

Commentary

Victims Twice Over: Return Narratives of Ethnic Korean Atomic Bomb Survivors by Oh Eunjeong

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Few experiences disrupt and disturb our fragile existential equilibrium as does migration. It's not just the act of moving, whether forced or voluntary; it's not just the challenge of leaving friends and family and moving to a new village, city, or country. Migration is most pernicious in how it changes both the person who moves and the place they leave behind.

Our time away from home reshapes us. It disorients, provoking a confusion about the direction of home itself. And just as we change, so does the homeland, so do our loved ones. In this sense, return can be the most confronting aspect of the migrant's journey. The home to which a wanderer returns is never the home from which she left.

And it's this experiential turmoil, this realization that both traveler and home change beyond recognition that Oh Eunjeong draws from in her hidden history of transnational Korea. In a field dominated by macro-political perspectives, Oh's cheekily titled historical ethnography brings to the fore memories of Koreans who were compelled to move back and forth across the East Sea by the violence and turmoil of global conflict and a reconfiguring geopolitical order.

Oh's analysis and her interviews with Korean atomic bomb survivors (*hibakusha*) unsettle simplistic, binary renderings of defeat/liberation,

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foreign/home, and Japan/Korea. Her ethnographic writing echoes that of Mary Chamberlain (1997) and George Gmelch (1980) in elevating migrant voices within broader political, economic, and social currents of the time. And by inviting us back to the chaotic days of reconstruction Japan, Oh challenges us to rethink concepts of identity, homeland, and memory through the experiences of ordinary Koreans.

Tokyo's surrender marked a critical juncture for millions of people in the Asia-Pacific region. Almost overnight, Japan shifted from empire to nation. This geopolitical realignment saw millions of imperial subjects suddenly liberated from colonial rule and asking, "What next"? In the case of some two million Koreans—many of whom had spent the war years working in Japanese factories, spinning mills, mines, and lumber yards—the end of the fighting was met with a feeling of ambivalence. And it's this ambivalence underscoring the reflections of Oh's interlocutors that challenges neat, oft taken for granted narratives of liberation—followed-by-happiness.

Instead, Oh's interlocutors express diverse opinions on why they returned to Korea, a country that was headed towards a devastating conflict of its own. Some were compelled to take care of family gravesites; others had purchased land to which they now returned. While Oh perhaps over-emphasizes the economic drivers of return migration for these individuals, her data critically underlines the generational and class differences that subsequently shaped Koreans' engagement and return to what in 1948 became the Republic of Korea.

Oh's transnational history of East Asia transcends nation-state borders and nationalist imaginaries. The ideas of home and of identity are at the surface of my own studies of Koreans in Japan. Koreans who migrated to the DPRK in the 1960s–70s, for example, found themselves feeling displaced, treated by local North Koreans as outsiders rather than returning kinsmen (Bell 2018, 2021).

That the homeland can become foreign terrifies those of us capable of imagining such existential displacement, and Oh respectfully captures this unsettling experience through the vernacular memories of her interviewees. Certainly, her writing is further evidence that anthropology has a great deal to teach us about human experiences of migration, displacement, and belonging.

As we move, we change. As we move, home changes. In this sense, whether A-bomb survivors returning to Korea or repatriates sailing to the

DPRK, home is elusive, always just over the next horizon. But must this longing without satisfaction be mourned? Perhaps home is, after all, a portable concept? Certainly, it's time that we follow Oh's lead and move beyond locating home within nation-state logics.

References

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