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Book review

**Kim, Eleana J. 2022. Making peace with nature: Ecological encounters along the Korean DMZ. Durham, NC: Duke University Press. 224 pp. Pb.: $26.95. ISBN: 9781478018353.**

Book review by

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As in much of the world, South Korean popular culture vacillates between elegies for lost nature and dreams for its redemption. The last tiger was killed in the 1920s. War and capitalism have transformed every centimeter of the peninsula. The "yellow dust" season, when sand and pollution blow across Korean skies, now lasts for much of the year. But nature is nevertheless all around in mountains, national parks and reserves.

The most charged symbol in this discourse on nature and culture has undoubtedly been the De-Militarized Zone (DMZ). The product of a hasty and ignorant scheme hatched by Dean Rusk and Charles Bonesteel in 1945, the Demilitarized Zone arbitrarily divides Korea and is composed of three parts: the MDL (Military Demarcation Line) itself, the DMZ on both sides of the line, and the CCZ (Civilian Control Zone) extending the zone into South Korean territory. As Eleana Kim points out in this groundbreaking ethnography, the DMZ becomes a symbol of nature and peace in the 1980s, even as thousands of additional landmines are added in anticipation of the 1988 Seoul Olympics (p. 135). Periodically, rhapsodic photo essays chronicle its biodiversity and revel in the irony of a natural oasis proliferating in the caesura of war. This enshrinement of "nature" amidst the horrors of human culture is the target for Kim's project, which traces a considerably more complex network that collapses these facile dichotomies.

Like most zones of exception, the DMZ is a bewildering fractal of prohibitions, restrictions and sovereignty. The DMZ is under UN control, but the CCZ is under the control of the ROK, yet military checkpoints and land-use restrictions abound. People are not allowed in the DMZ, but under particular restrictions can get near the DMZ or

visit the JSA (Joint Security Area). You may gain access to the CCZ, but land use may be restricted (e.g. agriculture). Capitalist development inside the CCZ is limited and concentrated—especially as the U.S. and Korean militaries have laid millions of landmines throughout the area.

The DMZ may be geographically discrete, but it extends temporally and discursively. It is the border against which South and North Korean nationalisms are articulated. It is a border of peace, but also of war; the line that preserves the truce is also the line that preserves the war. There are no troops passing across the MDL, but there are nearly 2 million troops massed around the MDL. It is a border against the encroachment of North Korean communism to the South, and South Korean capitalism to the North, but it is also the object through which Korean capitalism is articulated on both sides of the DMZ. It is a boundary that has separated and destroyed Korean families (이산가족), but it has also shaped the Korean diaspora abroad and the cosmopolitan development of the Korean Wave (한류). The DMZ is the triumph of a Cold War binarism, and simultaneously the proof of its failure.

Amid all of this, we are told that the DMZ is host to numerous endangered species, and has also emerged as an important corridor for migrating wildlife. This, as Kim tells us, is often displayed as irony: "This notion—that war and nature or militarization and preservation, when juxtaposed, coexist in ironic tension—has informed assertions that the DMZ, once representing national division, war, and death, now represents communication, peace and life" (p. 4). There are other places like this, certainly, and one thinks of Chernobyl and Fukushima, which are spaces of exclusion and of exception that use necropolitics to construct pristine nature.

Like other scholars exploring what Donna Haraway calls "natureculture", Elana Kim focuses on the complex interchanges between capitalism, ecology, culture, nationalism and colonialism that de-stabilize the DMZ as a site of pristine nature. Her work is based on an arc of fieldwork from 2011 until 2015 along multiple sites in the CCZ, including Paju (northwest of Seoul) and Cheorwon (in Gangwon province). Along the way, Kim analyzes sites that are densely connected nodes in a skein of agency, ecology and political economy.

The first is the humble *dumbeong*, small ponds that are used as water reservoirs by farmers to irrigate rice paddies. While other farms in Korea use municipal infrastructures for irrigation, military restrictions over the construction of waterways limit CCZ farmers to dumbeong—a vestige of Korea's past, re-created at the cusp of military- capitalist development in Paju (p. 63). These are what Kim terms "negative

infrastructure," "a kind of negative space where modern infrastructures might exist, if not for the division" (p. 64). Yet those dumbeong are themselves ecologically important, host to micro-organisms and plants that would otherwise have been obliterated by capitalist development. But is this pristine nature? Hemmed in by the explosive growth of Paju city, inundated with pesticides and run-off along with, of course, the product of war, partitioning and militarization, dumbeong are what Kim calls "emergent ecologies" "of humans, water, and the creatures that live within them" (p. 65). They are resources for farmers, objects of research, and homes for animals and plants.

Dumbeong additionally host species migration due to both climate change and the differential development of the DMZ. In other words, dumbeong are thoroughly hybrid: "at once artificial and natural, conditioned by the militarization of the border area but not limited to it" (p. 83). Will these dumbeong disappear as Paju's development accelerates? If, Kim concludes, activists succeed in linking them with other sites important to migratory birds, perhaps they can be preserved: "By weaving together crane habitats and residents' rights to land and residence, this network of ecological relations could link the precarious futures of birds and humans" (p. 83).

Chapter 3, *Birds*, explores the entanglement of avian and human lives across and through the DMZ, first with the remarkable lives of two famous ornithologists, Won Hong Gu, and his son, Won Pyong-Oh. Separated by partitioning, the two continued their scientific work without even knowing the fate of the other. But then: "In 1965, Won Pyong-Oh received a letter from the Asia headquarters of BirdLife International in Tokyo" (p. 88). A bird he had banded had been captured in North Korea by none other than Wong Hong Gu himself, achieving a measure of reunification through non-human agency. Since there was no Birdlife International branch in South Korea, it had been banded with "JAPAN," tying together the violence of colonialism, war, partitioning and human kinship.

These banded birds trace what Kim calls a "human-avian network" that connects animals, landscapes and humans with the colonialism and political economy. Despite the transcendence birds sometimes symbolize, they are also entangled in geopolitics, even as they exercise their own occasionally refractory agency. This is readily evident in Kim's analysis of migrating cranes (Black-faced Spoonbills (BFS)) of Guji-do, an island overrun with human-introduced goats and the remains of years of military artillery bombardment. It is "a naturalcultural borderland where BFSs have found a temporary haven in the narrow interstices of capital and militarization" (p. 102).

One charge leveled at multispecies or posthumanist anthropologies in general is their mythological character—the ways that indigenous accounts of nonhuman species become a wish-figure for the utopian hopes of the West. Guji-do is hardly that utopia, even as BFS cranes find their purchase on the shattered island. The final site for Kim's ethnography, the landmine, thoroughly punctures any idealistic pretensions that might be remaining.

Ending with landmines returns us to the ongoing violence and colonization, of which the DMZ is a visible, corporeal part. The mines, laid enthusiastically by the U.S. and the two Koreas in defiance of the 1997 Mine Ban Treaty (which the U.S. never signed), are the product of Cold War temporalities that colonize the future. Kim tells us that, should there be peace on the peninsula, the mines will take almost 500 years to remove (p. 123). In the meantime, the mines have been "lively": destroying people, constraining movement, but also creating "unexpected values, relations, and affects" (p. 128).

As "slow violence," they occasionally explode, but can also be harvested for metals. Minefields embody the thanatopolitics of U.S. empire, even as they have channeled human and non-human lives in the DMZ. Nothing, though, is a better rejoinder to the proposed "International Peace Zone" than their deadly presence, and while South Korea has certainly remediated other sites of U.S. toxicity in Seoul (Yongsan), Busan (Hialeah) and elsewhere, it is difficult to imagine the DMZ as an eco-tourism destination.

Indeed, we can see this ethnography as ultimately critical of such efforts to capitalize on the DMZ's ironic biodiversity, but Kim's intent is more complex, an ethnography that refuses to "celebrate the toxicity of militarization nor reinforce an epistemology of purity that looks to nature as a salve for human violence" (p. 152). Instead, this is about "making peace with division," here conceived of as the intersection of militarization, empire and capitalism. Yet it is also here, amid these heterotopias, that non-human species proliferate, enacting agency in lands overdetermined by geopolitical violence. This is less the utopian path that some multispecies anthropologists have followed than something more along the lines of Anna Tsing's work, where nonhuman species illuminate both the destructive power and the limits of capitalism. Here, we see beyond attempts that "mask but also reproduce colonial relations of dispossession and imperial sovereignty" (p. 154), and, in the process, perhaps gesture to other possibilities where non-humans may negotiate their lives amid human destruction.