Article

Improvising "Nonexistent Rights": Immigrants, Ethnic Restaurants, and Corporeal Citizenship in Suburban California

Charles T. Lee

School of Social Transformation, Arizona State University, Tempe, AZ 85287, USA; E-Mail: ctl@asu.edu

Abstract

Building on Henri Lefebvre's radical concept of "right to the city," contemporary literatures on urban citizenship critically shift the locus of citizenship from its juridical-political foundation in the sovereign state to the spatial politics of the urban inhabitants. However, while the political discourse of right to the city presents a vital vision for urban democracy in the shadow of neoliberal restructuring, its exclusive focus on democratic agency and practices can become disconnected from the everyday experiences of city life on the ground. In fact, in cities that lack longstanding/viable urban citizenship mechanisms that can deliver meaningful political participation, excluded subjects may bypass formal democratic channels to improvise their own inclusion, belonging, and rights in an informal space that the sovereign power does not recognize. Drawing on my fieldwork in the Asian restaurant industry in several multiethnic suburbs in Southern California, this article investigates how immigrant restaurant entrepreneurs, workers, and consumers engender a set of "nonexistent rights" through their everyday production and consumption of ethnic food. I name this improvisational political ensemble *corporeal citizenship* to describe the material, affective, and bodily dimensions of inclusion, belonging, and "rights" that immigrants actualize through their everyday participation in this suburban ethnic culinary commerce. For many immigrants operating in the global circuits of neoliberal capitalism, citizenship no longer just means what Hannah Arendt (1951) once suggested as "the right to have rights," or what Engin Isin and Peter Nyers (2014) reformulate as "the right to claim rights," but also the right to *reinvent ways* of claiming rights. I suggest such improvisation of nonexistent rights has surprising political implications for unorthodox ways of advancing democratic transformation.

Issue

This article is part of the issue "Inclusion through Enacted Citizenship in Urban Spaces" edited by Rachel Kurian (Erasmus University Rotterdam, The Netherlands) and Helen Hintjens (Erasmus University Rotterdam, The Netherlands)

1. Introduction

Recent studies on urban citizenship have turned critical attention to the "city" as the central site in forging political resistance, expanding social inclusion, and imagining new rights against the onslaught of neoliberal capitalist power and its associated political disenfranchisement. Building on Henri Lefebvre's radical concept of "right to the city," these literatures critically shift the locus of citizenship from its juridical-political foundation in the sovereign state to the spatial politics of the urban inhabitants (Holston, 2009; Isin, 2000; Purcell, 2003). Arguing

that "it is those who live in the city—who contribute to the body of urban lived experience and lived space—who can legitimately claim the right to the city" (Purcell, 2002, p. 102), Lefebvre (1996) articulates two principal rights for urban inhabitants—the right to participation and the right to appropriation—to reconfigure the production of urban space and bring about a renewed transformation of urban life.

As Mark Purcell suggests, "Lefebvre's right to the city is an argument for profoundly reworking both the social relations of capitalism and the current structure of liberal-democratic citizenship" (Purcell, 2002,

p. 101). Specifically, the right to participation alters the Westphalian framework that subordinates all forms of political loyalties to nation-state membership and filters "the voice of citizens...through the institutions of the state" (Purcell, 2002, p. 102); instead, it re-envisions urban inhabitants "as the majority and hegemonic voice" who hold the collective decision-making power vis-à-vis capital and state elites over "all decisions that produce urban space" (Purcell, 2002, p. 103). In addition, the right to appropriation affirms "the right of inhabitants to physically access, occupy, and use urban space" in accordance with their own needs, thus elevating the use value and use-rights of urban residents over and against the exchange value interests and property rights of corporate firms that have long bolstered the hegemonic "foundation of capitalist class relations" (Purcell, 2002, p. 103). In the words of Engin Isin:

> For Lefebvre the right to the city was the right to claim presence in the city, to wrest the use of the city from the privileged new masters and democratize its spaces. Lefebvre saw the rights to the city as an expression of urban citizenship, understood not as membership in a polity—let alone the nation-state— but as a practice of articulating, claiming and renewing group rights in and through the appropriation and creation of spaces in the city. (Isin, 2000, pp. 14–15)

From this vantage point, the conception of right to the city or urban citizenship embodies what Hannah Arendt (1951) once characterized as the struggle for "the right to have rights," or what Engin Isin and Peter Nyers further advance as "the right to *claim* rights" (Isin & Nyers, 2014, p. 8; emphasis in the original).

Yet, while the political discourse of right to the city presents a vital vision for urban democracy in the shadow of neoliberal restructuring (Purcell, 2002), its normative focus on democratic agency and practices remains, in Don Mitchell's words, "not yet well-grounded in the actual legal and social exigencies of city life" (Mitchell, 2005, p. 86). Thus, as Monica Varsanyi argues, urban citizenship is "not within easy grasp" because the sovereign power of the nation-state continues to present "very real daily challenges faced by undocumented residents" (Varsanyi, 2006, p. 240). Furthermore, given the all-encompassing reach of global capitalism, the dichotomous construct of urban inhabitants versus urban neoliberalism underestimates the degree to which the predominant urban residents' daily work and life are already deep-seated in and interwoven with the latter such that their use value and use-rights of urban space cannot be so distinctly separated from—but are rather in many ways intertwined with, filtered by, and articulated through—the exchange value interests of the capitalist-consumerist circuits (Lee, 2014, p. 79). In fact, the continuing ascendancy of both sovereign power and capitalist power can often render any emerging democratic mechanisms of urban citizenship insubstantial or unviable in real cities.

All this is not to say that the democratic impetus and spirit of urban citizenship and right to the city require no critical preservation. To the contrary, there is an urgent need to continue exploring ways to facilitate and expand democratic rights and participation for the urban inhabitants in these neoliberal times. Yet the way to engage this exploration needs to be connected with the present realities of the urban residents' everyday experiences of city life on the ground. As I suggest, instead of beginning our inquiry from a normative democratic angle, we may do better by first investigating how, in cities that lack longstanding/viable urban citizenship mechanisms, subordinate residents may engender their own (informal and unconventional) ways of claiming rights to the city that do not entail a democratic oppositional stance vis-à-vis the state and capital. From there, we can further examine what may be some unseen or imperceptible political implications of such existing practices on the ground in order to explore more creative and unorthodox paths of democratic transformation.

This article takes a modest first step in this direction. Borrowing from Jacques Rancière's (1999) notion of "the staging of a nonexistent right," it draws on my fieldwork in the Asian restaurant industry in several multiethnic suburbs in Southern California to investigate how immigrant restaurant entrepreneurs, workers, and consumers (both Asian and Latinx) engender a set of "nonexistent rights"—i.e., rights that are not (yet) existing or codified in law such as the rights to enterprise, work, consumption, residency, affective inclusion, biological wellbeing, and sociocultural belong—through their everyday production and consumption of ethnic food. I name this improvisational political ensemble *corporeal citizenship* to describe the material, affective, and bodily dimensions of inclusion, belonging, and "rights" that immigrants actualize through their everyday participation in this suburban ethnic culinary commerce, in an informal space that the sovereign power does not recognize. While proponents of urban citizenship vitally advocate for the inclusion of urban inhabitants by seeking to upend the forces of the state and capital (Purcell, 2003), I suggest that the fact that immigrants have been able to claim informal measures of rights in everyday commercial sites like ethnic restaurants also points to some extended, unorthodox strategic possibilities for the promotion of social inclusion that can help destabilize existing power structures and transform the current sociopolitical landscapes of rights.

2. Conceiving Corporeal Citizenship and Nonexistent Rights

Recognizing the structural exclusion and inequality that afflicts subordinate social groups in liberal capitalist societies (Young, 1989), recent literatures in the emerging field of critical citizenship studies have taken a further step to investigate citizenship as a contestatory practice and process whereby excluded subjects *enact* or

perform citizenship in claiming their rights to the polity, thereby turning their subordination and marginalization into an animated and open-ended political struggle. For instance, in their recent work Isin and Nyers (2014) redefine citizenship "*as an 'institution' mediating rights between the subjects of politics and the polity to which these subjects belong*" (Isin & Nyers, 2014, p. 1; emphasis in the original). As they explicate, by "institution" they do not simply mean an institutional organization but "a broader conception of processes through which something is enacted, created, and rendered relatively durable and stable but still contestable, surprising, and inventive" (Isin & Nyers, 2014, p. 1). Moreover, for them "polity" is not restricted to the state "as the sole source for recognizing and legislating rights" (Isin & Nyers, 2014, p. 1); rather, it encompasses "many overlapping and conflicting polities (city, region, state, international)…[wherein] struggles about authority in spaces and times that are autonomous, yet implicated, in the space of the dominant polity of the state" take place (Isin & Nyers, 2014, pp. 8–9). Lastly, they deliberately use "the subjects of politics" rather than "citizens" as the agents who enact or perform citizenship "because not all political subjects will have the designation of citizens" (Isin & Nyers, 2014, p. 1). As they conclude, "whether certain political subjects can make claims to being, or constitute themselves as, citizens is an important aspect of the politics of citizenship or politics *for* citizenship" (Isin & Nyers, 2014, p. 1; emphasis in the original). In other words, the very process by which excluded subjects contest or negotiate their inclusion and belonging transforms themselves into political claimants of rights as they enact the political subjectivity of citizenship. This dynamic underlines what Étienne Balibar calls the "permanent reinvention" of citizenship that reconfigures the boundaries/borders of inclusion and exclusion in democratic politics (Balibar, 2004, p. 10; Isin & Nyers, 2014, p. 6).

This critical perspective, which views political subjects' reinvention of citizenship as proceeding through the democratic claiming of rights (Isin, 2017), finds a parallel in the literatures on urban democratic citizenship, perhaps most ostensively shown in the works of James Holston who has examined how the urban poor in the global south "organize movements of insurgent citizenship to confront the entrenched regime of citizen inequality…as city regions become crowded with marginalized citizens and noncitizens who contest their exclusions" (Holston, 2009, pp. 245–246). As Holston writes, "the result is an entanglement of democracy with its counters, in which new kinds of urban citizens arise to expand democratic citizenships and new forms of urban violence and inequality erode them" (Holston, 2009, p. 246). In all, both Isin and Nyers' critical citizenship studies approach and Holston's urban citizenship framework address how excluded subjects bear democratic agency to stage citizenship and claim rights vis-à-vis different forms of polities, thus destabilizing the dominant political regime of citizenship.

Yet to the extent that this democratic articulation and documentation of insurgent citizenship is critically valuable and necessary, it also remains the case that sovereign power and capitalist power have combined to constrict the political possibilities and viable spaces of democratic insurgence in many polities, resulting in what Sheldon Wolin (1994) observes as the rare, episodic moments of "fugitive democracy" in a seemingly prevailing state of "neoliberal impasse" (Aslam, 2017). In this context, an exclusive focus on the contestatory formation of insurgent politics can miss how subjects lacking access, resources, and/or opportunities to enact urban democratic citizenship in their residing cities may resort to informal and surprising ways to reinvent spaces of inclusion and rights that do not involve direct political assertions of citizenship.

To illustrate one occurrence of such reinvention of urban citizenship, I examine how immigrant participants in the Asian restaurant industry in Southern California—who are afflicted by an ongoing socio-historical process of differential racialization that turns them into "perpetual foreigners" in the US democracy and who live in suburban regions that used to be white conservative strongholds—seek to fulfill their aspiration for inclusion and belonging through the everyday production and consumption of ethnic food. I name this improvisational practice corporeal citizenship to delineate both the material and psychosomatic dimensions of inclusion, belonging, and "rights" that immigrants actualize through their everyday participation in the suburban ethnic restaurants. As a term, corporeal citizenship underscores how these immigrants' actualization of inclusion and belonging is intimately tied to their affective feelings, psychosomatic wellbeing, and material attainment. As such, unlike urban citizenship, corporeal citizenship does not resort to a frontal attack on the state/city but rather utilizes the existing circuits of global capitalism (i.e., entrepreneurship, labor, consumption) for its own realization and expansion.

Conceived in this way, corporeal citizenship can be understood as carrying instrumental qualities as it is situated and manifested in everyday life under global capitalism. Previously, Teena Gabrielson and Katelyn Parady have used the term of corporeal citizenship to advocate for a vision of environmental justice that is intrinsically and non-instrumentally attuned to the "co-constitutive interactions between human bodies and the nonhuman natural world" (Gabrielson & Parady, 2010, p. 383). While their ecological model offers valuable normative insights, they nonetheless render a notion of corporeal citizenship that is unaffected by the instrumental effects of global capitalism. I depart from this non-instrumental conception by situating corporeal citizenship in the historical-material context of global capitalism, suggesting that we cannot untangle the ways in which immigrant inclusion, belonging, and "rights" are filtered through and intertwined with elements of capitalist instrumentality in contemporary postindustrial suburbs. It is important to

note, however, that such an instrumental contamination "does not so much override the possibility of resistance as create a 'strategic field' that sets the possibilities and limits of a space of political calculations and determines the possible range of actions" for immigrant and minority empowerment in neoliberal times (Lee, 2019, p. 25). For many immigrant and ethnic subjects residing in suburban California, ethnic restaurants have emerged to be such a strategic field for their improvisation of "nonexistent rights."

Here, the idea of nonexistent rights needs elaboration. Rancière has previously used the notion of "the staging of a nonexistent right" to characterize the ways in which subjects without formal status or political standing seek to claim rights in advance of sovereign recognition through democratic contestations (Rancière, 1999, pp. 24–25). While some may refer to the juridical structure of citizenship in arguing that rights must be institutionalized in order to have real meaning and efficacy, Rancière's insight here is that "citizenship is [also] fundamentally about political subjectivity" (Nyers, 2010, p. 98). Bonnie Honig thus writes that "the practice of taking rights and privileges rather than waiting for them to be granted by a sovereign power is…a quintessentially democratic practice" (Honig, 2001, p. 99). When excluded people engage in such practice, "new rights and standing are taken and then recognized only later (if at all)" (Honig, 2001, p. 100). As Honig furthers:

> We have here a story of illegitimate demands made by people with no standing to make them, a story of people so far outside the circle of who 'counts' that they cannot make claims within the existing frames of claim making. They make room for themselves by staging nonexistent rights, and by way of such stagings, sometimes, new rights, powers, and visions come into being. (Honig, 2001, p. 101)

From this vantage point, taking rights and liberties (before their codification in law) is an essential feature of democratic politics as excluded subjects enact the political subjectivity of citizenship to contest and redraw the boundaries of inclusion/exclusion and citizens/noncitizens.

Expanding on Rancière and Honig, I suggest that immigrant participants in the Asian restaurant industry can also be understood as drawing on their political subjectivity to acquire nonexistent rights; however, they do so not necessarily through public democratic contestations but rather through their ordinary involvement in the everyday activities/operations of ethnic restaurants. Through their culinary enterprise, labor production, and cultural consumption, immigrants improvise and actualize a series of nonexistent rights that are not yet existing or codified in law, such as the rights to enterprise, work, consumption, residency, affective inclusion, biological wellbeing, and sociocultural belong. While a citizen's general right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness

can seemingly compass the nonexistent rights that I catalogue here (e.g., the right to liberty may include the right to work and consumption, and the right to the pursuit of happiness may well include the right to affective inclusion, biological wellbeing, and sociocultural belonging), these rights remain "nonexistent" in the sense that they are not constitutionally protected or guaranteed by the liberal state, whether for formal citizens or noncitizens (e.g., although citizens can work and reside in the United States, they cannot legally claim a right to work or right to residency that can be guaranteed should they become unemployed or homeless).

Some may thus question the efficacy of these nonexistent rights, arguing that they can at best furnish a sense of inclusion but cannot provide meaningful protection against sovereign power or capitalist power. However, I wish to note that insofar as these improvisations of nonexistent rights achieve similar results "without formal state codification of such rights," they are not abstract or empty but can actually be understood as "a de facto actualization of…rights" in the concrete circumstances of these immigrants' everyday life (Cheah, 2006, p. 248). More important, as I suggest in the final section, immigrants' improvisation of nonexistent rights further points us to several political strategic possibilities to expand and transform the existing lexicon and distributive domain of rights for all citizens and residents alike. Given this, I do not limit my discussion to nonstatus immigrants, for my argument is that both documented and undocumented immigrants constitute the everyday spaces of ethnic restaurants where they perform for us how nonexistent rights are actualized by informal means, and how such appropriation has the potential to expand and transform the existing politics of rights.

3. Immigrants Improvising Nonexistent Rights in Suburban California's Ethnic Restaurants

3.1. Contextualizing Multiethnic Suburbs in Southern California

As the state with the most foreign-born residents in the United States, California has long been an immigrant gateway, with Los Angeles County in Southern California being considered "one of the most ethnically diverse places" in the country (Li, 2009, p. 2). Focusing on the ethnic Chinese in Southern California, geographer Wei Li has documented the suburbanization process in which, since the 1960s, not only did "many upwardly mobile Chinese…[move] out of Chinatown and adjacent inner-city neighborhoods to the suburbs in search for better housing, neighborhoods, and schools," but "a new trend began occurring during the same time period, which saw many new immigrants with higher educational attainment, professional occupations, and financial resources settling directly into the suburbs without ever experiencing life in the inner city" (Li, 2009, p. 2). This is certainly not a linear and homogeneous trajectory. Due to global

economic restructuring as well as changing geopolitics and national immigration policies, the immigrants who increasingly join this ethnic suburbanization in Southern California are "a heterogeneous, highly polarized population in terms of educational, occupational, and economic status" (Li, 2009, p. 2), with Asians and Latinxs hailing from different countries of origins being the two major non-White racial groups populating many residential, commercial and civic spaces of the region (Cheng, 2013).

I conducted my field research on the Asian restaurant industry in this highly heterogeneous and stratified region, with an investigative focus on the multiethnic suburbs that have changed (or are in the process of changing) the cultural-political landscape of what used to be a predominantly white suburban topography. My fieldwork sites cover numerous cities in Orange County (e.g., Anaheim, Costa Mesa, Fountain Valley, Fullerton, Garden Grove, Huntington Beach, Irvine, Tustin, Westminster, Yorba Linda) and Los Angeles County (e.g., Cerritos, Rowland Heights). Many are edge cities with a high growth and concentration of business, shopping and entertainment centers in the midst of residential communities. More prominently, these suburban sites in varying degrees constitute what Li (2009) famously coins as *ethnoburbs*, which refers to suburban residential areas and commercial districts with significant clusters of ethnic minority populations. Ethnoburban residents tend to be more affluent and heterogeneous in terms of race, ethnicity, and class compared to more traditional types of ethnic communities such as ghettos and enclaves. One of the most notable signs of ethnoburbs is the vibrant concentration of ethnic restaurants that cater to the immigrant and ethnic minority residents in the suburban communities. In fact, Southern California is particularly reputable among Asian Americans and immigrants for its vibrant Asian restaurant scene that offers a wide spectrum of "authentic" (that is, non-Americanized) Asian cuisines.

For the present study, forty participants, both Asian and Latinx, were recruited for qualitative interviews between 2015 and 2017 (the names of the interviewees are altered for the purpose of privacy/anonymity; the restaurants identified remain original in their names). As I used to reside in Southern California and have acquaintances who used to or are currently working in the ethnic restaurant industry, I used snowball method to approach the subjects of my study. I also visited different ethnic restaurants in the area and inquired people about their interest in participating in the study; along with this on-site approach, flyers were posted in certain commercial/shopping plazas where the restaurants were located for further recruitment. Interviews usually lasted between forty-five to ninety minutes and were conducted primarily in English, but Chinese and Spanish were also used depending on the linguistic backgrounds of the participants. As I am natively fluent in Mandarin Chinese, it facilitated my interviews with some immigrant participants from China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong who lacked fluency in speaking English or who simply preferred to

converse in their native language. Sometimes a mixture of English and Chinese were used to allow the participants to best express themselves. I also hired a Spanish-speaking graduate assistant who helped me conduct and translate interviews with a number of non-English speaking Latinx immigrants who work in the Asian restaurants. While I did ask the participants to share information on their citizenship status, I did not ask them to specify their migration status as a way to further protect their anonymity and avoid causing any potential fear or discomfort (this was especially relevant for a number of Latinx kitchen workers who had reservation about participating in the study, which I suspect had to do with their tight work schedule and their concern about the intent of the interview in the context of immigration raids). However, some participants did reveal information on their migration status during the course of the interviews as they narrated their own life experiences.

Importantly, many of the cities in my fieldwork, especially those in Orange County, have long been conservative bastions in California with a Republican base that is heavily white (e.g., Yorba Linda has long been known as the birthplace of Richard M. Nixon). While the demographics are changing in the region with the influx of Asian and Latinx immigrants, these ethnic subjects continue to occupy racialized positions within the process of global economic restructuring that underpins the development of multiethnic suburbs in Southern California. As Wendy Cheng observes in her study in the San Gabriel Valley (SGV), a well-known principal valley in the region that harbors a number of booming ethnoburbs:

> Asian and Latina/o immigrants are directly implicated in this latest round of global capitalist restructuring, which seeks a "two-prong" solution via technological innovation and cheap labor: Asian immigrants participate in both parts of the solution, furnishing highly educated professionals in technical fields as well as joining their Latina/o immigrant counterparts in low-wage jobs. This is true in the SGV, in which Latina/o immigrants work alongside Chinese and other Asian immigrants in the kitchens of ethnic-Chinese-owned restaurants, garment factories, and manufacturing firms. (Cheng, 2013, p. 6)

Furthermore, their economic positioning in this neoliberal restructuring is accompanied by their racialization as (different kinds of) "foreigners" that indexes their intricate social, cultural and political inclusion/exclusion vis-à-vis US citizenship. As Cheng furthers:

> With regard to Asian Americans and Latinas/os, one must also pay attention to differential racialization vis-à-vis Asian American model minority discourse and the ambiguously white status of Mexican Americans (referring to both day-to-day experiences of "passing" and historical and legal factors). These differentiated statuses of relative valorization coexist with a

"forever foreign" racialization of Asian Americans—stemming from a long history of exclusion from citizenship, civic participation, and even the nation itself—and a combined "foreign" and devalorized class stigma for Mexican Americans, whose position in the racial hierarchy shifted over the course of the last century to reflect many Mexican immigrants' niche in the American economy as cheap labor. All these discourses paper over the tremendous ethnic, class, political, generational, and racial (in the case of Latinas/os) heterogeneity of US Asians and Latinas/os—yet all "Asians" and "Latinas/os" must contend with the effects of the most salient racialized meanings. (Cheng, 2013, p. 15)

This daily "struggle for racial inclusion and belonging, or racial citizenship" (Tsuda, 2016, p. 135) for the Asian and Latinx populations given their racially marked status as "foreigners" is specifically manifested in the development of ethnoburbs, which has led to pushback from white residents "as large numbers of nonwhite immigrants 'intruded' into the traditional turf of white Americans—the suburb—and developed their own suburban residential neighborhoods and business districts" (Li, 2009, p. 93). As Li observes, "public discourse concerning cultural and political concerns, economic development, and even religious issues became tinged with racial rhetoric and nativist sentiment," and immigrant/minority residents, businesses, "political candidates, and religious institutions became the racialized targets of resentment" (Li, 2009, p. 93).

3.2. Immigrants Enacting Corporeal Citizenship in Ethnic Restaurants

So how do nonwhite immigrants claim rights and inclusion in the context of conservative cities that may value the economic benefits that they bring (i.e., capital investment, professional-technological expertise, rising property values, low-wage labor) but do not welcome their "intrusive" racial presence that threatens the existing social, cultural and political landscape of white suburbia? To be sure, public protests continue to be an important democratic political channel for immigrants living and working in suburban California to create "spaces of insurgent citizenship…to avoid, resist, and subvert the dominant discourses of the state and capital" (McCann, 2002, p. 78). Two recent events that took place in Orange County in late 2018—the rally by the Vietnamese community in Westminster's Little Saigon to protest the Trump administration's attempt to deport Vietnamese refugees and the picket protests staged by immigrant hotel workers represented by Unite Here Local 11 to demand higher wages in the Anaheim Resort—can be considered such examples of (sub)urban democratic citizenship vis-à-vis the state and capital, respectively. But while we need to continue preserving and expanding such democratic spaces, it is also the case that the hap-

penings of such political insurgences currently remain irregular and sporadic, and it opens up a question as to whether the mass immigrant populations in multiethnic suburbs (including those who have gone on strikes or participated in protests) enact citizenship strictly in this collectively insurgent way. As I suggest, in their everyday life, many immigrant participants in the Asian restaurant industry already seek to improvise and enact what I discussed earlier as corporeal citizenship to fulfill their material, affective, and bodily inclusion and belonging through the production and consumption of ethnic food. In doing so, they can be considered as renarrating the right to the city by recreating their own rights to participation and appropriation.

At the most basic level, corporeal citizenship in Asian restaurants is enacted through the fulfillment of material needs encapsulated by the realization of the "American dream." Driven by capitalist ideology, the idea of the American dream captures how a citizen or resident is able to realize and optimize the liberal right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness which, in the most concrete terms, bespeaks the actualization of the (nonexistent) rights to enterprise, work, consumption, and residency that all citizens and residents need to engage/access in one way or another to survive and live in capitalist democracy. Indeed, many immigrant restaurateurs express how opening a restaurant allows them to enterprise and build an economic foundation in their newly adopted homeland. For instance, Debra Chou, a Taiwanese restaurateur who lived in Japan for a number of years before immigrating to the United States, used the Chinese phrase *zhagen*, meaning "establishing roots," to describe how opening an Asian restaurant has enabled her to have stable earnings in helping her and her family realize their American dream.

Jackie Hwang, the owner of a well-known Asian bakery chain store in Southern California that has branches across several multiethnic suburbs in the SGV and Orange County, used the Chinese idiom *min yi shi wei tian* (meaning literally "food is the God of the people") to point to the longstanding Chinese cultural sentiment, "the top priority for human beings is to feed themselves" (Li, 2009, p. 108), as her motivation in entering the Asian restaurant industry. In using this phrase, Jackie drew on the traditional Chinese longing for gourmet food as a cultural gateway to envision and establish an ethnic consumer market for the food products/services that she provides (on her estimate, about 90% of her customers are Asian, and 10% are non-Asian). Having a steady stream of Asian patrons who frequent her ethnic eateries enables Jackie to actualize her right to enterprise as an immigrant. In fact, Jackie expressed that as an immigrant restaurateur, not only is she able to financially support herself and her family, but she also helps increase the tax revenues for the state and offers job opportunities for those who work in her establishments. In other words, Jackie sees her ethnic culinary enterprise as allowing her to help many other citizens and residents realize

their American dream and, by implication, their nonexistent rights to work, consumption, and residency.

Patrick Nguyen, co-owner of the family-owned Vietnamese restaurant, Pho Saigon, further offered his perspectives as a refugee:

> Our family came here as refugee like many other Vietnamese where the father was either working or joining South Vietnam government or army. After the Vietnam War ended in April 1975, the communist sent who had worked or was in the army of South Vietnam to jail. So my father escaped by boat and sponsored the family to the United States. It was tough for us at the beginning as English is not our original language. I believe all other immigrants or refugees have the same difficulty. But the United States is the country that has a lot of opportunity for who has talent or is willing to work hard to succeed.

He continued:

> Doing business is one of my dreams since I was a teenager. I entered the restaurant business because my relatives who just came from Vietnam had owned the restaurant there. When I see them working for other restaurant owners, I felt like why we do not do it for our own? And then we decided to open it. It was my first time to do business, so I had to learn many things. I believe restaurant business is one of the hardest industries and long hours work, but earn less. I did not believe this before, but after entering it, I now understand that feeling.

Here, Patrick's narratives underscore how, while ethnic restaurateurs can realize the rights to enterprise, work, consumption, and residency in "the land of the free," one has to earn them through hard work and labor, and even then, in their eyes, the material benefits they obtain can be disproportional to the amount of efforts they put in.

For restaurant workers who engage in even more intensive levels of bodily labor, the theme about working hard to fulfill their economic and material needs is even more apparent, but their narratives can also exude a sense of pride in their ability to chase the American dream and earn the nonexistent rights to work, consumption, and residency. Thus, when asked how life has been for him in the United States, Camilo, a Mexican immigrant who worked as a dishwasher and busboy at a Korean BBQ restaurant in Fullerton, responded:

> Good, somewhat good. I've learned to take opportunity. I've worked. I've given it my all for what I've wanted. What I've wanted I get. I've liked being here….I have my expenses, but I try to save and send back to Mexico…to all of my family.

When asked if he thought he was realizing the American dream, Camilo stated: "I think so. Working, everything is possible. In Mexico I never imagined I was going to buy a car, a house. I think so." He also acknowledged Asian restaurants for playing a role in helping him chase and achieve this American dream: "Like, how they help you find a job. They pay for your work. If you didn't have the work, you wouldn't do it."

Similarly, Caesar, a Mexican cook and food preparation worker who has had experiences working at a number of different Asian restaurants (including Korean, Vietnamese, Japanese, and Chinese), also noted how working in these establishments has enabled him to earn a living, raise a family with four children, own a car, and rent an apartment. Caesar, in fact, harbors an aspiration of co-opening a Japanese restaurant with his father and brother someday by pulling together everything they have learned from their prior experiences of working as cooks and sushi men at a Japanese restaurant in Tustin. This entrepreneurial aspiration, if accomplished, can further optimize his realization of the American dream.

It is notable, however, that for many ethnic restaurateurs and workers, the realization of corporeal citizenship in Asian restaurants is not limited to the actualization of tangible material benefits but also carries a deeper, intangible dimension of affective inclusion, psychosomatic wellbeing, and sociocultural belonging. For instance, Richard, the 60-year-old chef-owner of Chef Chen in Irvine, started his culinary career as a restaurant apprentice in Taiwan when he was fourteen and has been in the restaurant business in the United States since he came here in 1979. He indicated that his culinary philosophy is to provide his Chinese/Taiwanese customers with the "warmth" of *jiaxiang wei*, meaning "hometown taste," and to allow his non-Chinese customers to enjoy "real" Chinese food (which he contrasted with Americanized Chinese food such as Kung Pao Chicken or Broccoli Beef, even though his restaurant also offers these dishes as a way to appeal to customers with different tastes). He derives special meaning from his personal mission to passing on the culinary heritage of Chinese food that was taught to him when he was an apprentice in Taiwan, and feels honored when his customers recognize and affirm the quality and value of his cultural dishes. In fact, he feels proud "when everyone knows they need to come to Chef Chen if they want real Chinese food." His wife, Vivian, who co-operates the restaurant, added that their venue has been featured in the local mainstream magazine and newspaper such as Orange County Business Journal and Orange County Register. Such recognition and affirmation from his customers and local media bolster Richard's sense of affective inclusion and belonging in America. For Richard, food is not "just food"; rather, food is important in creating an affective atmosphere imbued with feelings of warmth, comfort, and delight that intimately contributes to his immigrant customers' psychosomatic wellbeing. By fulfilling immigrants' nostalgic longing, Richard said, "ethnic food can do the work of drawing crowds and keeping immigrants in the area," which is good for the community and busi-

ness. He takes pride in his culinary skills and enterprise in helping provide a dining environment where his immigrant customers can acquire a sense of sociocultural belonging, which in turn contributes to his own sense of sociocultural belonging as an immigrant entrepreneur.

Patrick, the co-owner of Pho Saigon mentioned earlier, echoes Richard on the psychosomatic and sociocultural benefits provided by ethnic restaurants. When asked whether ethnic food is important for immigrants, Patrick stated:

I think it is important to have a variety of ethnic food as the immigrants get used to their countries' food and it is hard to change that habits or tastes. Besides that, I believe for other immigrants who live in the same region should also like the ethnic food as they have or use similar ingredients….American food is too simple and I would say not really healthy and tasty to me….For me, I love to eat Asian food, especially Vietnamese food, so I mentally love to see Asian restaurant wherever I go, and I believe many others also have the same thought as I do. It makes America a more interesting place to live, especially for immigrants. We have a chance to taste different foods without traveling across the world to do so.

Some immigrant workers also accentuate the affective aspect of their labor and work environment that contributes to their own sense of inclusion and belonging in the community. For instance, Phoebe, who works as a server at a Japanese restaurant in Fountain Valley, commented that ethnic food is very important in helping immigrants gradually integrate into their newly adopted homeland. As a worker in an Asian restaurant, she is glad to play the role of delivering the kind of familiar comfort food that can "help soothe immigrants' fears in a new place and provide spiritual nourishment as they move into an unfamiliar environment." For her, many Asian restaurants in the community also serve as meeting places and informational platforms for immigrants to share and exchange resources, information, and referrals as they go about their daily life in the cities, which further generates a sense of community and belonging for all parties involved—whether for the customers, workers, or restaurateurs. By immersing herself in such an environment, it activates Phoebe's own sense of affective inclusion and sociocultural belonging.

For other workers like Antonio who works around the oven as a group leader of the bread department at the Taiwan-originated 85C Bakery Café in Irvine, being in a work environment that has personnel from multiethnic and multilingual backgrounds can further generate an affective sense of cross-cultural inclusion and belonging. In Antonio's words, "I think this [experience of working at an ethnic restaurant] is actually one of the most few ways to try to interact as a culture. I think this is definitely something that can break down the boundaries and the stereotypes that people assume about a cul-

ture." When asked if he has encountered any specific experiences that broke down the barriers and stereotypes, Antonio responded:

I actually see it everyday, you know. I see people like, from my culture (Mexican), interacting with people from like, Vietnamese. Something you wouldn't normally see it everyday, like they like to talk to each other, they get along. Something like people would say, oh, you know like, you don't see it out on the street, but you see it here. I see it personally, like, they (Vietnamese workers) take the time to learn our language as Mexicans, and we take the time to try to learn a little bit about their language…so they won't just be talking among themselves, you know. They try to learn it so they can interact with others.

What is significant in Antonio's narratives is how his multiethnic coworkers generate their own community of (and rights to) affective inclusion and sociocultural belonging at the workplace as a way to realize corporeal citizenship.

In addition to restaurant owners and workers, immigrant consumers best exemplify how exercising their nonexistent right to cultural consumption can be a way to generate and actualize their psychosomatic wellbeing in American suburbs. This is best illustrated by how, when asked to rate how unbearable they would feel if they were to live in a place without any Asian restaurants on a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being the most unbearable, many immigrant customers gave a rating of 1 or 2, with comments such as:

It'd be really unbearable because it's the kind of food I have been accustomed to since childhood; if I don't have access to it I'd be in anguish. (Interview with Chia Ling)

I don't have high tolerance of American food, so if there is no Asian restaurant near me, I would not be able to stand it and I can't imagine what it'd be like. (Interview with Ru Yu)

Asian food is more diverse and complex and there are many dishes that you can't cook yourself, so it'd be much more convenient to dine out at Asian restaurants if you'd like to eat Asian food that is authentic and of good quality. (Interview with Katie)

Yumi, a senior immigrant living in Huntington Beach, remarked that she often dines out at Asian restaurants for family and social gatherings, and one thing she insists on as a customer is that the food dishes provided by the selected restaurants need to be authentic and "taste right"—meaning that they need to be consistent with the hometown tastes as much as possible—something she and her immigrant relatives/friends highly value at an affective, bodily, and sociocultural level.

4. Why Does Corporeal Citizenship Matter? The Resistant and Political Implications of Nonexistent Rights

Recalling that the Lefebvrian vision of the right to the city operates through the urban residents' rights to participation and appropriation in an oppositional stance vis-à-vis the state and capital, my above analysis shows how immigrant residents in suburban California can be understood as renarrating this democratic framework of urban citizenship by using the global circuits of neoliberal capitalism (i.e., entrepreneurship, labor, and consumption) to improvise and engender their own material, affective, and bodily inclusion, belonging, and "rights" in their everyday life. These immigrants perform citizenship in their own ways not by avowedly "making rights claims" (Isin, 2017, p. 501), but by co-creating an ethnic culinary economy that allows them to "feel like citizens" in their community space where they can work, cook, consume, eat, chat, and associate with others without feeling like racialized foreigners. This actualization of corporeal citizenship through ethnic restaurants suggests that for many immigrant and ethnic subjects living in multiethnic suburbs, their ways to withstand racialized exclusion and to survive, contribute and participate as "citizens" in an existential sense are often channeled through the existing urban structures of entrepreneurial and consumerist capitalism. This bespeaks the limitation of corporeal citizenship but also its elastic political potential, because for many immigrants operating in the global circuits of neoliberal capitalism, citizenship no longer just means "the right to have rights" (*pace* Arendt, 1951) or even "the right to claim rights" (*pace* Isin & Nyers, 2014), but also the right to *reinvent ways* of claiming rights.

To be sure, this is by no means a rosy picture. As Li observes: "The contemporary integrated ethnic economy comes closer to observing the typical capitalist norms of minimizing costs and maximizing profits, and as a consequence there are overlapping racial and class tensions and conflicts within, as well as between, ethnic groups" (Li, 2009, p. 24). Indeed, narratives of interethnic and interclass conflicts as well as entrepreneurial challenges, labor disputes and consumer complaints abound in my own field interviews. There is also the critical question of *differential* realization of corporeal citizenship among immigrant participants given the internal class-ethnic-occupational hierarchy within the industry (e.g., a restaurateur is likely to realize more bundles of nonexistent rights and to a greater degree compared to a kitchen worker). Moreover, one should not lose sight of the structural white/Western hegemony that all immigrants still operate in and the racializing pushback against the Asian and Latinx "invasion" from the white nativist community.

But perhaps the most critical question here is whether these immigrants are simply reproducing a compliant notion of the neoliberal citizen without engaging in any democratic contestation and political demands vis-à-vis the sovereign state. To put it another way, why does corporeal citizenship matter if it does not appear to be challenging the existing power structures? As I suggest here, given that immigrants' corporeal citizenship does not emanate from an oppositional stance against the state and capital, its resistant and political implications can easily appear unseen or imperceptible. It requires us to shed the usual straight lens of seeing resistance as *immediately* or *directly* oppositional to take on a more panoramic—that is, *broader*, *long-term*, *nonlinear*, and *open-ended*—horizon in appreciating both the milieu and myriad of the resistant and political implications of nonexistent rights. In the remaining space below, I argue that the formation of immigrants' corporeal citizenship in ethnic restaurants actually signals three directions/paths to destabilize existing power structures and further democratic transformation over the long run.

First, the most "immediate" but largely imperceptible political effect of corporeal citizenship is its cumulative, cross-generational accruement of empowerment for immigrants and their descendants vis-à-vis the conservative bloc of US democracy. By seeing resistant signs only in the most visible and direct political actions, we lose sight of and fail to appreciate the kind of ongoing and enduring work immigrants are doing in their everyday practices to sustain, nourish and enrich both of their own and their descendants' corporeal life in the meantime so that they can exert resistant and political impacts in the long run. The closest example takes places precisely in suburban California with the surprise victory of the Democratic Party in the 2018 congressional midterm elections in Orange County, where it won four Republican-held congressional seats in this long-standing conservative fortress. This reflects not only "a nearly 40-year rise in the number of immigrants, non-white residents and college graduates that has transformed this iconic American suburb into a Democratic outpost" (Nagourney & Gebeloff, 2018), but it also signals at a deeper level how the changing sociocultural landscape of the region, such as the immigrant-run auto body shops, tax preparation services, banks, real estate firms, doctors' offices, hair salons, gift shops, supermarkets, and restaurants, furnishes a durable stronghold of corporeal citizenship that empowers ethnic/immigrant subjects materially, affectively and psychosomatically to hang on and live on in their residing cities so that they can build on their everyday acquirement of nonexistent rights to further exert their wider social, cultural and political influences through succeeding generations.

In fact, while I noted earlier that immigrants have been able to actualize their inclusion and rights in an informal space that the sovereign power does not recognize, the recent anti-immigration rampage pursued by the Trump administration from the travel ban, family separation policies, to the construction of the border wall may well have signaled what is not said: the sovereign power's implicit awareness of and growing alarm over the long-term (political) threat posed by undocumented immigrants' improvisation and appropriation of nonex-

istent rights as they go about their daily life by way of working, eating, consuming, residing, and building a life here (even without their taking on visible political actions) that deeply confounds the boundaries between citizens and noncitizens and destabilizes the hegemony of white America. It is also important to add that the source of this cumulative "threat" of immigrant-minority empowerment comes not only from undocumented immigrants but also from those with legal status, for they together build the cultural-material environment of everyday places like ethnic restaurants that socializes the immigrant participants to acquire nonexistent rights through the daily practices of entrepreneurship, labor, and consumption. The cumulative, cross-generational accruement of immigrant-minority empowerment that evokes the backlash from the conservative bloc of the state and civil society is reason enough to continue expanding such everyday spaces to keep on sustaining and reviving immigrants' corporeal citizenship.

Second, while immigrants' improvisation of nonexistent rights does not directly make demands on the state, the fact that they can be understood as trying to actualize them in forms of the rights to enterprise, work, consumption, residency, affective inclusion, biological well-being, and sociocultural belong nonetheless signals a political direction for us to rethink the very meaning of rights not as abstract juridical construct but as something that can be concretely and meaningfully lived and realized on the ground. For instance, what does the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness mean if the people do not have the *actual* rights to work, consumption, residency, affective inclusion, biological well-being, and sociocultural belonging that are constitutionally protected in a democracy (such that some need to improvise/actualize them in their own informal ways)? Though indirectly, immigrants' improvisation of nonexistent rights both reminds and performs for us what kinds of rights actually matter to people that we may want to protect and make realizable in lived reality. This would entail democratic actions on our part to demand the state to both expand and concretize the existing lexicon of rights and explore ways to enable and assist people (whether citizens or residents) to *actually* realize these rights. In fact, if we want these rights to be meaningful, we may consider, for instance, whether the right to work ought to entail the right to work in a diverse, inclusive and healthy environment, and whether the right to consumption may well entail the right to culturally rich and environmentally sustainable consumption. In other words, our open discussion about nonexistent rights can serve as a first step for us to engage in popular discourse and democratic dialogue on why we need to—and how we can—turn many not-yet-existing rights into existing, actualizable, and meaningful rights through the state.

Lastly, while we want to continue pressing the state through democratic politics, the fact that immigrants' improvisation of nonexistent rights takes place at commercial sites such as ethnic restaurants signals yet another strategic possibility for us. Specifically, we may also consider going *around* the state to reach out to the innumerable everyday commercial and civic entities located at the intersections of market and civil society and reposition them as alternative sites of "governance" that can function as institutional distributors/dispensers of an even more expanded list of nonexistent rights that allow immigrants, minorities, and other subordinate subjects to actualize inclusion, belonging, and justice. Ethnic restaurant is certainly such a site, and we can also consider places such as the university that can take on the role of sanctuary campus to shield undocumented members of the campus community from deportation and provide financial aid and scholarship to undocumented students in helping them acquire/actualize their "right to education." This is not to replace the sovereign role of the state to distribute rights, but to enlist the support of other institutional entities besides the state that can empower excluded subjects in de facto ways through institutionally authorized or dispensed rights.

In all, immigrants' seemingly apolitical corporeal citizenship in (sub)urban spaces has surprising and far-reaching political implications if we open ourselves up to a broader, nonlinear, and panoramic view of social contestation and resistance. The three pathways indicated here can be pursued simultaneously for us to maximize their long-term effects in actualizing democratic inclusion and transformation.

Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

References

Arendt, H. (1951). *The origins of totalitarianism*. New York, NY: Harcourt Brace.

Aslam, A. (2017). *Ordinary democracy: Sovereignty and citizenship beyond the neoliberal impasse*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

Balibar, É. (2004). *We, the people of Europe? Reflections on transnational citizenship*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Cheah, P. (2006). *Inhuman conditions: On cosmopolitanism and human rights*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Cheng, W. (2013). *The Changs next door to the Díazes: Remapping race in suburban California*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.

Gabrielson, T., & Parady, K. (2010). Corporeal citizenship: Rethinking green citizenship through the body. *Environmental Politics*, *19*(3), 374–391.

Holston, J. (2009). Insurgent citizenship in an era of global urban peripheries. *City & Society*, *21*(2), 245–267.

Honig, B. (2001). *Democracy and the foreigner*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Isin, E. F. (2000). Introduction: Democracy, citizenship and the city. In E. F. Isin (Ed.), *Democracy, citizenship and the global city* (pp. 1–21). New York, NY: Routledge.

Isin, E. F. (2017). Performative citizenship. In A. Shachar, R. Baubóck, I. Bloemraad, & M. Vink (Eds.), *The Oxford handbook of citizenship* (pp. 500–523). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Isin, E. F., & Nyers, P. (2014). Introduction: Globalizing citizenship studies. In E. F. Isin & P. Nyers (Eds.), *Routledge handbook of global citizenship studies* (pp. 1–11). New York, NY: Routledge.

Lee, C. T. (2014). Decolonizing global citizenship. In E. F. Isin & P. Nyers (Eds.), *Routledge handbook of global citizenship studies* (pp. 75–85). New York, NY: Routledge.

Lee, C. T. (2019). Citizenship. In J. M. Ryan (Ed.), *Core concepts in sociology* (pp. 23–26). Oxford: Blackwell.

Lefebvre, H. (1996). *Wring on cities*. Malden, MA: Blackwell.

Li, W. (2009). *Ethnoburb: The new ethnic community in urban America*. Honolulu, HI: University of Hawaii Press.

McCann, E. (2002). Space, citizenship, and the right to the city: A brief overview. *GeoJournal*, *58*, 77–79.

Mitchell, D. (2005). The S.U.V. model of citizenship: Floating bubbles, buffer zones, and the rise of the 'purely atomic' individual. *Political Geography*, *24*, 77–100.

Nagourney, A., & Gebeloff, R. (2018, December 31). In Orange County, a Republican fortress turns Democratic. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from https://www.nytimes.com/2018/12/31/us/orange-county-republicans-democrats-demographics.html

Nyers, P. (2010). Missing citizenship. *International Political Sociology*, *4*(1), 95–98.

Purcell, M. (2002). Excavating Lefebvre: The right to the city and its urban politics of the inhabitant. *GeoJournal*, *58*, 99–108.

Purcell, M. (2003). Citizenship and the right to the global city: Reimagining the capitalist world order. *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, *27*, 564–590.

Rancière, J. (1999). *Dis-agreement: Politics and philosophy*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.

Tsuda, T. (2016). *Japanese American ethnicity: In search of heritage and homeland across generations*. New York, NY: New York University Press.

Varsanyi, M. W. (2006). Interrogating "urban citizenship" vis-à-vis undocumented migration. *Citizenship Studies*, *10*, 229–249.

Wolin, S. (1994). Fugitive democracy. *Constellations*, *1*(1), 11–25.

Young, I. M. (1989). Polity and group difference: A critique of the ideal of universal citizenship. *Ethics*, *99*, 250–274.

About the Author

Charles T. Lee is Associate Professor at the School of Social Transformation, Arizona State University. He works at the intersections of political theory, cultural theory, and critical citizenship studies. Using a transdisciplinary approach, his work is broadly concerned with innovative formations of agency and resistance in the global circuits of neoliberal capitalism. He is the author of *Ingenious Citizenship: Recrafting Democracy for Social Change* (Duke University Press, 2016).