



Erica Vogel. *Migrant Conversions*. Oakland: University of California Press, 2020. xiii + 168 pp. \$34.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-520-34117-3.

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It takes thirty hours to fly from Korea to Peru, two countries that are on opposite ends of the globe from one another. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the trip might now take upwards of fifty hours. But cultural distances are far greater than geographical distances. For most Koreans, Peru is just part of Latin America; for many Peruvians, South Korea is not much different from China or Japan. Despite this geographical and cultural remoteness, there are Peruvians who have made a constrained and undocumented nest in South Korea. Some of them intended to stay in South Korea only for a while before migrating to Japan, the United States, or Spain. In most cases, these plans were not implemented. Many of them remained illegally in South Korea and live “unauthorized lives and refashion their identities” (p. 4) due to the fear of deportation at any unexpected moment.

After twenty-four months of field research, Erica Vogel centers these Peruvians’ stories in her book *Migrant Conversions: Transforming Connections Between Peru and South Korea*. The book is an ethnography of global trajectories—not only from one religion to another but also from ends to beginnings, from unexpected migrations to predestined routes, and from impossibilities to previ-

ously unimaginable possibilities. Vogel uses conversion “as an analytic tool for thinking about the ways movement and imminent departures promote transformative changes for migrants and their communities” (p. 5). She examines conversions with regard to money, religious beliefs, and cosmopolitan plans, and observes how these floating immigrants “negotiate the meaning of their lives in a constantly changing context of place, statuses, and relationships and continue to make meaningful impacts on their worlds even when their money has run out” (p. 6). The process of conversions “not only shows the ways seemingly disenfranchised migrants and their families understand, navigate, and even affect the most powerful of global forces, but also how transnational connections between Latin America and Asia can come to be deepened and redefined through an unauthorized and relatively small migration.”

Vogel vividly conveys racial discrimination in South Korean society through the experiences of Peruvian immigrants from the Global South, capturing the perspective of dark-skinned immigrants from a poor Latin American country, who are not readily welcomed in South Korea. While being interviewed by the author during a tour of Seoul, these undocumented immigrants revealed that

they were aware that South Korea is a bit more generous to white Americans. However, whatever their situations, many of them enjoy the temporal liminality they find in South Korea and the opportunities it brings. Even if they live an unstable life in a shipping container, in some cases, they feel better than if they were in a humble village in Peru. As Vogel indicates, being in South Korea changes their understanding of quality of life. Families back in Peru are not appreciative of the challenges of living in South Korea, worrying more about exchange rates and gaining access to their migrant relative's money than about their well-being. Many migrants turn to religious conversion as a balm when they realize that they cannot make as much money as they expected. Since religious conversion empowers them and gives them spiritual energy in an uneasy life, some of them want to share this belief with their families in Peru, though it is not easy. For Vogel, "their conversion strategies not only changed the meaning of money but also changed the nature of their relationships with their families and their ideas about their own lives as migrants" (p. 80).

There were times when immigrants suffered because of a dream that they could not achieve. Paty, one of the Peruvian immigrants Vogel writes about, wanted her sister to move to South Korea to work, make money, become a student, and convert to Protestantism. Although Paty's sister had no interest in studying, she compromised by getting a student visa. Families in Peru rarely react to the messages of conversion from their relatives in South Korea. Sadly, in reality money is often more important for them than the *respuesta* (answer) from God.

Why do these immigrants take the risk and stay in South Korea? Is it because of the Spanish saying *soñar no cuesta nada* (dreaming costs nothing)? Or because of the Korean Dream? The reasons Peruvian immigrants in South Korea make the sacrifice of separating from their families and risking deportation varies from one individual to an-

other, from money to jobs to a better life to a desire to travel to anything. Whatever the reason, their experience in South Korea "continues to affect their daily lives through the various ways they have come to see the world and the choices available to them" (p. 129).

I hope that the author's worthy efforts to value each person's story throughout this book will be taken as a key part of her argument. The Peruvian immigrants' situations are "constantly changing because of their own transnational movements and connections between Peru and South Korea, their unstable legal statuses in Korea, relationships with others also in transit and at home, and their own changing worldviews and plans" (p. 130). Conversions seem to happen in contexts of change: of environment, of currency and employment, of religion, et cetera. One could argue that reading this book was a conversion for the reader, because they changed from someone who was not aware of the reality of illegal immigrants in South Korea to someone who is. This book carries an academic value because of its contribution to studies on globalization and shows how "the process of pursuing a cosmopolitan conversion has already made a person cosmopolitan, even if the project does not go as planned" (p. 132).

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