Helen Kim. 2021. Presentation 2: Journeying 'Elsewhere': Diaspora and Korean Guest Workers. In Jinhye Lee (ed.), *Asian Diaspora in the Era of Globalization: Lived Experiences among Different Cultures*. Osaka: Asia-Japan Research Institute, Ritsumeikan University. ISBN 978-4-9911356-6-8

Presentation 2

Journeying 'Elsewhere': Diaspora and Korean Guest Workers

Helen Kim

1. Introduction

In this presentation I will describe my latest research on Korean guest workers who twice-migrated to the US, meaning that they first migrated to Germany and then migrated to the US. Hence the term twice migrants is being used here to describe them. This research was drawn from a chapter in my book on Korean guest workers, which is currently being written and the working title to that monograph is "Journeying Toward the Red, White and Blue: Aging Korean Guest Workers and Dice-Board Belonging in the US".

The first wave of Korean of nurse migration or guest worker migration occurred in South Korea from 1963 to 1980 when about 10,000, Korean nurses went to then West Germany as a response to Germany's massive labor shortage, particularly in certain industries such as healthcare, in particular nursing, and this was through a government led agreement. This was considered at the time the largest voluntary migration from South Korea in the country's migration history. This wave of migration is sometimes referred to as *padok* or translated as 'dispatched', and so these nurses were sometimes referred to as '*padok* nurses'.

In today's presentation, I offer up some accounts and perspectives that explain why these women first went to Germany, and some of the ways that they had to negotiate being 'other' while there. Then I'll move on to the experiences that they had when they moved to the US, and given that these women are now in their late 70s, and some in their early 80s, I'll talk later about how contemplate or navigate the possibility of return.

Up to now, there's been very little work done on guest worker experiences overall, and on their reasons for migrating. Some work has been done, mainly in Germany, and some work has also been done in South Korea, but there's been no work done on these twice migrants, those who moved from Germany to the US and to Canada, although again, my work is focusing mainly on the US.

Based on oral history interviews with former nurses in New York City and Seattle, this presentation will focus on why they left, and on some of the memories that they had. What it reveals is that these women did not go to Germany and then to the US purely for economic reasons. These women told me some very surprising stories of themselves, and their memories of their time in Germany, that then complicate the existing narratives of Korean migration to these places. It brings up very complex entanglements, of gender of relationships, of family, as well as the citizenship laws and migration policies in both countries.

While I only focus on Korean nurses in this presentation Korean nurse migration to Germany was just one half of the Korean guest worker wave story, as it is with most cases, that when we're talking about migration, gender plays a huge role in determining how, when and where. In the case of Germany and the Korean guest workers, there were also about eight thousand Korean miners, who were male, who were recruited to come and work in Germany from 1963 to about 1977, and as I pointed out earlier about 10,000 nurses who were also recruited to work in Germany, again from 1963 to 1980. Nurses who were recruited were automatically assigned to different parts of Germany, and many went to larger cities and this is why there are still long standing and significant Korean communities in these larger cities, such as Frankfurt and Berlin.

Meanwhile, male miners were recruited to work in the industrial region of Germany only, so very few of these miners went to other places, particularly major cities. In some cases they migrated or moved to cities after they had stopped working as miners, so you will find Korean men who moved on to other cities but initially, Korean miners were recruited to work only in the industrial region.

In my book, I include interviews with some of these miners and their experiences, which were altogether quite different to the nurses for some reasons that I'll mention later. What has often been mentioned in relation to the guest worker experiences in Korea is regarding their remittances, the money that they sent back to Korea, which actually totaled over 100 million US dollars according to some estimates.

In Germany, initial media coverage of the Korean nurses tended to focus on their exoticness as well as their hard work. They were often referred to as "dark haired angels".

Now, in the US, these guest workers have just been considered as part of the Korean diaspora who migrated directly from South Korea after 1965. The US had basically reformed their migration laws, so that post 1965 they had a very large wave of Asian immigrants. However, by only focusing only on their remittances in South Korea's case, or on their physical appearance in Germany's case, or as part of the overall wave of post 1965 Korean migration in the US case, this kind of coverage obscures and flattens their specific experiences, and erases the moments, the stories and memories of the joys as well as the difficulties that came with the choices that these women and their families had to make in migrating.

The Korean guestworker diaspora, in my opinion, is an exemplary case that grounds conceptualizations of diaspora that work to highlight the present. So within certain disciplines like political science, and even anthropology, and particularly from the perspective of US and UK scholarship, scholars tended to conceptualize diaspora in more traditional ways, and often there was a tendency to focus on classical definitions of diaspora as forced migration and exile. Examples of this would be certain topologies that would include the Jewish diaspora or the Armenian diaspora and their experiences, one of the defining characteristics that is often associated with forced migration and exile is this desire for a homeland, for return to this home. Then we have a widening of who or what counts as diasporic, but this association with a homeland, and this doubleness of loss and desire often remained in these accounts of

diaspora. The double relationship or dual loyalty they have to these places where they were displaced from, as well as connections to the places that they have made their new homes. That is what I call the classical definition, and we might disagree with this classical definition in the light of this category of newer definitions of Diaspora. A lot of this work was prevalent in the nineties, but for lack of a better word, I'll call them 'newer' here. There was a kind of intervention in diaspora studies by many cultural studies scholars, again from an Anglo perspective, and so I want to highlight the very important work here of Stuart Hall, of Paul Gilroy, of Jacqueline Nassey Brown, and Nadia Ellis, whose work on I'll talk more about later, and how important their work is to what I call this intervention.

Their theorizations of diaspora and diaspora consciousness have not just centered on what Nadia Ellis calls the experiences of "difficulty and loss", but they also talk about the possibilities, the practices of identity and culture that can emerge from these difficulties and the loss and the "necessary heterogeneity and diversity" of diaspora and diasporic belonging, that Hall pointed out so eloquently in his essays on diaspora identity and culture. Moreover, scholars like Jacqueline Nassey Brown and Paul Gilroy conceptualized diaspora not just as a state of being, but they see it as something that one does, as an active and conscious stance that one cultivates. When Dr. Chuang was talking about the cultural repertoire, this tends to affect ways of thinking about diaspora, and it is something that is material. This is what Jacqueline Nassey Brown talks about when she takes Paul Gilroy's conceptions of words, of the raw materials of diaspora, and calls it a set of diasporic resources that people gather and use, and where culture and cultural practices are integral to these practices.

2. Nurses' Journeys to Germany: The Elsewhere

I am going to focus on the stories of three Korean women who were nurses in Germany. They migrated from South Korea to then West

Germany in the 1960s as guest workers and then eventually migrated to the US. The interviews with these three women Young Ae who is 72, Yong Ki, 83, and Midet also 83, took place in Flushing, Queens, during a really typical blisteringly hot and humid New York City summer, in 2018. These three women are longtime friends who had come to know each other once they moved to New York City from Germany.

Young Ae was the youngest out of six siblings, and by the time she came of age her family, having struggled to live through a war, were now in post-colonial Korea and had run out of money for university education. Now, while university education was out of reach financially for most families nursing school or teaching school, which according to Young Ae were both less expensive, were therefore seemingly more within reach for some families financially. Young Ae said:

> "Of course, because that was a very difficult era for people and especially for young women who wanted to make something of themselves and get jobs. I too really wanted to get out there rather than just be at home, and I wanted to make my own money and get a good job. Growing up at the time we didn't have a lot of money, we didn't get much of an allowance, so I always wanted to make my own money independently, and that's why I ended up going to nursing school…. I was really excited and happy for the opportunity. I mean, at the time, it was really hard to leave Korea to go abroad, unless you were rich. The plane fare was so much as it was, so it would have been really hard. So I thought it was so great to be given the opportunity to go to Germany…."

So nursing was a profession that was available to young women at the time, and what many of these women including Young Ae said time and again, was that they had this desire to be independent and self-sufficient. This meant not only the desire to be economically independent, but very often this was tied to the larger issue of wanting to be free from their parents and be able to make their own decisions about their lives. The independence and the freedom to make their own choices within

their lives proved difficult for most young women in such a patriarchal and conservative society, but despite all their individual circumstances, all the women pointed out the dire conditions of the Korean economy at the time, and the lack of opportunities available to young people.

What was also really notable was that these women often defied their parents' wishes and expectations by insisting on leaving, which would have been considered unusual at the time. These women were often the first members of their families to migrate, and it meant that there was opposition not only from their parents, but also other members of their family, including their grandparents and siblings.

Nadia Ellis says, "The urgent sensation of a pull from elsewhere…is paradigmatic of diasporic culture". In her book, she uses it to make an argument about an imagined elsewhere, that is always just out of reach; something that is elusive and vague, but that this desire for elsewhere is what connects examples, according to Ellis of diasporic culture. She mainly does this by looking at diasporic texts, but I think where it relates here is to use it to describe that sense of a pull towards elsewhere. It articulates emerging from the very real circumstances of war, of poverty and lack of opportunities, but where one isn't necessarily reduced to these conditions. So these women dreamed of going elsewhere, going abroad to be able to fulfill these dreams of opportunities. So in other words, Ellis's conceptualization serves here as a reminder, the reason these women left cannot just be reduced to the instrumental or the practical, but that there were other reasons for going abroad.

Moreover, when I asked Young Ae what she knew about Germany before leaving, she laughed, and said, "Nothing". They knew of America, but they knew nothing about Germany, except that it was not Western Europe. What they did see though was this opportunity to just go somewhere else; to leave Korea.

3. The Model Minority Myth and Gender

Now I would like to introduce a quote from Myung Hee (83), who talks about what it was like once they got to Germany. I asked her about her everyday experiences of going to work as a nurse in Germany. She said:

> "Yes, it was very busy. We worked in the surgery. We just had to go wherever they needed us. If we saw people running towards someone, we did the same. We didn't even know German at first. We just saw people and followed. We worked really hard and I remember that they really liked the Korean nurses because we worked so hard. But then we started to learn German and could communicate better, and if we thought differently, we learned how to communicate our different opinions. Sometimes there were even disagreements. So they simply liked us better when we couldn't speak German. That was so funny for me."

The early days were a blur of language learning, working shifts, and acclimating to a brand new place where they had to learn how to do things differently. All the women talked about how difficult the work was, especially because of the sense that they were often recruited from a poor background. They felt that they needed to impress the German head nurses with their hard work and good work ethic. Most felt that they were there to represent Korea and Koreans and certainly couldn't do something without somehow affecting the image of Koreans. The seemingly funny comment about how they were more likeable when they could not speak German, served as a reminder of their somewhat subordinate position in Germany as guest workers, but it also of course hinted at how Young He and other Korean women did not play into the stereotypes of the submissive Asian woman, and both spoke up and spoke back. When the Korean nurses worked in Germany, they already understood that they were positioned not only as guest workers, but as non-white non-European *auslanders* or foreigners. But in contrast to the US's system of racialized hierarchies, with which these women were

very familiar, having grown up in a militarized Korea that was divided by war, and militarized by the US, Germany did not have such a well-defined racial order.

Another participant, Mirae, recalled that she was shocked when more than once people asked if she was from Africa. The shock came not only from being misidentified, but also from the Germans' inability to see and identify her as someone distinct from a person who was African. This is particularly egregious because Koreans would have learned from those already established US racial hierarchies that African Americans, including Africans would be on the bottom of the US racial hierarchy. This inability to distinguish between someone who is being typically Asian from someone who is phenotypically African would have indicated that in Germany, anyone who was not seen as being typically white, would be considered or perceived to be 'other' regardless of where those people were from. Obviously, some of that has changed over time, but this was taken from a memory that Mirae had had.

Now in Germany, the term *auslander*, foreigner, or similarly someone with a migration background has become the term that is used to group all those who are visibly and audibly different from white Germans. The German way of measuring those minorities was to then categorize them as good and bad migrants. Now in Germany, public and political debates on multiculturalism and the politics of difference in this period often got framed around debates on integration, where Germans blamed immigrants for refusing to integrate culturally and linguistically into the wider German society. These cultural markers could include practices such as speaking German fluently without an accent, but it also included cultural and religious beliefs such as being Muslim or Christian. Korean guest workers were seen as being closer culturally to Germans and therefore were seen as the deserving and good migrants who had the potential to integrate well, in contrast other groups. Thus the Turkish, also a more significant guest workers diaspora in Germany, were often labeled as bad and undeserving migrants who were irreconcilably different, and were incapable of or refused to integrate into German

society. It seems that this was often a way of masking anti-Muslim racism against the Turkish. In contrast, Koreans became the model minority in Germany.

Moreover, this model minority myth that was salient in Germany and of course salient in the US and other places, had a very gender specific dimension to it. These nurses were admired for their willingness to work hard and their dedication, and they were praised for doing so without complaining or getting angry about how much work they had to do. So in other words, as long as they were grateful, quiet and willing, they would continue to be praised. As I stated earlier, German newspapers often refer to these Korean nurses as these 'soft, dark haired angels'.

However, praising Korean guest workers work was also, as I said, highly gender specific. In comparison, after the first few years, Korean miners were not as positively represented in mainstream German media, and were accused of being sometimes lazy or at least less hardworking, and not as compliant. The climate towards guestworkers and particularly miners grew increasingly hostile in Germany by the end of the 1960s, and there were increasingly demanding calls to end guestworker migration. Eventually, in 1973, there was a temporary ban on guestworker migration, including mining. This ban prohibited the hiring of workers from outside the EEC region on jobs lasting for more than 90 days.

However, the German government was surprised when these very same grateful and quiet Korean nurses went on strike over the possible end of visa renewals in 1973. When these Korean nurses took to the streets and protested over the potential ending of their visas, they showed the Korean government, coworkers, friends and colleagues, that they were not these passive angels whose labor could so easily be discarded as the German government had possibly hoped. These women explained that they participated in these marches and protests to express to the German government that they were real people with real lives, hopes and

dreams that matter, and that they would be adversely affected if their visas were not to be renewed.

It is interesting to note that in these demonstrations it was not just the Korean women who came out to march, but also their coworkers, their white German colleagues, who came out to march with them. This shows us shows there were certain kinds of spaces of solidarity as well, but that I can't elaborate on this in this presentation.

4. Migration and Marriage: Gendered 'Geographies of Power'

Now let us move on to thinking about the ways in which marriage and migration worked together to create these gender geographies of power. Here Mirae, who is 83, who talks about how she was able to bring her children over to the US eventually. Mirae says:

> "My children were under 10. One was 5 and one was 6. They didn't want to leave the house because they were scared. I was single and was just trying to raise my children alone, because my husband, didn't want to emigrate to a foreign country to follow his wife! He said he wanted to try and come to Germany on his own. In what way would that happen? My son, he was only three when I left, and so when he saw me next, he was six, and he had grown so close to his dad at the time, but he had become a stranger to me. When he first got to Germany, he hated it and just kept saying that he wanted to go home to Korea. He'd keep on packing a suitcase and trying to leave. He was so little. How would even get on a plane by himself? So because of this, my husband came to Germany." [Shakes her head]

So marriage within a transnational context reflects how migration has impacted women positively and negatively. A lot of literature on marriage and migration has reinforced the view that it was the men who migrated and the women who simply followed the men. In contrast to

this view, these Korean nurses were the first ones to migrate and it was their husbands who followed them. Mirae's husband, for example, had stayed behind in Korea was working part time as an English translator for the US Army. He took over childcare duties while Mirae was overseas. Then, as Mirae explained, after waiting three years, eventually her husband joined her as well.

Mirae's story points to the difficult position that these women were facing at the time between work, migration, and family and the way that migration and labor laws both hindered and helped families by introducing new opportunities, as well as tensions and ruptures. These women were navigating difficult and contradictory terrain and having to work and earn money. But at the same time, they were resented for having a role that empowered them, and were simultaneously expected to take on the intensive maternal role, typical of Korean mothers and wives. Mirae' s husband refused to migrate to Germany because he didn't want to be her dependent, even though it did offer an opportunity to be reunited, and a means to leave Korea, because it could also mean that he would no longer be head of the family unit. Mirae's apparent frustration even to this day, suggests that this ran deep, and was not something easily forgotten. She felt guilty and sad for having to leave her young children in Korea, and having her departure precipitate a sense of loss in her children. This created an additional burden and complexity to their story in Germany, as these memories bring with them a complex swirl of emotions of guilt, of pride, and of sadness.

Mirae's story itself points to the wave of gender migration and state sponsored migration, and how becoming guests workers had reordered and disrupted the existing patriarchal structures in the Korean family. Again, many women recruited as nurses became the sole or main breadwinners for their families. This is because the guest worker program also allowed for dependents to be sponsored, and this is how Mirae's husband came, but it was also the case that dependents were not allowed to work in Germany, to discourage these dependents from arriving and staying.

5. Double Migration to the USA: Becoming Diasporic

Now we will jump to the US where these women discuss the early years of their lives in the United States. When I interviewed Young Ae about the USA she told me:

Ae: "… and we bought our first business in Rego Park, Queens."
Helen: "What kind of shop was it?"
Ae: "It was a deli where you could get sandwiches and other stuff."
Helen: "Why Rego Park?"
Ae: "Well, there was a woman that we knew from Germany and she wanted us to do business together, so that's why we got the place in Rego Park. We got to know her in NYC. When you first arrive from Germany you form these relationships, and of course you meet lots of Koreans, but there were special relationships between people who were in Germany and you get to know people from there and help people from there. And I got to meet Mrs. Kim and Roy's mom too."

Helen: "So where did you live in NYC when you first arrived?"
Mirae: "We lived on Austin St. in forest Hills . We all settled there and lived there together. We got together all the time and knew lots of people there. We went around to places together and even on holidays like Thanksgiving, and we would celebrate these together, and we would celebrate these events together (When she said we she meant other Korean guest workers who had also migrated to the US.). They didn't all necessarily come together on the same plane, but often, we would kind of follow each other months, sometimes, of course, years after. So we spent all of our free time and weekends being at each other's houses to eat together. Those were some really fun times and we were all quite close. These were some of the best people I've ever befriended. And I felt blessed."

Diaspora belonging is often practiced, and again, this is what I mean about this kind of exemplary case with Korean guest workers. It's practiced and it's felt at the local level rooted in these strong social networks that were forged in Germany and fostered in the US.

These have turned into informal associations and sometimes form lines that connect friendship circles from across the US and Canada, with larger nodes in cities such as LA, New York, Chicago and Toronto, where of course, there are substantive Korean diaspora communities. They have organized lots of local small scale gatherings on a monthly or biannual basis, and they reinforce a sense of a kind of Diasporic Korean-ness. At the same time, they support these local connections that are grounded in physical places and spaces. As Mirae pointed out these special relationships that are forged go above and beyond the ethnic affinities that others have studied.

Strikingly, all of the women told me that these friendships were the closest and longest friendships they had had, even if of course, over time, they did grow apart, and developed friendships outside of those networks. All these women still maintained at least one or two close friendships with a former guest worker from Germany. So this suggests that the specific migrant trajectory reinforced these close affinities amongst this specific group of Korean immigrants that were forged again through the shared experiences and outlooks shaped by their years living in Germany and the US.

Within these small circles, they can reminisce and bond over their shared memories. The significance here is that these affinities were again, not just based on ethnicity. Once these women were settled in New York City, which has a very well established Korean community, they made many other Korean friends or acquaintances. However, their affinities with other Korean guest workers was much stronger, as Mirae tried to explain. It was the affinity between these women born of their suffering, and for those who had been in Germany, so many years ago, the suffering was not easily expressed in the stories they shared with each other, but was nonetheless present in their hearts and their actions towards each

other. With each meal they shared, with every weekend spent together, with every act of solidarity, they work together to create new homes and lives in the US.

6. This is My Home! The Myth of Diasporic Return

Let us look at their stories to highlight how these women contemplate ideas of return at their age and at this particular stage in their lives, where they are now all very much retired, and where their children and grandchildren are involved, and have grown and settled in the US. So we have Myung Heei, who says:

> "Oh no, I would never leave the US, this is my home. I've always felt that this was my home, and I would never go back. I mean, we go back a lot. And we're always connected to Korea…my husband, my kids and me. But Korea is not a place to live."

And Mirae who says:

> "I don't know this Korea nowadays, it's completely changed, and I don't recognize it anymore. Every time I go back, it's like I'm going to a foreign country. Of course, I know the language. And I know people there. But that's it."

Now Mirae was talking to me on the street as she was saying this, and to prove her point, she stopped in the middle of the street and gestured to me as she's saying this last line throwing her hands up in front of her face. She's saying this as if to signal that this unrecognized ability is not about being able to see, but about not being able to see what is in front of your face.

This feeling of bewilderment about her birthplace is something that is shared by many of her peers and those who left Korea so very long ago. But it is also said without necessarily a kind of sense of loss or sadness. Now, in the earlier years of studying return migration, it was

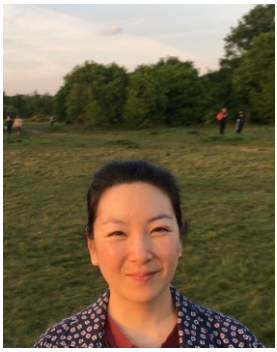
often understood as something that could be final, and would end in a kind of resettlement in the country of birth and origin. However, more recent research on rich return migration has argued that there's more of a transnational back and forth rather than a kind of final settlement in one place. This is also reflected in the literature on return migration that defines return as, 'real, virtual, imagined, desired, forced, or denied' (King and Steele, 2011). Moreover, return can be permanent or temporary, and isn't necessarily determined by a set amount of time. As Myung Hee noted, she goes back to Korea regularly, and while she chooses to live in the US, she can also maintain her transnational ties and connections, and sustain them through repeated visits, as well as other points of contact with Korea. But saying there is no recognition also suggests this about Diasporic longing and belonging. It's not so much that it's about a longing for return, and I think that Mirae's statements make this clear, but there's a longing for a sense of belonging, and perhaps a desire for there to still be something that can connect these people back to a particular place that does exist. So when looking at the sense of return, perhaps a better way of thinking about diaspora is that it is not related so much to the sense of exile or loss, but that it is about inhabiting and identifying with that 'elsewhere' that Ellis elucidates in her book. So the return is not necessarily about physically holding onto a tangible place or geographical location, although there is that too, but more often it is through the people, culture, and practices of diaspora belonging that are created and sustained in the here and the now, right in these present places that they call their homes. So the sense of elsewhere is significant and central to the creation and continuation of a diasporic imaginary one where it's possible to feel a sense of rootedness somewhere, and yet feel a connection and affinity elsewhere, without necessarily feeling that there was only a sense of loss in this.

So it's not that these women have no affinities or ties to Korea, because they do, but that it doesn't have to be that they feel a sense of loss or nostalgic about returning. They don't want to return there

necessarily because and I quote, “Perhaps there is no going home again. There is maybe a detour, but there is no return”.

Presenters

Helen Kim



Presentation 2. "Journeying 'Elsewhere': Diaspora and Korean Guest Workers"

Dr. Helen Kim is a Lecturer in the School of Media and Communication at the University of Leeds. Her research focuses on diaspora, urban migration and 'race' in the UK, the US and Germany. She wrote "Making Diaspora in a Global City: South Asian Youth Cultures in London" in 2015. She is currently writing her second book on diasporic and postcolonial memory and twice migration based on the oral histories of the Korean 'guestworker' diaspora who have settled in Germany and the US.