Introduction

*How to Get Over a Border*

Sandra Fahy

Safety and survival cannot be guaranteed in getting over borders. The caveat is dependent on person and place: depending on the citizenship and country of residence of an actor in question, some of the techniques elaborated in this brief essay may be more or less attractive to my reader. Luckily, reading offers a safe method of border crossing through looking into the lives of others. Borders tell different stories—not only about the nation or region, but also about lives that are ravaged. It is the latter—the ravaged—that are so often trampled over in the rush to ensure national and regional security.

What is the Work of a Border?

First and foremost, borders are about keeping some people here and other people there. Borders, of course, are both material and ideological. At times, a nation may claim a bit of territory, perhaps some historically disputed part of land, say, an uninhabited chunk of rock in a sea with two names, and in such a case borders are no longer just about people being here or there, but about resources from there getting used here. In the real, borders demarcate poverty and conflict—in other words, suffering. That is the greatest push factor for the legal and illegal movement of people, creating a disruption of borders in their various manifestations. In the era of the Anthropocene, we see another kind of border crossing. Environmental damage and destruction in the resources one nation floats, waterborne or airborne, into the food resources of another, threatening the lives of people elsewhere.

Agonies of poverty and conflict can be traced in the personal narratives of refugees and stateless persons across the globe as they endeavor to cross one border after another in
search of legality. Migrants, be they licit or otherwise, find that borders rise up to meet them in the form of police-led residence card inspections, discrimination in access to housing, and in other daily reminders that one can be ejected. Opportunity and risk largely shape which borders are crossed, where people cross, and their chances of success on the other side. Once there, another kind of crossing occurs: crossing into the culture of the other.

As an anthropologist, what comes to mind when I think about borders is that they indelibly shape socio-political dimensions of human life. Not merely where one goes to school, for example, or what entitlements are offered—but more critically, what difficulties and dangers one is compelled to live alongside. The number of children one cannot have. The internet pages one cannot read. The complaints against government one cannot make. The intellectual and creative desires one cannot fulfill. Further still, borders may shape if one can even live. And, if permitted to live, borders may determine the quality of living. It is not a metaphor to acknowledge that borders shape bodies.

**How the Korean Border Shapes Bodies**

You can link the effects of the North-South Korean border to the bones of people born on either side. The research of Pak, Schwekendiek, and Kim published in 2011 did just that. The study looked at height differences in Koreans born prior to and after the division of the Korean peninsula. When they examined the height of 6,512 defectors in South Korea, they found that those North Koreans born before the division of the Korean Peninsula were taller than their South Korean peers. Combined with this, and more damning still, they found that all “North Korean cohorts born thereafter were shorter than their South Korean counterparts.”

Stunting is the body’s way of sacrificing linear growth in order to survive. Stunting does not happen from a few missed meals; rather, it is the long-term result of protracted malnutrition at critical growth periods. The border between North and South Korea, arguably more than any other border in the region or world, demonstrates how political demarcation—borders— can materialize in the flesh and bones of citizens. This is demonstrated in the spread of contagious diseases such as tuberculosis and multi-drug resistant tuberculosis in North Korea. It is demonstrated in mortality rates. It is demonstrated in birth weights. It is demonstrated in the number of people who gamble their lives for a chance to get over the border.

As a scholar of human rights focused on the Korean peninsula since its division, it is hard for me to think of a border without also thinking of it as loathsome and heartbreaking. Borders protect the sovereign while the human struggles. Borders thwart our efforts to improve the human condition. Borders signal inequality and the limits on opportunity. As migration scholar and Oxford University Professor Bridget Anderson observed, “borders are a fantasy that sustains inequality.” This naturally leads me to

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reflect that borders are like the geopolitical manifestation of the face of Janus: at once the start and the end; at once the point of transition and the point of termination; at once part of the past and part of the future.

The border that divides Korea into North and South was arbitrarily drawn by foreign hands at the end of World War II to delineate US and Soviet occupying areas. The selection of the 38th parallel would later become the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) after the armistice that froze the Korean War. As Suk-Young Kim, a University of California Los Angeles scholar, observed, “For both South and North Koreans, one of the reasons the DMZ figures so prominently as natural trauma is that so few are able to cross it.”3 The DMZ is an emotionally traumatic feature of the land and national psyche of Koreans, and to cross the DMZ, Kim argues, is not “simply a neutral matter,” and—this short introductory piece will show—that other ways of transgressing the border are deliberately without neutrality.4

**How to Get Over a Border: Three Examples**

Borders, like other loathsome and heartbreaking things in life, must be got over. From among the complex borders of Asia—which this issue explores—I share some field notes from one of the more complex, intractable, and stubborn of borders in the region: the DMZ. These three short vignettes emphasize that people are willing to bypass the DMZ physically, emotionally, and materially, no matter the costs.

**Throw Your Life at It**

When the young North Korean soldier Mr. Oh ran across the DMZ, cameras caught how the border fought to contain him. In fact, the cameras caught how benign and sleepy the actual border was—it seemed indifferent to his moment of courage—and by contrast, how driven, determined, and brutal that other border carried in the hearts and rifles of his comrades was.

Mr. Oh, age 24, fan of K-Pop and with a gut full of parasites, acted on his decision to run either to his death or to a new life on 13 November 2017 at three in the afternoon. Stationed at the Joint Security Area (JSA) on the Demilitarized Zone, he ran towards the South at one of the most dangerous, highly-guarded, and politically spectacular points of connection between the two Koreas. The escape was caught on United Nations Command CCTV cameras and eventually released, allowing the world to see his

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4 Ibid.
heart-stopping dash to freedom as North Korean AK-47-armed soldiers hunted him. He was shot at forty times by fourteen of his comrades and found bleeding nearly to death in a pile of leaves on the South Korean side.

North Korea has a de facto embargo on any of its citizens leaving the country without permission. This is a violation of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, Article 12, sections one and two, to which North Korea is a signatory. This covenant stipulates components related to the freedom of intra- and international movement. When the Korean People’s Army shot at the defecting soldier they were also violating one of the most basic of rights: Article 3 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the right to life, liberty, and personal security. Yet, the soldiers were following the instructions of their commander Kim Jong Un. Former officials from North Korea report that a person who defects from the North is deemed a treasonous individual who should be shot to death. This policy dates back to the early 1990s. If the soldiers had not chased Mr. Oh, if they had not tried to kill him, they would likely have been killed themselves. The footage captures all of these men running for their lives, for very different reasons. In his book On Strengthening Socialist Lawful Life, Kim Jong Il wrote, echoing the words of his father, “Our laws are important weapons for the realization of our national policies.” Under North Korea’s revised 2012 Penal Code, Article 63, “Treason against the Fatherland” stipulates that “those who betray the Fatherland by fleeing and surrendering to another country” are subject to capital punishment. How differently would the scenario have played out if Mr. Oh had been shot at the Sino-DPRK border? How many shots across that border would have been caught on camera?

A few days after Mr. Oh’s dash to freedom, Marc Knapper, the Chargé d’affaires ad interim at the American embassy in Seoul, tweeted a picture from the spot. It showed North Korean People’s Army soldiers digging a trench and planting trees to block the open space where the young Mr. Oh crossed. It is exceptionally rare for a person to cross the border between North and South Korea. Typically, such a journey is taken from North Korea across the Tumen River along the Sino-DPRK border into China. That route can last a few hours, and is only open to those with money, connections, and luck, but for those who only have their wits, the journey can take several years. Few defectors leave North Korea by boat. In July of 2016, a young North Korean defector


was found wandering the streets of the western Japanese city of Nagato in Yamaguchi
prefecture. He told police he jumped from a shipping vessel and swam ashore using a
plastic flotation device. He stated that he was born in 1990 but had no identification
papers. In 2011, nine North Koreans spent five days at sea until the Japanese Coast
Guard picked them up. They were resettled to South Korea.

**Wear a Costume, Climb an Embassy Wall**

Forty-four North Koreans dressed up as construction workers gained entry to the Ca-
nadian Embassy in Beijing on 29 September 2004. Prior to this, two smaller groups of
North Koreans entered the same Canadian embassy in Beijing, and just a few weeks
earlier, eleven men, fifteen women, and three children from North Korea climbed ce-
ment walls and cut through a metal fence to gain entry to a Japanese school in the same
city. They were transferred to the Japanese Embassy and sought asylum.

North Koreans jumped embassy walls elsewhere too. In late September 2009, nine
North Koreans entered the Danish Embassy in Hanoi, Vietnam, seeking political asy-
lum and passage to Seoul. These embassy storming activities led China to circulate
memoranda to all foreign embassies and missions in the country. The memorandum
asked foreign governments to “inform the Consular Department of the Chinese Min-
istry of Foreign Affairs in case the illegal intruders were found, and hand over the
intruders to the Chinese public security organs.” The United Nations High Commis-
sion for Refugees released a statement informing embassies that handing over North
Koreans to Chinese authorities are acts tantamount to refoulement. The vast majority of
embassies ignored China’s demand.

Those who successfully scale the embassy walls generate a political crackdown on
their brethren still in hiding throughout China. But they also force themselves into
a face-to-face encounter with the state apparatus via diplomatic channels, compelling
norm-abiding states to permit their application for refugee status. Contrary to popular
belief, however, diplomatic missions and embassies do not enjoy full extraterritorial
rights; they are not the sovereign territory of those countries they represent, but are
rather bound to the laws of the host country. Nevertheless, their physical territory
is not to be trespassed by the host country unless given permission. For this reason,
refugees sometimes use embassies to escape the host country, the arm of local laws

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unable to reach them, and diplomatic channels can then be used to resolve the refugee problem. However, even this is not secure. Violations of embassy extraterritoriality have occurred.

Through the course of any one individual defector’s journey to be granted legal human rights, the individual is in fact compelled to act criminally. One has no right to rights, as Hannah Arendt phrased it in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* in 1951. If one wants to activate their rights, they must wrest them from the sovereign through criminality: “the stateless person, without right to residence and without the right to work, had of course constantly to transgress the law.” They must seek out a broker or some other illicit system, such as a false passport, to gain entry into another country. Climbing the wall of an embassy, an illegal entry, is of course criminal. But in breaking the law, the refugee enables the law to include him or her—to recognize their human existence through recognizing them as a criminal. By breaking the law, ideally within countries that are democratic, the refugee is able to access a kind of human equality, even if as an exception to the norm.

**Send Your Message in a Bottle**

In the chilly February weather in 2018, South Korean rap music blaring, we set out in the car before sunrise to reach a maritime border between North and South Korea. Other cars, other activists, would meet us there. A pickup truck, weighed down with a mighty load of rice stuffed in plastic water bottles, was also making its way. The typical delays and confusions associated with coordinated activism ensued: someone needed coffee, another needed the bathroom. Were we on the right road? Would the water be too frozen to carry the bottles across the border? At one point it seemed everyone in the car, driver included, was on a mobile phone shouting directions and queries. As planned, a foreign journalist and her translator—hyped about the event they were about to witness—was picked up en route. Defiance, like all acts borne of passion, is exhilarating.

Like protagonists nearing the end of a long and difficult journey, one final snag tested our fortitude. A kind of “border-before-the-border” in the form of an angry farmer momentarily waylaid us—his land was ideally positioned for defector guerilla activists to intrude upon in their work. Common courtesy meant we had to get in and out of his property quickly so as not to catch his attention, but the narrow dirt road to the water’s edge which sat upon his land was blocked. A towering mid-weight excavator, its crane arm positioned like a fist pounding the earth, prevented us from driving the rice truck to the edge of the water. We had to unload and walk a kilometer with the supplies on our backs. This back and forth between the truck and the coastline took time; some rice

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15 Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* 286, also see 280.
16 The exact location is withheld for safety reasons.
was lost on the path and several people, as if to mourn the loss, stopped and stared. No matter. Such a setback was sheer child’s play compared to the challenges posed by the DMZ and the North Korean regime.

Near the water along the South Korean coast, we clustered in batches around the bottles. We undid the water bottle lids and put three more items in each: a USB, a U.S. dollar bill, and a single pink pill in a plastic-foil bubble (an anthelmintic to kill roundworms). Activists gifted with strong forearms were tasked with tightening the bottles in preparation for their long voyage into North Korean waters, into the nets of fishermen, into the hands of black-market sellers, into the homes of a lucky few. The rice could be sold, the money used, the pill sold or consumed, and the USB used as a portal into another world of entertainment. Before the final send off, an activist-leader among us spoke. “A North Korean can live for a month or two on what is in this bottle,” he said, holding one aloft. We stood around the mountain of bottles. Pictures were taken and prayers were said. Finally he shouted: “Throw them as far into the water as you can!” And, knowing they had to make it all the way to North Korea, we did.
Photograph by the author in February 2018 near the North and South Korea border. The sign reads "Love and Hope to the North Korean People." The men in the picture are former North Koreans citizens and activists.

It is true that borders signal division and inequality from historical grievances, but they are also places where past conflicts are sutured to the present—borders are sites of “connected disconnection.” Intriguingly, this feature of “connected disconnection characterizes” the present era quite well in that events which occur far away do impact our local environment, particularly in regards to technology and ecology. Against this contemporary trend blending the distant and the local, physical borders may have met their match. However, the cognate borders in the mind and heart—the earliest form of borders made from the robust material of human emotion and prejudice—may be strengthened or softened in the future. We will see.

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