

AN OPENING
CRYSTAL MUN-HYE BAIK



AN OPENING

Crystal Mun-hye Baik



#105

ESSAY PRESS GROUNDLOOP SERIES

In Essay Press's Groundloop series, curated by Maria Anderson and Travis Sharp, we seek to bring together authors exploring diverse subjects through loud, innovative architectures.

Series Editors Maria Anderson
 Julia Cohen
 Andy Fitch
 Ellen Fogelman
 Courtney Mandryk
 Emily Pifer
 Victoria A. Sanz
 Travis Sharp
 Ryan Spooner
 Randall Tyrone

Series Assistants Cristiana Kyung-hye Baik
 Ryan Ikeda
 Christopher Liek

Book Design Travis Sharp

Cover Art Cristiana Kyung-hye Baik

CONTENTS

Wreckoning by <i>Cristiana Kyung-hye Baik</i>	1
An Opening	5
<i>To locate</i>	7
<i>To know with certainty</i>	8
<i>To see, to master</i>	10
<i>A General Sketch</i>	13
<i>A General Sketch (continued)</i>	14
<i>Questions for Numbers</i>	15
<i>Questions (continued)</i>	15
<i>An Earnest Attempt to Search</i>	16
Last Impressions	19
Untitled Essay	33
Notes/Acknowledgements	40
Author Bio	42

Wreckoning

A sunlit hike
along the coastline

rift of the Pacific
rearranging
our view.

Spring rush—
wild fennel, sage,
rosemary. Bankside
cypresses.

All right then,
back to Oakland, horizon
circling the sunset

the sun suspended
like a lit balloon.

5,593 miles from Pyongyang.

Where my grandfather spent time.

Where my family
might have lived

had it not been
for division.

Where.

Cotton shirts wet
from summer
sweat.
Not unlike
New York in August, but without
garbage's soiled scent.

The Taedong River,
emerald and shadows.

Short-horned grasshoppers
wedding air, distracting

couples who are stretching
their legs, lingering

near water—last days
of summer.

Twilight. A bridge. Reminding
me of a summer

where I haunted
bridges, seeking summer walks
cooled by evening.

Not unlike tonight.

Headlights' beams
catching bow waves.

People
coming back home

after a day
in the office, factory, the fields.

“Reunification Road”

122 miles between Seoul and Pyongyang.
Google tells me that in a plane moving 560 miles per hour
the trip would take 22 minutes.

Walking, five to six days.

I’ve stood on this road before.

A dust-turn path boarded
by the sky.

The demilitarized zone.

Aerial view: roofs of sky-blue houses resembling arrows.

Cameras keep watch.

American, British, German and Australian tourists
pay to have a close-up view from
the South Korean side.

“Unification Hill (Odusan Unification Observatory): A
venue for education on security matters, Unification Hill
is situated where the Hangang River and the Imjingang
River meet. At Odusan Unification Observatory, you can
also [pay to] observe the daily lives of North Koreans.”

I have walked through
these grounds.

A soldier tells me,

This is bruised land, scarred land,

but “our” land. In each

blue house, a blue line
is drawn across the carpet, not unlike
the division created
by my second-grade teacher

designating the classroom’s “noisy” zone
from the “quiet” zone.

This time, if I cross, I will be shot.

How much a body can
and cannot change things.

A body crossing this blue line
staying flesh.

I am not a phoenix breathing fire
to blaze the land

into cinder, ash, craters.

But, after 70 years of separation,
a crossing body

that does not transform, destroy, decimate
might feel like an indictment?

A waste.

A lie deformed into many truths.

Nation-states
are born from blue tape

governing lives,
separating families, silencing
the familial to echoes.

Sleeping in phosphorescent
blue light.

How scatological logistics
transform a room into

a site of an unending war.

— *Cristiana Kyung-hye Baik*
March 2018

AN OPENING

To locate

A lie deformed into many truths.

The following is an excerpt from a *Jimmy Kimmel Live* episode filmed at the Hollywood Walk of Fame in Los Angeles, California in 2017:

Question: *Do you believe the United States should take military action against North Korea?*

Answer from pedestrian: *I would say yes, for sure.*

Question: *And where exactly is North Korea?*

Answer from pedestrian: *What, on the map? I don't know. I'm horrible at geography.*

As the broadcaster asks these questions, hearty laughter from the audience is audible. Throughout the four-minute segment, several pedestrians provide similar answers.

At the end of it all, no one is able to identify the location of North Korea or the Korean Peninsula on the color-coded map.

To know with certainty

*Where my family
might have lived*

*had it not been
for division.*

Where.

What do you know about North Korea? is the question I posed to ----, ----,
----.

Their responses are anticipated.

A partial list of collected answers:

Axis of Evil
Human rights violator
Torturer
Deluded
Brainwashed
Communist
Poverty
Famine
Defectors
Black Hole
Third World

But how do you know this to be true? is my second question.

They stare back.

Turn on the news.

The New York Times *reports these things on a weekly basis.*

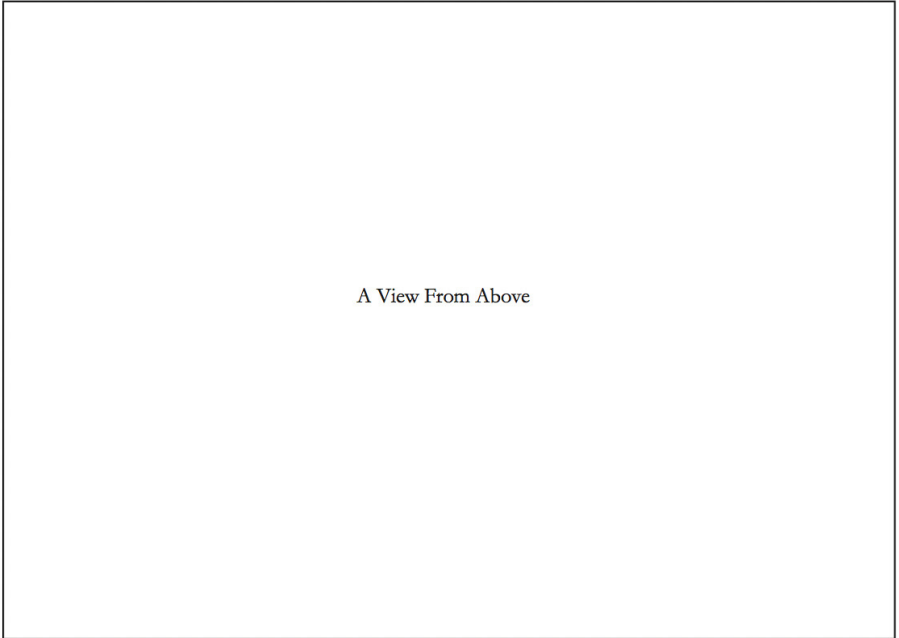
North Koreans, they are human—they're just like us. It's not their fault they live under a dictator.

To see, to master

Aerial view: roofs of sky-blue houses resembling arrows.

Cameras keep watch.

*American, British, German and Australian tourists
pay to have a close-up view from
the South Korean side.*



A View From Above

In a 2006 press briefing to the CIA, Donald Rumsfeld (US Secretary of Defense from 2001 until 2006) referenced a satellite image of Korea that depicts the peninsula's light footprint in a truthful manner. While the southern half of the Peninsula is mapped by crisscrossing arteries of white veins and bright circular bulbs that signify dense concentrations of electricity and light, the northern half is almost all shadow, almost completely dark.

In response, Rumsfeld states that this is his favorite photograph of all time, excluding the photographs of his wife and family: "It says it all. That's the south of the Demilitarized Zone, the same as north, same resources north and south, and the big difference is in the south it's a free political system and a free economic system."¹

Today, the accumulation of captured wavelengths directly corresponds with one's liberation, happiness and freedom.

In conjunction with these perceptions, an arrangement of other considerations.

A General Sketch

*Sleeping in phosphorescent
blue light.*

US Defense Strategies from Above (aerial views are imperative):

Air Pressure

Saturation Bombing

Precision Bombing

Scorched-Earth Policy

Enclose, Close Off, Suffocate

Napalm Dust

A Belt of Radioactive Cobalt

Destruction Radius

A General Sketch (continued)

*I am not a phoenix breathing fire
to blaze the land*

into cinder, ash, craters

Calculations (estimations)

635,000 tons of American bombs dropped in the north

32,557 tons of UN-endorsed napalm dropped in the north

Results

3,000,000 civilians killed, the majority concentrated in the north
(my family, the families of friends are nestled somewhere in these numbers)

8,700 factories destroyed in the north

5,000 schools destroyed in the north

1,000 hospitals destroyed in the north

600,000 buildings destroyed in the north (in 1953, only two buildings remained standing in the capital city)

A journalist was recorded saying: *Every city is a collection of chimneys.*

These strikes continue through diplomacy, including US- and UN-approved food and trade sanctions.

Questions for Numbers

What do numbers remember?

Do numbers relay the true essence of martial violence and the force it took for the United States to nearly obliterate a sovereign nation that it considered (still considers) a pesky thorn in its capitalist side?

Would vocalizing these numbers, out loud, challenge US media coverage of North Korea?

If numbers are not convincing enough, how else might we craft a counter-history more factual, more believable to Americans?

Questions (continued)

Do statistics embody the fleshed traces of fear, panic, chaos, madness produced by war?

Do numbers correspond with the sheer determination it takes to rebuild a society left in ruins, even under the promise of future bombs?

Do numbers help us to see more clearly? If so, what is it that we are seeing?

Is it possible to reduce the dead to statistics? (I hold myself accountable to this question)

What must one do to ensure that they will never be vulnerable, again, to military strikes?

An Earnest Attempt to Search

122 miles between Seoul and Pyongyang.

*Google tells me that in a plane moving 560 miles per hour
the trip would take 22 minutes.*

When I searched for “North Korea” on Google, the search engine’s PageRank (PR) algorithm generated 3,710,000 Results in .71 seconds. The generated links are a composite index and a constantly evolving snap-shot of the keyword’s “vital pulse” in the realm of virtual information. The progressive order of websites that appear on Google is determined by the following factors:

- (1) The frequency and location of a keyword on a webpage
- (2) The length of time the websites have existed
- (3) The number of “touches” or links associated with each site

The sites that appear first on the search list are considered the most relevant, the most important.

Here in the United States, Google searches are determined by the PR algorithm—a calculation designed by Lawrence Edward Page (a CEO, Internet entrepreneur, multi-billionaire) for the purposes of maximum returns.

On 13 April of 2018, the top-generated links are as follows:

“UN Appeals for Aid to North Korea as Donations Drop” (*Wall Street Journal*)

“They Escaped from North Korea: Personal Stories and Mementos of Defectors” (*ABC News*)

“Pompeo says he can imagine a ground invasion of North Korea” (*Axios*)

“North Korea” (*Wikipedia*)

“Trump’s Syria Threats are why North Korea wants nuclear weapons...” (*CNN.com*)

“North Korea Revealed” (*Reuters.com*)

“North Korea Fast Facts” (*CNN.com*)

LAST IMPRESSIONS

To feel in solidarity with him or to build with him or to like what he does, it is not necessary for me to grasp him. It is not necessary to try to become the other (to become other) nor to “make” him in my image.²



A space in outstretched time



Waiting



Fields



Heartbeat



(Un)detected

Missing

governing lives,
separating families, silencing
the familial to echoes.

Sleeping in phosphorescent
blue light.

How scatological logistics
transforms a room into

a site of an unending war.

I am trying to fold race into geopolitics and geopolitics into poetry. Hence, geopolitical poetics. It involves disobeying history, severing its ties to power.

– Don Mee Choi, *Hardly War*

An Opening is an edited excerpt from *Reencounters: On the Korean War & Diasporic Memory Critique*, a forthcoming book where I consider the enduring implications of the Korean War in the twenty-first century.³ Mobilizing Korean diasporic cultural works as aesthetic mediations of memory (including oral history projects, video installations, experimental films and time-based performances), *Reencounters* attunes to the persisting cycle of militarized repercussions that are indicative of rather than outside of the everyday. Demonstrating, for instance, how Korean militarized migrations are repackaged as American immigration history; how silences of war congeal into the hardened marrow of familial bonds; how war's human returns become integral to the inner-workings of global economic infrastructures; and how the politics of national forgiveness collapses martial and leisure economies, *Reencounters* examines the terms of recognition that configure war's manifestations as integral elements of the present. Thus, nestled within this larger book project, *An Opening*—with its haphazard arrangement of borrowed poetry, images and queries—is part and parcel of *Reencounters*' diasporic memory archive.

To be sure, my emphasis on the Korean War's longevity does not aim to soften or anesthetize the bruising blow of slow militarized violence, which touches lives in interrelated yet distinct ways. Spanning from sharp pains associated with decades-long family separations to the potential threat of nuclear annihilation, war reorients us towards its ever-diversified forms in the twenty-first century. In fact, a critical re-examination of and reckoning with these militarized sedimentations, or what I describe in my book as the process of *reencountering*, intimate how brute forms of violence are conditioned by governmental apparatuses that permit populaces to live (or conversely, to gradually perish) on a day-to-day basis. As Caren Kaplan notes, the “time and space of contemporary war” is characterized by an inalterable structuring that implicates all of us in the machinery of militarized conflict, albeit in different ways and through disparate means.⁴

While tracing the blurred boundaries between wartime and peacetime, *An Opening* and by extension, *Reencounters*, offer no easy (re)olution as to how or when the Korean War will formally end. However, by suggesting the everyday as a potent terrain in which to return to, reassess and remember otherwise, these entwined projects challenge the logics of inevitability and foreclosure so crucial to the US state's ideological rendering of the Korean War as simultaneously continuing and over. That is, political pundits still script the un-ended Korean War as a conflict that will conclude with the North Korean state's total collapse. And yet, the uneasy deferment of such a foreseeable ending troubles this self-evident truth. Thus, reckoning with the Korean War's violent entanglements is a political project as much as it is an epistemological one: we must be willing to untether ourselves from the enduring tales we have long been taught to know and trust within formal educational settings, intimate circles of loved ones, and our given families. In turn, the evocation of radically different memories that gnaw at and exist alongside more familiar narratives orient us towards demilitarized *presents* that are seemingly impossible or out-of-reach in the here-and-now.

With this in mind, I partake in my own mnemonic praxis of untethering through a set of diasporic memory practices offered in this chapbook. Strangely enough, the focus of *An Opening* occupies both a real and imagined place within the American social imaginary: "North Korea." Here, I reference the country in quotation marks because the "North Korea" that the US populace has been exposed to for so long is a comedic object refracted through the polarized lens of Cold War political discourse. Forever demonized by the US government as the sole culprit of the Korean War and a heartless communist violator of human rights, "North Korea" is also a common punchline on late-night television shows and slick studio films or the focal point of documentary exposés. Indeed, for the American public, it seems as if curtailed access to and contact with the DPRK has evolved into an incessant desire to know, see and touch: the recognizable narrative of "North Korea" as a forlorn and forsaken place ruled by a cruel demagogue is anchored by an Orientalizing fascination for the incomprehensible other. In effect, the eagerness to know, catalogue and study the inaccessible other crystallizes through hyper-sensationalized, tabloid-like imagery

and colorful discourse that satiates the public's hunger for open access, truth and transparency.

In this vexed field of ideological representations, caricatures and complex realities become muddled to the degree that the former substitutes for the latter. Case in point: in the fictional feature-length film *The Interview* (2014), Kim Jong-un, played by Randall Park, becomes the only living national politician to hold the dubious honor of being assassinated on the silver screen. Relatedly, we might refer to Margaret Cho's farcical portrayals of Kim Jong-Un and Kim Jong-Il in *30 Rock*, as well as her appearance in the 2015 Golden Globes as the robotic DPRK Army General "Cho Yung Ja." In the void of face-to-face contact with "North Koreans," these accounts become proxies for subjectivities that are always already missing from the public arena (here, it might be worthwhile to note how journalists' nuanced critiques of Park's and Cho's portrayals are lightheartedly deflected by celebrities who claim that Park and Cho, as Korean/Americans, are justified in providing satirical depictions of "their own people"). In countless other Hollywood spoofs, America's disdain for "North Korea" mutates into innocent American humor, as "North Koreans" are doubly cast as dangerous deviants and normal humans who just want to enjoy global goods that Americans freely own and consume. This oppositional construction of "North Koreans"—as Yellow Peril *and* just like us—supplants the grey zones of subjecthood that can never be documented by extractive methods of visual capture.

But even in my own attempts to problematize such hackneyed portrayals, I too have struggled to articulate what it means to remember, reassess and reencounter "North Korea" without seeking to elucidate, uncover and ultimately contain. This difficulty, I think, stems from my own uncertainty in regards to what I know and don't know about "North Korea." Undoubtedly, I am critical of and resistant to the Western media's polarized portrayals of the Korean peninsula. Reflective of this resistance, *An Opening* unsettles how we are taught to perceive, remember, and know (or *not* know) the Korean War. Yet, as a scholar primarily trained and situated in the United States—and as someone who cannot possibly speak for or on the behalf of others who inhabit a different positionality than my own—I am anxious that these passing observations, no matter how carefully framed or

researched, will unintentionally generate flattened perspectives of an “authentic North Korea.” And while any critical memory of the Korean War must destabilize the United States’ imbecilic portrayals of “North Korea,” I also distance myself from utopian narratives that reduce this place to a homogeneous society wholly unblemished by state violence. What, then, do I recognize and know about “North Korea”? And conversely, what is it that I am seeking to question and unknow? Does questioning simply imply a countermove that replaces a hegemonic narrative with a more truthful version of history or does it entail a different epistemological project altogether? And given my ties to this very real, very imagined place—as Cristiana Kyung-hye Baik notes in the epigraph, “Wreckoning,” North Korea *is where my grandfather spent time and Where my family might have lived / had it not been for division*—how do I make sense of a global history that is also my own history without subsuming this reality to the narrow confines of personal biography, familial sameness and cultural authenticity? *What else* is potentiated by this mnemonic praxis of questioning and unknowing?

In consideration of these inquiries, I find Édouard Glissant’s contemplation of opacity in *Poetics of Relation* a generative provocation. For Glissant, the “right to opacity” does not seek to mark, decipher and “reduce things to the Transparent.”⁵ On the contrary, opacity acknowledges the problematics of knowledge formation and the ways in which complex subjecthood points to an “irreducible singularity.”⁶ Understood as such, to question is not simply antithetical to the enmeshed projects of knowing and containing. Instead, questioning holds us accountable to the shapeshifting conditions of power that determine who and what we recognize, see and know in our daily lives.⁷ As a mode of refusal, questioning also considers how the desire to make transparent is too often indebted to the affiliated projects of conquest, enclosure and occupation. By extension, questioning compels us to acknowledge that even in our most deliberate attempts to problematize the status quo, our maneuvers to decode are always already partial, subjective and incomplete.⁸ There are limitations as to

what we can access and know. But it is precisely this partiality, this incompleteness, that animates affective and epistemological openings constituted through relational difference(s): to question permits us to “feel a solidarity” without seeking to “become the other” or “make [others] in my image.”⁹ Only then may we begin to understand that “it is impossible to reduce anyone, no matter who, to a truth that he would not have generated on his own.”¹⁰

Mobilizing Glissant’s essay as a starting point and my sister’s poem as a poetic guide, the preceding pages contain a hybridized convergence of passing observations, data and statistics, and images and poetry stanzas, reassembled in my attempts to question and unknow “North Korea”, at least in the ways that the United States perceives this place. More specifically, this essay-in-progress offers an open-ended sequence of diasporic memory practices that formulates questioning as a meaningful form of remembering. Indeed, questioning is pivotal to what poet Don Mee Choi refers to as a *geopolitical poetics*, or cultural expressions that potentiate discordant memories incongruent with dominant historiography. In part, this act of remembering otherwise interrogates the “humorous,” the “familiar” and the “ordinary” by registering the accumulative forms of violence that underpin these very terms. These discursive processes of questioning, however, are not conclusive or finite, nor do they aim to supplant existing narratives with more truthful representations of life in “North Korea.” Rather, the first half of this chapbook asks us to reconsider dominant perceptions by re-sensitizing us to the “limits of every method” and untethering our knowledges, even if a little bit, from the official “law of facts” that govern the everyday.¹¹ In a narrower sense, these diasporic memory practices provide an imperfect means for me to reencounter a place that feels so different and distant, yet so proximate and close to my diasporic personhood. They attempt to make sense of unrealized relationships, a genealogy of militarized migrations and an unwritten history of disappearances and dispossessions that can never be rectified, reclaimed or made transparent. In other words, they allow me to remember through and with opacity.

Notes and Acknowledgments

Thank you to Niana Liu and Cristiana Baik who provided nearly all of the photographs included in this chapbook, with the exception of the last photograph (with the caption “Missing”), which is my own image. I am eternally grateful to Cristiana, who provided the original poem enclosed in this chapbook and *Reencounters: On the Korean War and Diasporic Memory Critique*. Lastly, thank you to Vinh Nguyen and Travis Sharp of Essay Press who provided such astute feedback for different iterations of this experimental visual essay.

1. Direct quotation of Donald Rumsfeld from US Department of Defense Report, 2006. Included in David Shim, *Visual Politics and North Korea: Seeing is Believing*, 2014, pp. 3-4.
2. Édouard Glissant. *Poetics of Relation*. Translated by Betsy Wing. University of Michigan Press, 1990, p. 193.
3. This book will be published by Temple University Press in Fall 2019.
4. Caren Kaplan, “Sensing Distance: The Time and Space of Contemporary War” in *Social Text* online (*Periscope*), 17 June 2013. https://socialtextjournal.org/periscope_article/sensing-distance-the-time-and-space-of-contemporary-war/. Accessed 17 July 2013.
5. Glissant. *Poetics of Relation*. p. 189.
6. Glissant. *Poetics of Relation*. p. 190.
7. Glissant. *Poetics of Relation*. p. 192.
8. In regards to my engagement with “partial knowledges,” I am especially grateful for Donna Haraway’s “Situated Knowledges: The Science Question

in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective” in *Feminist Studies*, vol. 14, no. 3, Autumn, 1988, pp. 575-599.

9. Glissant. *Poetics of Relation*. p. 193.

10. Glissant. *Poetics of Relation*. p. 194.

11. Glissant. *Poetics of Relation*. p. 192.

Crystal Mun-hye Baik is Assistant Professor in Gender & Sexuality Studies at the University of California, Riverside. Her first book, *Reencounters: On the Korean War & Diasporic Memory Critique*, will be published in Fall 2019 by Temple University Press. Her publications appear in the *Journal of Asian American Studies*, *Verge: Global Studies on Asia*, *American Studies Journal*, and *Social Text/Periscope*. Currently she lives in Los Angeles, CA.



Essay Press is dedicated to publishing artful, innovative and culturally relevant prose. We are interested in publishing single essays that are too long to be easily published in journals or magazines, but too short to be considered book-length by most publishers. We are looking for essays that have something to say, essays that both demand and deserve to stand alone. We particularly welcome work that extends or challenges the formal protocols of the essay, including, but not limited to: lyric essays or prose poems; experimental biography and autobiography; innovative approaches to journalism, experimental historiography, criticism, scholarship and philosophy.

Essay Press, like other small independent presses, needs support from its committed readers! Please consider [donating to Essay Press](#), so we can continue to publish writing that we and our readers admire.

