

Collective Memory and Community Solidarity in the Korean Diaspora

Haruki Eda, UCCS Sociology

Mnemonic Alienation and Transformative Memory Production

Ethnic Koreans in Japan (Zainichi Koreans) and the United States (Korean Americans) often grow up with limited access to historical knowledge about their ancestral homeland and family history. Such conditions of mnemonic alienation underscore community relations in the Korean diaspora. In response, diasporic Korean activists and organizers have engaged in the politics of memory around historical redress, preservation, and education. Since the 2000s, grassroots endeavors to address the lack of collective memory have kindled a Korean diaspora politics that reshapes ethnic solidarity among Koreans and other racial/ethnic minorities in Japan and the US. Their politics of memory thus situates a radical meaning of Korean identity in geospatial relationalities of power in the Trans-Pacific region. How does such collective memory production foster diasporic community belonging centered on political solidarity rather than cultural affinity alone?

Based on my ethnographic research on Korean community organizing in the US, I examine two examples of what I call *transformative memory production*. This concept refers to a process of collective memory production that confronts the hegemonic temporality of imperialist history, which assimilates racial/ethnic minorities through erasure. Those organizers articulate a specific political meaning while addressing their alienation from historical memory. The empirical cases demonstrate how contemporary Korean diasporic identity is constructed in relation to homeland anti-military struggles

and anti-imperialist mobilizations in Japan. Through embodied practices of memory production such as site visits, rituals, and storytelling, those organizers let themselves be engulfed in an alternative sense of time. Their work on diasporic memory thus points to contradictory temporal frames of the capitalist state versus the persistent presence of dead Koreans' labor and spirits.

In the full draft, I analyze these practices through a queer materialist reading of Emile Durkheim's theory of collective consciousness, proposing that transformative memory production animates the sacredness of life and land against the profanity of forgetting. I conclude by discussing how this research intervenes in the scholarship on ethnic nationalism through the lens of embodied agency.

Case 1: Homeland-Diaspora Continuum in the Korea Education and Exposure Program (KEEP)

First, the Korea Education and Exposure Program (KEEP) helps the organizers reinforce a *homeland-diaspora continuum* that bridges grassroots movements in Korea and the US. Asian American activists have organized exposure trips to visit their ancestral homelands and develop a strong sense of political commitment to the transnational struggles against US imperialism (Wu 2007). During the 1990s, Korean American organizers began coordinating such delegations to Korea, starting with South Korea (Republic of Korea: ROK) in 1995 and expanding to North Korea (Democratic People's Republic of Korea: DPRK) in 2001. KEEP was initially a collaborative project with a few Leftist Korean organizations in New York, California, and South Korea, formed in the context of the democratization in the ROK, increased US hostility towards

North Korea, and emergent political consciousness among young Korean Americans after the 1992 LA civil unrest (Chung 2007). This volunteer-run grassroots delegation program brings participants to sites of anti-military, democratic, and labor struggles in South Korea; their delegations to the DPRK visit schools, hospitals, factories, farms, and historic sites. The program requires all participants to attend several study sessions prior to the trip and organize at least one public report-back event upon return. I participated in the 2011 delegation to the DPRK and 2023 trip to the ROK, while volunteering for the planning team since 2015. This program is now organized by a community organization, Nodutdol for Korean Community Development.

Here, I focus on a site visit in 2023 to Camp Humphreys, the largest overseas US military base, located in a rural town Pyeongtaek on the east coast of the Korean peninsula. During WWII, the Japanese forces first occupied the area and displaced its residents. In 2001, the United States Forces Korea (USFK) proposed to relocate from the Yongsan Garrison in Seoul to Camp Humphreys, purportedly to move out of the range of North Korean artillery. The ROK government financially supported the expansion of the Pyeongtaek facilities, which includes luxurious amenities like golf courses and a water park. Local residents of Daechuri and Doduri villages refused monetary compensation and began resisting the expansion, ultimately confronting the South Korean police in 2006 (Martin 2018; Moon 2012). Despite international support for the resistance, the expansion was completed in 2018, displacing the farming families from the land that their ancestors had tilled for generations to remove saltwater and make it arable.

In August 2023, the delegation visited the Pyeongtaek Peace Center, which documents environmental degradations caused by the US base and advocates for locals-

centered solutions. The Center also hosts anti-militarization activists from all over the world to raise awareness, strengthen networks, and continue supporting the displaced residents. The main conference room is decorated with repurposed materials from demolished houses, protest paraphernalia, and solidarity gifts and messages, thus functioning as a small archive of the peace struggle. In the same neighborhood, where the displaced residents now live, a warehouse also archives and exhibits similar materials and photos of the struggle.

Having arrived around dinnertime, the delegation enjoyed a meal in the cozy cafeteria before getting together in the conference room for a workshop presentation by the Center staff. A short-haired, middle-aged woman distributed dozens of large laminated photo printouts, asking each of us to pick one that resonated with us somehow. They featured tense moments of protesters confronting the police, landscapes with metal fences and barbed wires, and glimpses of what life there used to be – elders hanging outside a traditional house, a close-up of a grandmother and a granddaughter, an old farmer woman carrying a bunch of rice stokes in the field. We were then presented with photo slides of base-related issues such as sports stadium lights attracting insects and damaging crops, or concrete fence walls preventing drainage and causing floods. The presenter shared that the USFK not only denies the residents' requests to turn those lights off but also refused to comply with the local recycling law. After the workshop, the delegation held a nightly debrief to discuss our takeaways. Unlike most of the previous evenings, our mood was somber, and some of us cried as we processed the residents' loss of indigenous livelihoods and connection to land, as well as our collective loss in the ongoing fight against US militarism.

Next day, we drove around the perimeter of Camp Humphreys, gaining a sense of the geography. The hilly, commercial parts of the town drew my attention to English signs advertising real estates, barbecue and burgers, and billiard halls. On the flat farmland side were seamless metal fences with barbed wires, which made sure to contain a stream inside the base so the farmers could not access the water. Looking in, we saw large housing units, tennis courts, and a few people playing golf. We then drove to the neighboring Osan Air Base, reaching the back of the fenced facility through a narrow country road along the river that flowed towards Daechuri. As our driver was parking the bus, we were greeted by the ground-shattering sounds of fighter jets taking off every few minutes. As we got off the vehicle pushing earplugs in, we found ourselves at the end of the runways, right outside the fence. The noise was unbearable as the soundwaves made our intestines rumble, literally shaking the core of our being. The takeoffs were so frequent that we could not even hold a conversation, so we simply stood together in the humid summer air. It was an otherwise beautiful landscape, with a couple of herons resting in the river. We cried again, at the instinctual terror that the fighter jet shockwaves caused in our bodies, and at the birds and animals still carrying on with their ordinary lives in the hellscape.

Back from the trip, public report-back events were organized in New York, Oakland, and Los Angeles. I participated in the LA report-back in November held at the Harriet Tubman Center for Social Justice with approximately fifty audience members. Since it was impossible to discuss all the dozen site visits, we had selected a few themes including the anti-militarist struggles in Pyeongtaek to develop our talking points and rehearse the program via Zoom. Instead of a lecture-style presentation, we opted for an interview-style conversation between an emcee and a couple of delegates to personalize

our stories. Prompted by the emcee (a Nodutdol member who did not go on the trip), we talked about our motivations, how we prepared, what moments stood out to us, and what lessons we draw for organizing in the US, along with key information of progressive movements in South Korea. Photos from the trip were also exhibited on the walls and slideshow screens. To provide a sensorial simulation of the emotionally impactful experience we had at the Osan Air Base, we showed a video clip of those fighter jets taking off even though no speakers would be able to recreate the level of blasting soundwaves we felt in our guts. “You just have to be there to feel it,” we added, “but we wanted to show you this because it was so terrifying.”

It is indeed impossible to convey the entirety of our experiences, but gaining sensorial exposure is important for turning our bodies into vessels of collective memory. By observing the militarized farmlands, feeling the environmental damages, and hearing the air broken, we attempted to internalize the magnitude of the struggle. Site visits like this help the diasporic Korean delegates gain a sense of the homeland under foreign occupation (as the ROK state upholds US interest above its citizens’ welfare). They develop a politicized Korean identity that would not otherwise emerge from tourist and family visits, recommitting themselves to the advocacy efforts in the US. Through public report-backs, the collective memory of the anti-base struggles is further disseminated to strengthen grassroots understanding and support. Countering the political and emotional disconnect among young Korean Americans, KEEP participants travel, embody, and reinforce a *homeland-diaspora continuum*. The diaspora does not exist independently of the homeland; the organizers situate themselves historically in a continuum of political spaces, such as Pyeongtaek and Los Angeles. Whereas the Pyeongtaek struggle exemplifies a collective memory of ongoing loss within our

generation, the next case of transformative memory production focuses on our recent ancestors' generation, about a hundred years ago.

Case 2: Zainichi-Nikkei Conversation in the Nikkei Decolonization Tour (NDT)

Second, the Nikkei Decolonization Tour (NDT) generates a *Zainichi-Nikkei conversation* that articulates a decolonial geography of Japan to foster radical solidarity. NDT is a grassroots delegation program inspired by KEEP for people of Japanese descent to visit historical sites and connect with progressive movements in Japan. The first delegation took place in 2015, although the programmatic origin dates back to 2010, when members of Eclipse Rising including myself conducted an exposure trip. Coordinated by Zainichi Korean and Burakumin (people of the feudal-era untouchable caste in Japan) organizers across the Pacific (Bayliss 2013; Lie 2004), NDT mobilized an explicitly anti-colonial category of *Hisabetsu Nikkei*, literally “those of Japan who are discriminated against,” thus shifting away from the dominant Japanese American identity discourse of Nikkei that can uncritically reinforce the imperialist power relations of the Japanese nation-state against Zainichi Koreans, Okinawans, Burakumin, the Ainu, and other migrant communities in/of the Japanese Archipelago.

In August and September 2023, the second NDT delegation flew to Japan to participate in the commemoration of the hundredth anniversary of the Kanto Earthquake Massacre. The delegates included young and older, queer/non-binary, mixed-race, and working-class Japanese organizers and members of the CWJC. Similar to KEEP, NDT delegates also met with labor, anti-racist, and feminist organizers,

joining a “comfort women” solidarity rally and visiting former coal mines where unnamed Korean laborers’ remains are kept by volunteers. Among the dozens of their site visits, I focus on the memory of the 1923 Kanto Massacre, in which estimated 6,000 Koreans, Chinese, communists, and even Japanese who were mistaken as Koreans were murdered in the aftermath of a major earthquake by the Japanese police and civilian vigilantes under the martial law (Eda 2015).

Back in California, NDT participants organized a public report-back event in February 2024 at the Eastside Arts Alliance in Oakland. I flew in to help out by broadcasting the whole event via Instagram Live. It was a wet and cold Saturday evening, but the event guests, roughly thirty of them (including some Nodutdol members) filled the rows of stackable chairs. As we remarked afterwards, the audience included both Korean and Japanese people, which does not often happen for community events like this. Alongside snacks, drinks, and merch items, a flowery altar by the stage decorated the venue; it featured a glass-framed photo print of the “Column of Strength” girls; a protest sign that reads “From River to the Sea, From Okinawa to Palestine, End the Occupation;” photos of radical Japanese American elders, a Palestinian flag, and a Zainichi Korean “comfort women” survivor, Song Shin-Do; a sage bundle on an abalone shell; and piles of hand-folded origami cranes. The program began by paying tribute to Japanese American community elders who have expressed solidarity with Hisabetsu Nikkei and whose radical legacies the NDT members draw on: Yuri Kochiyama, Richard Aoki, and Kerry Doi. After my brief presentation, the delegates seated themselves on the stage to have a “fireside-style conversation” with photo slides.

While reporting back on their visit to Arakawa River in Tokyo, one of the delegates shared his profoundly emotional experience during a ceremony to

commemorate a mass killing of 200-300 Koreans in that location through a reading of testimonials.

One of the Zainichi Korean performers was speaking about how one of the victims was caught and about to be killed, basically begging for his life saying “I’m not Korean, I’m Japanese, I’m Japanese.” I sat with that for a moment and I just like realized, that phrase, “I’m Japanese,” it just reverberated through generations, through Zainichi Korean generations. This denial of self, of this Korean identity, and become a shell and wanting to be Japanese, this kind of internal soul that a lot of Zainichi Koreans that exist experience. And I was thinking about my grandfather who said the same thing, my father who said the same thing. That has impacted their generation, his generation ... to my generation, meaning myself. And of course it happened a hundred years ago, but this was the nexus and genesis of this pattern of self-denial that a lot of Zainichi Koreans have been forced to experience and forced to tell ourselves, and so I just lost it. This is it, this is one of the sites where it all really began and I see this, and I was thinking of my father and my grandfather, my grandmother, my mother, all of the behaviors and personalities connected to this one spot where, this self-denial and self-, like suicide, has happened, and that reverberates through the generations ... This was one of my favorite moments.

After this segment, the program shifted to a reading of the Kanto Massacre testimonies from the ceremony they attended. Accompanied by jazzy saxophone and contrabass, the delegates took turns reading short but harrowing accounts of earthquake survivors witnessing vigilante killings of anyone deemed Korean. Here is an example of those testimonies, which NDT members translated into English:

Testimony #5: Mun Muson – Living in the Oimachi Rowhouses while Working at a Textile Factory, City of Shinagawa

A person from my hometown who came to Japan with the help of my father said, “Korean people have done nothing wrong,” and ignored my father’s restraints, saying, “I’m going to protest!” and went out. A few minutes later, a group of Japanese people stuck something like a bamboo stick in the neck of my father’s friend and carried him around past us. “I told him not to leave,” my father lamented, and I was so shocked that I couldn’t even speak.

Testimony #8: Kenjiro Arai - Former police officer, Honjo City

There were a lot of children, they were lined up and decapitated in front of their watching parents. Afterwards, the parents were crucified. There were also men who were

sawing off the arms of Koreans still alive. What's worse, they did it halfway through and turned to another Korean to do the same. I could not bear to see the unspeakable cruelty. Later, a grandmother and a daughter came, saying "My own son was killed by these guys in Tokyo." I saw them carve out the eyes out of the corpse with a carving knife.

With a somber and heavy atmosphere in the room, the emcee asked the audience members to come forward and offer more paper cranes to the altar while the musicians continued playing. The program concluded light-heartedly by enacting a Japanese traditional custom of *setsubun*: the first day of spring according to the agricultural calendar, when roasted soybeans are thrown outward from the house at *oni*, or demons. NDT delegates stood outside the venue with photo-print masks of demonized Biden, Kishida, and Yoon, at whom the event guests threw soybeans.

In comparison to KEEP, which engaged a politicized Korean identity with homeland struggles, the NDT generates a *Zainichi-Nikkei conversation*. This framework brings together various marginalized groups of Japan – the Ainu, Okinawans, Burakumin, Zainichi Koreans, and Zainichi Chinese – to help rearticulate diasporic Japanese identity through a critical lens. Building on Japanese American activism and scholarship on ethnic and racial identity (Kurashige 2002; Omi, Nakano, and Yamashita 2019; Takahashi 1997; Takezawa and Okihiro 2020; Yamashiro 2011), the Zainichi-Nikkei conversation provides an intervention by forging a transnational Korean-Japanese solidarity framework through the lens of diasporas rather than the nation-states in service of US capital.

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