

From Undocumented Migrant Workers to Migrant Media Activists: A Case Study of MWTV Migrant Media Activists*

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(In lieu of an abstract) Exclusion of and discrimination against migrant workers in South Korea have long been popular research topics for anthropologists and other social scientists. Whereas earlier research focused on the status of migrant workers as minorities and their exclusion from mainstream Korean society, this article examines how long-term migrant workers have adapted to South Korean culture, what kinds of qualifications and opportunities they have gained in South Korea, and how their lifeworlds changed as a result. While exploring how and in what contexts the South Korean nation-state realized and executed violence on migrant workers, the analysis turns to how migrant media activists resisted this violence through protests and media productions. By illustrating the activities of migrant media activists and their production of media contents, the article argues that the lives of migrant workers have been equally shaped by the biopolitics against migrant workers in Korean society and the identity politics of migrants' struggles to be recognized as social beings.

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1. Research Objectives and Argument

Exclusion of and discrimination against migrant workers in South Korea [hereafter, Korea] have long been popular research topics for anthropologists, as well as other social scientists. Earlier research in this field mostly focused on the status of migrant workers as minorities and their exclusion from mainstream Korean society. The nature of these studies was mostly illuminative and their results called for a systematic reformation of laws and policy, demanding a social shift. Since then, anthropologists have investigated the actions or agency of migrant workers who resolved the problems they faced and overcame discrimination by creating ethnic and national networks as a way of adapting to Korean society (Ham Hanhui 1997; Yu Myeonggi 1995, 1997; Han Geonsu 2003). These newer studies steered away from the older narrative that portrayed migrant workers purely as victims and placed greater focus on the rise of their resistance. This was significant in that it shifted the perspective through which migrant workers were perceived and positioned in Korean society.

However, all of these studies examined the actions, agency, and practices of migrant workers only within the boundaries of their workplace or ethnic networks. This limited the scope of migrant workers as agents of their own actions. Since most of the existing research was focused on the lives of migrant workers based on their exclusion and isolation in Korea, other aspects of their lives, such as the relationships they fostered with the outside world and the effects it had on them, went largely ignored. This perspective painted migrant workers only as a group of homogenized, socially isolated people, rather than seeing them as individuals with unique experiences. They failed to investigate their “lifeworlds,” a term coined by Jürgen Habermas, to offer a more nuanced understanding of migrant workers. A considerable number of migrant workers came to Korea with the intention of staying for a minimum of five years to upwards of ten years. Considering that a significant number of migrants attempted to settle down in Korea, it was important that they were no longer considered only as a group of segregated minorities isolated from the rest of Korea or as abused migrants. Their prolonged stays and presence called attention to the reality that they were indeed viable members of Korean society, constantly interacting with Koreans and constructing their own lifeworlds. Given the current state of migrants in Korea, it was imperative to examine how long-term migrant workers were adapting to Korean culture, what

kinds of qualifications and opportunities they were gaining in Korea, and how their lifeworlds changed as an outcome. Moreover, I wanted to analyze the social phenomenon and effects that occurred within their own communities as a result of their interactions with Koreans, and illuminate the fact that migrant workers did not live in isolation but were in constant contact with Korean society. A discussion on migrant workers' agency and practices within this context has long been overdue.

To fill a void in this area of research, I examined the emergence of migrant media activists in Korea and what their practices signified. Migrant Worker's TV (MWTV)¹—a non-profit organization I worked with for the purpose of this research—consisted of migrants who had previously worked as undocumented workers and have now established their own media network in Korea. As producers, journalists, anchors, documentary directors, and actors, they disclosed various social problems concerning migrant workers, while working tirelessly to enter the public sphere as a relevant voice in media. All the migrant media activists in this organization have lived in Korea for over ten years. Their years in Korea, particularly the years they spent in the Korean workplace, have undoubtedly produced long-lasting effects on their lifeworlds. These effects included encountering discrimination, isolation, oppression, and social pressure, as well as being exposed to opportunities to learn new skills, including the usage and integration of a sophisticated media system. In this article, I investigate the various conflicts, issues, and problems migrant workers have faced in their interactions with Korean society, as well as the specific events and cases that gave rise to the establishment of MWTV. I also document how the migrant workers transformed their careers into migrant media activism by examining the circumstances surrounding the formation of this company. By so doing, I intend to shed light on their agency and empowerment. A significant part of this research was devoted to observing the kind of activities migrant media activists engaged in in Korean society and the message they transmitted through the contents of their media production.

At a glance, the work of migrant media activists seems to conform to the tenets of multiculturalism, which has been trending in Korea. However, the work of these activists initially stemmed from the life and identity crises, or issues related to identity representation of migrant workers that

¹ (Translator's note) The acronym has since changed to Migrant World Television.

surfaced in light of problems concerning the legality of their stays in Korea, not from conceding to the predominance of multiculturalism or multicultural policy. In this article, I discuss the emergence of various media activities of migrant activists from the paradigm of the power relations unfolding between the axes of biopolitics and identity politics. I also investigate the work of migrant media activists both in Korean and in migrant communities, exploring the memory and experience of their participation in the protests that took place at Myeongdong Catholic and Seoul Anglican Cathedrals. Lastly, I examine the issues related to migrants' lives and identities by analyzing the various activities and contents produced by MWTV. Through these efforts, I extrapolate the relevance between the activities and actions of migrants and Korean society as a modern nation-state.

2. Theoretical Background and Research Method

1) Nation-state and Biopolitics

Michel Foucault (1990) argued that before the modern era, the sovereign power had the authority to “take life or let live.” However, what emerged in the modern period was biopower, power over life or “the right to make live and let die,” which replaced sovereign power. In contrast to the sovereign power’s politicization of death prior to the modern period, the biopolitics of the production and reproduction of life (through nation building) became a key issue of the nation-state in the modern era. The living population—represented as the members of the nation-state—became the primary object for authorities to ensure, maintain, and develop. However, contrary to the belief that perfect realization of the ideal nation-state was possible, globalization and the emergence of a mass labor migrant population that crosses national borders increased the level of diversity and cultural differences, creating disjunctures for the nation (Appadurai 2004). The alleged infallibility of the nation-state ideals crumbled, triggering the rise of domestic risk (Beck 1997; Huntington 1997; Giddens 1990; Lewellen 2003). Matters concerning the control and management of outsiders living within state borders became important topics to consider. The new reality of mass migration and settlement in an era of increasing globalization required a readjustment of the role and function of the

nation-state.

Due to the vastness of the issue, I narrow the focus of this article to the topic of undocumented migrant workers in Korea. The Employment Permit System (EPS) established in 2003 gave documented migrant workers limited labor rights, which were previously unavailable. However, this policy also enforced the deportation of those who were no longer documented.² This deportation policy was a method through which the newly introduced biopolitics of the state was foisted on migrants. In other words, this deportation policy became another form of population management that, through the exclusion and segregation of their bodies, took away the rights and self-identity of migrants. It is important to note here that Giorgio Agamben's concepts of *homo sacer*, "bare life," and "the state of exception" offered a different interpretation of biopolitics than had Foucault. In his analysis of *homo sacer* and the state of exception, Agamben (2008) used the paradox of the sovereign who had the power to suspend the validity of the law and place himself outside the law, to discuss issues of the cloistered political life of humans and the uncertainty of life, which formed the crux of modern biopolitics. He defined "the state of exception" as the suspension of law, including the social norm for the preservation of the juridical order, and as the "zone of indistinction," to which *homo sacer* or the "bare life"—life stripped of form and value—was consigned. According to his argument, modern power was manifest in the form of violence in the state of exception, using the body and life of *homo sacer* as a conduit.

Examining the condition and status of undocumented migrant workers in Korea through Agamben's theoretical framework, one can see that governing the population of undocumented migrant workers invariably created "the state of exception," which resulted in the suspension or cessation of rules, laws, institutional processes, and even cultural customs embedded in the society and nation. In the state of exception, the state power exercised physical force and violence through the body of the migrant workers in the guise of lawfulness. For instance, undocumented migrant workers were not treated as true members of society nor were their

² Even if documented migrant workers received labor rights in the beginning, their prolonged stay in Korea inevitably rendered them as "potential illegal migrants." Therefore, the biopolitics of undocumented migrants applied equally to documented migrants. Documented migrant workers were only temporarily exempted from biopolitics.

social positions³ and conditions deemed relevant by the state power when crackdowns, deportations, or physical violence were forcibly used against them. Rather, the sovereign power suspended the rights that accompanied undocumented migrants' social status and conditions, while simultaneously realizing a new form of state power by taking control over their physical bodies. Undocumented migrants were labeled "illegal aliens" by the state and reduced to a "bare life" exposed to physical violence. In the context of maintaining and guaranteeing the continual existence of the modern nation-state, Foucault's biopolitics and Agamben's "bare life" can be interpreted in the same vein, as the modern nation-state making life itself a part of politics, which legitimized and justified the very existence of the state.

2) *The Struggle for Recognition and Politics of Identity*

The "bare life" of undocumented migrants related to the issue of belonging could also be referred to as the life of people without a nationality.⁴ Migrants' separation from their homeland also meant their separation from a country that reinforced their sense of belonging (Foucault's argument), on account of their existence being converted into the object of the biopolitics of a foreign country (Agamben's argument). In other words, they experienced a nationless "state of exception" precisely because of the existence of the foreign nation-state. This was the reason the biopolitics of

³ The meaning of "social position" encompasses the status and condition of migrants, the nationality of migrant workers, citizens, or general workers; and the rank and authority developed in social relationships.

⁴ Of course, those who study transnational migration or transnationality examine the identity constructions of migrants based on their relationships with their home countries and their status as migrants in a foreign land. They also investigate how migrants maintain their sense of belonging to their homeland while reconstructing their identity in the new country. Scholars who study this subject view migrants as agents who exercise power derived from the changes they undergo (Louie 2000; Schiller 1999; Schiller and Fouron 2001; Tsuda 2003). However, when one defines migrants largely as free agents within the framework of nation-state ideals, it takes the focus off the conflict, confrontation, violence, and the possibility (or impossibility) of negotiation and communication migrants face in their new country and their efforts to adapt and survive (Smith 2003). Discourse on transnationality regarding migrants and the deterritorialized space must be re-examined to ensure that the space doesn't become "ghettoized" or subjected to violence or oppression by the state (Kim Gwangeok 2010).

migrant workers, homo sacer, and the “bare life” inevitably accompanied the issues of identity: separation and subjection to “modern violence” and “bare lives” due to the state infiltrating the consciousness of migrants and damaging their sense of identity. Moreover, since the “bare lives” of migrants were often associated with crime, migrants were naturally grouped as the other, stripped of political, social, and cultural rights.

Invariably, negotiating and resolving issues related to their rights with the very power that defined their social status became key to recovering their damaged identity. Axel Honneth (1992) introduced the concept of “the struggle for recognition,” using the psychological mechanism of the human desire to be recognized by their rights. He expounded on the concept using George Mead’s classic thesis on the relationship between “I” and “Me.” Mead (1963) contended that the struggle for recognition was a process through which one gained self-understanding from the perspective of the generalized other and an intersubjective recognition of oneself and others. The “Me” interacted with the generalized other while the “I” observed and recognized the “Me” as the reflection of other’s image and expectations of the “Me.” In other words, self-understanding derived from internalizing one’s interactions with others and their perspectives. Based on these viewpoints, Honneth argued that the objective “Me” stripped of rights and identity looked for a new way to be recognized through the subjective “I,” discovering the possibility of resolving its own conflict. Finding a new way to be recognized meant allowing the subjective “I” to re-evaluate the values, norms, and ideologies imbued on the objective “Me” by others and demand from those who stipulated the values of the objective “Me” the legitimacy of their existence and rights through action and arguments based on facts and reason.

Honneth defines “struggle for recognition” as social actions taken by individuals and groups to achieve recognition of rights. The struggle for recognition also encompassed the endeavor to remedy cultural injustices rooted in the social patterns of representation, interpretation, and communication such as cultural domination, non-recognition, and disrespect (Fraser 1997; Jeong Gayeong 2008). Fraser regarded the politics of recognition as part of identity politics, for the struggles to restore the damaged identity of individuals and groups were intrinsically related to their intent to be recognized for their rights and identities within the society to which they belonged. That is to say, politics of recognition postulated the recovery of rights and freedom in one’s life, as well as the

restoration of one's lost identity (Kim Gwangeok 1991).

Based on the theoretical findings discussed above, I examine "the struggle for recognition" and identity politics in the form of migrants' resistance against the biopolitics of the nation-state. In addition, I focus on the agency which migrant workers exercised to carry out their mission, specifically the strategies employed by migrant media activists who founded the Migrant Workers' TV, and the contents they created. In so doing, I intend to illuminate how a nation-state's bio-politics was forced on migrants and reveal aspects of their struggle for recognition and identity politics.

I conducted field research at Migrant Worker's TV located in Yongsan district in Seoul from February to December of 2009. Established in December of 2004, MWTV was run by migrants from twelve countries including Bangladesh, Nepal, Burma, Mongolia, China, Indonesia, the Philippines, Russia, Vietnam, the United States, Canada, and Japan, as well as Korean activists. Through the production of various television programs, the organization shed light on the human rights issues of migrant workers and informed them of pertinent information they needed to navigate their lives in Korea. MWTV provided programs in the languages of the twelve countries stated above in addition to Korean. The company consisted of thirty members, including one foreign executive, one Korean executive, and multilingual news anchors,⁵ journalists, producers, and editors. The migrants produced their own videos and broadcast the contents through the Internet and the cable channel, RTV.⁶ The core members of the organization included two Korean activists who were in charge of administration, one Korean activist who worked in media production, and six migrant media activists. In this research, I conducted in-depth interviews and participant observation, focusing on migrant media activists and their practices and activities. My interviews usually lasted approximately two hours at a time. While working as a volunteer four to five times a week, I established strong rapport with the members of the group. Through this effort, I was able to participate in filming, program production, migrant

⁵ Approximately ten people—migrant workers, marriage migrant women, study-abroad students, Korean university students, and others—assumed the role of multilingual news anchors. However, they were mostly volunteers who participated in news production only two to three times a month.

⁶ (Translator's note) RTV is Korea's first public access channel whose contents were produced by viewers.

media education, management meetings, and translation. These activities helped me conduct research for this article.

3. Migrant Workers' Protests

1) Rising Number of Undocumented Migrant Workers and Deportation Policy

Currently, there are about one million migrants living in Korea. Among them, about 220,000 are undocumented. To shrink that number to 200,000, the Korean government enforced crackdowns and deportation. You might be having a hard time imagining what crackdowns look like. Some people hear the words “crackdown” or “immigrant office” and literally have a heart attack right then and there. It’s that frightful. When they crack down on 20,000 people, they enlist the help of the employees at the immigration office. There are not quite 1,000 of them, so they call on gangsters who come out with metal pipes. If we hear word that the people from the immigration office are on their way, some people jump out of a five-story building...

When we were protesting in 2003, twelve people committed suicide. Some hanged themselves, some jumped in front of subway trains. One of my friends suffered from a heart attack because of crackdowns. He was a healthy man, but he had a heart attack when he was caught and was taken away handcuffed. (Ttura, 13 years in Korea,⁷ Burmese, member of the MWTV management committee)

In 2003, the Korean government implemented the Employment Permit System (EPS) and enforced broad-scale crackdowns and deportation. Before the EPS was implemented in 2003, most of the migrant workers arrived in Korea through the Foreign Industrial Trainee System. Problems occurred, however, when trainees left their respective training companies due to low pay and workplace violence. These poor conditions motivated them to find better paying jobs at other companies even as they lost their documented status. Because this happened frequently, the government issued warnings and cracked down on illegal aliens. However, due to the complaints of small/mid-size businesses about the shortage of human resources and their request to consider the conditions of the domestic labor market, the government turned a blind eye to the “illegal” employment of undocumented workers and did not

⁷ In this article, the years of migrants’ stays in Korea was calculated until the year 2010.

enforce deportation. However, when the number of undocumented workers rose to over 300,000 due to weaknesses in the Industrial Trainee System, the government implemented the Employment Permit System in 2003, resulting in the enforcement of crackdowns and deportation on an unprecedented scale.

Although some undocumented migrant workers were deported to their home countries, many hid in the shadows. However, over three hundred of them protested on November 15 and 16, 2003 at Myeongdong Catholic and Seoul Anglican Cathedrals, marking the beginning of a series of protests to come. The founding members of MWTV also participated in protests that occurred between 2003 and 2004 at Myeongdong Catholic Cathedral (approx. 380 days), at Seoul Anglican Cathedral (approx. 80 days), and at other locations in six different regions in Korea to oppose the deportation of migrant workers. As evidenced by Ttura's story, migrant workers were subjected to crackdowns, deportation, imprisonment in foreigners' detention centers and were prone to suicides caused by fear of deportation and physical violence. These atrocities pointed to the emergence of a new form of governing power or biopower of the modern nation-state with the advent of a massive influx of migrant workers. This was not a matter of legality but a problem concerning the internal and external boundaries of law. In other words, debating the issue of legality (or illegality) of undocumented migrant workers and deporting migrants were not outcomes that resulted from enforcing the existing law or the legal system. The increasing trend of globalization caused an influx of migrant workers in Korea, which posed a threat to the homogeneity of the nation-state. As a way of averting this crisis, the state produced and operated biopower through the state of exception by borrowing the formality of law and the legal system to confine and deport migrants. The government labeled the undocumented migrants as "illegal aliens," effectively reducing them to conditions of the bare life or homo sacer exposed to physical violence and even death (Agamben 2008). The power of the state infiltrated the very bodies (both physical and representational) of migrant workers through physical violence, which contrasted greatly with the legal procedure and system that was explicitly used on Koreans. This act immediately stripped the rights and qualifications of migrant workers as viable members of society, rendering them "natural men" whose bodies became subjected to a new form of power. In other words, another aspect of biopower revealed itself through the conduit of ethnicity, race, state, and

citizenship, while the nation-state produced the bare life or homo sacer through the mechanism of imprisonment and deportation (Agamben 2008; Butler and Spivak 2007).

2) The Formation of Migrant Workers' Identity Through Education and Learning

The 2003 migrant workers' protests gained momentum when migrants joined hands with Korean civic society and labor organizations and when members from groups such as the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions and immigrant centers participated in the movement. Through these protests, migrant workers discovered a new identity they had not considered before. Through the education provided by Korean activists, migrant workers began to awaken to their newly found identity as laborers.

Since most of the migrants here were undocumented workers, they didn't believe labor laws applied to them. They thought things like severance pay was something other people get. They generally thought those rights didn't belong to them. But through labor education, they learned that undocumented workers were also entitled to severance and overtime pay and could be compensated for work-related accidents. I clearly remembered their faces when they first learned that. Koreans taught them about labor rights and told them migrant workers were entitled to receive severance pay. They were amazed. Before 2003, when I saw someone asking for severance pay, I thought they had guts. Everyone obviously agreed that migrant workers who were denied their monthly pay should get paid, but they were surprised to hear that they should also receive severance pay. Business owners also panicked now that people were asking for it. They didn't know labor laws applied to migrant workers. They just made migrants work, thinking they would take whatever was given them. But when we gave the migrants a lamp—so to speak—they could see everything. They saw themselves as real workers. They thought, "I am a worker. There is no reason I shouldn't get severance pay." Undocumented workers now tried to get severance pay and apply for compensation for work-related accidents. If you are a worker, all the contents of the Labor Standards Act apply to you. In the beginning, some people said these regulations didn't apply to undocumented workers. But undocumented workers do the same work. Whether their status is legal or illegal, they all produce work and have the same productive capacity. They are all equally workers. (Somottu, 16 years in Korea, Burmese, executive officer of MWTV, band leader of "Stop Crackdown")

As told in Somottu's narrative, migrant workers began to awaken to their identity as laborers by taking part in the education provided by civil society activists in Korea. He stated that, "many migrant workers who

became part of the protest groups had not identified themselves as laborers before they joined the protests.” This was due, in part, to the institutional system that made it difficult for them to request even the most basic rights as laborers because they were undocumented workers. For example, Meonju—a Nepali who is currently employed at MWTV as a multi-lingual news anchor—lost three fingers at a factory when a machine took in her hand. Although the business owner paid for her medical expenses, he pressured her to work without pay for a year in order to recuperate the loss he suffered due to her medical fees. She confessed she had no choice but to acquiesce, because she was an undocumented worker. She was more worried about the business owner reporting her and getting deported. After she was discharged from the hospital, she worked sixteen hours a day at the factory. Like Meonju, most undocumented workers had no idea what kind of protection they could receive or what kind of legal, institutional rights they could claim. Because of their undocumented status, the workers did not believe they were entitled to laborers’ rights. The circumstances of the migrants and their inability to claim their rights put them in a “state of exception” that stopped or discontinued the function of their rights, and reduced them to a bare life in which they had no choice but to relinquish their selves to the pressure of the business owners (Agamben 2008).

Somottu compared labor rights to “a lamp that was given to workers who were navigating a dark road.” At the protest sites, migrant workers learned about laws regarding labor, employment standards, industry safety, and work accident compensation, which helped them realize that undocumented workers also had rights to the protection these laws offered. After the protests, Somottu’s friend Sottia returned to her previous job and requested severance pay from her former boss. She immediately put her knowledge into action when she learned that the rights she believed only belonged to Korean workers also equally applied to her and other migrant workers. She transformed from being merely stunned by the fact that she could receive severance pay to having the courage to actually request this benefit from her boss. This example showed that migrant workers whose “language” had been previously denied had gained their own “words.” This was also a political act that converted problems that were considered personal into public issues (Kim Gwangweok 1991). These changes became possible as migrant workers acquired knowledge and asserted their voices.

Migrants, declaring ownership of their rights, broke the silent surface of the power relationship that was formed when they were voiceless and ignorant of their rights. Business owners panicked when undocumented migrant workers referred to labor laws and demanded severance pay. When business owners denied them saying, “You are illegal. You don’t get severance pay!” migrant workers fought back asserting, “People who are undocumented, legal or illegal are dealt with by the immigration office. That is no concern of yours or the Ministry of Labor’s. According to the Labor Standards, we are considered laborers, too. Did my illegal status ever cause you harm?” This was the picture of workers who knew their rights.

You get angry and frustrated when you learn about laws like that. (laughs) Korean workers feel the same way. To put it another way, students should learn these things (institutional systems and laws related to labor). Someday, they will be workers. They need to know the basics of labor rights, labor education, and why they need to work... I handed out survey sheets to about forty students. I asked them to consider why they needed to think of themselves as laborers and why they needed labor education. But they didn’t understand why they needed this education or why it had anything to do with them. Korean schools don’t teach them things like that, but this kind of education is good. It changes your mindset and prepares you. (Tingtun, 17 years in Korea, Burmese, media educator, and producer)

Rather than seeing themselves as victims, migrants began to perceive themselves as workers who could legitimately claim their rights. This transformation gave migrants, who participated in protests, a particular sense of freedom and dignity. Contrary to his statement that, “Learning about those laws made me angry and frustrated. I shouldn’t have learned about them at the protests,” Tingtun’s face looked pleasant, joyful, and free. He insisted that I also receive labor education. He passed out survey sheets to his fellow migrant workers, as well as to the students at the university he attended. In the survey, he included questions about the importance and necessity of labor rights and education in addition to questions that reaffirmed or reminded them of what it meant to be a laborer. His awareness of these issues went well beyond his own internalization, as he transferred his knowledge to other potential laborers to establish commonality with and receive support from his fellow students. Tingtun’s actions—in comparison to his former self as factory worker who was “trained” through a disciplinary power and/or power of surveillance as a docile body (Foucault 1990)—could be understood as a way of self-

governing his body which enabled him to cultivate his own life. This was a form of self-government, the right to “the care of the self” or “technologies of the self”⁸ (Foucault 1997). Self-government signified the technologies of the self, which enabled the transformation of oneself in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, perfection, or immortality. This idea differed from the technologies of dominant power within strategic or political power relations. Self-government not only created a space for an equal standing with the dominant power but also at the points of resistance against the dominant power. Thus, self-government, as a form of bioethical practice, did not succumb to the dominant power, nor did it construct a hierarchical relation between others and the self (Foucault 1997). Tingtun’s actions and awareness of his identity, not as a victim but as a laborer, took on a form of self-government that encouraged people to pay attention to their mutual interests and understandings, while claiming their rights and reporting the contradictions and injustices found in Korean society.

In some ways, we benefited from the government enforcement of the deportation policy in 2004. Even though we didn’t acquire anything in terms of policy or institutional system, we gained people. A lot of migrant activists showed up. This was how groups like “Burma Action,” MWTV broadcasting company, migrant protests, and the multinational rock band, “Stop Crackdown” that voices the concerns of migrants were formed ... Even now, these people are involved in various activities. In my opinion, their actions represent one million migrants who are living in Korea. (Ttura, 13 years in Korea, Burmese, a member of the MWTV management committee)

The Korean government’s legal and institutional implementation of the employment permit defeated the collective resistance of migrant workers and protests that demanded the stop of deportation, resulting in the eventual cessation of migrants’ protests. However, the protests that lasted from 2003 to 2004 provided migrant workers with another galvanizing opportunity seen as a transformation of a lifetime. Quitting the protests was regarded not as a failure but as a chance to explore other social movements, as their work continued even after the protest ended. The activities of the members of Migrant Worker’s TV (MWTV), which I

⁸ Foucault (1998) defined this as a new right that is both anti-disciplinary and emancipated from the principle of sovereignty or repression. This right also includes “the right to live, to be free, to leave, to not be persecuted, and to legitimate self-defense in relation to government” (Foucault 2000).

specifically focused on for this article, were the continuation and reproduction of the migrant workers' movement but in a different form. Korea's material and human resources, in combination with migrants' work, became effective tools that sustained their movement. In the next section, I examine how the broadcasting media, MWTV, was launched. I explore its unique traits and significance and the kind of social changes overseen by these migrant media activists.

4. MWTV and Migrant Media Activists

Yi Byeonghan offered to help us form [MWTV]. I asked Haemini, my Nepali friend, and Ttura to join us. The four of us visited RTV to learn about the organization and its facilities. We also had a meeting with the RTV employees...As you know, November 18 is Migrants' Day. We produced a 100-minute discussion program titled, "Korean society as seen through the eyes of migrant workers" to air that day. That was the first time I was involved in something like that, and it was really fun. There weren't any programs like that before. [When we were interviewed by other media] we were usually edited out. [But in this program] we could say whatever we wanted and that energized us ... Later we were able to produce other programs [like the news and documentaries]. (Mabub, 11 years in Korea, Bangladeshi, documentary film director/actor)

We wanted to make our own voices heard. We rallied on the streets, held press conferences, and protested, so people would hear us. But they didn't! [Korea's mainstream] media didn't include our voices. So, we thought if we made our own voices heard, we could be the mouth and ear of migrant workers. Our basic and fundamental goal was to become the mouth and ear of migrant workers. (Ttura, 13 years in Korea, Burmese, a member of the MWTV management committee)

Mabub and Ttura realized, based on their experiences at the protests, that there was a lack of or very limited communication with the Korean government or society. This realization changed the direction of their movement and shed light on the necessity of a different type of communication. Although their protests were covered by a few main news media, their voices were distorted, bent, or were otherwise treated as cursory. They had to climb many hurdles in order to say what they truly wanted to say. In order to overcome this problem, they chose to create their own media in the form of a broadcasting station.

Around the time the protests were ending, Mabub (Bangladeshi), Ttura

(Burmese), and Haemini (Nepali) met Yi Byeonghan—an artist and a member of a Korean arts organization called “MixRice”—who had just coincidentally attended a discussion session about issues related to migrants. This encounter became the turning point for migrants, giving them opportunities to explore a new direction for the migrant workers’ movement. In December 2004, Mabub, Ttura, and Haemini were able to design, produce, and broadcast on RTV a program called “Korean society as seen through the eyes of migrant workers” with the help of Yi Byeonghan. After the initial project, Tingtun, Somottu, Minu, and Eosok worked as journalists and producers at RTV and began to produce in earnest multilingual news and discussion programs. Although they began this work in early 2005 in the RTV office with a single desk, in 2008 they relocated to Research Space Suyuneomeo⁹ in Yongsan and created an independent office with a small studio, becoming their own broadcasting station.

Unlike other media companies, MWTV was comprised mostly of migrant workers among its six core members and volunteers, who worked as multilingual anchors and translators. Although Korean activists also participated in program planning, their opinions were regarded equally with those of others and did not hold dominant influence. Korean activists aided migrant media activists, which indicated that their relationship with migrant activists were based on equality. The migrant activists had a hand in 100 percent of the production process, unlike organizations funded by the government or other sponsors. They became the principal contributors of the contents, shedding light on migrant workers’ community and soliciting a better understanding of their lives (Sim Boseon 2006). Considering that the relationship between Korean society—which included sponsor organizations, civic organizations/centers, mainstream media, and the state itself—and migrant workers has traditionally been unequal, asymmetrical, and based on exclusion (Kim Gwangeok 2010), the equal relations among the members of MWTV was a remarkable sign. This was due to their awareness of the inequality that commonly existed between migrant workers and Koreans. Despite the fact that migrant workers contributed to the Korean economy in their respective roles, they were

⁹ (Editor’s note) In Korean, it is written as 수유+너머, meaning Suyu (a location name) and beyond. Suyuneomeo refers to a research group that represents alternative social and cultural values in the Korean society.

pushed to the margins of society or were deemed invisible. Even in the mainstream media, they were represented in stereotypes and distortions (Han Geonsu 2003). Taking a more egalitarian approach to defining their relationships with each other was intended to remedy the disparity that traditionally existed between the two parties. For this reason, MWTV was co-operatively run by two executives from the beginning: one foreigner and one Korean.

Internet activities and broadcasting became a haven and a channel of communication through which migrants could tell people their stories. The creation of a virtual space allowed them to extend their issues and problems from a “contiguous” space, such as protest sites where actual face-to-face encounters and interactions could occur, to “non-contiguous” spaces in which individuals could interact and communicate through the Internet or broadcasting (Tsuda 2003). This medium provided migrants with a means to continuously expose their problems and appeal to the Korean society while becoming the vehicle through which they could maintain and reinforce their collective identity (Anderson 2002; Appadurai 2004). The MWTV website received approximately three to six thousand visitors a day, with an all-time viewer count of over 630,000 as of 2011. What is important to point out here is not the fact that they chose the virtual space of the Internet and television to make their voices heard, but that through the development of their thoughts and assertions, this space was reconstructed into a free protest site authorities could no longer restrict. This space became a place in which powerless people could freely speak out and those without legal rights could demand freedom, creating a dynamic “public space.” Ironically, through the “deterritorialized space” of the media (Appadurai 2004; Lévy 2001), the status of migrant workers, who were formerly placed outside of state and territorial boundaries or in a “state of exception,” were now crossing boundaries to the internal or the public sphere. Their entry to the free cyber world created a different form of political space and equipped them with a platform that helped them launch their political independence (Lévy 2001).

Migrants were not limited to the virtual arenas of the Internet and broadcasting, but also received opportunities to take their activism to various public spaces in Korean society. Migrant workers at MWTV gained new titles as actors, directors, multicultural instructors, multinational band musicians, media instructors, resulting in the expansion of physical boundaries in which they worked. At times, mainstream media companies

such as “M” or “K” requested to use the videos migrant workers created in their own news, while one of the main newspapers explored a multicultural project in partnership with MWTV. Migrants’ activities were now publicly covered by the press, and they were bombarded with requests to speak in universities. They held special lectures about migrant issues at Korean universities and participated in panels at academic conferences to share their thoughts and views about the problems concerning migrant workers. This visibility increased the opportunities and number of places from which they could demand change, while enabling them to freely speak and communicate with other members of Korean society. In other words, they produced a discourse on migrants and migrant workers as media activists and as intellectuals. In the past, they lived in the shadows of an invisible domain and their lives were a mere economic tool. However, their transformation as media activists increased the visibility of laborers in general and the breadth and scope of their work. They no longer hesitated to come out of the shadows, joining various groups and organizations.¹⁰ They were no longer seen as mere economic tools or “beings with only a body”; they were now recognized as social beings, political agents, and viable members of Korean society. Media activists became political and social subjects, through the language and actions of their work they gained recognition as actors and participants in the public sphere (Habermas 1998; Arendt 1996; Agamben 2008). What this acknowledgement meant to them and what kind of changes it brought to their self-conception can be seen in the following narrative of Eosok.

This was the reason why I thought it was worth working for MWTV. I was just an ordinary person working at a factory until 2005. Nobody knew who I was, but now every Nepali knows who I am.

I attended an event yesterday and received an award. Not a big one, a small

¹⁰ I learned that MWTV established various joint relationships with many organizations in April 2009 at the fourth anniversary evening celebration honoring sponsors. Over 60 organizations and approximately 500 people supported MWTV and attended the event. These sponsors included groups such as regional media education organizations; human rights meeting for attorneys; laborers’ unions such as the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions and Federation of Korea Trade Unions; migrant support groups such as the Joint Committee with Migrants in Korea; regional migrant support groups; Catholic, Buddhist, and Protestant organizations and other religious groups; and middle and high school volunteers. MWTV’s relationships with other organizations vastly grew in range and variety in comparison to the joint relationships they formed with labor groups and migrant centers during the 2003-2004 protests.

one. But regardless of the size, the award meant they respected me. They thought, “He is this kind of person.” I was working as a Nepali journalist and even though I was not very good, I had the title. There is a Nepali migrant workers’ community in Korea. They gave me the award yesterday. I believe I made the right decision to get behind the camera. I wasn’t able to make a lot of money, but I think I earned fame. The community recognized me as a journalist. I was happy but more than that, I felt a greater responsibility because I believe I need to give back more than what I receive. (Eosok, 10 years in Korea, Nepali, MWTV producer, left Korea voluntarily in December 2009)

The Nepali migrant workers’ community recognized Eosok for leading the efforts to protect the rights of migrant workers by presenting him with an award. When he was recognized as a “social being,” he experienced an internal transformation of self-acknowledgement. An important aspect to consider here is the difference between those who were socially accepted and those who were not. Eosok’s self-acknowledgement guaranteed the sustainability of his media activities and gave him a greater sense of responsibility as a media activist. He was able to re-evaluate his own hopes and actions by interacting and collaborating with others. Through this process, he was able to further develop his abilities and potential, which helped expand his plans for the future. This was the reason he continued to work as a media activist and not as a factory worker (as an exception among migrants) even though his finances were in better shape when he was working at the factory.¹¹ The members of MWTV no longer identified themselves as migrant workers; they were now migrant media activists. So, how did the messages they wanted to deliver to the migrant or Korean society specifically manifest through the media? How did information present itself in this newly created “protest site”?

¹¹ Let us look back at the lives of the media activists when they were migrant workers. Minu, who is currently working as a producer at MWTV, sat in front of a sewing machine for sixteen hours a day when he was a migrant worker. Even so, he was never able to share a few words with his colleagues because he needed to meet his daily quota. He was a low-paid menial worker who was accustomed to a fast-paced working environment and an “invisible” being living in enforced silence. He was no more than a being with only a body or “bare life.”

5. Broadcasting Biopolitics and Identity Politics

1) *MWTV as a Conduit of Information*

Tingtun: A lot of my friends from different countries ask me, “What’s new these days?” Most of them want to hear about the kind of law, or protection they could get and how they can get it. They often forget what’s happening in the Korean news, but when they watch MWTV, they find out what they need to know. They can find it online whenever they want.

Minu: Those are the things migrant workers want to know about the most. But the government doesn’t provide anything in English and even the things in Korean don’t reach the migrants. The workers mostly rely on rumors or what other people say even when they are false, so a lot of them have the wrong information. I think it’s important to correct their thinking and give them the right facts. For example, some migrant workers think the government doesn’t crack down on migrants as frequently. People who only want to believe good things really do believe that the government might stop.

This conversation was grounded in the recognition that for migrant workers, it was impossible to know what action to take when their rights were threatened, since they never received proper information about living in Korea. When an influx of migrant workers arrived in Korea, the state and businesses only considered their economic utility without contemplating their need for information or training about how to live in Korea. The workers were usually sent to work sites within two to three days of their arrival in Korea, which was problematic.¹² Tingtun repeatedly contended: “It is necessary to give migrant workers and marriage migrants who come to Korea for the first time at least three months to learn the language and culture.” Even though the Korean government provided migrant workers with information on legal and systematic labor rights through their

¹² Through the Korea Federation of Small and Medium Business, migrant workers received necessary employment training after their arrival in Korea, but it was only for 20 hours over the span of 3 days. When the training was completed, they were immediately sent to their employers. Employers also received training regarding prevention of hiring illegal residents of foreign descent; reporting the beginning of workers’ employment; necessary information in relation to the employment management of foreign workers; the duties and rights of employers; methods for managing foreign workers; and an outline of the employment permit system and standards. This training lasted approximately one hour, after which they met the migrant workers (Ministry of Employment and Labor Employment Permit System 2018a).

discussions of the employment permit policy, workers who were not familiar with the Korean language were not able to grasp the contents within their short training. If the contents were too complicated or if the trainees were unable to fully comprehend the rights and protections they were entitled to due to language barriers, then the laws and systems were helpful only nominally.

As quoted above, Minu asserted that, “the government doesn’t provide anything in English and even the materials in Korean don’t reach the migrants.” This indicates that even though the Korean government established laws and systems for workers, they failed to provide proper channels through which the information could be delivered. In order for information to function, an appropriate medium and channel between the messenger and receiver must exist. If the delivery system is lacking, it is as if the information did not exist in the first place.

In response to this need, MWTV mainly reported news related to laws, systems, policies, and workers’ rights rather than the news of individual countries or cultural events.¹³ Information about laws, systems, and policies was directly related to the life and death of migrant workers and their right to life. Specifically, this information included articles about delayed wage payments, work accident compensation, labor unions, deaths/disasters, crackdowns, and deportation among others.¹⁴ MWTV news heavily focused on policies and laws related to migrant workers as reported by Ministry of Labor or Ministry of Justice. The news reports by MWTV were a public passageway through which migrants could be informed. As Minu pointed out, when workers had limited access to important information, they had no way of knowing which rights they were entitled to and how they could use them, leading to their own harm and loss. They often relied on information distributed by their ethnic networks or unofficial channels, which were usually limited or inaccurate. At times, this led to a waste of money, time, and exposure to danger. By distributing information that was withheld from migrants, the content-makers of

¹³ Multilingual news generally covered stories about workers’ rights (22 stories, or 44 percent), Korean news (6 stories, or 12 percent), medical concerns (4/8), seminar workshops (4/8), issues regarding children (3/6), news of individual countries (3/6), cultural events (2/4), and miscellaneous topics (6/12). Of these topics, MWTV gave workers’ rights the greatest percentage of coverage (Mediact 2006).

¹⁴ The articles about death, deportation, and crackdowns of migrant workers constituted the greatest percentage of articles related to laborers’ rights at 28 percent.

MWTV helped their viewers claim their rights.

2) Reasons Behind the Irrational System and the Contradictory Gaze

The mission of MWTV did not stop at delivering necessary information to migrant workers. The station also uncovered basic problems and contradictory aspects of institutions and policies. It called attention to the structure of the law, institutions, and policies that paradoxically and inevitably led to the illegalization of migrant workers. Simultaneously, it shed light on the negative gaze with which Koreans perceived migrant workers by telling related stories and creating articles and videos, while reporting the injustices they suffered. So, how did they disclose and report the contradictory elements found in legal and institutional structures, and unfair treatments migrants received through the media?

Eoseok and Tingtun learned about an institutional injustice a migrant suffered that resulted in the loss of his status as a documented migrant while interviewing him for a story. In the fall of 2008, they met a Nepali man named “K,” as they were developing a report on the conditions of migrant workers in the manufacturing industry in Paju. At the time, “K” was working at a furniture factory. Although he was qualified for a three-year stay as a “legal” migrant worker, he lost his documented status when he relocated to several different jobs.¹⁵ When “K” first arrived in Korea, he worked at a farm in Paju. However, he was forced out of work for three to four months in the winter during the agricultural off-season. Because the Employment Permit System¹⁶ only allowed migrants to transfer to a job within the same industry, he tried to find work in different farms, but to no avail. Even if he did apply for a transfer, he needed permission from his

¹⁵ The Employment Permit System allowed employees to change their jobs up to three times. However, the change was only legal if the employer unilaterally cancelled the contract, temporarily or permanently shut down his business, delayed wages, or caused physical harm. Migrant workers could not change their jobs of their own volition, since business owners held all the control. Migrants could transfer to a different job if their boss delayed payment or inflicted violence, but only if they could provide proof (Ministry of Employment and Labor Employ Permit System 2018a).

¹⁶ The Employment Permit System only allowed the transfer of jobs within the same industry. This transfer opportunity was limited to a maximum of three times. Migrant workers who deviated from this law lost their documentation even if they had time remaining in their legal status and they were subjected to deportation (Ministry of Employment and Labor Employ Permit System 2018b).

employer. If he transferred without permission, he was automatically considered absent without leave, which left him undocumented and subjected to deportation. “K” left the farm in the winter due to no work and wage delay, “illegally” transferring to the furniture factory where his Nepali friend worked. He reasoned he was more desperate to send money to his family in his home country than he was afraid of working as an undocumented migrant. Due to limited job transfer opportunities and freedom, even those who had time left in their “legal” status often left their original work and found other “illegal” jobs.¹⁷ Eosok, who was in charge of the story, denounced the employment permit policy, saying, “without a doubt, this was an unreasonable system that mass-produced undocumented workers.” He argued that we needed to put a stop to migrant workers relinquishing their documented status by guaranteeing a free job transfer. As Eosok mentioned above, the case of “K” working at the furniture factory illuminated the unjust structure of the legal system that lent no protection to migrants working in an unstable environment, leading to the possibility of migrants losing their documented status at any time. Institutional provisions allowed the law and social systems to reduce migrant workers, regardless of their legal status, to “bare life,” while also functioning as a mechanism for some business owners. Business owners had the absolute, unilateral authority to cancel employment contracts (if they disliked the workers), which generated migrant workers who were loyal and “obedient” to them. By converting a structural problem into a personal one, they justified the legal system that foisted biopolitics of “take life and let live” (Agamben 2008) on migrant workers and limited their rights, while unequivocally oppressing and threatening their right to life.

Although “K” stated that he was more desperate to send money to his family in his home country than he was afraid of working as an undocumented worker as a reason for switching to a different job, the anxiety and fear he felt as an undocumented worker were undoubtedly more threatening and oppressive than what outsiders might imagine.¹⁸ As

¹⁷ According to the research results of a human rights group, 2,450 migrant workers lost their legal status between January 2008 and January 2009 due to the limits placed on the employment period (The Kyunghyang Shinmun, November 13, 2009).

¹⁸ Rekmi, a Nepali migrant worker, switched to three different companies within four months of his arrival in Korea and ended up committing suicide in January 2010 due to extreme stress. According to his colleague “P,” he had a difficult time sleeping and often said he was “anxious, dizzy, and wanted to return home.” However, he was unable

soon as migrant workers “chose” to become “illegal,” the biopolitics of state authority infiltrated their minds and bodies. Migrants were placed in “the state of exception” and reduced to “bare lives” by the mechanism of state power¹⁹ as evinced in their condition of feeling anxiety and fear on a daily basis, being trapped in situations in which their employers made unjustifiable demands or delayed their pay, living under oppressed conditions of isolation and segregation due to their illegal alien status,²⁰ and facing health failures and death, for example by heart attack, that could be triggered at the mere mention of crackdowns. (Even if the physical power of the state did not directly infiltrate their bodies through methods such as crackdowns or deportation, it still took a significant toll on their physical health.) The following example from the documentary, “We Need State Protection” illustrates these excesses.

Robert and Lu were hitchhiking to the Cheongju Foreigner Protection Center²¹ to see their friends. At the end of 2007, their friend, who was working as a manager at a branch of the Migrants’ Trade Union as an undocumented worker, was taken to the Protection Center when the government cracked down on him. As they hitchhiked, they asked Koreans what they knew about the Center. Most Koreans replied they knew nothing, while some explained that it was a place to protect and help foreigners who were abused by the owners of small to mid-sized businesses. Robert and Lu’s

to return because he had accrued a heavy debt before coming to Korea (Deombeol, April 2, 2010).

- ¹⁹ Even legal migrant workers were not excluded from “the state of exception” and “bare lives.” In November 2008, a broad-scale crackdown squad in Maseok deployed 2,600 employees from the immigration office and indiscriminately abused and brought into custody about 100 migrant workers without checking whether they were documented or undocumented.
- ²⁰ The anxiety and fear about crackdowns reduced the scope of migrants’ social activities, limiting their community engagement and restricting activities only to their home and workplace. Due to the fear of crackdown, they were forced to disengage from their community and some felt forced to stay home instead of visiting the doctor’s office even when they were ill. One Vietnamese migrant worker was discovered eight days after his death. This case illuminated how the undocumented migrant status further pushed migrant workers into social isolation. These situations illustrate migrants’ internalization of subordination and automatic internalization of surveillance –the panopticon (Foucault 2003). (MTV articles and videos of related story in Migrant World TV, September 28, 2009).
- ²¹ (Translator’s note) Cheongju Foreigner Protection Center is the literal translation of the Korean name. However, its official English name is Cheongju Immigration Detention Center.

conversation with the drivers struck an admiring tone: “Our friend in Cheongju doesn’t even contact us anymore. He must be having too much fun at the Center. He has forgotten all about us! We are really curious about this place. We want to get there as fast as we can and get protection. We want the Korean government to protect us, too.” The day after they arrived at Cheongju Foreigner Protection Center, they were able to meet their friend who was detained there until he got deported. They came out of the building after the visit, saying: “The Foreigner Protection Center is not a very fun place and we don’t want to be there.”

The documentary cited above was produced by a Canadian named Robert Prey,²² who studied media production through the migrant activist training program that was established in 2007. This documentary chronicled his travel to the Cheongju Foreigner Protection Center to visit a migrant activist who was detained there. One of the issues on which this documentary shed light was the fact that migrants’ status became “illegal” not because of criminal conduct, but when their legal status in Korea expired. Their “illegal” status merited a lawful imprisonment or deportation by the state, rendering their existence a “bare life,” which could possibly atrophy to death. Another concern the documentary addressed was the significance of the name, “Foreigner Protection Center” that detained “illegal aliens.” The imagery that depicted the relationship between migrant workers and Korea were in forms of binary oppositions such as good/evil, legal/illegal, safety/danger, order/anomie, and domination/exclusion (Durkheim 1992; Douglas 1997). The authors of these metaphors, the Korean state or Korean society, used the term “protection center” (rather than “prison” or “detention center”), invoking positive imagery, as if the center’s purpose was to help and resolve the problems of foreigners. By so doing, the power and violence that penetrated the bodies of undocumented migrant workers and illegal aliens was cleverly concealed. Stuart Hall (1997) argued that specific identities or images are formed and understood through representation within a cultural system, including its stereotypes. He understood stereotyping as representation practices and processes, marking the difference between groups; essentializing their differences; converting them into specific attributes through reductionism and naturalization; placing them in binary opposition; and observing them through the lens of fetishism or negation.

²² (Editor’s note) The original article misidentifies the filmmaker as Nomad Prey.

Through this process, he contended, one could construct a set of images that coincided with the dominant perspective of society. According to Hall's notion of representation, the image of illegality placed on migrant workers posited them as an object that remained fixed and unsegmented, while harmfully reducing and essentializing them as "dangerous criminals" and making symbolic and physical violence against them inevitable. Instead of using objective facts related to crime rates,²³ Koreans stereotyped migrants based on their length of stay in Korea, status as outsiders, their citizenship and ethnicity, the territory and state they belonged to, and the economic gap between their home country and Korea. This allowed the producers of these images to place themselves in a position of superiority and dominance in a binary, hierarchical relationship. Additionally, the state (and its actions such as the implementation and cessation of laws, and the production and dissemination of specific images) translated itself into a politically-correct agent by exercising its power in various forms (Spivak 2005; Said 2007). By exercising sovereign power, the state not only excluded migrants from its boundaries, but also included them in its domestic juridical order (Agamben 2008), effectively masking its intent to maintain the structure and internal order of the nation-state.

Another interesting fact related to "We Need National Protection" was the reference "we." The "we" in the title of the documentary referred to the illegal residents, Robert and Lu, Caucasian males whose legal stay in Korea had expired. The film recounted their hitchhiking all the way to Cheongju, allowing the viewers to imagine the extent of the freedom over their own bodies they possessed. Even at the Foreigner Protection Center, the place in which the force and power of the state over one's body posed the greatest threat, the film depicted them in a carefree state. This section elucidated the duality with which Koreans gazed on foreigners, exposing ideologically and phenomenally the commonalities and differences between what members of the state referred to as Western Caucasians and

²³ The actual crime rates of migrant workers reveal that "illegal residents" have wrongfully been associated with the image of criminals. According to a study conducted by Choe Yeongsin (2007), the crime rate of illegal residents was 20 percent lower than native Koreans based on 100,000 people who were examined. This challenges the belief that undocumented workers posed a criminal threat. In fact, migrant workers were part of a vulnerable group that was subjected to criminal misconduct by native Koreans due to their cultural difference and poor living conditions.

migrant workers from developing countries. They had two aspects in common: one, they were placed in the nation state's outer boundaries, and two, they were experiencing "the state of exception." Moreover, rules that were not used in Korean society were imposed on them and blurred the boundaries between legality and illegality. However, one group was reduced to "bare life" through the force of the state on their bodies, whereas the other group was elevated to the inviolable "sacred life" by the state and society.²⁴

Thusly, migrant media activists disclosed the cloistered part of Korean society by means of media, while telling the story through their own gaze and reporting the unjust exercise of power and violence of the state on migrant workers, especially those from developing countries. Migrant media activists became the producers of their own representations rather than remaining as objects of state power. By so doing, they sought to deconstruct the power relationship between the dominant society and themselves. Moreover, their representations offered insights into the hypocritical and distorted gaze with which Koreans regarded migrant workers and Korean society.

3) Migrant Media Activists as Agents of Representation

The images of migrant workers on the mainstream media might have moved Korean people to tears, but they never accurately reported the situations we were in. I felt this personally when I interviewed with various media companies. The Korean media still portrays us as poor, pitiful people. We began to critique what the mainstream media was doing. Then, we discussed the need to create a broadcasting station company to tell our own stories. We believed migrant workers should be not only objects of media but also its agents. (Mabub, 11 years in Korea, Bangladeshi, documentary film director and actor)

Public broadcasting networks, the press, or shows like the "Chat with Beauties,"²⁵ never cover the most painful and decayed part of reality. They

²⁴ My definition of "sacred life" as I used the term to describe Western Caucasians in Korea differs from the meaning Agamben (2008) attributed to the term. I borrowed the term "sacred life" to allude to the "inviolable life" given to Caucasians in contrast to the "bare life" of migrant workers who are subjected to abuses and even killing through actions treated as inconsequential.

²⁵ (Translator's note) The "Chat with Beauties" a.k.a "Misuda" was a Korean talk show that aired on the Korean Broadcasting System from 2006 to 2010. It featured a panel

either glamorize stories or turn a blind eye to our problems, supposedly to give us relief, since to them, we are just poor human beings. Religious groups, especially, only try to connect with migrant workers through charitable causes, which is a big problem. Most marriage migrants and workers are highly educated and are independent agents of their own lives. Even though they are undocumented migrants in Korea, they do not cause harm; they contribute to the advancement of Korean society. Fundamentally, Koreans don't respect migrants as independent agents or human beings. That is our biggest complaint. We decided that if we don't make our own voices heard as migrants, nothing would change. So, I believe it's important for migrants to do the work ourselves. (Minu, 17 years in Korea, Nepali, MWTV team leader of video production)

As Mabub and Minu indicate, executing a proper representation of migrants and migrant workers in Korean society became difficult when there were no available channels or opportunities that allowed them to represent their social and cultural identity. Koreans were unable to accurately understand the troubles or realities of migrants not only because the Korean media did not cover them, but because it preferred to describe migrant workers through specific stereotypes (Han Geonsu 2003; Kim Hyeonmi 2008). According to Yun Taeseon's research (2002), of the migrant stories reported on the Korean news, stories about the crimes migrant workers committed amounted to 47.1 percent, exceeding the stories related to human rights, which were measured at 23.1 percent.²⁶ The large part of migrant workers' news that consisted of crime reports "proved" to viewers that migrants were mostly seen as a people who posed danger to society, causing Koreans to fear them and view them in a negative light (Yi Seonhwa 2007). Moreover, the faces of migrant workers were represented through images of poverty, filth, laziness, foolishness, ignorance, pity, abnormality, and as objects of aid. Such images implied that Koreans were in turn affluent, clean, diligent, successful, normal, and charitable subjects. Koreans did not identify with the images that were attributed to migrant workers. Departing from the signified, the sign represented autonomously and produced a certain order by way of its representations. A specific order was also formed when the subject and

of foreign women residing in Korea who discussed their experiences and thoughts on Korean culture.

²⁶ Gaps often exist between representation and reality as discussed in Choe Yeongsin's work (2007).

object of representation encountered each other through a chain of representations (Habermas 1998). In other words, the production and arrangement of images, and the broadcasting and dissemination of those images generated and reproduced the hierarchical order between the subject and object. Butler (2008) claimed that being delivered a message, being given a name, becoming subjected to enforcement, and being forced to respond to otherness, all pointed to the existence of a certain violence. Being delivered a message meant a deprivation of will and such deprivation derived from conditions and situations as described in this article. This kind of representation produced a kind of order. It also alienated and isolated the other through exclusion and separation, rather than understanding or embracing them. The isolation and alienation of the other reinforced the governing order and hierarchy, making the enforcement of violence possible. The images of migrants that have been perpetuated by the mainstream media point to the problem of representation and the disparity between those who own the language of representation and those who do not.

As told by Ttura and Minu, people who had no opportunities to represent themselves directly were treated as non-humans or rendered completely invisible. As a result, they became susceptible to the power of the state that could potentially strip them of their humanity and agency. By contrast, those who were able to achieve proper representation (especially those who could self-represent) were positioned to receive better opportunities to exercise their agency or bear witness to their own humanization. Migrant media activists sought to overthrow the distorted images imposed on them by producing and rearranging their own images of lives that have largely been neglected by Korean society. In other words, by showcasing the ordinariness of their everyday lives and of migrants as agents of their own actions, they strategically differentiated themselves from the otherized images Korean society foisted on them. Broadcasting the images of their daily lives is a form of resistance as well as a way to restore their self-esteem (Scott 1985; Jeong Gayeong 2008). For example, one of the videos they produced showed a member of a migrant family living a normal, everyday life: a woman prepared breakfast, went grocery shopping, went to work, and met with friends in the evening for a chat. This video was filled with tedious, ordinary images. However, the focus of this video was not its dullness but the explicitly ordinary life of a migrant. These images were far from the images of criminals or people stricken with poverty in dire need

of charity and sympathy. The video illustrated how migrant workers were people just like Koreans. Another video of Bangladeshi migrants delivering coal briquettes to senior citizens living alone to heat their homes produced the same effect. One Bangladeshi migrant worker in the video stated, "It's fun, and it comforts me when I can work in Korea and do volunteer work by delivering these [coal briquettes] to the grandmothers and grandfathers who are old and are in difficult situations." This video normalized migrants as human beings and highlighted the fact that they were contributing members of Korean society—not objects of pity and charity—who helped their neighbors in need and gave back to their communities. Through the media education provided by MWTV, one migrant worker trainee produced a music video titled, "We Make Korea." In the video, he performed with other migrant workers using guitars and a synthesizer made with the foam padding he manufactured at his work. He sang into the microphone, declaring and affirming his identity: "No matter what others say, we are workers. Workers who change Korea through sweat and blood, so we can live confidently in the world!" The media contents produced by migrants, such as those mentioned above, took on the form of self-representation that subverted the formation of unequal relationships between migrant workers and Koreans, restoring to the migrants their damaged identity.

Migrants became both the subjects and objects of their own representations on MWTV, disturbing social hierarchy and order. Instead of being portrayed as pitiful, poor, miserable people in need of aid, they were represented as independent individuals who cultivated a mutually beneficial relationship with Korea. These media contents showed that migrant workers were no longer living the "bare life," vulnerable to deportation, but were viable, contributing members of Korean society. Moreover, through the contents they produced, media activists sought to construct a new order between migrant workers and Korean society forging a more equal relationship between them. As evidenced by the examples illustrated above, the activities of media activists and the contents they broadcast recognized migrant struggles or identity politics. According to Nancy Fraser (1997), the struggle for recognition aims to correct cultural injustices, such as cultural dominance, non-recognition, and disrespect, which were rooted in the expression, interpretation, and communication methods found in certain social patterns. "Negative moral feelings such as disrespect, denigration, and shame" were felt when one's identity was

invaded and these feelings were used as a medium through which the recognition struggle was galvanized (Honneth 1992). Fraser (1997) argued that the desired recognition could be achieved through cultural or symbolic changes that positively reevaluated the identity and cultural products of maligned groups. The struggle for recognition could also be seen as a form of identity politics in that in both of these frameworks, individuals sought recognition by society for their identity (Jeong Gayeong 2008).

6. Conclusion

In this study, I conducted a microanalysis of how and in what context the nation-state realized and executed violence on migrants, and how migrant media activists resisted this violence through protests and media activism. By illustrating the activities of migrant media activists and their production of media contents, I argued that the lives of migrant workers were equally shaped by the biopolitics against migrant workers in Korean society and the identity politics of migrants' struggle to be recognized as social beings. Further, I contended that structured aporia, deeply rooted in Korean society, tainted the perspective of Koreans, and reduced the lives of migrant workers to homo sacer and the "bare life." In this article I also examined the strategic actions taken by migrant media activists to resist the power of the state.

Rather than treating the birth of the bare life—contextualized as illegal aliens subjected to deportation in this article—from a juridical perspective, I examined it as a matter of state power in relation to the survival of the modern nation-state. As Foucault argued, the modern nation-state turned life itself into a political issue while, as Agamben asserted, the sovereign power stripped and reduced human rights to the bare life, creating a domain in which people were rendered invisible. It was through exclusion of those forced to live the bare life that the existence and continuation of the nation state was justified. Pushing migrants out of state boundaries appeared to be a reasonable decision, since they were not ethnically Korean nor Korean citizens. When Minu, one of the members of MWTV, was deported back to his country in October 2009, several civic and social organizations worked through various channels to stop his deportation. However, Korean Internet users justified his deportation by associating his

status as an illegal migrant with crime and misconduct.²⁷ Even so, the increasing hybridity or diversity in the real world has made it ever clearer that dichotomous ways of thinking in terms of “either... or...” can no longer result in an immutable social order. For example, with the advent of the globalization paradigm (*segyebywa*), a greater social demand was made for multiculturalism, which was strongly linked with cosmopolitanism. Further, a binary system of thinking became increasingly unconvincing. Within the system that forces “either.... or...” identifications, social beings are voicing valid reasons for their existence as “both... and...” (Rosaldo 2002).

I examined the genesis of the efforts migrants put forth to justify their existence in Korean society and to restore their damaged identity through the actions of migrant media activists and the stories they told through the contents they produced. While the contents of their work included self-representation drama, struggles for recognition, and identity politics, they also reflected migrants’ own interpretations of Korean society filtered through their own perspectives, resulting in the otherization of Koreans. The self-representation drama inescapably became a mirror of how Koreans were seen and represented. They intentionally portrayed Koreans in ways that were unacknowledged by Koreans and, through these representations, demanded correction, change, and introspection of their conscious choices. Migrant media activists continued to hope that Koreans would reconsider the unequal relationship between Koreans and foreigners, especially in a country that touts multiculturalism, while also imagining the future of Korea as a more inclusive nation.

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²⁷ For more detailed information on Minu’s deportation, see Chapter 5 in Jeong 2010.

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