). Thus, North Korean migrants define themselves as redeemed refugees and South Korean citizens through performing their personal narratives, working within the pre-existing framework of evangelical testimony in order to combat their marginalization.

Methodology and Theoretical Framework

This chapter relies in part on a series of interactions I had with Oksim over the course of my fieldwork in June 2019. Our conversations provided me with insight into how the church can provide community and meaning for North Korean migrants. This insight was especially significant as it nuanced my view of church testimonies; without speaking to Oksim, it would

have been difficult to comprehend how migrants approach church testimonies as a part of their service and commitment to a beloved community.

When I returned from my fieldwork, I searched for "escapee church testimonials" (*t'albukcha kanjŭnghoe)* on YouTube. These videos are recordings of testimonials that North Korean migrants delivered publicly in front of churchgoers; either the church itself or churchgoers film these testimonies and upload them to YouTube. After watching many of these videos, I identified major themes and chose three testimonials to discuss as case studies. These testimonials each demonstrate how the narrator strategically approaches personal narration to achieve her respective goals. In order to analyze migrants' church testimonials, I turn academic literature that theorizes performance of personal narratives, "conversion" testimonials, and the role of public testimony for refugees and asylum seekers (Gubrium and Holstein 2000, Jeffers 2012, Mckinnon 2009, Noy 2004, Wake 2013).

Notably, I found few testimonies given by male migrants while searching for "escapee testimonies." In fact, the overwhelming majority of videos that appear upon searching "escapee church testimony" (*t'albukcha kanjŭnghoe)* are the testimonies of female migrants. Male migrants' "escapee testimonies" do exist, but they are fewer in number and significantly less popular in terms of viewership. While female migrants' most popular church testimonies have hundreds of thousands of views, even a million in one case, male migrants' popular church testimonies have between 5 to 50 thousand views.[9] Thus, this chapter only focuses on the testimonies of female North Korean migrants in addition to theorizing about the gendered contours of migrants' church testimonies.

9 The most popular church testimony with over a million views is the testimony of Lee Sun Sil that I will discuss in the following pages.

The Church: A Place of Refuge, Community, and Meaning

For the overwhelming majority of North Korean migrants, churches are at the core of migrants' social spheres and communities in South Korea. From the time migrants leave North Korea, throughout their journeys across China, to after they resettle in South Korea, evangelical churches and missionaries play a central role in advocacy, assistance, and support for North Korean migrants (Choo 2013, Jung 2011, Han 2013). So pervasive is Christian influence in North Korean migration that, as of 2014, it was estimated that between 80 to 90% of migrants identify as Christian upon arriving in South Korea (Jung 2014, 154). With "underground" churches and safe houses across northeast China, Christian missionaries are the primary actors who assist migrants on their "escape" journeys through China and Southeast Asia, finally arriving in South Korea. After migrants arrive in South Korea and leave the Hanawon Resettlement Support Center after three months of linguistic and civic education, South Korean churches become migrants' central agents of resettlement support.

Not only do churches play an integral role in advocating for and ensuring migrant rights, they also become spaces for migrants to maintain solidarity and ethnic identity with fellow migrants and receive social assistance from South Korean churchgoers (Choo 2014, 111). Over my interactions with Oksim in 2018 and 2019, Oksim explained to me on multiple occasions the importance of her involvement with the church community. The church was the first organization that offered Oksim community and support in South Korea after she left the Hanawon Resettlement Center. Not only does Oksim attend church every Sunday, she also attends social gatherings at the church multiple times a week, meeting and maintaining relationships with both native South Koreans and fellow migrants. Oksim even met her husband through her involvement in the church. Oksim informed me that she bonded with her South

Korean mother-in-law by regularly attending church with her husband's family. The North Korean migrants in Hae Yeon Choo (2006) and Jin Hyeon Jung's (2011, 2014) studies had similar experiences; in comparison to non-profit organizations and governmental support, South Korean churches play a central role in providing migrants material and emotional support as well as community.

Scholars have observed that South Korean church leaders frequently call on North Korean migrants to publicly speak about their traumatic experiences of escaping North Korea (Choo 2013, Jung 2010). These testimonies are meant to "provide spiritual inspiration" to churchgoers, but they also serve to feed churchgoers' curiosity regarding the North (Jung 2010, 141). In our conversation, Oksim explained to me that a protestant South Korean missionary she met in China had requested Oksim to publicly deliver her "escape testimony" of leaving North Korea and converting to Christianity on multiple occasions after she resettled in South Korea. Over the 15 years since her resettlement, Oksim had spoken in churches across Seoul and Incheon on multiple occasions to audiences ranging from general congregations to teenagers during youth-retreats. According to Oksim, these testimonies fed church-goers' curiosity regarding North Korea as well as boosted their morale for "unification" (*t'ongil*) of the two Koreas. When I asked Oksim if she enjoyed delivering her story to these audiences, she laughed awkwardly and answered, "Well, I guess… I think it makes sense that people are interested in North Korea." To Oksim, telling her "escape testimony" was a service she pleasantly agreed to provide. Above all else, Oksim's answer confirmed that, to her, it was not extraordinary that so many South Koreans were interested in her "escape story;" rather, their interest was a given. She seemed to have no qualms with her pastor asking her to deliver her "escape testimony" on so many occasions; this had become her expectation. As a member of the church community and a

North Korean migrant, Oksim felt that, "Of course, this is something I can do [for the church]."[10] For Oksim, telling her "escape testimony" was a duty associated with being a Christian, community member, and North Korean; for church leaders and church goers, Oksim's escape testimony provided them "morale" and inspiration as well as satisfied their curiosity regarding the "Other" of North Korea.

While Oksim's story serves multiple purposes across the South Korean church spaces, the structure and content of her story along with the stories of other migrants are similar. When I first asked Oksim about her experiences recounting her personal narrative, I used the term "escape story" (*t'albuk sŭt'ori*) to refer to this narrative. When Oksim answered my question, however, she corrected my terminology to "escape testimony" (*t'albuk kanjŭng*). When North Korean migrants share their stories in churches, their narratives automatically assume the form of a Christian "testimony," providing migrants a clear script to follow when relaying their experiences: conversion and salvation (Jung 2010). As Jin-Hyeon Jung (2010) notes, the narrative framework of salvation is well-known to evangelical churchgoers across the globe. Mirroring biblical stories of the church's salvation, testimonies describe an individual's journey from sin and transgression to salvation and deliverance. Thus, the context of the South Korean church determines the general structure and content of migrants' personal narratives before they even articulate these personal narratives.

Testimony as Constitutive Performance

North Korean migrant church testimonies emerge out of historical convention for North Korean migrants to deliver public testimonials, and these testimonials fall into the genre of

[10] As Oksim told me, "*tangyŏnhi chega haejul su innŭn kŏjiyo*."

performative personal narratives. As I mentioned in this thesis's introduction, there has been a convention for North Korean migrants to publicly deliver testimonies that narrate their migration since the pre-Famine period of "hero" migrants (2014, 145-153).[11] The South Korean government expected that migrant "heroes" would deliver their testimonies in return for the government's support; similarly, many South Korean churches expect that migrants will publicly deliver their conversion testimonies in return for membership in the church community.

For both migrant "heroes" and migrants who arrived in the past three decades, public testimonials are not just tools to disseminate political propaganda. These testimonials are also tools for North Korean migrants to prove their allegiance to South Korea and constitute themselves as rightful citizens. As Chaim Noy (2004) argued, "…narrative of personal experience is nothing short of the 'inroad into the phenomenon of self-understanding and selfhood', a 'central narrative theme' around which people construct and convey who they are" (116). Building on Gubrium and Holstein's (2000) argument that individuals "talk themselves into being" through personal narration, Chaim Noy contended that personal narrative performance is a nuanced act of identity construction; these performances are "[sites] in which social meaning—including that of the narrator's identity—is fervently negotiated and constructed" (Noy 2004, 117). Rather than an expression of one's fixed or stable identity, personal narrative performance "implies a performative struggle for agency" wherein the narrator defines themselves as the agentive protagonist of their story (Noy 2004, 118). When North Korean migrants publicly share their personal narratives, they engage in a construction of

[11] In addition, from the minute North Korean migrants enter South Korea, they are taken to the South Korean intelligence agency where they undergo an extensive process of questioning. The goal of this questioning is to sus out "spies" from refugees, testing the sincerity of migrants' desires to live in South Korea (Anna Field, "New jeans, new schools, new worries: North Korean family settles into South Korea," *The Washington Post,* March 23, 2018, Accessed March 8, 2020). After migrants leave their three-month stay at the "Hanawon" Resettlement Center, many enter into church communities who invite them to perform their testimonies to congregations.

self and articulation of agentive subjectivity. Migrants' testimonies (*t'albuk kanjŭng)*, which are named the same word used for religious testimonies (*kanjŭng)*, center around their conversion from North Korean to South Korean and "unbeliever " to "believer." As such, migrants constitute themselves as both South Korean citizens and Christians through their narration. The stories begin in the "darkness" of North Korea, a place shadowed by a ruthless dictatorship, failed communist policies, and moral depravity, and end in the "light" of South Korea, which is associated with Christianity and capitalist, protestant influence (Jung 2010). Migrants narrate from the perspective of a converted subject who has "become" an enlightened Christian and South Korean citizen; thus, they are able to inhabit the perspective of the South Korean audience as they narrate and condemn the "wilderness" of North Korea.

Migrants are not only converts to Christianity and South Korean identity; they are also traumatized refugees, and their testimonies play a central role in demonstrating their "refugee" identity. Scholars have observed that, in the case of refugees, testimony plays a pivotal role in constructing the speaker's identity as someone deserving of international aid and asylum. In her study of the refugee crisis in Western countries, Allison Jeffers demonstrated that the process of determining refugee status is a "'bureaucratic performance" that begins from the moment that refugees "claim asylum" (Jeffers 2012, 31). When refugees claim asylum and perform their personal narratives 'as refugees,' ''[n]ot only are [asylum seekers] conjuring the law ...they are conjuring themselves... bringing themselves into being as refugees'' (37). Sara McKinnon pointed out that refugees seeking to prove their refugee status in US immigration courts must both perform "credibility…narrate rationally, and modulate their affective responses" (Mckinnon 2009, 216). Refugees must perform sincerity, displaying emotion when appropriate, as well as maintain rationality as they frame their experience in the form of a coherent narrative. Personal

narratives are particularly potent for refugees who seek to convince their audience members of their refugee status as "[conveying] testimony [can] transform their spectators into witnesses" of the trauma they have experienced (Wake 2013, 329). Caroline Wake noted that the strategic performance of trauma often inspires suspicion of refugee testimonies, however, international systems of aid and immigration perpetuate a "habitual and structural reliance upon [refugee testimonies]" (Wake 2013, 330).

Migrants' church testimonies affirm their status as traumatized "refugees" deserving of legitimate status in South Korea. Migrants' church testimonies often include graphic details of migrants' suffering and trauma, highlighting migrants' experiences of human trafficking and torture. For example, in the testimony of middle-aged female migrant Lee Sun Sil that she delivered at Promise Christian Church in 2015, Sun Sil tells the congregation that she was forced to give birth to her child at a train station in North Korea. When she "escaped" into China, Sun Sil was repatriated to North Korea nine times, and each time she was brutally beaten by North Korean soldiers while her child was forced to watch. Sun Sil tells the audience that she fell victim to human trafficking and was deceived into selling her child in China. In the testimony of Shin Eun Hee that she delivered to the Daegu Seomun Church in 2015, Eun Hee tells the congregation that she lived in a shed in China alongside rats and snakes for 3 years after she escaped North Korea. In a voice quivering with tears and emotion, Eun Hee describes how her mother pleaded, screamed, and threw herself before the truck of North Korean police as they captured Eun Hee; Eun Hye tells the audience of her "humiliating" experience of a North Korean officer following her to the restroom to search her waste for money. The graphic details of trauma in Sun Sil and Eun Hee's stories are not unique within the migrant testimonies; rather, it is expected that North Korean migrant testimonies include such harrowing details. Sun Sil and

Eun Hee's testimonies invite the audience to "witness" their experiences of trauma, thus fully comprehending how deserving of asylum Sun Sil and Eun Hee are.

Because migrants' church testimonials on YouTube are mostly those of female migrants, graphic details of trauma invoke and strengthen a gendered understanding of North Korean migration. As Hae Yeon Choo (2006) pointed out, many South Koreans believe the stereotype that North Korean women are victims of rape and human trafficking, thus sexually impure victims. In his (2016) ethnographic study, Joowon Park discovered that this stereotype is still prevalent among both South and North Koreans in South Korea. The genre of migrants' "church testimonials" includes migrants' harrowing accounts of abuse and torture; the more details of pain and suffering in the narrative, the more a migrant can demonstrate the conversional power of "escape" and the audience can commiserate with the migrant. Because female migrants deliver many of these church testimonies, church testimonies perpetuate an image of female North Korean migrants as objects of victimization, trauma, and even sexual impurity.

Furthermore, North Korean migrants' performance of personal narratives through church testimonies showcases a well-established convention of voyeurism; South Koreans expect that North Korean migrants will not only have experiences of pain and trauma, but also perform these experiences for South Korean spectators. This puts migrants in a bind as they narrate their experiences. They are asked to share their experiences of trauma for "inspiration" and "morale;" however, if migrants fail to appropriately portray emotional affect, testimonies can incite suspicion against their sincerity. Thus, North Korean migrants' performance of personal narratives in the form of church testimony is at once an adherence to a familiar genre of public North Korean testimonies as well as a tool through which migrants construct themselves as damaged and redeemed refugees and South Korean citizens.

Overview of Testimony Strategies

Following the mold of church testimony, the "North Korea escape testimonies" (*t'albukcha kanjŭnghoe*) of migrants Lee Sun Sil, Shin Eun Hee, and Lee Ae Ran describe North Korea as a desolate, God-less space that they escaped. However, each of these migrants also use the salvation framework to emphasize that North Koreans' deserve the same privileges and social standing as South Koreans. These include moral uprightness, material prosperity, and ultimately the right to "live well" (*chal salta)* in South Korea. Moreover, each of the migrants emphasizes the need for the two Koreas to unify in their testimonies. This demonstrates migrants' use of the church platform to "remind" South Koreans of North and South Korea's shared ethnic heritage as well as South Koreans' obligation to care for their estranged "lost brethren" still living in North Korea. Thus, North Korean migrants revitalize their connection to estranged family and friends in North Korea, affirm their essential connection to South Koreans, and assert their right to dwell in South Korea. Migrant's maneuvering within the evangelical framework to achieve these goals demonstrates that migrants are not simply objects acted upon by the South Korean state and church; rather, they are subjects who find methods to tell their experiences for their own purposes even within the problematic, voyeuristic context that compels migrants to testify.

Lee Sun Sil: Beauty, Faith, and Godliness

In the YouTube video entitled, "'Escape, That Happy Choice' Broadcaster Lee Sun Sil Testimony Talk," Lee Sun Sil, a middle-aged North Korean migrant, presents her testimony to

the congregation of the Promise Christian Church in Daegu, South Korea.[12][13] Lee's testimony is a "model" North Korean testimony that closely mirrors the theological framework of salvation and escape from North Korea outlined by Jin Hyeon Jung (2011); during the hour-long testimony, Lee charismatically and confidently relays a dramatic story of her difficult childhood in North Korea, the hardships and suffering Lee faced in North Korea and in China, and the "happiness" she found after she arrived in South Korea. Lee's public speaking skills are evident as she captivates the audience with her testimony. The congregation agreeably provides "Ah-mens" at the most inspirational or miraculous moments and gasps at the dramatic and tragic moments.

Screenshot of Lee Sun Sil's Testimony, (YouTube.com, 2015)

In her testimony, Sun Sil combines material possessions, commodities, and upward mobility together as clear indications of South Korea's relative superiority to North Korea. Sun

12 "*T'albuk, kŭ haengbok'an sŏnt'aek" pangsongin isunshil kanjŭngjip'oe."*

13 The recording of Lee Sun Sil's testimony can be found at this link: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IrTSyWwXtSY&t=126s

Sil begins her testimony by disparaging her weight, commenting on how "beautiful" South Korean girls are compared to North Korean girls: "I used to think I was beautiful before I came to South Korea…North Koreans' faces are all round, but South Korean girls' faces are so small and beautiful." After comparing the physical differences of "beautiful" South Koreans compared to the "round-faced" and "short" North Koreans, Sun Sil tells her story of migrating from North Korea to South Korea, setting the scene by describing the desperate living conditions she faced in North Korea. Sun Sil states that, even though her parents were born in Pyongyang and her father held a respectable work position, she "could not live well" (*chal salchinŭn mot haessŏyo*). According to Sun Sil, the inability to "live well" includes lack of material possessions, the inability to decide which career a person wishes to pursue, and the futility of "working hard" within an economic system that does not award diligence. Sun Sil lists commodities familiar to South Koreans that she did not have access to as a child: air-conditioning, TV, "anything at all." She tells that audience that they should be thankful they were born in South Korea and not North Korea, as North Koreans "cannot live well." She further states: "In South Korea, you tell your children to dream anything they want to…," referring to children's dreams for their future professions, "[but] in North Korea, you cannot dream your own dreams." She describes North Korea as a place where people cannot have their own aspirations and "dreams," and, by contrast, South Korea as a place where people can "dream" and become anything they wish to through hard work and determination. By making these associations, Sun Sil explicitly implicates North Korea's communist system that "prevents individuals from success" and praises South Korea's capitalist system for compelling individuals to "work hard." Individuals' inability to "live well" (*chal sanun got)* becomes an indicator of the North Korean system's flaws.

Sun Sil explicitly draws out moral comparisons between the two peoples and countries, suggesting that South Koreans are morally superior in comparison to their North Korean counterparts. After discussing South Koreans' supposed ability to fulfill their "Korean dream" of achieving upward mobility and working in any profession one chooses, Sun Sil states that, in North Korea, she only learned to be a thief. Sun Sil tells the audience that, because of North Korea's communist system, North Koreans are morally underdeveloped and often lie and steal in order to survive: "In North Korea, if you don't steal, you are an idiot." She continues, "the only reason I am so tall is because my mother stole food in order to feed me." However, as she mentions, Lee grew up in a time of prosperity relative to the North Korean famine of 1994—1998. During this time, Lee states that North Korea's communist policies led to mass starvation in the country that bred "burglary," "robbery," and moral depravity among the population. Thus, Lee directly associates North Korea's communist policies with both its economic struggles and moral depravity among the population.

Sun Sil paints a picture of North Koreans as morally, spiritually, and physically deficient in comparison to South Koreans; however, she also outlines a path through which North Koreans can depart from these characteristics: escape North Korea, convert to Christianity, and migrate to South Korea. The comparative value of converting to Christianity versus migrating to South Korea is ambiguous; it seems that, according to Sun Sil, these things go hand-in-hand. Sun Sil states that "escaping" to South Korea was like entering "heaven" (*j'unguk*), and through this migration she moved from a place where she "could not live well" (*chal salchinŭn mot'anda*) to a place she "could live well." Whereas North Korea was a place of suffering and moral deficiency, South Korea is a neoliberal paradise where people "work hard" and enjoy the fruits of their labor. However, when Sun Sil addresses challenges she has faced in South Korea and

confronts South Korea's areas of imperfection, she quickly points out that "one can only find true happiness through salvation." Though Sun Sil clearly wanted to discuss some of the challenges she faced adjusting to life in South Korea, she approaches these issues cautiously in front of her native South Korean audience members: she reverts to Christian standards of goodness and salvation to uphold a standard of morality, success, and happiness that transcends South Korea's national borders. This Christian framework allows Sun Sil to refer to a community, the Christian community, that includes herself, other North Korean migrants, and her Christian audience members. Sun Sil redraws the boundaries of her South Korean community to include migrants while also arguing that North and South Koreans should be judged according to the same standards of Christian doctrine.

For example, Sun Sil brings up and uses Christian doctrine to criticize South Korea's "superficial beauty standards." When Sun Sil describes her physical difference with South Koreans in the first few minutes of her testimony, she says, "…compared to South Korean beauties (*minyeodul*), I don't amount to anything…but there is a person who loves me and finds me beautiful! Jesus Christ." While Sun Sil believes that South Koreans are more beautiful than North Koreans, she also emphasizes that this beauty is superficial in comparison to the approval of God. Sun Sil later returns to the topic of physical beauty at the end of her testimony, mentioning that many South Koreans are very thin and undergo facial plastic surgery. Sun Sil bemoans these standards of beauty to the congregation, telling them, "If I went to heaven like that, God would say, 'Who are you? That's not the person I made.'" Sun Sil also describes her experience with "un-Godly" beauty standards while appearing on the reality TV-show *Now on My Way to Meet You*; Sun Sil says that, as she prepared to appear on the show, the producers requested that she lose weight before making an appearance. Sun Sil broadly ties the producers'

requests to South Korean standards of beauty, admonishing this standard as superficial and un-Godly: “I may be fat, but I am beautiful the way that God made me.” Sun Sil’s emphasis on her faithfulness and “inner beauty” allows her to tell the audience that God’s grace (*hananimŭi ŭnhye*) favors her inner qualities even more than South Korean qualities. In fact, South Korean traits, such as “superficial beauty standards,” can actually express un-Godliness.

Sun Sil appropriates external indicators of “strong” Christian faith to argue that she, even as a North Korean, is a better Christian than her South Korean family members. By placing herself ahead of her South Korean in-laws on the scale of dedication to Christianity, Sun Sil shifts the determining factor of morality towards a universal standard of conduct. She thus equalizes herself with South Koreans. By the time Sun Sil arrived in South Korea, she had already converted to Christianity and gained “faith” in Christianity (*sinang*). Sun Sil tells the audience that “Through the grace of God” (*hananimŭi ŭnhyero),* she began her life in South Korea, married a South Korean man, and thus joined a South Korean family. Sun Sil tells the audience that her faithfulness surpasses even that of her South Korean family members; while Sun Sil regularly attends church with her husband, she states that her sisters-in-law, by contrast, do not. Sun Sil has more laudable faith than her native South Korean sisters-in-law; Sul Sil tells the audience that she gained the complete approval of her mother-in-law due to her faithfulness. It is important to note that Sun Sil’s mother-in-law originally disapproved of Sun Sil because of her North Korean background. Sun Sil does not criticize her mother-in-law for discrimination; rather, Sun Sil “proved” herself as worthy of her mother-in-law’s acceptance by faithfully practicing Christianity. Thus, while Sun Sil places herself on equal footing with her South Korean sisters-in-law, even surpassing them, in terms of Christian faithfulness, she still does not criticize anti-North Korean sentiment. In Sun Sil’s case, Christianity is not a tool that equalizes

North Koreanness and South Koreanness; rather, it is a tool through which Sun Sil can transcend the "problematic" aspects of her North Korean identity.

Sun Sil ends her testimony with a plea characteristic of all church testimonies I have observed: "North and South Koreans are one people…Our hearts and emotions are alike…North and South Korean must reunify." Ultimately, Sun Sil wants her audience to believe that North and South Koreans are "brothers and sisters" in blood and in Christ. For Christian North Korean migrants, both the salvation imperative and ethnic longing demand that the two Koreas unify. Thus, Christian discourses become tools through which migrants accomplish two major objectives. First, migrants can vie for North and South Koreans' sameness, thus reaffirming migrants' right to belong in South Korea. Second, migrants revitalize their emotional connection to their homeland, North Korea, by pleading that North and South Korea unify.

Lee Ae Ran: Righteous Indignation at South Korean Disinterest

Screenshot of Lee Ae Ran's Testimony and Sermon, (YouTube.com, 2017)

Unification of the two Koreas is a central tenet of the testimony of Dr. Lee Ae Ran, a North Korean migrant who has lived in South Korea for two decades, that she delivered at the Save Korea Foundation in Atlanta, Georgia in 2017.[14] After praying, Dr. Lee begins her testimony by reminding the audience of the suffering that "all North Koreans" currently face: "In the land of North Korea, people cannot even know what freedom is… our North Korean comrades live in the midst of contempt, suffering and dying…let us pray for liberation to come even one day faster." Though Dr. Lee does not make it clear whose "contempt" North Koreans live within, her message is clear: North Koreans are suffering in desolation, and it is the duty of Christians to unite in prayer to alleviate this suffering.

Dr. Lee's words paint a desolate picture of North Korea for her audience even before she begins to describe her "difficult" childhood. Dr. Lee begins, "My birth situation was not good…", referring to the low political class of her family, "…I lived a very difficult life." [15] Dr. Lee says that, in her adolescence, she believed that North Korea would soon collapse due to Kim Jong Il's weak leadership. However, North Korea did not collapse; instead, Dr. Lee states that the people of North Korea unjustly starved and suffered due to "evil" North Korean leader Kim Jong Il and his communist policies. Moreover, Dr. Lee emphasizes that the *communist policies* of Kim Jong Il led to the "Arduous March" of 1994 to 1998 that killed over a million people in North Korea: "It was because of the communist system and Kim Jong Il that 300,000 people starved to death… it was absolutely not the fault of the North Korean people." According to Dr.

[14] The recording of Lee Ae Ran's testimony can be found through this link: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Xt2GZzDGXbM

[15] In North Korea, families fall into difficult ranks associated with one's political loyalty to the North Korean State. This "songbun" status theoretically determines one's access to education, job opportunities, upward mobility, social responsibilities, etc.

Lee, North Koreans are not morally deficit or underdeveloped, rather they are pitiable victims of a negligent state's oppression.

After painting the image of North Korea with suffering and hardship, Dr. Lee immediately turns her focus towards criticizing South Koreans for their apathy towards their suffering North Korean comrades: "It is not that the two Koreas have not been capable of reunifying, it is that they have not reunified because there is no affection [in South Korea] for the pathetic (*pulssanghan*) people in North Korea." She goes so far as saying, even if North Korea collapses, North and South Korea's division will continue due to the shameful apathy of South Koreans. Dr. Lee's description of North Korea mimics the familiar imagination of North Korea in evangelical circles: North Korea is unforgiving and God-less. However, Dr. Lee implicates another villain through the biblical framework: apathetic and selfish South Koreans. As Dr. Lee matter-of-factly tells the audience, "In order for reunification to happen, there has to be a *will* to reunify among the South Korea people…South Koreans do not have this *will.*" It is not because of North Koreans' evil traits that they suffer, but rather because of South Koreans' apathy towards national unification. Dr. Lee points out that a major tenet of the Christian faith is to care for the weak and sharing "salvation" with those who will go to hell without this salvation. Dr. Lee conflates North Korea with hell to highlight South Koreans' "shameful apathy" towards the plight of North Korean people who suffer in the "darkness" of disbelief. Thus, Dr. Lee uses Christian doctrine to argue that South Koreans' lack of interest in North Korea evidences their lack of good Christian faith.

Dr. Lee draws out this biblical metaphor to claim that Kim Jung Un is "Satan himself" (*Sa T'an*), and, therefore, the political leaders of South Korea are morally reprehensible for making deals with the devil (seeking to engage with North Korea). Dr. Lee scathingly condemns

South Korean politicians for their apathy towards North Koreans and the issue of unification: "…to be honest, no matter what happens, the situation in North Korea will remain the same because South Korean politicians have no interest in the North Korean people or in reunification." Dr. Lee directly critiques President Moon Jae-in, one of the most powerful men in South Korea, for his willingness to cooperate with a "murder and villain" (*sarin, akdang)*, "Satan himself" (*Sa T'an*), Kim Jung Un. Dr. Lee draws out this religious metaphor to argue for her political beliefs and desire to "aid" her North Korean "brothers and sisters"; as a North Korean migrant, Dr. Lee deeply cares for the North Korean people and views that the only way to "save" them is through unification. Dr. Lee uses the Christian doctrine of salvation and aiding the weak to transform her anger towards South Korean political leaders into "righteous," biblically justified indignation. Thus, South Korean political leaders' apparent "apathy" towards national unification is not only an ideological failing, but also morally and spiritually reprehensible.

To Dr. Lee, the imperative for the two Koreas to unify is uncontestable and justified by both the bible and Dr. Lee's personal attachment to North Korean people. In a voice quivering with deep emotion, Dr. Lee sends a message to North Koreans: "Do not despair…We will not give up on you, we will not forget you… we will regain our lost other half [North Korea] … we will be just like it was in the past." Dr. Lee's desire for national unification results from a conflation of ideological conservatism, religious fervor, and her sense of attachment towards her "left-behind brothers and sisters" in North Korea. Moreover, Dr. Lee does not identify with a national body of the present, but rather with an imagined united "Korea" of the past. Dr. Lee's "homeland" cannot be South Korea, a place led by incompetent and apathetic political leaders, or North Korea, a country alike to "hell" itself. Instead, Dr. Lee's true "homeland" is an imagined nation where the "two halves" of the peninsula are harmoniously united. Dr. Lee's deep

emotional ties to North Korea and North Korean people are obvious; her voice quakes and seems to stumble over barely contained tears when she refers to the "suffering" of the North Korean people. Dr. Lee uses biblical doctrine to contend for a group of people with whom she identifies and commiserates. Thus, the biblical framework becomes a tool for Dr. Lee to maintain an emotional connection to her people as well as vie for her political agenda. Dr. Lee ends her testimony by requesting the South Korean congregation and South Korean people in general to vie for unification through their actions and prayers: "I implore you to think of unification as essential to our prosperity and peace… this fight for reunification is a righteous one… as President Seung Man Rhee said, freedom is a gift to us from God, and we must spread this gift to others."

Dr. Lee's pleas for "unification" stem from her assertion that North and South Koreans are essentially the same; North Koreans are "lost brother and sisters," forgotten by their South Korean brethren who have decided to ignore their plight. Dr. Lee's argument that South Koreans should care about North Koreans is not just due to biblical obligations; rather, they are bolstered by the fact that North and South Koreans are a part of the same ethnic family. The biblical family that Dr. Lee focuses on is not so much a universal family, but rather distinctly Korean in composition. Dr. Lee's invocation of an imagined national community of Koreans showcases how she uses her testimony to assert North and South Koreans' ethnic similarity. Her testimony does not focus on North Korean migrants or their position in South Korea; in light of her other assertions, focusing on this would be repetitive. North and South Koreans are undeniably the same, so the fact that North Korean belong and deserve to dwell in South Korea is unquestionable.

Sin Eun Hee: Combatting Stereotypes

Screenshot of Sin Eun Hee's Testimony (YouTube.com, 2017)

The last migrant testimony I will discuss, the testimony of Sin Eun Hee, evidences how Eun Hee works within the Christian framework to criticize South Korean discrimination against North Koreans. Like the testimonies of Sun Sil and Dr. Lee, Eun Hee's testimony frames North Korea as the "wilderness" and South Korea as a place of salvation.[16] Eun Hee spends 20 minutes of her 30-minute testimony describing her traumatic experience of escaping North Korea. The first half of Eun Hee's story chronicles her experience living in a shack in China for three years, becoming separated from her family, and being repatriated to North Korea. As I mentioned in my discussion above, Eun Hee recounts these experiences in heart-wrenching and gruesome detail. Eun Hee's story takes a turn, however, when she decides to go to church in China. At

16 The recording of Sin Eun Hee's testimony can be found through this link: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H675eoRial8&t=349s

church, Eun prayed to God that she would be reunited with her family. Eun Hee tells the congregation that she reunited with her family only three months after this prayer, after which the congregation applauds. After reuniting with her family, Eun Hee finally entered South Korea.

While the majority of Eun Hee's testimony mirrors the binary framework of North Korea as "bad" and South Korea as "good," in the final minutes of her testimony Eun Hee uses the Christian doctrine to combat discrimination against North Koreans. Eun Hee tells the audience that she "received immense blessings" while living in South Korea; however, Eun Hee did encounter obstacles during her resettlement. Eun Hee concludes her testimony by telling the story of her marriage to a South Korean man. When Eun Hee first met her husband, her mother-in-law vehemently disapproved of their union: "South Koreans usually believe that [North Koreans'] personal "environments" (*saramŭi hwan'gyŏng)* are different, so they will not choose to accept North Koreans as their daughters-in-law." Eun Hee states that her mother-in-law told her that she must have come to South Korea just to steal away her "great son" *(challan adŭl).* However, "by the grace of God," Eun Hee's mother-in-law had a dream in which Jesus admonished her for her negative judgements of North Koreans: "How can you [as a Christian] have negative stereotypes about North Koreans?" The mother-in-law repented after waking and then enthusiastically took Eun Hee in as her daughter-in-law. After telling this anecdote, Eun Hee tells the audience, "There are many people like me in South Korea. Please take care of North Koreans… our comrades, my friends, and my siblings." Eun Hee calls upon the Christian obligation to care for one's neighbors and be kind to ask South Koreans to not discriminate against North Koreans, but rather to pray for and take care of them. Moreover, Eun Hee, like many other migrants, reinforces the notion that North and South Koreans are fundamentally similar: "our comrades."

Conclusion: Agency in Narration?

Church testimonials serve multiple purposes and functions for North Korean migrants. Many South Korean churches expect that migrants will publicly share their testimonials to churchgoers. For churchgoers, testimonies not only serve as "inspiration," but also feed South Koreans' curiosity for representations of the "Other," North Korea, and satisfy a voyeuristic fascination with North Korean migrants' experiences of trauma. For North Korean migrants, publicly sharing their escape testimonies allows migrants to participate in the church community and match churches' "generosity" towards migrants by satisfying the church goers' desire to hear migrants' testimonies. This transaction highlights a problematic dynamic wherein migrants' social and emotional support partially hinges upon their performance of "Otherness" and trauma. Moreover, because representative migrants' church testimonies are overwhelmingly female, traumatic church testimonies perpetuate a gendered stereotype of North Korean migration that poses female migrants as victims and, potentially, sexually impure.

However, more than simply a transactional exchange, migrants' church testimonies are constitutive performances wherein migrants define themselves as both Christians and South Korean citizens. Migrants' church testimonies follow a clear script of conversion from North Koreanness to South Koreanness, thus "darkness" to "light;" through narrating this transformation, migrants argue for their legitimacy as converted refugee subjects in South Korea. Migrants invite their South Korean audience to bear "witness" to migrants' trauma, and the audience can thus fully comprehend how deserving the speaker is of South Korean citizenship. Through these narrations, migrants strengthen their connection with their South Korean audience through emotional affect and aligning themselves with South Korean identity.

This chapter has shown that migrants' church testimonies do not simply construct the narrator's identity; migrants' testimonies work within the Christian doctrine to argue for all North Koreans' upward mobility and right to South Korean citizenship. Migrants use the Christian doctrine to criticize discrimination against North Koreans and South Koreans' apathy towards North Korean people. Thus, North Korean migrants' church testimonies are tools through which migrants revitalize their connection to their homeland and people, invoke an imagined national community wherein North Koreans rightfully belong, and combat discrimination against North Koreans. North Korean migrants do not simply acquiesce to South Korean hegemony as they narrate their experiences; instead, they are agentive subjects who work within a hegemonic power structure to achieve their goals.

Migrants certainly assert themselves as agentive subjects through their personal narratives; however, as this chapter revealed, historical, social, and spatial context as well as gender mediate the terms of migrants' narratives. In the next chapter, I explore migrants' voices in another setting to demonstrate how different social and contextual factors alter migrants' representation: the South Korean reality TV show *Now on My Way to Meet You* (2011--present). Whereas South Korean churches largely adhere to a conservative framework that condemns North Korea, *Now on My Way to Meet You* has evolved alongside South Korea's shifting societal and political conditions to reflect new nuances in migrants' representation. Moreover, analysis of *Now on My Way to Meet You* demonstrates how migrants create and contest paradigms around themselves through dialogic interactions between migrants and South Koreans.

Chapter 2: Meaningful Encounters on *Now on My Way to Meet You*

Since December 4, 2011, the South Korean television network Channel-A has aired the variety show *Now on My Way to Meet You*, or *Ije Mannareo Gambnida,* to audiences across South Korea and beyond through their YouTube channel. *Now on My Way to Meet You* brings together a cast of twelve North Korean migrants, four South Korean celebrity panelists, and two South Korean hosts in variety show (*yeneung*) format, a cross between reality TV and talk-show, in hour-long episodes each week. As of 2020, *Now on My Way to Meet You*'s migrant cast includes between 4 to 6 male migrants and 6 to 8 female and the show focuses on topics ranging from politics and education to daily life and popular culture through semi-structured interviews with migrants. In addition to these interviews, *Now on My Way to Meet You* provides a variety of entertainment including sketches, games, and migrants' musical performances. According to the show's lead writer and executive producer, the goals of *Now on My Way to Meet You* have remained consistent since its inception in 2011: eradicating stereotypes and paving the way for migrants' successful integration into South Korean society. *Now on My Way to Meet You* seeks to humanize migrants by highlighting migrants' and South Koreans' shared Korean heritage while drawing lines between the migrants and the North Korean regime they have fled (Epstein and Green 2013, 1).

Now on My Way to Meet You is a significant site for analysis for multiple reasons; first, the show has become the most popular and consistent representation of North Korean migrants in mainstream South Korean media over its decade-long run. *Now on My Way to Meet You* pulls in the highest ratings of the South Korean reality TV shows focused on North Korean migrants, and its most popular episodes have even surpassed popular SBS and KBS shows in viewership

ratings (*Dong Ah News* 2016).[17] As most South Koreans do not regularly interact with the population of over 33,000 North Korean migrants living in South Korea, *Now on My Way to Meet You* has become a main channel through which many South Koreans see, hear, and virtually "meet" North Korean migrants.[18] Accordingly, *Now on My Way to Meet You*'s representation of migrants, which migrants are allowed representation, and to what extent migrants have input into these representations have a direct impact on the South Korean public's perception and reception of migrants. Scholars have noted how representations of North Koreans on the show have evolved alongside South Korea's shifting demographics and political relationship with North Korea (Green and Epstein 2013, Choo 2018). These studies focus on the program's broader implications for the perception of North Korean migrants in South Korea with emphasis on the gendered contours of migrants' representation (Tae and Hwang 2012, Choo 2018). However, these studies have largely neglected to understand *Now on My Way to Meet You* as the product of complex negotiations between migrants and South Koreans, instead representing the show as a one-dimensional representation of South Korea's imagination of North Koreans. This chapter seeks to complicate this understanding by analyzing how the cast and crew of *Now on My Way to Meet You* negotiate migrants' identity and place within South Korea through multiple complex levels of interaction. Owing to its variety-show format, *Now on My Way to Meet You* is a highly interactive form of media; rather than a monolithic embodiment of conservative South Korean media, it is constituted by layers of not only social and political change, but also interactions between migrants and the show's writers, producers, and hosts. This chapter answers the questions: how do the interactions between *Now on My Way to Meet You*'s

17 SBS and KBS are two of South Korea's three most prominent television broadcasting networks.

18 I gathered this information through field work in Seoul in the summer of 2019. I conducted interviews with the lead producers and writers of *Now on My Way to Meet You* as well as interviews with migrants and a South Korean non-profit organization in Seoul.

North and South Korean cast members shape migrants' representation? How do cast members construct the South Korean nation and negotiate North Koreans' place within it through their interactions?

I argue that the interactions between the South Korean panelists and the North Korean migrants construct South Korea as a modern, multicultural, and democratic nation. Rather than simply a legal designation, migrants' right to citizenship is a process of balancing their North Korean cultural identity with a new South Korean identity tied to neoliberal self-development. "North Koreanness" occupies a liminal space between a foreign cultural heritage and a temporal "authentic" Korean identity. In both cases, North Koreanness is a commodifiable embodiment of an intriguing, temporally distant "Otherness." This view of North Koreanness incorporates migrants neatly within South Korea's "multicultural society" (*tamunhwa sahoe*), a formation that organizes ethnic difference on a hierarchy measured against a normative standard of "South Koreanness" (J. Kim 2011). By fitting within this ethnic hierarchy, North Koreans are both "Othered" as categorically different from South Koreans and de-"Othered" as "new citizens" who are "becoming" South Korean as they economically advance and pick up South Korean accents, trends, and viewpoints. *Now on My Way to Meet You* creates this hierarchal harmony by manufacturing intimacy between the show's audience and North Korean migrants through emotional affect, comedy, and "familiar" characterizations of the show's migrants.

On one hand, *Now on My Way to Meet You* reifies hegemonic South Korean nationalism that poses South Koreanness as modern and advanced and North Koreanness as backwards; however, this analysis also shows that the interactive nature of the variety show format that centers upon migrants' participation has enabled migrants' representation to become more nuanced over the years. Moreover, as the show has evolved to focus on the North and South

Korean cast's personalities and comedic interactions, *Now on My Way to Meet You* encourages South Korean viewers to empathize and bond with North Koreans. Rather than a monolithic product of South Korean hegemony, my fieldwork research reveals that bonds between the migrant cast and South Korean writers, producers, hosts, and celebrity panelists have shaped *Now on My Way to Meet You* into a product that embodies the complexity of these cross-cultural interactions and dialogues. The politics and formation of identity are not fixed, but rather in constant negotiation within these interactions.

I approach this issue by first providing the theoretical framework and methodology of my analysis. I then provide an overview of how *Now on My Way to Meet You* has evolved in its decade-long run as a result of both political and social change in South Korea and interactions between the show's producers, writers, and cast. Then, I conduct a close reading of an episode of *Now on My Way to Meet You* with reference to other current episodes in order to demonstrate how the show approaches "encounters" between its South Korean panelists, hosts, and migrant cast.

Methodology and Theoretical Framing

My analysis is based on fieldwork I conducted during the summer of 2019 in Seoul, South Korea as well as close analysis of multiple episodes of *Now on My Way to Meet You* published by Channel A onto YouTube. During my field work, I conducted structured and unstructured interviews with the executive producer of *Now on My Way to Meet You*, Kong Hyo Soon, who has served as the show's executive producer since 2013 and the show's lead writer, Jang Hee Jung, who has written for *Now on My Way to Meet You* since its inception in 2011. These interviews gave me a few major insights. First, I learned how the show recruits migrants,

how episodes are planned, how the script for the show is written, and the show's process of editing 5 hours of footage to produce hour-long episodes. Second, Kong Hyo Soon and Jang Hee Jung described how pivotal the relationships between the show's migrant cast and South Korean crew are to *Now on My Way to Meet You*'s tone and message. Finally, producer Kong and writer Jang revealed their perspectives on how *Now on My Way to Meet You* has evolved since 2011 in response to political shifts, viewer demands, and relationships between the cast and crew.

After these interviews, I attended a live taping of *Now on My Way to Meet You* and observed the taping of episode 393, "The characteristics of North Korean men! What is a North Korean man, according to North Korean men?" I was at the studio for about eight hours; I arrived an hour before filming (mid-morning) and left an hour after filming (evening). I recorded how the South Korean director and producer guided migrants to behave on camera and migrants' discussions during taping. Simultaneously, I recorded how migrants behaved and which topics migrants tended to discuss, paying attention to differences between migrants of different genders and ages. I also took note of which topics the directors encouraged migrants to avoid discussing. I took pictures during taping in order to analyze the construction of the TV-show's set, the stylistic choices of the set designers, and the symbolism of the set's design. Throughout the day, I took note of how the migrants, celebrity panelists, hosts, and crew interacted on and off screen. After returning from Seoul, I watched the edited version of the episode I observed in Seoul and recorded which segments the editors chose to include and exclude from the published episode. I observed the visuals, sound-effects, and cuts between segments and what these editing techniques suggested about migrants' discussions and opinions.

One of my primary areas of interest as I attended the live-taping and watched edited episodes was how the cast describes and defines North and South Korean identity through their

interactions; the cast and panelists continually interrogate what it means to be "North Korean" by asking migrants questions about their identity and experiences. The hosts must also find ways to interpret cultural differences between the migrant cast and South Korean hosts and panelists as they arise. To interpret these interactions, I turn to Sarah Ahmed's (2000) theory of "encounters" between different groups and individuals. *Now on My Way to Meet You* is a manufactured space of "encounters" wherein North and South Koreans "meet;" the terms and results of these encounters both symbolize the audience's "encounter" with North Koreans and produce a model for the audience to follow when interacting with migrants. The encounters between North and South Koreans on the show define what it means to be "South Korean" in opposition to what it means to be "North Korean." Sarah Ahmed (2000) noted that national bodies are produced not just through their creation of a shared history and identity as Benedict Anderson observed (1983, 13); the "We" of the nation also defines itself through encounters with "Others," or individuals and groups who do not belong to the nation (Ahmed 2000, 97). Ahmed argues that inventing the nation relies on individuals recognizing that "Others" do not belong to the "We" of the nation as much as it relies on individuals recognizing those who do belong to the nation (2000, 98). Ahmed's scholarship is especially helpful in my analysis as she primarily focuses on "multiculturalism," which is a central framework of *Now on My Way to Meet You.* Ahmed observes that, in multiculturalism, a nation's recognition of internal "Others" not only reinforces the definition of being a part of the nation, it also asserts that the "We" of the nation can live with cultural diversity (Ahmed 2000, 97). This can signify the tolerance and modernity of the "We." North Korean migrants, on the other hand, can become internal "Others" whose difference the South Korean majority fetishizes.

Scholars have noted that South Korean multiculturalism largely reflects a hierarchical ordering of ethnicity in relation to South Korean culture and identity, thus reinforcing South Korean ethnic and cultural hegemony (Jun 2014, Kim 2014). South Korea's "multicultural" policies to integrate and assimilate ethnic minorities into society also encourage South Koreans to become "tolerant" citizens capable of dealing with new national demographics brought on by globalization (Jun 2014, 93). In doing so, South Koreans are made into "cosmopolitan citizens [which] fundamentally constitute 'enhancing national competitive-ness' in the global market" (Jun 2014, 92). Television programs such as *Now on My Way to Meet You* that promote "multicultural society" aim to educate South Koreans about the nation's minority groups and encourage South Koreans to show "tolerance" towards them (Jun 2014, 92). As I describe later in this chapter, *Now on My Way to Meet You*'s hosts approach North Koreanness as funny and quaint; when the hosts encounter cultural differences too great, they encourage viewers to "tolerate" and overcome these differences. This dynamic is fundamentally hierarchical; the host and producers' perception that North Korean traits are "cute" or "humorous" implies that South Koreanness is the more "developed" normative standard. "Tolerance" encourages viewers to forgive certain behaviors or statements because North Korean culture is "under-developed" compared to South Korean culture.

North and South Korea's legacies of national division further accentuate the objectifying and developmental gaze of the national "We" upon internal "Others." Since the Korean War (1950-1953), the two Koreas have defined themselves in opposition to each other in terms of ideology and development in order to argue for either Korea's superiority. Scholars have pointed out how South Korea invented North Korea as a Cold War enemy and North Koreans as worthy of suspicion through media representations until the 2000s (Hughes 2008, Epstein 2009). As I

discussed in the introduction of this thesis, as the number of North Korean migrants increased in the past two decades, South Korean media representations of North Koreans shifted to reflect South Korea's multicultural policies towards other minority groups. However, legacies of national division have not dissipated; both multiculturalism and legacies of division influence South Koreans' perception of North Korean migrants. Both influences have led to North Koreans occupying the place of internal "Others," and South Korean media related to migrants reflects this characterization. Thus, *Now on My Way to Meet You*'s encounters between 'developed' and 'modern' South Koreans and the foreign, less-developed "Others" of North Korean migrants.

It is essential to recognize how *Now on My Way to Meet You*'s South Korean producers, writers, and hosts produce a clear distinction between the modern South Korean state and the North Korea from which the migrants fled; however, it is equally essential to recognize how North Korean migrants define themselves as part of the "We" of the South Korean nation within their interactions with the South Koreans on the show. While the image of North Korea that the show produces remains a fixed "Other" that is inferior to South Korea, the relationships between North and South Koreans on the show portray migrants as mobile subjects capable of traversing from the unacceptable "Other" into the national "We;" however, these transformations are still distinctly hierarchal, gendered, and limited to discursive South Korean citizenship. The migrants of *Now on My Way to Meet You* can "become" fully South Korean through neoliberal self-development.

Overview: Meeting North Korea with the Developmental "Gaze"

Now on My Way to Meet You's hegemonic construction of South Korean nationalism that poses South Korea as modern and developed and North Korea as backwards has remained

consistent since 2011. Migrants' position within this dynamic, however, is not fixed. In the show's first years, *Now on My Way to Meet You* allowed migrants little space to express their voices within the show's narrative of South Korea's superiority over North Korea. The show's format between 2011 and 2013 matched the Lee Myung Bak presidential administration's framing of North Korean migration in terms of human rights issues. Moreover, the show largely focused on sexualized portrayals of the female migrant cast as beautiful objects of traumatic experiences.

However, *Now on My Way to Meet You* has evolved since 2011 to focus less on the migrants as voiceless objects and instead as lovable, recurring "characters" on the show. While this results partially from South Korea's changing political and social context, my fieldwork suggests that this shift also results from the close relationships built between the show's producers and migrant cast. The show now focuses on the migrants' familiar relationships with the South Korean panelists, creating a sense of intimacy on the show and thus intimacy between the South Korean audience and North Korean migrants. As conversational, light-hearted interactions between the migrant cast and South Korean crew have increased, the space for negotiating and renegotiating the South Korean nation's boundaries through these interactions has increased also. However, *Now on My Way to Meet You* ultimately still limits migrants' representation according to the show's political messaging and gender paradigms. Thus, the show's focus on migrants' participation allows migrants to define their position as "belonging" within the nation, but only within South Korea's discursive paradigms of citizenship and gender.

Now on My Way to Meet You between 2011 and 2013

Mirroring the human rights-focused rhetoric of the conservative Lee Myung Bak administration (2008-2013) that demonized North Korea as South Korea's ultimate enemy, the first years of *Now on My Way to Meet You* focused primarily on North Korea's human rights abuses and migrants' experiences of trauma. As the show reified this image of North Korea, it also reinforced an image of South Korea as a masculine, modern, and democratic nation that could provide refuge for the feminized victims of the failed North Korean state. Migrant cast members were young, attractive females who testified of their experiences of victimization and hardship. The show dubbed these migrants "Northern escapee beauties," playing on a well-known Korean phrase, "Northern woman, Southern man" that suggests that women from the North are more docile and beautiful while men from the South are more assertive and handsome (Epstein 2013, 4). *Now on My Way to Meet You* alternated between featuring light-hearted, flirtatious "chatter" between the Northern "beauties" and the male South Korean hosts and presenting dramatized versions of the migrants' escape stories and reunions with lost family members. These stories highlighted North Korea's human rights violations. For example, in episode 45 the South Korean host Nam Hui Seok guides the discussion with the panelists towards North Korea's "Arduous March," the Great Famine. The show cuts to a montage of images of starving women and children as dramatic piano music plays behind a voice-over that narrates a brief description of the famine. Greene and Epstein (2013) point out that such montages included dated images chosen simply for their appalling nature, many of which had no connection to the migrants' stories or experiences (10).

The show's set alongside its focus on the beauty and physical trauma of its "migrant beauties" accentuated the gendered dynamic between both the South Korean male host and the

female migrants and the superiority of the strong, masculine South Korean state that provided these migrants refuge. *Now on My Way to Meet You* highlighted migrants' physical attractiveness through camera shots that focused on migrants exposed legs and at-times revealing clothing, often adding effects to shots of migrants' facial expressions to signify feelings of embarrassment and innocence.[19] The migrants sat in neat rows with their backs straight and knees pointing in the same direction. Meanwhile, Nam Hui Seok stood and roamed freely around the set as he led discussion. This produced a clear power dynamic between the female migrants and male host; while the female migrants did not have the power to move at their will, the male host had the power to move across the set's space as he led the conversation. Nam Hui Seok took full control of the hour-long program, guiding migrants in tightly structured interviews wherein he questioned members of the migrant cast. *Now on My Way to Meet You*'s explicit flirtatious subtext commodified guests' intriguing yet non-threatening "Otherness" and physical attractiveness. Thus, while the South Korean male on the show was mobile and authoritative, the female migrants were immobile, sexualized objects.

Each episode featured a female migrant's harrowing account of physical suffering and abuse she endured while living in and then escaping from North Korea. These stories often included accounts of physical torture, forced marriages with Chinese farmers, and rape. A representative example occurs in episode 28: Lee Sun Sil, a middle-aged North Korean migrant who frequently appears on the show, describes her experiences of torture and abuse at the hands of Chinese and North Korean officials, being sold into human trafficking upon entering China,

[19] The migrants' "chatter" with the male host and celebrities fell into a pre-existing format of "multicultural" reality TV shows that drew on romantic dynamic between foreign-born women and South Korean men. For example, *Now on My Way to Meet You*'s immediate predecessor, *Misuda* (2006-2010) or the "Global Talk Show," featured foreign-born women living South Korea engaging with a South Korean male host (Nam Hui Seok who is also the host of *Now on My Way to Meet You*) in discussions of dating, food, and culture.

and even being deceived into selling her child in China (Epstein and Greene 2013, 11).[20] Lee Sun Sil emphasizes that the majority of North Korean migrants ("80%") experience such trauma during defection. In Lee Sun Sil's story along with the many migrant stories that mirror hers, the migrant's weak and vulnerable female body became an object of abuse and trauma. This feminine, victimized portrayal of North Korean migration reflects a greater trend in South Koreans' perceptions of North Korean migrants. As Joowon Park showed in his (2016) study, many South Koreans assume North Korean women to be the victims of human trafficking or that they have had relations with Chinese men during their defection. While this perception is beginning to shift, conservative South Korean audiences still hold this assumption.[21] In both Park's ethnographic observations of female North Korean migrants in Seoul and in *Now on My Way to Meet You,* migrants became objects of beauty and trauma. In the first years of *Now on My Way to Meet You,* migrants were both sexualized victims and sexualized objects of beauty for the South Korean gaze.

Now on My Way to Meet You's portrayal of migrant women and South Korean men reflected the patriarchal, neocolonial aspects of multicultural policy that conceptualizes migrants' assimilation through female migrants' marriages to South Korean men. In response to the rising number of marriage migrants in South Korea in the 1990s and 2000s, the South Korean government began to implement policies and programs to support the integration of "multicultural families," or families made up of a South Korean male and foreign-born female,

20 Lee Sun Sil is the same migrant whose church testimony I discussed in chapter two. Lee Sun Sil, like many of the migrants on *Now on My Way to Meet You,* have presented their testimonies in many spaces on multiple occasions since their resettlement.

21 South Korean mainstream media has experienced major shifts in its portrayals of North Koreans in the past decade. As Lee Joo Young (2020) noted, whereas mainstream South Korean films and television dramas portrayed migrants as passive objects or militarized cadres before the 2010s, current media portrayals portray North Koreans as agentive subjects who can organize themselves. See *Crash Landing on You* (2019-2020) for an excellent example of this trend.

into South Korean society (J. Kim 2001). While the first years of *Now on My Way to Meet You* implicitly referred to this dynamic, other shows such as KBS's *Love in Asia* (2005-2015) and TV Choseon's *Love Unification: Southern Man, Northern Women* (2012-2015) explicitly focused on the union of South Korean men and migrant women.[22] As Carla Freeman (2011) noted, the South Korean government has framed marriage between South Korean men and foreign-born women as a patriotic act that strengthens the South Korean nation; the marriage migration of foreign-born women, often from lower-income countries compared to South Korea, signified South Korea's advanced economic and social development. The marriage of North Korean or Korean-Chinese (whom many South Koreans associated with North Korea) women to South Korean men was doubly patriotic, as this union symbolized the subsumption of North Korea into the patriarchal South Korean nation-state (Freeman 2011). The romantic subtext between *Now on My Way to Meet You*'s "migrant beauties" and the South Korean celebrities elicited this patriarchal, neocolonial union of "Northern women, southern men."

The theme of national reunification permeated the early version of *Now on My Way to Meet You*; this theme further suggested South Korea's superiority over North Korea. With the official support of Korea's Ministry of Unification, *Now on My Way to Meet You*'s slogan for the first 105 episodes (from 2011 until December of 2013) was "A Touching Project for Divided Families" (Choo 2018, 3). Echoing the format of a previous prominent TV-show *The Person Who I Miss* (*geu sarami bogo sipda*) that reunited separated family members, *Now on My Way to Meet You* often included the tearful reunion of North Korean families separated during the border-crossing process (Epstein and Greene 2013). These tearful reunions had a nationalistic,

[22] *Love in Asia* (2005-2015) chronicled the stories of South Korean men visiting the home countries of their foreign wives, and *Love Unification: Southern Man, Northern Women* (2012-2015) set up romantic virtual encounters between North Korean female migrants and South Korean male celebrities.

political message behind them: families were torn apart and divided as a result of North and South Korea's national division. Only the unification of North and South Korea could provide a solution to the heart-breaking division of families across the DMZ. The show's focus on North Korea's human rights abuses made the form of this potential "unification" clear: the North Korean government would need to collapse and South Korea would assume political precedence over the peninsula. The gendered dynamic between North Korean women as innocent, attractive objects who gained acceptance into South Korean society through their association with South Korean men reified this colonial vision of national unification.

Now on My Way to Meet You from 2013 to the Present

In 2013, however, *Now on My Way to Meet You* pivoted; the show's slogan was revised to be "North-South Communicative variety" and the show moved its focus from migrants' stories of trauma and escape to instead focus on stories of migrants' successful resettlement. Moreover, Kong states that *Now on My Way to Meet You*'s research team began to pay closer attention to online criticism from both North and South Korean viewers that the topics of the show were too "depressing" or seemingly "inauthentic." In order to respond to criticism against the show and meet viewers' demands, Kong's team adjusted the show to focus on more light-hearted topics that relate to popular culture and North Korean society. Moreover, the producers decided to seek out male migrants to appear on the show alongside the "migrant beauties" in order to address criticism against the show's sexualized portrayal of migrants. Shifts in *Now on My Way to Meet You*'s production and vision coincided with greater transformations of South Korea's perception of North Korea and North Korean migrants. As I discussed in this thesis's introduction, after Lee Myung Bak's descension from presidential office in 2013, the precedence

of the "human rights framework" was increasingly challenged by policies and media that placed North Korean migrants within the greater framework of South Korean "multicultural society."[23] North Korean migrants were no longer simply embodiments of physical trauma and suffering or "long-lost ethnic brethren;" they also became members of a cultural minority group that South Korea hopes to assimilate.

Even within these shifts, *Now on My Way to Meet You* still draws boundaries around the South Korean national as a "modern," developed nation-state; the show's portrayal of North Korea, on the other hand, has shifted from a despicable abuser of human rights to an intriguing, developmentally-behind "Other." The first seconds of episode 393 (aired on June 23, 2019) exemplify *Now on My Way to Meet You*'s approach towards representing North Korea. The face and lifted fist of Baek Myung Ho, a middle-aged North Korean migrant and reoccurring guest on the show, fills the screen as he exclaims: "The spicy and salty men of *Imangab*, let's go!" The screen cuts to a long shot that displays thirteen North Korean men lined together on set yelling "Let's go!" in response to Baek's call. The men begin to sing a modified version of a famous North Korean national song, "With Pride" (*Porandŭshi*). Those acquainted with North Korean national performances will immediately recognize the tune and lyrics: "When we walk, we walk with pride...when we sing, we sing loudly with pride…" and, just when the original lyrics would say, "For my beautiful country, the only one in the world…" the men sing: "For the men of *Imangab* (*Now on My Way to Meet You*), we walk with pride." The panelists perform their "North Korean-ness" for the viewers as the men carol a North Korean national anthem. *Now on*

23 Examples of such media are provided earlier in the chapter; reality TV-shows such as *North-South Love Reunification* (2012--2015), *Love in Asia* (2005--2015), and *Morangbang Club* (2015--present) focused much more on North Korean migrants as members of minority groups, much like the other migrant groups living in South Korea from other parts of Asia.

My Way to Meet You harnesses the stereotypical images of North Korean people singing their national anthem in unison to entertain audiences.

Picture of the men of "Now on My Way to Meet You" before singing "Porandŭshi." (Source: author)

The image of North Korean-ness that *Now on My Way to Meet You* conjures is pre-modern, "authentically Korean," and in sharp contrast with Seoul's modernity. As the men bellow a North Korean national anthem, they are surrounded by a set meant to symbolize a rustic North Korean town. Behind the men are mock "shops" for rice and North Korean noodles, all topped with visibly rusty tin-roofs. Props of rusty bikes, traditional vessels for fermenting Kimchi, and dented pots and pans have been placed around the set. The audience listens to a group of "salty and spicy" North Korean men sing a national anthem of the nation they have escaped while looking upon a representation of North Korea as rough and rustic, sharply

contrasting the cramped skyscrapers of Seoul. *Now on My Way to Meet You* brings attention to stereotypically "North Korean" traits and provides the South Korean audience an opportunity to encounter the intriguingly foreign "Other" of North Korea.

Picture of "Now on My Way to Meet You"'s set. (Source: author)

Now on My Way to Meet You conjures a "pre-modern," developmentally-behind image of North Korea not just through its set, but also through the cast's discussions. Discussions on the show have shifted from the "human rights" framework towards a developmental understanding of the North and South Korean divide. For example, when Nam Hui Seok introduces new migrants, a popular topic of discussions between Nam Hui Seok and the migrant is what "awed" the migrant when he or she first arrived in South Korea. The migrants' stories express awe towards South Korea's development, commenting on the grandeur of the Incheon International Airport, the attractiveness or style of South Korean people, and Seoul's many skyscrapers and

cars. According to these accounts, South Korea is modern, developed, rich, and free. On the other hand, North Korea is unequal, less developed, and bound by strict social class systems. This shift mirrors a greater turn in the show's goals from focusing on stories of trauma and reunifications towards focusing on migrants' stories of successful integration. Migrants' stories of successful integration coupled with the show's strategic marketing of migrants "North Koreanness" reflects central tenets of South Korea's "multicultural" policies: seeking to successfully integrate ethnic minorities while also objectifying markers of their cultural "Otherness" for South Koreans to gaze upon.

While the set has evolved since 2013 to play upon and appeal to the audience's interest in North Korea as a temporally distant, exotic "Other," the migrant cast's position on the show has also shifted. In the show's first few years, migrants were sexualized objects. By 2020, *Now on My Way to Meet You* has significantly lowered its focus on migrants' sexuality and instead primarily focuses on the cast's personalities and their interactions with each other. A pivotal factor that contributed to this shift has been the relationships formed between the production team and the migrant cast. Such relationships are not unusual in the variety show genre; however, the first years of *Now on My Way to Meet You* did not reflect these relationships. Instead, *Now on My Way to Meet You* between 2011 and 2013 reflected a gender power dynamic between the host and migrants as well as the influence of the Lee administration's "human rights" rhetoric. As the show continued, South Korea's societies view of North Korean migrants shifted towards multiculturalism; at the same time, the producers, panelists, cast, and crew developed close bonds that are reflected on screen. According to executive producer Kong Hyo Soon, the production team's decision to focus on the migrants' personalities rooted from the crew's relationships with the migrants; however, Kong also made it clear that the show hoped to

promote South Korea's "multicultural" harmony; as producer Kong told me, "We want the viewers to like North Korean migrants and feel like they are friends with them." Both executive producer Kong Hyo Soon and head writer Jang Hee Jung explained to me that their primary reason for remaining on the show instead of pursuing other projects has been the relationships they have formed with the migrant cast. When I arrived at Channel A's studio in Northern Seoul to observe the taping of episode 393, producer Kong greeted me and then brought me into *Now on My Way to Meet You*'s small studio and dressing rooms. On the way to Kong's dressing room, Kong greeted each migrant she met, teasing them about their choice in outfits and asking about their families. The cast was clearly excited to see Kong; while one young man laughed in embarrassment at Kong's playful jibing, Jeong Yoo Na, a veteran cast member in her late-twenties who has appeared on the show for years, happily hung onto "older-sister" Kong's arm as she made her rounds. Kong asked me to wait for her as I somewhat awkwardly observed her catching-up conversations with various members of the migrant cast. Kong remained on set through the duration of the episode's taping, calling out individual members of the cast to "laugh bigger!" and teasing the older male North Korean migrants in between takes in response to their answers.

A sense of familiarity between cast and crew of *Now on My Way to Meet You* pervaded the set. During the two major breaks while taping, the majority of the male members of the migrant cast and South Korean panelists exited the building to smoke outside of the studio; the female members of the migrant cast stayed inside the studio to chat. As I had already watched many episodes of *Now on My Way to Meet You* before observing this taping, I was aware that the show's editors add special effects to highlight comedic, flirtatious or playfully antagonistic relationships among the migrants, South Korean panelists, and hosts. I was skeptical about the

authenticity of these interactions before coming to the taping. I was surprised to find, however, that the teasing, jibing, and laughter that characterize the show's edited form also pervade the unedited version of *Now on My Way to Meet You.* There were multiple moments before, during, and after taping wherein the host Nam Hui Seok or a South Korean panelists made a joke to other cast members that clearly related to a prior interaction or event; while these "inside jokes" left me feeling out of the loop, I also recognized that these jokes demonstrated the strong sense of familiarity and mutuality in the relationships between the migrant cast and the South Korean panelists, hosts, and staff.

Now on My Way to Meet You harnesses and heightens this "familiarity" through writing and editing that creates intimacy between the North Korean migrants and South Korean viewers. Scholars have noted that variety shows, a category unique to East Asia, seek to eliminate social distance between celebrity participants and viewers. This social distance roots from conventions to follow social rules and maintain "face" in the public sphere (Painter 1996, Epstein and Green 2013). Variety shows achieve this goal by poking fun at the celebrity participants through hosts jibing at the celebrities and shows' editing, showing them face and fail physical challenges, and engage in multiple physical displays such as dancing, singing, running, etc. For the migrant cast, this "social distance" from the audience stems from the migrant's "Otherness" as North Koreans; *Now on My Way to Meet You* lessens this distance by showing migrants engage in these entertaining, at times embarrassing physical displays. In addition to physical displays, *Now on My Way to Meet You* highlights the cast's familiar, comedic characterizations to create intimacy with the audience. As Misha Kavka (2008) noted, reality television is a technology of intimacy that functions by drawing viewers close to the figures on screen. Kavka argues that the authenticity or staging of reality television pales in importance compared to the affect and

emotions that reality television deliberately produces. Viewers find "truth" in media not simply through the "transparency or erasure of the media frame, but rather in social…truths which arise out of this frame's manipulation" (5). Through reality TV's strategic manipulation of the emotions that appear on screen, reality TV can elicit emotional responses from the audience and manufacture intimacy between the audience and the objects on screen.

Now on My Way to Meet You creates intimacy between the North Korean migrants and South Korean audience by showing the close relationships between the show's cast; from a production standpoint, featuring the migrants' tearful stories of escape alongside the happy, comedic interactions between the cast is an optimal combination for manufacturing affect and intimacy. Examples of the cast's tearful emotions and comradery are scattered throughout *Now on My Way to Meet You*'s episodes. For example, one segment on episode 392 features the tearful reunion story of the young, shy cast member Min Hyeok Soo who producer Kong teased on the day of taping I observed. After years of separation, Min's younger sister finally arrived in South Korea to join him and his mother; the crew filmed Min and his mother's reunion with Min's younger sister, even following them into Min's home to film their dinner together. In "reunion" segments during the show's earlier years, the migrants were, essentially, strangers to the audience; the story's appeal was its tragedy, and these stories signified the desperate situation of migrants in and as they left North Korea. By contrast, Min is a long-time cast member and "character" on the show; the show's hosts tease his serious demeanor and the other cast members ask him about his family. His mother has appeared on the show multiple times. Min's reunion with his family is deeply emotional for the whole cast; the camera cuts to the faces of the hosts, panelists, and other migrants tearing up as the clip of Min and his sister plays in the studio. Long-time viewers will feel as though they know Min and his family, likely tearing up alongside

the celebrity cast and crew. Min is not just a North Korean "Other;" he is a familiar character to whom the audience feels connected.

Screenshot of Min Hyeok meeting his sister and Nam Hui Seok crying. The caption reads, "That awkward little brother," as Nam Hui Seok says this. (Source: YouTube)

Though such heart-wrenching segments fill between 5 to 10 minutes of screen-time on most episodes, *Now on My Way to Meet You* primarily focuses on the happy, comic interactions of cast members. This humor establishes familiarity between the cast and creates intimacy between the viewers and migrants. Yumiko Ehara (2005) explores the act of "teasing" in her analysis of Japanese mass media's treatment of the 1970s women's liberation movement. Eraha points out that, while teasing establishes familiarity between two parties, confirming that these parties' relationship is "'one where we can tease each other'" (47). This establishment of familiarity through teasing is clear on *Now on My Way to Meet You*— for example, on episode 421, *Now on My Way to Meet You* begins with a reoccurring migrant panelist Ah-ra telling the other guests on the show about her appearance in the South Korean drama *Crash Landing on You*

(2019-2020), a drama about a romance between a North Korean solider and South Korean beauty mogul. Nam Hui Seok responds to A-Ra, “Do you think I am more handsome, or Hyun Bin is more handsome?” Hyun Bin is the male protagonist of *Crash Landing on You* and is famous in South Korea for his handsome appearance; Nam Hui Seok, on the other hand, is not conventionally attractive. The shot cuts from Nam Hui Seok’s face to a side-by-side image of Nam Hui Seok and Hyun Bin; the editors have added emphasis to Nam Hui Seok’s eyes to imply that they are small, signifying that it is absurd for Nam Hui Seok to suggest that he is as handsome as Hyun Bin. The background noise is filled with the panelists hysterically laughing and scoffing at Nam Hui Seok’s comment. Such “teasing” showcases the cast’s close and amiable relationships.

Screenshot of comparison between Nam Hui Seok and Hyun Bin. The caption reads, “Hyun Bin… We apologize on Nam Hui Seok’s behalf-- the whole production crew.” (Source: YouTube)

Though humor establishes familiarity, it also plays upon and strengthens hierarchal stereotypes regarding North Koreans. Yumiko notes that teasing also holds other meanings and establishes hierarchy when the “teaser” is a member of a clearly dominant party over the

"teased" (2005, 48). *Now on My Way to Meet You'*s "teasing" portrays North Koreanness as "backwards" and South Koreanness as "modern." Jokes point out that North Korean men are "rough" and unrefined whereas South Korean men are more refined and progressive; for example, in episode 393, Nam Hui Seok draws a direct comparison between Kim Jun Hyeok and Choi Jung Ho. Kim Jun Hyeok, a migrant in his mid-twenties, is the "modern," cosmopolitan scholar and Korea University student who Nam Hui Seok states has totally "become" a Seoulite (*wanjŏn sŏul sarami twaetta*); Choi Jung Ho, on the other hand, is the "rough and direct" North Korean man who often uses English incorrectly and makes comical remarks regarding how "unmanly" South Korean men are (*namja tapchi mot handa)*. These stereotypical characterizations apply to the women as well; whereas North Korean young women are beautiful and "innocent," and older North Korean women are "loud and strong." For example, Ah-ra, another veteran migrant cast member in her late twenties, is the sweet and innocent "escaped beauty" with whom all of the other cast members get along; Lee Sun Sil and Yoo Hyun Joo, two middle-aged women, are the "loud," "strong" North Korean *ajummas* (middle-aged women) who terrorize the men on the show. The editors and producers have commercialized stereotypical "characters" and their comedic interactions.

The hosts' jokes often directly mock the cast's "North Korean" traits. Minutes after Nam Hui Seok joked that he was not as attractive as Hyun Bin during episode 421, he asks the migrants if the creators of *Crash Landing on You* (2019-2020) consulted North Koreans while writing the show. One veteran migrant cast member, Jeong Min Woo, responds that they contacted him. Name Hui Seok feigns shock and responds, "Could they understand you?" Nam Hui Seok pokes fun at Jeon Min Woo for his heavy North Korean accent, as he does in many other episodes. Considering that North Koreans are commonly discriminated against because of

their difficulty with "Seoul language," Nam Hui Seok's jibe towards Min Woo seems especially problematic.

However, because *Now on My Way to Meet You*'s comedy originates from the interactions and relationships formed on and off of the show, the "teaser" and "teased" can reverse just as quickly as the dialogue between the cast members. Migrants are not the only ones "teased;" on the contrary, the show's South Korean celebrity panelists often become the target of jokes as well. For example, the rivalry between Jun Hyeok, a college-aged migrant who regularly appears on the show, and the South Korean radio host Kim Il Joong almost exclusively ridicules Il Joong. Whereas Jun Hyeok represents a young, sophisticated, ex-Pyonyangite who studies at one of South Korea's most prestigious universities, Il Joong is the abrasive, insecure, and frustrated by Jun Hyeok's articulate opinions. On episode 395, "The Avengers of North Korea Experts Analyze the Summit Meeting," after three South Korean professors provide their opinions on the Summit meeting between Kim Jung Un, Donald Trump and Moon Jae In, Jong Il suddenly demands Jun Hyeok what he thinks about the Summit meeting. All of the panelists mutter, "How mean…" and the screen fills with effects that say, "So mean!" in reference to Il Joong suddenly demanding Jun Hyeok to share his opinions. As Jun Hyeok responds to Il Joong, "I will briefly share my opinion…", Il Joong responds, "That's ok, you can share it for a long time!" The panelists laugh and scoff at Il Joong's "meanness," but the host points out, "Wow, Il Joong is turning bright red!" The migrants and celebrities both laugh at Il Joong's embarrassment at his own behavior as cartoon beads of sweat fly from Il Joong's red face. After Jun Hyeok articulately provides his opinion on North and South Korean politics, the shot returns to Il Joon to add red blushing effects to signify his embarrassment. The power dynamic between the "teaser" and "teased" does not remain static; rather, the show's "teasing" comically defaces all

cast members in keeping with *Now on My Way to Meet You*'s goal of eliminating distance between the North and South Korean cast members and, by proxy, the South Korean audience and North Korean migrants.

Screenshot of Il Jung turning red as Nam Hui Seok says, "He's turning red!" (Source: YouTube)

Moreover, as *Now on My Way to Meet You* has increased space for migrants to share their thoughts and opinions, migrants are able to work within the developmentalist framework of the North-South divide to assert themselves as rightful subjects within South Korea. A key example of this appears in *Now on My Way to Meet You*'s introduction of migrant panelists. In the show's earlier years, new cast members recounted their "escape" (*t'albuk)* stories during their introduction. Now, when *Now on My Way to Meet You* introduces new cast members, most migrants describe themselves as individuals who longed for freedom and opportunities for social and economic advancement in South Korea. When Nam Hui Seok asks newly arrived Ga Yeon why she chose to defect from North Korea on episode 392, she answers: "In South Korea, I can dream dreams for my future. In North Korea, you don't have the ability to choose your future.

People need to have paths to go forward into the future." [24] As she speaks, the shot cuts to the faces of other migrants nodding in agreement. While North Korea is a place where one is unable to advance, South Korea is a "place where you can dream for the future." Only two episodes later, "The first for *Now on My Way to Meet You,* the math genius who represented North Korea!", a college-aged North Korean migrant Lee Jong Ho recounts his story of defecting after watching South Korean dramas: "I could not believe that a place like that [as shown in the dramas] existed." Ga Yeon and Jong Ho's stories, like the many other stories of North Korean migrants on the show, express awe towards South Korea's development. In their stories, Ga Yeon and Jong Ho simultaneously confirm South Korea's superiority over North Korea and remind the audience that they came to South Korea to pursue their dreams. Such stories encourage the audience to sympathize with migrants as individuals who came to the great country of South Korea to pursue their own "Korean dreams."

Disjuncture in Negotiation

While *Now on My Way to Meet You* allows migrants to speak freely regarding their opinions and perspectives, the South Korean producers and editors ultimately hold final control over which content appears in the published episodes. This leads to moments of disjuncture wherein the migrants' statements do not match the producers' agenda for the show, thus demanding the producers to navigate an ambiguous space between producing their desired content and maintaining authenticity. As I learned from the producers and writers and observed confirmed during the five-hour taping, *Now on My Way to Meet You* is not, in fact, scripted. Rather, the show's producers conduct interviews with migrants regarding an episode's topic in

[24] Entitled "Comparing Campus Life between North and South Korea," this episode aired on June 23, 2019.

the weeks leading up to taping, recording migrants' most "interesting" or funny comments and observations. The writers create an outline of topics to cover during taping based on these interviews, and the hosts are prompted to ask specific migrants for their perspectives on issues. The hosts lead conversations by asking interview questions and beginning and ending segments; however, migrants' conversations can quickly turn from on-topic to off-topic.

During the taping I observed, though Nam Hui Seok began discussion by asking one cast member a question, many other migrants would invariably chime in to voice their opinions or make comments. Moreover, migrants' answers did not always match producers' expectations. For example, before the taping of episode 393, *Now on My Way to Meet You*'s writers had prepared for Nam Hui Seok to ask the two older North Korean men about their gripes regarding how their wives had "changed" after coming to South Korea. Nam Hui Seok asked Choi Jung Ho about his "problem" with his wife that he had described to the producers during his pre-taping interviews. Choi answered Nam Hui Seok by describing how his wife had stopped using high honorifics to address him after a few years living in South Korea. This segment was clearly meant to be comical; the South Korean panelists laughed in response to Choi's gripes, gently pointing out that he might be slightly unreasonable. However, the comedic tone shifted when the other middle-aged migrant, Lee Myung Ho, interjected: "South Korean men are so weak with their wives. Being a real man is called being 'patriarchal' in South Korea, it's so ridiculous." Listening to his comment, I looked over to producer Kong to gauge her response. She shook her head and whispered to me, "That one (referring to the comment) is not going to make it into the episode." When I later watched the edited version of episode 393, I confirmed that, while Choi's story remained, Lee's comment did not "make it" into the episode. As I later discussed with producer Kong, the editors removed Lee's comment in order to preserve the show's comedic

tone as well as protect Myung Ho's image. Myung Ho's expression of masculinity was not in line with the "progressive" South Korean masculinity that producer Kong wanted *Now on My Way to Meet You* to promote.

The producers and editors of *Now on My Way to Meet You* make strategic choices when planning and editing episodes to maintain the show's central purpose: creating harmony between North Korean migrants and the South Korean audience. As producer Kong told me when I asked about Lee's controversial comment, "Of course we are not going to keep something like that in the show—we want people to like North Korean migrants." On *Now on My Way to Meet You,* migrants are able to tell their stories and share their opinions, so long that they fall within the non-controversial boundaries that the show has created for itself. In the case that migrants voice criticism towards South Korea and South Koreans, while *Now on My Way to Meet You* does not completely cut this content, it employs strategic "smoothing" strategies to ensure that the show's content is still palatable to its audience. For example, one of the most central topics of discussion on episode 393 is the challenges of North Korean men adjusting to South Korean society. One of these "challenges" is dating; Jun Hyeok informs the audience that it has been difficult for him to find a girlfriend in South Korea. He fears their reaction when he "comes out" as North Korean. The hosts encourage Jun Hyeok that he is a wonderful person and that no good person would care that he was born in North Korea, but Jun Hyeok corrects them; he tells them of his experience visiting his girlfriend's home be greeted by the suspicious stares of her reluctant parents. His girlfriend's parents told him, "You are North Korean…" Though the hosts try to reassure Jun Hyeok that this comment is not necessarily derogatory, Jun Hyeok again corrects the hosts: "No, that word, 'North Korean person,' held greater meanings." Later in the episode, a segment focused on "duty," a trait that the migrants identified as a central aspect of North

Korean male culture, brings attention to another North Korean migrant, Lee Wui Ryeok. The hosts and migrants identify Wui Ryeok as the most "dutiful" member of the cast and begin to tell stories of how kind and hard-working Wui Ryeok is. As Wui Ryeok responds to these comments, he explains through tears that he works three jobs in South Korea to make ends meet; his life in South Korea is not an idealistic fantasy, but one of struggle and hardship. Nam Hui Seok follows up Wui Ryeok's speech to implore the audience to show kindness towards North Korean migrants, referring both to Wui Ryeok's speech and the controversial comments of the middle-aged migrants Choi Jung Ho and Lee Myong Ho earlier in the taping: "Today these individuals have said many self-deprecating things, but I wonder if these things are not just areas that we will have to work harder to understand and accept. I believe that reunification is not too far off." When North Korean migrants such as Jun Hyeok speak out "too much" and highlight issues that might disrupt the show's harmonious tone, the South Korean host must smooth over this moment of disruption by asking the audience to tolerate migrants' differences.

Migrants' voices are ultimately limited to *Now on My Way to Meet You*'s political messaging and framework. Moreover, despite producers' belief that including male migrants would balance the show's gendered power dynamic, *Now on My Way to Meet You* still reflects a patriarchal ordering of gender, voice, and agency. When male migrants first joined the show in 2013, these migrants stood as serious "experts" of North Korean politics and society; the female migrants, on the other hand, were still largely portrayed as "cute," pretty, and "fun." Though *Now on My Way to Meet You* has added male migrants who engage in "funny" interactions with the hosts, the hosts still treat male migrants as more authoritative sources regarding "serious" topics such as politics and society than their female counterparts (Choo 2018). Indeed, *Now on My Way to Meet You* has added male migrants, young and old, as well as older female migrants;

however, young female migrants are still beautiful objects who provide insight into "daily life" topics such as culture and trends as opposed to politics. For example, though female migrants have dominated the cast since 2011, it was not a female migrant who became the first "unofficial expert" of North Korea; rather, it was Jun Hyeok. As I discussed previously, these "migrant beauties" are less sexualized than the female migrants of *Now on My Way to Meet You*'s earlier years and there is now much less emphasis on their experiences' of trauma and victimization. However, South Korean popular media still values female youth and beauty as a commodity "which can be converted into cultural capital" (Epstein and Green 2013, 6). As writer Jang told me during our interview, "People don't tune in to see ugly women." Within the bounds of *Now on My Way to Meet You,* female migrants' bodies remain objectified and their voices remain marginalized.

Conclusion: Negotiation and Agency in Cross-cultural Encounters

This chapter has demonstrated that *Now on My Way to Meet You* is a virtual and physical space of "encounters" between North and South Koreans, or temporally distant "Others," and the modern, dominant "We" group of South Koreans. Within these encounters, North Korean migrants and the South Korean cast and crew define South Korea as a "developed" multicultural society. Migrants' membership in South Korean society hinges upon their ability to balance their North Korean identity with their status as "modernizing" and self-developing South Korean citizens. North Korean identity occupies a liminal space between a non-threatening foreign culture and an "authentic" past Korean identity; in either case, North Koreanness as a commodifiable object of temporally distant "Otherness." This presentation of migrants' palatable "Otherness" fits into the greater framework of South Korea's "multicultural society," or a society

that organizes ethnic difference on a hierarchy relative to a South Korean standard. Thus, North Korean migrants are de-"Othered," or become familiar and acceptable, through their maintenance of temporal "Otherness." At the same time, migrants are expected to "become" fully South Korean through neoliberal self-development. Migrants' liminal identity reflects their ambiguous position in South Korea: "Others" whose terms of "Otherness" are constantly in flux as migrants and South Koreans interpret and negotiate their difference.

Most importantly, this chapter has argued that *Now on My Way to Meet You*'s structure of "encounters" wherein the migrant cast and South Korean cast and crew meet, bond, joke together, and cry together has opened space for migrants to exert agency over their representation. Migrants define themselves as North Korean-South Koreans through these cross-cultural interactions. Migrants' agency to freely express their opinions has significantly increased over the past decade as the producers have responded to shifting political and social climates and interacted with the migrants themselves. While migrants' control over their representation has expanded, nevertheless this agency is limited to the confines of *Now on My Way to Meet You*'s political messaging of multicultural harmony and South Korea's discursive framework of citizenship and gender.

These findings suggest that social context and space play a major role in the degree to which marginalized individuals can exert agency and reverse hierarchies; for example, a reality TV show such as *Now on My Way to Meet You* that focuses on the cast's familiar, funny, and human characterizations and interactions allows migrants more space to present nuanced representations of themselves than a show that focuses on "escape stories" (*Now on My Way to Meet You* (2011-2013)) or an evangelical church that asks migrants to deliver "escape testimonies." Further, these findings suggest that dialogic interactions between individuals are

more capable of representing nuanced selfhood, identity, and citizenship than "testimonials" of conversion wherein migrants coherently narrate their "escape" from North Korea to South Korea. The "self" and cultural citizenship, after all, are not fixed as a testimonial might lead us to believe; rather, they are constantly "becoming and being made" (Ong 1996).

In the next chapter, I explore a third site where North Korean migrants produce their personal narratives for public consumption: migrant-run YouTube channels. In contrast to the South Korean church space and South Korean-produced *Now on My Way to Meet You,* North Korean migrants create and maintain their YouTube channels. South Korean institutions such as churches and *Now on My Way to Meet You* ultimately appropriate migrants' personal narratives for political messaging and commercial gain. Moreover, objectification of the female body dominates mainstream South Korean media such as reality TV shows. Migrant YouTube channels, on the other hand, showcase how migrants appropriate their stories for their own gain. Analysis of migrant-run YouTube channels reveals how both female and male migrants have approached their self-representation within a societal context that demands their visibility and commodifies their difference.

Chapter 3: The Labor of Self-Representation in North Korean Migrant YouTube Channels

The YouTube channels of migrants such as Han Song Yi, Kang Nara, Son Bom Hyang, Jeong Seong San, and Kim Gil Sun have garnered hundreds of thousands of subscribers and millions of views over the past few years.[25] The videos of these "escapee Youtubers" (*t'albukcha yutubŏ)* range from escape stories (*t'albuk sŭt'ori*), discussions of North and South Korean politics, to daily "vlogs" (video log), make-up tutorials, *mokbangs,* and live-streams where migrants directly interact with their audience.[26] "Escapee YouTubers" employ and commodify "North Koreanness" to build online followings and generate revenue. On one hand, the growing collection of "escapee YouTube channels" exemplifies how migrants work within hegemonic paradigms of knowledge to present their South Korean audience a palatable version of an "Other," North Korea. On the other hand, these channels allow North Koreans to assert control over how their stories are told and, moreover, reap the social and monetary benefits of their public representation.

This chapter analyzes how North Korean migrants have approached the work of self-representation on YouTube, crafting and commodifying palatable versions of "self" for their viewers. I focus on video-blog (vlog) channels that use North Koreanness as a starting point to provide personality-driven content, including migrants' "escape stories," opinion videos, daily vlogs, and "educational" content about North Korea. I conceptualize migrants' self-representations, or their creation and commodification of personality-based content, as a form

25 While there are many more YouTube channels run by North Korean migrants, these channels stand out as particularly popular. Their subscriber counts are as follows: Han Song Yi (HanSongYi TV), 120,000; Kang Nara (*Nolsae* Nara TV) 113,000; Jeong Seong San (Jeong Seong San TV), 283,000; Kim Gil Sun (Kim Gil Sun's Everything about Pyongyang), 60,000. To see other examples of popular "escapee YouTubers," you can search "탈북자 유튜버" in YouTube and many will appear.

26 "*Mokbangs*" are pre-recorded videos or live-streams wherein individuals film themselves eating large amounts of food to simulate having a meal "with" their audience.

of labor. The "labor" of self-representation entails migrants deliberate crafting of palatable versions of "self" that appeal to their South Korean viewers. This analysis shows that migrants' "palatable" and commercialized "selves" are both intriguingly "Other," or North Korean, and ardently patriotic "New-Settler" South Korean citizens. Moreover, the contours of these commercialized "selves" are highly gendered; both female and male migrant YouTubers emphasize their "cuteness" (*aegyo)* to enhance the commercial value of their self-representation. While "cuteness" sexualizes female migrants, male migrants' "cuteness" softens and demilitarizes North Korean male representation. Through representing themselves as gendered North Korean "Others," migrants profit from South Koreans' desire to virtually consume palatable, non-threatening representations of North Korea; by staying within the bounds of South Korean patriotism, migrants remain legitimate constituencies in South Korea.

The implications of migrant YouTubers' commercialization of an "Other"-ed yet patriotic "selves" are multiple and ambiguous. On one hand, because migrants commodify their self-representations, the conditions and contours of these representations are inherently tied to what their South Korean viewers will find appealing and thus "subscribe" to. North Korean migrants' "palatable selves" must be both North Korean and South Korean, "cute" but not overly sexual, and "authentic" and sincere while still light-hearted. Thus, migrants' agency to produce and craft their representations on "their own terms," outside of hegemonic South Korean gender and citizenship, is contentious. Moreover, when "telling your story" becomes a livelihood, Marx (1932) would argue that the storyteller becomes alienated from this product. Because this product is a representation of "self," this alienation becomes a loss of humanity.

However, I counter this viewpoint to argue that North Korean migrants' self-representation on YouTube is agentive, representing avenues for nuanced self-expression as

migrants engage in dialogic interactions with their audience members and negotiate their representations through these interactions. Migrants' commodified representations certainly showcase a problematic condition for their legitimacy as subjects in South Korea: performing palatable "Otherness" while reaffirming South Korea's national superiority through patriotism. However, as migrant YouTubers engage in dialogue with their viewers through comments and videos, they challenge stereotypes and complicate South Koreans' understanding of North Koreans. Drawing from the theories of critical pedagogy that argue knowledge should be produced and contested outside of traditional hegemonic institutions, YouTube is a space wherein diverse individuals create and consume new "knowledge" (Friere 1970, Giroux 1992, Kellner and Kim 2010). A democratized platform such as YouTube allows "knowledge" production to become a process of creation, dialogue, and negotiation wherein diverse individuals negotiate their worldviews in contestation with those of "Others." A platform such as YouTube where ostensibly anyone can create and publish content allows traditionally marginalized individuals such as North Korean migrants to "deploy new media technologies to construct and publish their political…" and, as I argue, social and personal " ...agendas" (Kellner and Kim 2010). Though migrants do not upturn hegemonic constructions of commercialized gender and patriotic citizenship, they do work within these constructions to challenge stereotypes, present their worldviews, and sustain their livelihoods in South Korea.

I approach this topic by first providing an overview of my research methods and theoretical framework. Then, I analyze how North Korean migrant YouTubers approach the work of self-representation between intriguing "Others" and patriotic citizens in videos of popular "escapee YouTubers": Han Song Yi, Kang Nara, Lee So Yul, Heo Jun, Tango (Jang Myung Jin), and Yoo Seong. I discuss how migrant YouTubers commodify their self-

representations in regard to cultural identity, citizenship, and gender. I then move my attention towards the interactive nature of these YouTube channels and how migrants engage in dialogic interactions with viewers that redefine the boundaries of South Korea to include North Korean migrants. Through these interactions, migrants challenge viewers' stereotypes and conceptualizations of North Korean people. I conclude with a discussion of the benefits and potential losses associated with migrant YouTubers' transactional self-representations.

Methodology and Theoretical Framework

This chapter depends on my analysis of North Korean migrant YouTube channels, or "escapee YouTuber" (*t'albukcha yutubŏ)* channels. I discovered these channels through my conversations with Oksim, a North Korean migrant whom I discuss in this thesis' introduction and first chapter. While asking Oksim for her opinions on the TV show *Now on My Way to Meet You,* Oksim suggested that I look into "escapee YouTuber" channels as these would show migrants' "unmediated" perspectives. After speaking with Oksim, I searched "escapee YouTubers" and found that there are multiple North Korean migrant YouTubers producing and publishing content related to North Korea on YouTube. These YouTube channels do not just include migrant "vlog" channels, on which I focus my analysis. I discovered that there are also migrant-run YouTube channels dedicated to discussing politics and society, educational channels that feature structured interviews with migrants about their experiences in North Korea, and evangelical migrant-run YouTube channels, to name a few. The migrants who run these channels are not just young women and men; there are also channels run by older male and female migrants as well as channels run by both female and male YouTubers of multiple generations. I focus on the "vlog" channels of North Korean migrants in their twenties and

thirties because these are significantly more popular than other migrant-run channels in terms of viewership and notoriety.[27] Moreover, "vlog" channels represent a turn from traditional North Korean migrant representation that largely focus on "escapee stories;" migrant vlog channels also include videos about their thoughts, opinions, and daily lives. Finally, "vlog" channels evidence how North Korean migrants create affective self-representations to appeal to their audiences. Through analysis of "vlog" channels that hinge upon the creation of affect and intimacy between the vlogger and audience, we can understand how some migrants have gone about the work of commodifying palatable, edited, yet "authentic" representations of "self" to viewers. Therefore, I analyze migrant vloggers' self-representations and pay particular attention to how North Koreanness, South Koreanness, and gender manifest in vloggers' videos.

I conceptualize migrants' production and commodification of "self" as labor; this enables us to more clearly understand how migrants' "stories" and "selves" function as products. Migrants produce and exchange their self-representations for monetary profit and popularity. Thus, migrants' "self-representations" are commodities that transform into monetary and cultural capital. Moreover, conceptualizing migrants' production of self-representations as labor enables us to make sense of how North Korean migrants negotiate the transactional nature of their self-representations, finding ways to "regulating capitalism from within" (Hochschild 2011, 32). I discuss this negotiation as well as the potential "gains" and "losses" of commodified identity in the conclusion of this chapter.

[27] There are a few newspaper articles in major English-speaking news sources that explore "North Korean defector YouTube Stars." For example, see Na Young Kim and Dasl Yoon's article "A New Generation of North Korean Defectors Become YouTube Stars" in *The Wall Street Journal,* published August 27, 2019 (https://www.wsj.com/articles/a-new-generation-of-north-korean-defectors-become-youtube-stars-11566919074) and *The New York Press* article "North Korea refugees use YouTube to reveal life inside Hermit Kingdom," published September 26, 2019 (https://nypost.com/2019/09/26/north-korea-refugees-use-youtube-to-reveal-life-inside-hermit-kingdom/).

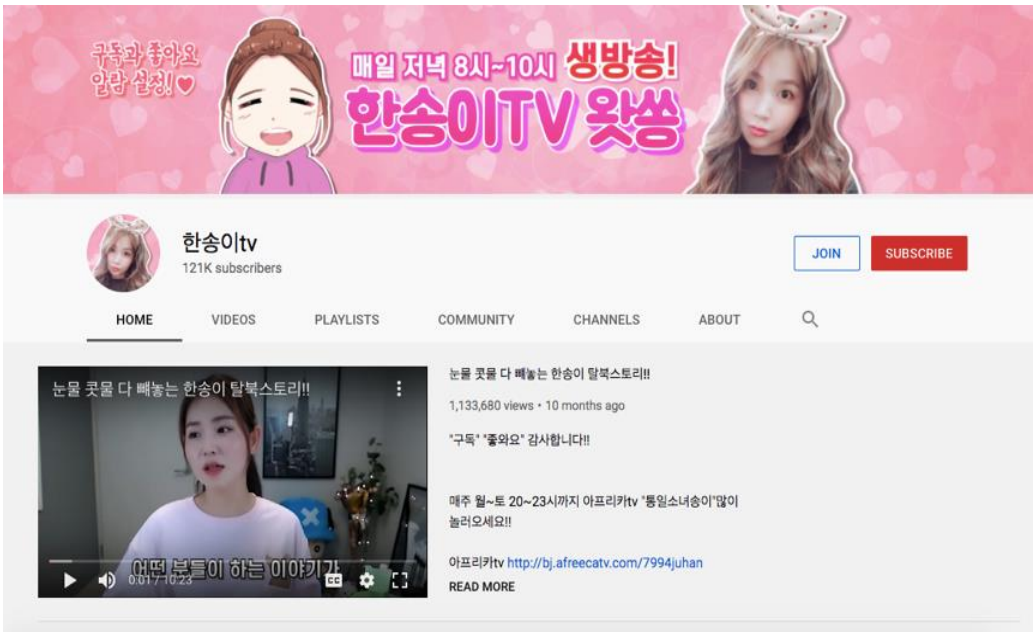
I turn to theories of critical pedagogy to describe YouTube's significant potential as a tool for North Korean migrants to combat their marginalization. Critical pedagogy strives for the ‘‘action of dialogical Subjects upon reality in order to transform it .... [by] posing reality as a problem’’ (Freire 1970, 168). Paulo Freire argued that meaningful education must pose problems, question hegemonic structures of knowledge and power, and root from individuals' subjective experiences and understanding of the world. As individuals engage in dialogue, presenting and interrogating each other's viewpoints, they can overturn hierarchical structures of power and knowledge. As North Korean migrants use YouTube to present their perspectives, opinions, and narratives, they become the producers of knowledge around North Korea and North Koreans. South Korean institutions and paradigms of citizenship have shaped North Korean migrants' perception and representation. As North Korean migrants gain a platform to voice their perspective and experiences, they "acquire their own voices in the politics of representations as the prerequisite of critical human agency for further social emancipation" (Kellner and Kim 2010, 13).

Palatable "Otherness"

A glance at the YouTube channel homepage of the most popular migrant vloggers reveals the defining characteristics of the "escapee YouTube" genre: combinations of content related to North Korean culture, society, and daily life alongside personality-driven content such as *mokbangs*, daily vlogs, and videos reacting to popular trends or media. North Korean migrant "vloggers" strategically market their North Korean identity in order to attract viewers, subscribers, and "likes." Both male and female vloggers favor a "cute" aesthetic, though the appeal to "cuteness" produces different effects. While female vloggers' "cuteness" sexualizes the

vlogger, male vloggers' "cuteness" serves to "soften" the image of North Korean masculinity to South Korean viewers. Both cases demonstrate a colonial dynamic wherein South Korean viewers consume palatable, nonthreatening versions of the "Other," North Korea. In the case of women, the "Other" is sexualized for South Korean visual consumption; in the case of men, the "Other" must be demilitarized so as not to threaten South Korea's masculine dominance.

With over 121,000 subscribers and a total view count of more than 16.7 million views, Han Song Yi and her YouTube channel *Han Song Yi TV* is one of the most popular "escapee YouTubers." Song Yi's "About" page introduces her channel as such: "The content that you are curious about— North Korea, *mukbang*, "*yabang*" (vlogs of the female YouTubers "going out" at night), videos about my dog, travel videos; I will bring you a variety of topics and content ^^".



Screenshot of "Han Song Yi TV" YouTube Channel

Song Yi's choice of videos to represent her channel on her "homepage" reveals her leveraging of North Koreanness as her method of attracting viewers. The video Han Song Yi has chosen to

represent her channel plays automatically after clicking on *Han Song Yi TV*: “My *t’albuk* (escape) story that will make you cry until your nose runs!" The first category of videos under her main video, “Main Uploads,” includes videos that cover “hot topics” related to North Korea. Song Yi’s videos range from “Marrying a North Korean migrant???”, to “Good North Korean food vs. Bad North Korean Food,” to “Song Yi’s final reactions to *Crash Landing on You*” (a popular South Korean romantic TV series about a North Korean soldier and South Korean business mogul). These North-Korea related videos entice viewers to click on the videos with titles that promise to “wow” viewers with surprising or shocking content; for example, “North Korea’s crazy system,” “A North Korean’s Reaction to South Korean protests???” and “The *real* reaction of a North Korean watching South Korean performances.” The overwhelming majority of Han Song Yi’s video titles denote that she is North Korean; this implies that, rather than a discussion topic, simply being North Korean is one of Song Yi’s most marketable characteristics.

Han Song Yi’s other most marketable characteristic is her brand of flirtatious, youthful “cuteness.” Song Yi’s icon is a picture of her tilted head donning a large, pink bow with her lips pouted, surrounded by pink hearts. Many of Han Song Yi’s “thumbnails,” or pictures that represent YouTube videos, include close-up images of Song Yi pouting or smiling at the camera. Moreover, Song Yi does not just upload edited videos to YouTube; she, like many female migrant “vloggers,” has a channel on the Korean website AfreecaTV where she live-streams herself for two hours each day. Song Yi promotes these live-streams on her YouTube channel and uploads recordings of live-streams after they air. Song Yi performs songs, dances songs such as the “Gummy Bear song,” and answers questions from her viewers as they directly send her sums of money. The usernames of Song Yi’s viewers indicate that the majority are male, and Song Yi refers to herself as “*noona*,” or “older sister,” during her live-streaming. Song Yi

answers viewers' questions about whether or not she has a boyfriend and if she will marry a Korean man; for example, in one live-stream I observed, many viewers left comments asking, "Will you be my girlfriend?" and saying, "Song Yi *noona* is so pretty." Song Yi playfully responded to these comments, "Oh, thank you!" while making heart signs with her fingers. If viewers send her money, she will also make heart says and respond in a baby-like voice, "Thank you!" Song Yi's live streams clearly accentuate a gendered dynamic wherein Song Yi presents a sexualized, "cute," "child"-like version of herself and the mostly male viewers send her money in return.

North Koreanness and gendered "cuteness" are central tenets of migrants' channels, marketing, and content. When one clicks on the channel of Kang Nara, another migrant vlogger with over 113,000 subscribers and 7.9 million total views on her channel, the viewer will immediately see a banner and main video that points out Nara's North Korean background. The slogan of Kang Nara's channel is written in front of a cartoon image of herself in a traditional *hanbok* in front of the Juche Tower in Pyongyang, North Korea: "The escaped North Korean beauty, Let's Play Nara." Underneath this banner, a video plays of Nara wearing a North Korean soldier's costume; Nara solutes the camera and formally greets the audience in an exaggerated North Korean accent: "Hello everyone!" Nara then mentions that she borrowed the soldier costume for today's videos and proceeds to explain that she will be doing her daily make-up routine for the audience.

Screenshot of Kang Nara's "transformation" into North Korean soldier (Source: YouTube)

Nara comments that she hopes the viewers don't think it's silly that she is bearing a North Korean military uniform costume; she thus makes it clear that her "uniform" is a costume, and her hundreds of other videos show that she does not normally wear North Korean clothing or speak in a North Korean accent. When another YouTuber, "Dave," asks Nara why she does not have a North Korean accent in a collaboration video, Nara tells him that she does not want to face people's negative stereotypes regarding North Koreans in her daily life. Moreover, she tells him that her accent "naturally faded" over the years she has lived in South Korea. Her "North Korean accent" and "uniform" are not expressions of her everyday life, but rather "accessories" she uses to entertain her YouTube audience. Moreover, Nara adds effects to her video that emphasize her "cuteness," adding pink spots to her cheeks to signify laughter or embarrassment. A playful, childish jingle plays in the background of her "title sequence," or an introduction that plays at the beginning of each of her videos. Kang Nara combines her North Koreanness with "cuteness" to market herself to her audience.

Tango TV, a migrant vlogger with 35,000 subscribers and 3.5 million views on his channel, employs the same tactic of marketing his North Korean identity: his channel name is "North Korean man, Tango!" and he greets the audience with, "I'm glad to see you, comrades!", intentionally using the word "comrade" to emulate how North Koreans refer to each other.[28] Tango tells his audience that he would not normally speak in a North Korean accent or use North Korean phrases; however, he still does this in order to entertain his YouTube audience. For Tango, his "North Koreanness" is a central part of his personal "brand." Tango combines his "North Koreanness" with "cute" and "funny" editing to create an image of himself as a lovable, funny, and non-threatening representation of North Korea. In Tango's "title sequence," a clip plays of Tango holding a teddy bear and waving it at the audience. In Tango's videos, he uses special effects to add humor and "cuteness" to his statements and actions. For example, in his video, "Things that North Koreans are afraid of in South Korea!", he opens with a shot of himself "punching" the audience, though his "punches" are accompanied by "cute" popping sounds and animated lightning bolts. Similar to Tango, migrant YouTuber Yoo Sung presents himself as "cute," funny, and distinctly non-threatening on his channel "North Korean man." With 50,000 subscribers and almost 3 million total views, Yoo Sung is another representative male migrant vlogger. Yoo Sung's main video begins with him dancing in his chair and singing a famous North Korean song, "It's so good to meet you, comrades!" while the song plays in the background.[29] After this, Yoo Sung introduces himself as "the North Korean man who is as soft as a feather." Yoo Sung's content, like the other migrant vloggers, centers around North Korea but also branches out to include vlogs. Yoo Sung, like Tango, presents himself as cute, likable,

28 "*Pan'gapsŭmnida tongmudŭ!"*

29 The name of this song is, "*Pan'gapsŭmnida,*" and a recording of this song can be found: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8sFz9MONoSE

funny, and "soft." As Eun Ah Cho (2018) noted, "harshness" and militarization have dominated South Korean media images of North Korean masculinity until the past decade. Yoo Sung and Tango's use of "cuteness" and humor to represent themselves defies South Korean stereotypes regarding North Korean men, eliminating distance and creating intimacy between the men and their viewers.

Maintaining Legitimate Citizenship

The intriguing "Otherness" of North Korea is a central appeal of migrant YouTubers' content, and migrants base the majority of their videos on their knowledge of North Korea. However, migrants also clarify that they are not actually that "Other" by showcasing their South Korean patriotism to the audience. Migrants claim South Korean citizenship through their language, discussions, and perspective on North Korea. This showcases a problematic dynamic wherein North Korean migrants must balance their commodified representatives of "Otherness" with their alliance to South Korean hegemony in order to remain appealing to their audience and appear as legitimate constituencies in South Korea. As Han Song Yi says in the first seconds of the main video on her channel:

> Some people in South Korea keep saying, "Hell Joseon, hell Joseon," but I want to tell you that the real "Hell Joseon" is North Korea! Our country (South Korea) is really livable! In North Korea, there are many people who live constantly worried about what they are going to eat for their next meal! I hope that you all take the time to reflect on your life and think more positively!

In this quote, as in all of Song Yi's videos, when Song Yi refers to "our country" she is speaking of South Korea. Though Song Yi's channel is predicated on her ability to represent and embody North Korea to her South Korean audience, she makes it clear that she is South Korean and views South Korea as her country. While "our country" is "like heaven" and a land of "freedom," North Korea is a "hell" from which Song Yi escaped. Song Yi expresses her South Korean citizenship through her deep love for her new "homeland," South Korea.

The root of North Korea's reprehensibility is unclear from Song Yi's content; it is only clear that North Korea is invariably inferior while South Korea is superior. This highlights how Song Yi's main concern is not to provide a detailed critique of the North Korean system but is rather to show Song Yi's acknowledgement to her audience that South Korea is the "better" Korea. In her video, "How do the top 1% of North Korean society live??" Song Yi focuses five of the video's six minutes on the "ridiculous" displays of wealth from North Korea's top 1%, of whom Song Yi's aunt was one. Song Yi admits, however, that she too was from a well-off background in North Korea. However, she quickly follows this up and concludes the video by saying, "But, to be honest, I think that the poorest of the poor in South Korea are far better off than North Korea's 1%! At least they can eat without oppression or suppression. There is no oppression or suppression in South Korea! But what about North Korea?" Song Yi's videos do not describe any experiences of "oppression or suppression;" rather, these things are presumed to be undeniable facts agreed upon by all regarding North Korea. Instead of explaining what "oppression" North Koreans in the 1% face, Song Yi continues, "How bad must it be [in North Korea] if even members of the 1% are escaping to South Korea?" She concludes the videos by asking her viewers to live positive lives and to click "subscribe" and "like" her video.

Criticizing North Korea and praising South Korea is a common thread among North Korean migrant vloggers. In Tango TV's most watched YouTube video, "Three Things North Korea is Better than South Korea," the three reasons that Tango lists as why North Korea is "better" than South Korea are: the air in North Korea is better, you don't need to exercise in North Korea, and people have "offline" hobbies. Tango explains that the air is "better" in North Korea because the country has very few cars and an underdeveloped transportation system. According to Tango, people do not need to exercise in North Korea because, no matter where people go, they walk there because they do not have public transportation or cars. Finally, people have "offline" hobbies like fighting because there are no electronic devices and people cannot use the internet. Meanwhile, the "pitiful" people in "our country," South Korea, have to drive everywhere in fancy cars, have a transportation system that "takes you anywhere you want to go in the whole country, and are consumed by their state-of-the-art cell-phones. Tango concludes by saying, "Are you confused about if these are good things or bad things? Let's just say they're good…" Through this satirical commentary, Tango communicates to his viewers that North Korea is so inferior that its best qualities are laughable in comparison to South Korea.

Playing with Representation and Defying Expectations

While migrants affirm their likeness to their South Korean audiences through nationalism and reify a hierarchical divide between the two Koreas, they also transgress against conventions of seriousness and gravity around "escape stories" by approaching "serious" topics in a light-hearted, irreverent manner. This showcases how North Korean migrants disrupt stereotypes surrounding North Korean migrants. For example, in Han Song Yi's most popular video, "My escape story that will make you cry until your nose runs!," Song Yi defies the genre conventions

of the "escape story" (*t'albuk sŭt'ori*) to tell her story through light-hearted editing and with her personal brand of *aegyo,* or "cuteness." Typically, "escape stories" reflect a non-religious version of "escape testimony," which I discussed in chapter 1. "Escape stories" are conventionally a serious matter, as they detail migrants' experiences of hardship and trauma while "escaping" the "ruthless" regime of North Korea. Song Yi, however, does not tell a story of hardship; instead, Song Yi energetically tells her story alongside humorous editing meant to highlight Song Yi's "cuteness," adding animated figures to illustrate her points. Song Yi does not tell her audience stories of starvation; on the contrary, Song Yi states that her reason for defecting was because she saw the hit Korean drama *Heirs* (2013). As she watched the two main characters ride in a sports car alongside the ocean, she thought: "I couldn't possibly watch this and not defect." As Song Yi excitedly explains that her reason for defecting was because of the many Korean dramas she watched while in North Korea, little figures with famous Korean drama actors' heads pop onto the screen alongside wacky sound effects meant to amuse and entertain the viewers. In spite of the video's title, there is no clear moment in her "escape story" when Song Yi attempts to elicit the audience's tears or sadness by displaying her own emotion or adding affective music. On the contrary, Song Yi's story sharply contrasts tear-jerking church testimonies or *Now on My Way to Meet You'*s dramatic "escape stories." Song Yi's story is comedic and light-hearted, altogether defying conventions of "escape stories." Many of the "top comments," or comments that have received the most likes from viewers, on this video criticize Song Yi's irreverence: "I can't believe she is talking about "escape" so brightly…" Two videos later, however, Song Yi responds to such comments with another video entitled, "The pain that I have been holding in for a long time." Though the thumbnail of this video includes Song Yi seemingly crying, the first half of this video is Song Yi filming herself eating a meal in a

mokbang format. In the last minute of the video, she says to the audience, "There is something I've been hiding from you all for a long time… I am having surgery for hemorrhoids." All of the top comments for this video are the responses of shocked and amused viewers; as one viewer write, "I thought this would be about your parents in North Korea or something about North Korea haha (kk)." Song Yi disrupts the convention of both "escape story" and the pain and suffering many South Koreans expect North Korean migrants to have undergone.

Many other migrant YouTubers also genre-bend by bringing up serious topics in a light-hearted, playful manner. Like Tango's video I previously discussed, Heo Jun also has a video regarding "Why North Korea is better than South Korea," for example, the reasons they choose include transportation, cars, exercise, no electricity, and no food waste. These videos do not just evidence the migrants' South Korean patriotism; they also showcase how Tango and Heo Jun approach typically "serious" topics through light-hearted satire. The YouTubers use these topics to address food scarcity, lack of adequate infrastructure in North Korea, and energy shortages; all of which are serious issues in North Korea. However, in both videos the migrants choose to discuss these topics satirically with upbeat music playing in the background. By bringing up these topics through satire, migrants undermine the topics' gravity and seriousness; furthermore, migrants defy the perception of them as passive, helpless victims. As I discussed in the introduction of this thesis, since the presidential administration of Lee Myung Bak (2008-2013), one of the dominant South Korean perceptions of North Korean migrants is that North Koreans are damaged victims who the South Korean state must protect as a global proponent of human rights. As such, many South Koreans might expect migrants to approach topics related to North Korea's alleged "under-development" with grave seriousness. Moreover, for many years, North Korean migrants in mainstream media met this expectation; while the migrant "heroes" of the

1960s and 70s delivered anti-communist lectures to audiences across the country, the "refugee" migrants of the 2000s came to South Korea with stories of hardship, starvation, and suffering. South Korean institutions such as the government, churches, and even reality TV shows such as *Now on My Way to Meet You* during its first two years (2011-2013) propagated migrants' heart-wrenching "escape stories" for political purposes. Migrant YouTubers, however, flip this convention on its head as they discuss "escape" through light-hearted satire.

Moreover, migrant YouTubers directly respond to discrimination against North Koreans through videos wherein migrants respond to hateful comments from viewers. These videos both combat stereotypes and reaffirm migrants' status as rightful South Korean citizens. Hate comments similarly target migrants' North Korean background: "Go back to your country!", "Why did you 'escape'?", "Just go back!", "Commie!" (*ppalgaengi*). In the hate-response video of Tango and Lee So Yol (another migrant YouTuber with over 60,000 subscribers), Tango and So Yol both tell the audience: "You guys, we have no place to go. South Korea is our country now." Tango and So Yol tell the viewers that North Korean migrants are, in fact, South Korean; Tango and So Yul explain to the audience that such comments are deeply hurtful. They request their viewers to be sympathetic towards North Korean migrants. Heo Jun, another YouTuber with 170,000 subscribers, reminds his audience that North Koreans migrants are the most "patriotic" South Korean citizens in his hate-response video: "North Korean migrants are extremely patriotic! I love this country very much." Heo Jun convinces the audience of both his and all migrants' identification with South Korean identity. Heo Jun, Tango, and So Yol use their platform to tell their viewers that they, along with all North Korean migrants, are legitimate subjects in South Korea.

Though migrant vloggers do not focus their entire content on eradicating stereotypes or combatting discrimination, their channels' popularity enables them to address hate against North Korean migrants "on the side" while their normal content remains vlogs and funny videos. However, even migrants' vlogs, *mokbangs*, and humorous videos inadvertently combat stereotypes against North Korean migrants. Over the years, dominant perceptions of North Korean migrants have included that migrants are lazy, ignorant, and backwards (Choo 2006, 2014). Scholars have documented South Koreans' perception of North Koreans as threatening or "under-developed" "Others" (Choo 2006, Choo 2014, Chung 2008, Jung 2014, Lankov 2006). Migrant YouTubers lessen the distance between themselves and South Koreans by inviting their South Korean viewers to "a look" into migrants' "daily lives." In "vlogs," migrants take viewers along with them during their daily tasks such as going to the store, eating, cleaning their houses, applying make-up, and playing with their dogs. Vlogging invents a virtual two-way relationship between the vlogger and the viewer; the viewer not only "meets" the vlogger, the viewer develops a sense of intimacy with the vlogger as the vlogger shares with the viewer daily life's mundane moments. For example, While Han Song Yi, Lee So Yol, and Son Bom Hyang regularly upload *mokbang* videos where they "eat" with the viewers; Heo Jun, So Yol, and Song Yi upload "daily vlogs" wherein they film themselves doing their daily tasks or traveling; Nara, uploads makeup tutorial videos and vlogs wherein she describes her favorite makeup products. By producing such "daily life" vlogs, migrant vloggers lessen the distance between themselves and their South Korean viewers.

As North Korean migrants produce content that focuses on their subjective experiences, thoughts, and opinions, they disrupt and reshape paradigms around migrants' public representation. As Freire (1970) argued, hegemonic structures of knowledge and power can only

be disrupted as individuals engage in dialogue with each other, presenting and contesting each other's viewpoints and experiences to interrogate "reality." North Korean migrants' production of content wherein they present their experiences and opinions invites viewers to question their perceptions of North Korea and North Korean people. In addition, as I described in this chapter's "methods" section, young, "cute" migrant vloggers are not the only North Korean voices on YouTube; there are both female and male North Korean migrants of many different backgrounds and ages. As narratives around "North Koreanness" multiply, the public's understanding of North Korean people and identity becomes more nuanced. Moreover, as North Korean migrants respond to hateful comments from viewers, combatting stereotypes and asserting their right to belong in South Korea, they engage in dialogue that rewrites hegemonic perceptions of South Korean cultural citizenship. As migrant YouTubers gain more popularity in terms of viewership, their authority over their representation increases. Thus, YouTube can ultimately give migrants a platform to speak against discrimination and approach hateful commenters from a position of power.

Conclusions: Labor, Commodification, and Estrangement of "Self"

North Korean migrants' YouTube channels have indisputably opened space for migrants' representation to become more nuanced, multiple, and negotiable. As North Korean migrants produce content that dialogues with and even challenges South Korean viewers, migrants complicate paradigms around North Korea and North Korean identity. As Kellner and Kim (2010) observed, the internet has opened up remarkable possibilities for members of marginalized groups to challenge hegemonic structures of knowledge and power. However, Kellner and Kim also predicted that, if individuals' representations on YouTube become overly

commercialized, the claws of capitalism would inevitably subsume individuals' voices and agency as they succumb to capitalism's seduction (Kellner and Kim 2010, 30).

To Kellner and Kim's dismay, North Korean migrants' self-representations on YouTube are, indeed, commodified. For Han Song Yi, Tango, Kang Nara, Lee So Yol, and many others, YouTube and live-broadcasting on AfreecaTV are migrants' primary sources of income. However, I argue that their self-representations are still agentive. North Korean migrants' self-representation is deliberate and strategic *work*; migrants craft and commodify versions of themselves that appeal to viewers, balancing and selling their representations on their own terms. Migrant YouTubers create the images of North Koreanness that they want to produce and are not afraid to counter the opinions of their South Korean viewers. Moreover, though migrants do not completely upturn stereotypes against them or hegemonic constructions of citizenship, migrants use their representations for their own purposes. Through commodifying their "selves," migrants sustain their livelihoods in South Korea, transforming their palatable "Otherness" into monetary and cultural capital. Through adhering to South Korean nationalism, migrants argue for their right to belong in South Korea.

Moreover, I further argue that migrant YouTubers' commodification of a literally-edited "self" is not simply a process of Marxist alienation; rather, North Korean migrants navigate their market relations "from within," employing "mechanism of defense" that regulate their detachment from "precious symbols of self" (Hochschild 2011, 32). Migrants make meaning of their transactional representation by arguing that their content is "educational" for South Koreans who wish to learn about North Korea. "Escapee YouTubers," including Han Song Yi, Tango, and Kang Nara argue that their content humanizes North Korea and North Korean

migrants to their mostly South Korean viewers.[30] In a social context wherein South Koreans are hungry for representations of the North Korean "Other," migrant YouTubers meet this demand while also challenging stereotypes, defying the expectations, and carving their "rightful" place in South Korea's societal fabric.

[30] Na Young Kim and Dasl Yoon, "A New Generation of North Korean Defectors Become YouTube Stars," *The Wall Street Journal,* August 27, 2019, https://www.wsj.com/articles/a-new-generation-of-north-korean-defectors-become-youtube-stars-11566919074

Conclusion

Throughout this thesis, I have explored how North Korean migrants' approach the work of self-representation within multiple contexts and influences. North Korean migrants produce their self-representations into pre-existing paradigms of knowledge around North Korea, North-South Korean migration, and expressions of gender. North Korean migrants do not overtly upturn hegemonic constructions of gender, nationhood, and citizenship; rather, they find creative ways to work within and outside of these frameworks to assert themselves as agentive subjects within their social contexts. When necessary, they are traumatized refugees and righteously mobile church-members; at times, migrants are lovable "characters," and occasionally "cute" and comedic influencers. Further, migrants work within South Korea's discursive citizenship to establish themselves as producers of knowledge, bearers of cultural capital, and "rightful" South Korean citizens. Migrants manage and balance their liminal identities as "Others" and South Koreans "in the making" to their benefit, traversing across identities to establish themselves as North Korean-South Koreans and transnational subjects.

Migrants' produce and commodify their self-representations in dialogue with not only discursive gender and citizenship, but also South Koreans. This thesis suggests that, as North and South Koreans engage in dialogic interactions and exchanges, definitions of citizenship and identity are in constant flux and negotiation. My findings illuminate the fluid nature of power and agency between individuals and institutions, particularly in the case of a marginalized minority community such as North Korean migrants. North Korean migrants' public stories of escape and migration cannot be separated from the hegemonic constructions of national belonging that dictate their acceptance into South Korean society. At times, migrants' stories certainly affirm South Korean nationalism and ethnic superiority; however, migrants' stories also

defy these discourses and rewrite them to suit their needs. As Foucault told us, “Discourses are not once and for all subservient to power or raised up against it… We must make allowances for the complex and unstable process whereby a discourse can be both an instrument and an effect of power, but also a hindrance, a stumbling point of resistance and a starting point for an opposing strategy. Discourse transmits and produces power; it reinforces it, but also undermines and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart” (Foucault 1976, 101-102). South Korean notions of national belonging are not a centralized, incontestable force; rather, minority individuals subjectively interpret and rewrite discourses of national belonging as they interact with other individuals and institutions. As more members of marginalized groups gain access to platforms for representation and narratives multiply, migrants challenge relations of power and hierarchies of knowledge. After all, the nation is a community constituted by the imaginings and participation of individual subjects, and stories are tools through which individuals constitute the nation and themselves as subjects.

This thesis has shown that North Koreans’ self-representations are closely tied to South Korean perceptions of North Koreans and North Korea, and this perception has shifted significantly over the past decades in response to social and political change. Until the 2000s, South Korean viewed North Korean migrants as evidence of South Korea’s ideological superiority over North Korea. Migrants demonstrated South Korean capitalism and evangelicalism’s superiority through their testimonies. Since the mid-2000s, however, South Korean “multicultural” policy has attempted to reshape perception of North Koreans and incorporate them into the discursive formation of multicultural society. Thus, migrants’ representations are largely limited to South Korea’s definitions of acceptable “multicultural” citizenship. Migrants’ representation of their North Korean background can be intriguingly

"Other," but they cannot be threatening or overly masculine. This would disrupt South Korea's patriarchal construction of multicultural society, a society wherein minority cultures are "cute" and commodifiable objects ranked on a hierarchy of difference relative to the normative South Korean standard. Moreover, gender plays a significant role in how migrants' voices are expressed, heard, and interpreted. Though the voices of female migrants have expanded and become more diverse, especially after the development of "YouTube," female migrants' representations are still highly sexualized and taken less seriously by South Koreans compared to the voices of male migrants.

Ultimately, this thesis suggests that South Korean multicultural society is not a centralized production of South Korean actors and institutions; rather, as minority individuals gain visibility, new forms of multicultural society are presented and contested that often defy "official" intentions. North Korean migrants are particularly significant actors in the current and future production of South Korean multicultural society; as Korean co-ethnics, both recognizably similar to and "Other" from native South Koreans, North Koreans complicate notions of a monolithic, homogenous Korean identity. North Koreans, along with the millions of minority individuals living in South Korea, evidence that South Korea is, in fact, "multicultural." However, official South Korean "multiculturalism" inherently propagates notions of native South Koreans' superiority. Through their stories, North Koreans are writing new discourses about "being Korean" that open the possibility for diversity, multiplicity, and heterogeneity.

Areas for Future Research

Based on my findings, a significant area for future research is to investigate how North Korean migrants approach their self-representations during their daily lives. While this thesis

focuses on migrants' public self-representations, I believe that studying how North Korean migrants negotiate their liminal identities during their daily lives in public and private spaces will bear important insight into the particularities of North Korean migrants' social positions in South Korea. As I discovered during my fieldwork, the vast majority of North Korean migrants did not, in fact, want to be interviewed. Though the non-profit organization I partnered with sent my request to hundreds of migrants, only Oksim, an individual I already knew, responded. The directors of Teach North Korean Refugees informed me that most migrants have no interest in publicly "sharing their stories;" on the contrary, migrants receive so many requests for interviews from media outlets and researchers that these requests are extremely burdensome. If researchers or media representatives wish to speak with migrants, they must pay a significant fee (on average $100 per a few hours) to do so. Moreover, researchers have noted (Song and Denny 2019) that migrants who participate in interviews often "feed" researchers what the migrants expect that the researchers are hoping to hear.

In the future, I hope to conduct research within North Korean migrant communities to better understand both migrants who choose not to "self-represent" and migrants who choose to do so. As this thesis discussed, self-representation has become a paid job for some North Korean migrants; more work needs to be done regarding the social and psychological effects of North Korean migrants' commercialized identities. I believe that Jay Song and Steven Denny's (2019) observation that North Korean migrants do not always produce "reliable" information deserves more prodding and interrogation to understand the social conditions which frame North Korean migrants' participation in media and research interviews.

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