

BOOK REVIEW

**Erica Vogel, *Migrant Conversions: Transforming Connections between Peru and South Korea*
(Oakland, CA, University of California Press, 2020)**

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Migration is a global movement with millions of people participating as individual actors. This duality that connects global and individual experiences brings anthropological studies into prominence, for each migrant community can be considered unique in its language and relationships. Erica Vogel's ethnographic study, *Migrant Conversions*, demonstrates an insightful and compelling example of Peruvian migrants' transformations, either in their statuses or in how they see themselves before the world that keeps forcing them to change to survive as the flag carriers of globalization. She examines Peruvian migrants reconsidering their migrations and converting their economic, social, and cultural capitals fluidly to suit their plans and to be part of an extensive transnational community, becoming spiritual saviors and global leaders of their community at the cost of loss and constant anxiety. As Vogel puts it, "...conversions were a way for migrants to negotiate their place in the world and to influence the ways others saw them(86)". She demonstrates the liminality and value of being a low-profiled migrant abroad, and she also presents the power relations between migrants and their families as indicators of conversions' effect that change in time and context.

The identity and positioning of Vogel as the researcher also play an important part in this project: her identity as a Spanish-speaking, nonreligious American scholar enables her to establish almost effortless connections with the Peruvian migrant community by providing them with the comfort of an empathetic and eager outsider who functions as someone to whom they may communicate their story, knowing that their words will be heard by a larger audience. Moreover, the fact that she was a documented migrant as an English teacher in South Korea for years gives her an insider position in the eyes of the Peruvian migrant community. This research project is one long journey of fieldwork between South Korea and Peru; dating from 2006 to 2011.

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Vogel conducts participant observations and interviews going back and forth in South Korea, where documented and mostly undocumented migrants lived, and their families in Peru, and even when migrants are deported, visiting them in Peru again. The fact that fieldwork took place in both countries, and over a long period of time provide an extended vision to see how these conversions shaped, and where these conversions are directed to in the near future. The book contains four chapters respectively named as: Peru, South Korea, Peru; Monetary Conversions; Religious Conversions; and Cosmopolitan Conversions.

In the first chapter, Vogel explains Peruvians' motivations for coming to South Korea in the 1990s, using their temporary tourist and unskilled labor visas to use this time as a springboard to land in Japan, where living conditions were better, and then their reasons for staying in Korea. However, she shows that starting with the financial crisis in 1997, remaining as documented migrants became harder for Peruvians; the Employee Permit System (EPS) effectuated since 2004 simply excluded the Peruvian migrant community in South Korea, and the global financial crisis in 2008 was another strike for those who were left and still holding on to survive, most of them living under the constant threat of deportation.

In the second chapter, besides all these economic and definitional conditions, Vogel presents how the lives of Peruvian migrants transformed under such circumstances. Instead of accepting their loss as an end, some of them managed to turn their ends into new beginnings by adding new meanings to their remittances for keeping the value of their economic actions. While the economic power of remittances they sent to their families would be devalued in dollars, they kept converting their social capitals to prove their worth.

The third chapter points out the book's main highlight of migrant conversions by religious means. Renewing religious foundations, or having brand new one in South Korea reaches many aspects of Peruvian migrants' lives. Throughout the book, the transformative influence of Korean churches on migrants is strongly felt: as opposed to how absent their presence in the legal processes, they feel cherished in positions of global spiritual projects. They feel accepted and useful through carrying out sacred missions by converting their families, or continuing their lives as educated pastors and spiritual leaders abroad. At some point, their *raison d'être* converts from money into the spiritual discovery of God.



The fourth chapter gives a holistic framework for the whole conversion projects of Peruvian migrants. Vogel uses the word “cosmopolitan” to point out “infinite ways of being”, which drives migrant communities to keep planning for the next global act they are going to take (9). She delivers the alienating effect of having cosmopolitan conversions when migrants are deported to their countries, making them keep searching for their global community and experiences they had back in South Korea, in other destinations.

Eventually, Vogel takes readers on a thrilling adventure that splashes the reality of “liminars” in the name of Peruvian migrants surviving in South Korea by revealing their stories, relationships with their families and transnational communities, spiritual dilemmas and loss of many things as parts of their un/successful migrations (12). Migrant Conversions contributes to studies that give voice to many undiscovered stories of migrant communities that interconnect the world, as well as to some rare studies of non-Asian communities in South Korea, and the discipline of Asian Studies.