

# AN ENCLAVE LEFT BEHIND: KOREATOWN FOR WHOM?

By Zina Fraser<sup>1</sup>

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Since cities have become defined by their global connections in the 20th century, ethnic enclaves have flourished as diasporic communities find new neighbourhoods to call home. This paper explores the evolution of ethnic enclaves over time in the context of Toronto's downtown Koreatown, formed in the second half of the 20th century. A recent shift in immigrant routes away from this area and toward the suburbs is revealed through an analysis of the decreasing population of Korean immigrants and the disappearance of community institutions in Koreatown. Consequently, it is argued that this neighbourhood has evolved from an ethnic enclave for Korean immigrants to a space of branding and consumption of Korean identity by an urban middle class.

## Introduction

In the current climate of global connectivity, widespread diaspora has become a significant variable in the shifting flows of urban life. The routes traced by immigrants from their homeland to new home countries often change from one generation to the next, and roots are continually put down in the form of community institutions (churches, clubs, community hubs) and businesses to create cultural landscapes within cities, or ethnic enclaves. This has been the case for Korean immigrants in the Toronto Census Metropolitan Area, making up 61,300 people as of 2011 (Kang, 2016, p. 44). While this population's original route to Toronto traced through downtown Koreatown in the 1960s (Brown, 2012), it has since shifted toward North York (Kang, 2016, p. 44). However, the downtown area, home to only 810 Koreans as of 2016 (City of Toronto, 2018a; City of Toronto, 2018b), is still known as Koreatown, and its signage and media narratives evoke a sense of place as such. According to Qadeer et al. (2010), an ethnic enclave necessarily comprises businesses, services, and institutions for a group of residents, creating a complete community at the neighbourhood scale (p. 317). With this in mind, the existence of a Koreatown without its Korean population raises the question of for whom this place now exists.

In the paragraphs that follow, it will become clear that since immigrant routes have shifted away from Koreatown, the area has lost its population and roots in the form of community institutions, keeping only its businesses. Despite this shift in settlement patterns, the neighbourhood's continued branding with and consumption of Korean ethnic identity demonstrate that this identity has been commodified for consumption by the middle class. In this paper, I will first discuss the route traced by Koreans through Koreatown that resulted in the establishment of an ethnic enclave, complete with businesses and community institutions. Next, I will examine the change in immigrant routes away from downtown Koreatown toward North York in the 1990s to find that a shift in

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community institutions toward this suburb also occurred. Finally, I will analyze marketing narratives branding Koreatown with ethnic identity and associated consumption of Korean identity to discuss the reconstruction of the neighbourhood for the middle class.

**1960s-Early 1990s: Downtown Koreatown as Route to Toronto**

Korean roots in the forms of both community institutions and diverse businesses were present in Koreatown when it was the main route traced by Korean immigrants through Toronto, making it a complete ethnic enclave at that time. This original route emerged in the 1960s and was the product of political context in both Canada and Korea (Brown, 2012). As instabilities endured into the 20th century, these missionaries became sources of comfort and resources, helping the first Koreans emigrate to Canada (Brown, 2012). Korean presence in Toronto specifically began with Koreans sent to the University of Toronto to study theology, many of whom were able to settle in the area due to new immigration laws, and subsequently sponsored family members to join them (Brown, 2012). Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, these immigrants put down community roots in the form of the Alpha Korean United Church at Bloor and Huron Streets (Brown, 2012), as well as newspapers and community groups further west on Bloor (Might Directories, 1976, 1983, 1990).

Community institutions located between Bathurst and Christie streets during the 1980s and early 1990s were diverse, including the Ontario Korean Businessmen’s Association, the Canadian Korean Go & Chess Institute (Might Directories, 1983), the Association of Korean Canadian Scientists & Engineers, the Korean Da Book Club, the Korean-Canada Amateur Sports Association, and the Korean YMCA (Might Directories, 1990). In terms of businesses, there were professional services as well as retail establishments: Kim’s Camera and Sound, Korea Travel Service, Korean & Chinese Food (Might Directories, 1983), Youn San Man Architect, Won Lee Chartered Accountant, and the Bloor Park Medical Centre that included Matthew C. Kim Family Physician among others (Might Directories, 1990). With this diverse distribution of businesses and community institutions, a Korean enclave emerged, shown in Figure 1, where the Korean community could find services, community hubs and employment.

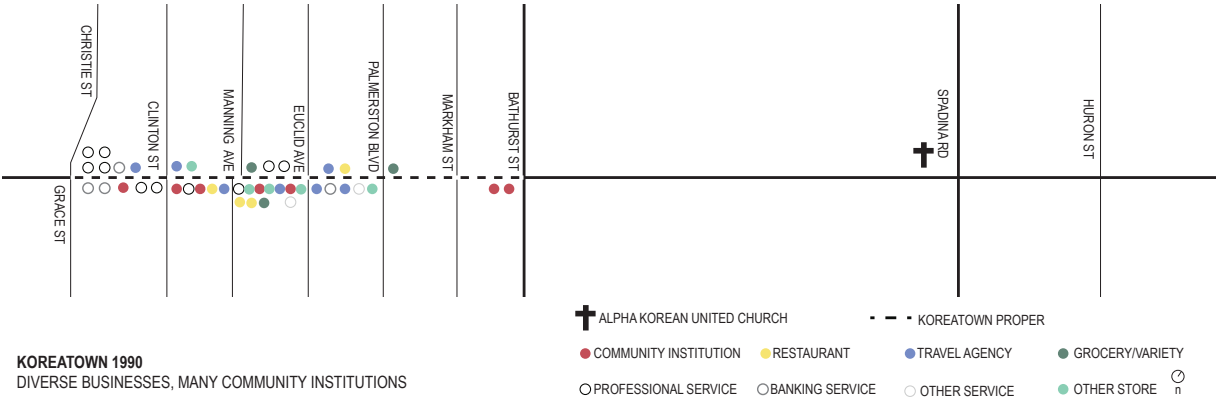


Figure 1 Korean-owned groups and establishments in 1990 Koreatown. Data interpreted based on city business directory (Might Directories, 1990), map geography based on Google Maps (Map Data c2018 Google).

## Late 1990s to Present: A Shift to the Suburbs

In the 1990s, routes traced by Korean immigrants shifted toward North York. Many community institutions mirrored this shift, leaving Koreatown with little population or community hubs, and therefore no longer meeting the definition of an ethnic enclave. This new route to Canada was again the product of sociopolitical context in both Korea and Canada. South Korea suffered a significant economic recession in 1997, which resulted in an influx of educated and skilled immigrants under the economic class (Kang, 2016, p. 1). Many were also in search of a better education for their children, as the South Korean education system had become extremely competitive due to the country's small resource base and reliance on human capital (Kang, 2016, p. 2). Whereas the first wave of immigrants in the 70s and 80s emigrated to Canada mostly under the family class (Kang, 2016, p. 28), these immigrants under the economic class were able to afford to settle in the suburbs (Kang, 2016, p.1), which helps explain the shift in Korean routes toward North York. Significantly, immigrants were considering the quality of education they could provide for their children, and North York offers good schools (Kang, 2016, p. 44), not to mention more green space compared to the downtown area.

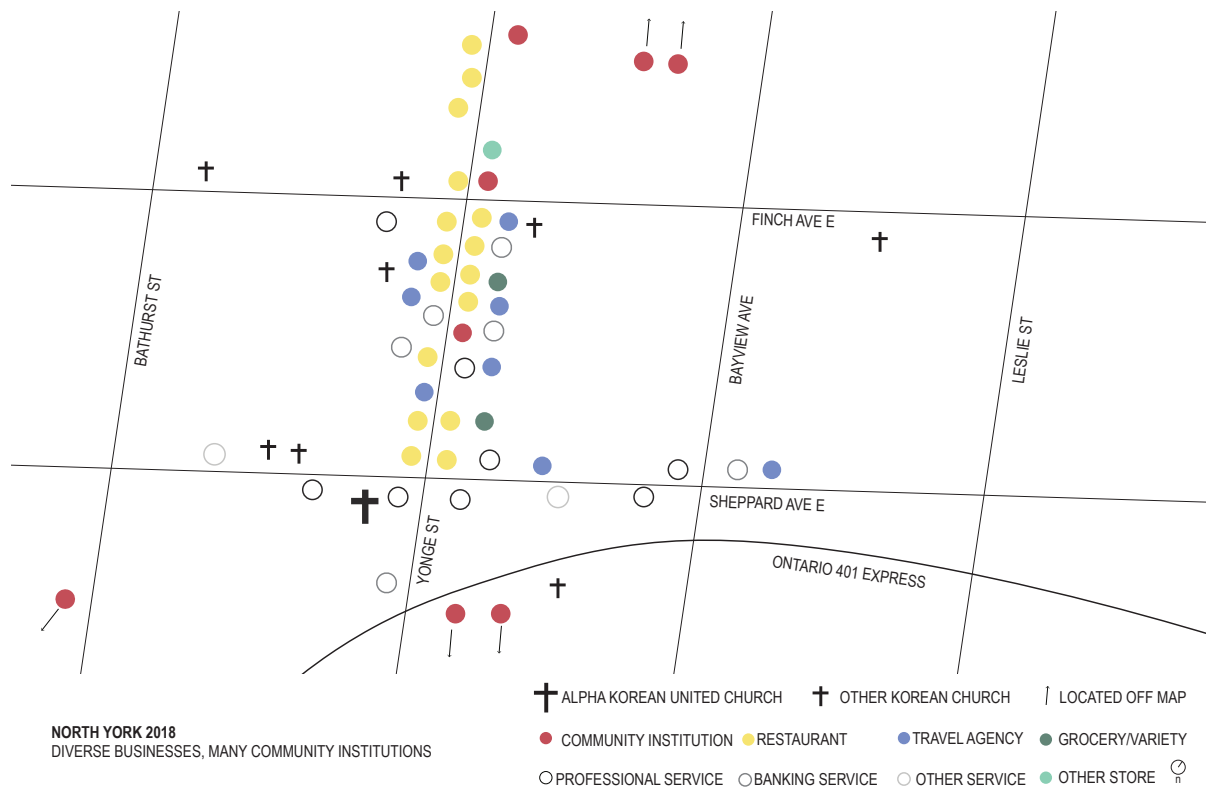


Figure 2 Korean-owned businesses and community institutions currently located in North York. Data and map geography interpreted based on Google Maps (Map Data c2018 Google).

Although various theories exist as to why immigrant routes shift together and enclaves continue to form, likely explanations include a desire for a sense of community (Qadeer et al., 2010, p. 318), as well as barriers faced to employment in Canada that lead to defensive entrepreneurship catered to one's own community (Chan & Fong, 2012, pp. 116-117). Barriers to employment are one reason for which a subset of this second route traced by Korean immigrants in Toronto emerged: that of the *kirogi*, or wild goose, family (Jeong & Belanger, 2012, p. 259). In these cases, the family breadwinner remains in Korea to work, while the rest of the family moves to Toronto to give their children a better education (Jeong & Belanger, 2012, p. 259), often staying in North York (Shin, 2012, p. 186). These are transnational families: one member remains in Korea, transferring capital to Toronto to support the others, who in turn communicate back to Korea and periodically return (Kang, 2016, pp. 19-20). These kinds of families facilitate transnational flows of capital, goods, and people between North York and Korea, supporting the emergence of the ethnic enclave by frequenting Korean businesses, and sending and receiving capital and goods from Korea (Kang, 2016, pp. 19-20). As illustrated in Figure 2, North York is certainly meets the definition of an ethnic enclave, featuring Korean community institutions as well as businesses that cater to Koreans.

As the Korean community shifted toward North York, Koreatown's distribution of community institutions and businesses began to change dramatically. As illustrated in the chart in Figure 3, after immigrant routes shifted toward the end of the 1990s, Koreatown was home to fewer community institutions and services geared toward Koreans, and instead more stores and restaurants. The current iteration of the area is illustrated in Figure 4: where a cluster of Korean community clubs, associations, and services existed in the 1980s (Might Directories, 1983) and 1990s (Might Directories, 1990), there is now a concentration of Korean food and drink establishments, along with a few other shops and ethnic restaurants. In fact, the only community institutions left are the Seniors' Centre at Bloor and Grace streets, perhaps a sign of the last travellers of the original route, and the Korean Journal. The extremely faded sign (Figure 5) of this last institution is unsurprising given the area's population of only 810 ethnic Koreans (City of Toronto, 2018a; City of Toronto, 2018b). Even walking down the street, a shift toward the suburbs is apparent: a flyer is tacked to a closed store front, advertising a suburban location (Figure 6). If an ethnic enclave necessarily comprises businesses, services, and institutions that create a complete micro-community as defined by Qadeer et al. (2010, p. 317), it is clear that Koreatown, with its lack of community institutions and low Korean population, no longer falls under this category.

### **Branding an Empty Koreatown: Commodification of Korean Identity**

Presently, Koreatown retains an observable ethnic identity. Without the community hubs and diverse Korean-owned businesses that comprised the former ethnic enclave, this points to the commodification of Korean cultural identity. In turn, the businesses associated with this commodification reveal the groups of people for whom the neighbourhood now exists. To begin, Koreatown's colourful signage complete with Korean lettering continues to evoke a sense of place rooted in Korean identity, as illustrated in Figure 7. This sense of ethnic identity is reinforced by the neighbourhood's Business Improvement Association (BIA), which state on their website: "Korea Town is the perfect place to taste Korean culture and food. [...] Try Korean BBQs, pork bone soup, and a variety of vegetarian dishes [...]" (Korea Town BIA, n.d.). Here, the words "come try Korean BBQ" (Korea Town BIA, n.d.) demonstrate that the Korean identity attributed to the neighbourhood is being constructed as something specifically geared toward consumption of Korean culture by non-Koreans. According to Terzano (2014), ethnic identity is considered commodified when the area branded with it is void of that ethnic population (p. 344). This is clearly the case here: the BIA

KOREAN-OWNED BUSINESS	1976*	1983**	1990***	2000****	2018*****
Community Institution		●●	●●●●●●	●●●●	●●
Restaurant/Bakery	●	●●●	●●●●●	●●●●●●●●●●	●●●●●●●●●●
Travel Agency	●●●●●	●●●●●●	●●●●●●	●●●●●●●●	●●●●●
Grocery/Variety	●●	●●●●	●●●●	●●●●	●●●●●
Professional Service		●●	●●●●●●	●●●●●●	
Banking Service		●●	●●●●	●●●●	●●
Other Service		●●	●●	●●	●●●●●
Other Store			●●●●●		●●

Figure 3 Change in Koreatown businesses over time. All data has been interpreted based on either Toronto city business directories, Google Maps, or observation, and cannot be completely accurate.

\*Based on Might Directories, 1976.

\*\* Based on Might Directories, 1983.

\*\*\*Based on Might Directories, 1990.

\*\*\*\*Based on Polk Multi-Dimensional Intelligence, 2000.

\*\*\*\*\*Based on data from Google Maps, Map data c2018 Google, as well as personal observation.



Figure 4 Koreatown's current distribution of businesses and community institutions. Data interpreted based on observation and Google Maps (Map data c2018 Google).



Figure 5 Korean Journal sign is faded in upper right hand corner.

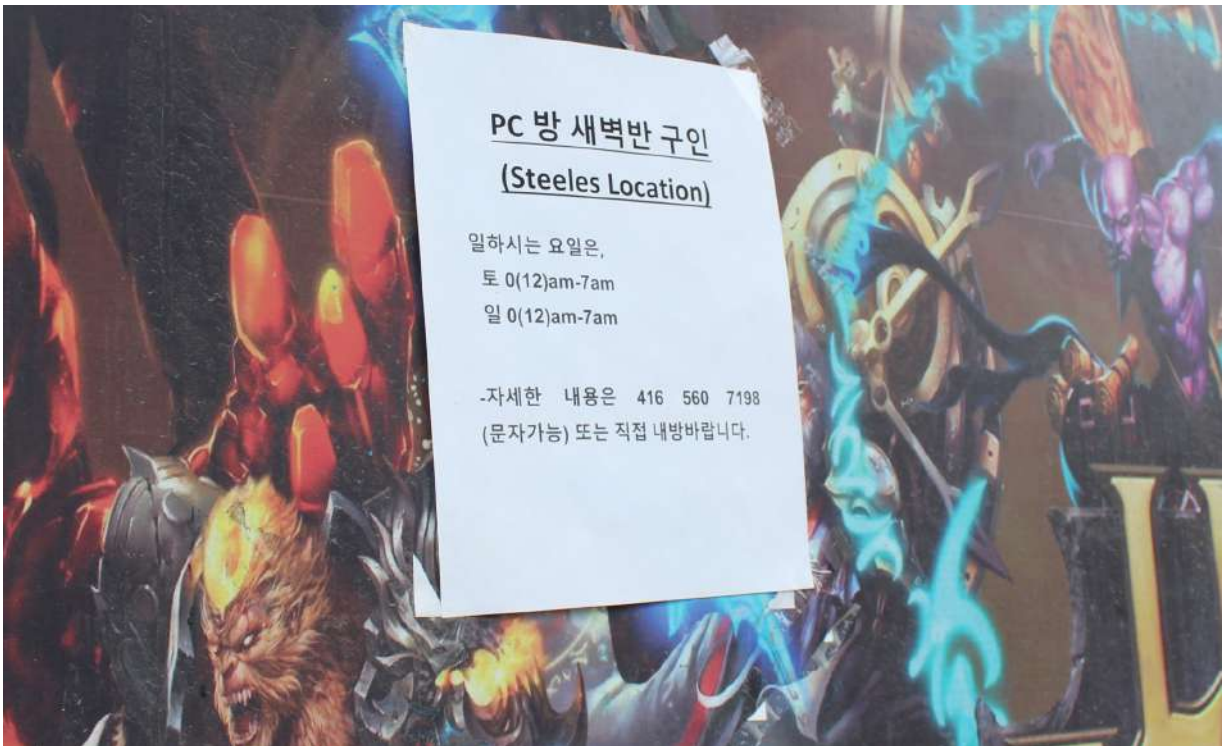


Figure 6 Sign pasted on the front of closed Gigabytes Internet.

is claiming that Korean culture can be consumed in an area that is no longer home to the majority of Toronto's Korean population (City of Toronto, 2018a; City of Toronto, 2018b). Furthermore, the Korea Town BIA website advertises that the neighbourhood's "[...] signature event is the Dano Festival which is held on the first weekend of June at Christie Pits Park" (Korea Town BIA, n.d.). According to Langedger (2016), the use of festivals as tourist destinations is another hallmark of identity commodification (p. 1817). When this happens, cultural practices become performative, rather than for the community itself (Langedger, 2016, pp. 1813-1814). This branding of Koreatown with Korean ethnic identity for consumption begs the question of for whom the area now exists, the answer to which lies in the specific businesses packaged within this neighbourhood brand.

In keeping with their location in a neighbourhood branded with Korean ethnic identity, Koreatown businesses are places in which to consume Korean culture. As laid out in Figure 3, food and drink establishments dominate, and many restaurants in particular offer consumption of Korean culture in the form of food: Arisu Korean BBQ & Sushi at Bloor and Markham streets claims to offer "authentic Korean BBQ[...]" (Arisu Korean BBQ & Sushi, n.d.), Home of Hot Taste boasts its "Korean Style Fried Chicken" on the sign outside, and other stores including the Korean Village Restaurant and Mapo Korean BBQ use Korean identity to sell a dining experience. One restaurant in particular epitomizes the construction of Korean identity for consumption: Barrio Coreano, a Korean-Mexican fusion restaurant with an "intentionally distressed aesthetic" (Ipsum, 2013), offering dishes such as Korean beef tacos and "K-Mex slaw" (Ipsum, 2013). This is a place to consume Korean culture (or someone's idea of it) recreationally – it is not a place for the Korean community itself.

The restaurants outlined above are examples of the kind of consumption of culture that is associated with gentrification, outlined by Shaw (2008) as a process in which the white middle class is attracted to an area for its sense of place, subsequently remaking it according to their own tastes and displacing the original occupants (p. 1698). Ethnic identity can be a part of this sense of place, and its commodification can be a part of the remaking of city space (Langedger, 2016, pp. 1812-1813). In Koreatown, the processes of gentrification taking place are more in line with commercial gentrification, a remaking of the city focused around businesses as opposed to residences (although the two are related) (Shaw, 2008, p. 1706). This is because the sociopolitical contexts behind the shift in routes traced by Korean immigrants through Toronto suggest that Korean residents were likely not displaced.

The process of commercial gentrification in Koreatown is demonstrated effectively through a comparison between two of the restaurants mentioned above, reflecting a remaking of the city to conform to middle-class tastes. First, there is the Korean Village Restaurant, owned by the same Korean family since before immigration routes shifted away from Koreatown (Daubs, 2017). Second, there is Barrio Coreano, which was established more recently by a chain (Ipsum, 2013), and represents a literal remodelling of Korean identity to be infused with elements of Mexican culture. Additional businesses catering to the middle class that have emerged include two upscale tattoo parlours (First Kiss Tattoo and Vintage, Speakeasy Tattoo), two yoga studios, as well as upscale cafes (Rustle & Still, Good Neighbour). There is also street art present in Koreatown (Figure 8), which is another variation of place-making often associated with the process of gentrification (Matthews, 2010, p. 667). Overall, the fact that Koreatown seems to be undergoing these processes of gentrification suggests that the neighbourhood is now an area that caters to the drivers of this process: the middle class.

Although this new middle class is now dominant in Koreatown, there are other groups worth mentioning that continue to frequent the area: Korean consumers, as well as consumers of ethnic products more generally. This presence is demonstrated through the existence of PAT Central, a Korean grocery store chain. PAT Central is known not only for importing products from Korea, but also for creating Korean ethnic food products in-store (Kang, 2016, p. 57). The presence of a store location in Koreatown thus suggests that there is a market for Korean ethnic products in the area (rather than simply Korean cultural experiences), and therefore that Koreans likely frequent the area. However, as opposed to the other two Korean grocery store chains in the Toronto area (Kang, 2016, p. 58), PAT Central store locations are not generally located in concentrated areas of Korean population (Kang, 2016, p. 57), attracting customers of many ethnicities (Kang, 2016, p. 56). This demonstrates that while Koreatown is likely frequented by Korean consumers in some capacity, it is within a context of diverse consumers of ethnic products more generally, rather than as a place to build their community.

An additional factor that is affecting the continued presence of Korean consumers in Koreatown is the neighbourhood's proximity to the University of Toronto. As mentioned previously, part of the reason Koreatown emerged as such is related to an influx of Korean theology students to this school (Brown, 2012). Today, the university still has a significant Korean student presence, complete with a Korean Students' Association (University of Toronto, n.d.). In any case, most of the activity undertaken by Koreans in Koreatown today would be limited to consumption in a neighbourhood remade by the middle class, as the only community institutions left are the Seniors Centre on Grace Street, and the faded Korean Journal.



Figure 7 Collage of some of the signs that mark out different roots in Koreatown, evoking a sense of place.





*Figure 8* Street art in Koreatown

## Conclusions

Overall, it is clear that since immigrant routes have shifted away from the Koreatown, the area has lost its population and roots in the form of community institutions, keeping only its businesses. Despite this shift in demographic, the neighbourhood's continued branding with and consumption of Korean ethnic identity demonstrate that this identity has been commodified for consumption by the middle class. Koreatown is now a place to not only consume Korean culture in the form of food, but also to sit in an upscale coffee shop or go to a yoga class. Korean immigrants can no longer go there to meet with the Korean Canadian Amateur Sports Association, or take a class at the Korean YMCA.

It is difficult to predict the future of Koreatown. However, the Seniors Centre as one of the last community institutions, coupled with the processes of gentrification taking their course, could hint at a possible end to the neighbourhood altogether. One thing is for certain: the area is changing and will continue to change. Perhaps a third route traced by Korean immigrants through the city will emerge, increasing the complexity of the situation trifold. Such is urban life – the relationship between people and the built environment in which they live is never static.

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## Figures

**Figure 1** Fraser, Z. (2018). Koreatown 1990. [Digital illustration].

*Data interpreted from:*

Might Directories (1990). Toronto City Directory Central Ed., pt. 2. 1990. 910.7135.T59. Toronto Reference Library Humanities and Social Sciences Department Reading Room, Toronto, Ontario, Canada;

Map geography based on Google Maps, Imagery c2018 Google.

\*Interpretation of data means results cannot be completely accurate, however significant trends are observable.

**Figure 2** Fraser, Z. North York 2018. [Digital illustration].

*Data interpreted from:*

Google Maps, Map Data c2018 Google.

\*Interpretation of data means results cannot be completely accurate, however significant trends are observable.

**Figure 3** Fraser, Z. Change in Koreatown Businesses Over Time. [Data representation table].

*Data interpreted from:*

Might Directories (1976). Toronto City Directory 1976 Streets. 910.7135.T59. Toronto Reference Library Humanities and Social Sciences Department Reading Room, Toronto, Ontario, Canada;

Might Directories (1983). Metropolitan Toronto City Directory vol. 2. 1983. 910.7135.T59. Toronto Reference Library Humanities and Social Sciences Department Reading Room. Toronto, Ontario, Canada;

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Google Maps, Map data c2018 Google; Personal observation.

\*Interpretation of data means results cannot be completely accurate, however significant trends are observable.

**Figure 4** Fraser, Z. (2018). 2018 Koreatown. [Illustration].

*Data interpreted from:*

Google Maps, Map Data c2018 Google; personal observation.

\*Interpretation of data means results cannot be completely accurate, however significant trends are observable.

**Figure 5** Fraser, Z. (2018). Faded Korean Journal Sign. [Photograph].

**Figure 6** Fraser, Z. (2018). Sign Pasted on Closed Store. [Photograph].

**Figure 7** Fraser, Z. (2018). Koreatown Signage. [Digital collage].

**Figure 8** Fraser, Z. (2018). Street Art in Koreatown. [Photograph].