Book Review

Korea Journal, vol. 65, no. 4 (Winter 2025): 374–379.
doi: 10.25024/kj.2025.65.4.374

Beyond Nationalism and Ecological Exceptionalism: *Biological Peace in the DMZ's Anthropocene*

Making Peace with Nature: Ecological Encounters along the Korean DMZ. By Eleana J. Kim. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2022. 224 pages. ISBN: 9781478018353.

Jaehwan HYUN

In both the global and domestic imagination, the Korean Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) exists as a profound paradox. It is simultaneously the most heavily militarized border on Earth and a "treasure house of ecosystems," whose protection, as historian-cum-Anthropocene advocate Julia Adeney Thomas (2012) argued, is accidental. This view that "reckless human violence" and the "evacuation of all human beings" have had the "unintended result" of creating a zone free for other species has become a dominant narrative in emerging DMZ studies. This growing body of DMZ literature often remains caught in a binary: either depicting the DMZ as a site of *pristine nature* to be preserved in time, or using its ecology as a metaphor for a human-centered, nationalist project of reunification.

Eleana J. Kim's *Making Peace with Nature* is an ethnographically rich and theoretically ambitious work that aims to dismantle this binary. While engaging seriously with science and technology studies literature, Kim presents two interconnected critiques of the existing DMZ discourse: first, it rejects the romanticized ideal of pristine nature, and second, it challenges the pervasive human-centered (often nationalism-centered) peace and ethics that dominate discussions of this borderland.

Jaehwan HYUN is an associate professor at the Institute of Liberal Education, Pusan National University. E-mail: jhwanhyun@pusan.ac.kr.

Instead of relying on these clichéd tropes, the author offers a compelling and urgent alternative: a more-than-human ethics centered on a "biological peace" (*saengmulhakjeok pyeonghwa*) (pp. 19–20). The biological peace is not about North and South Korea using nature as a symbol but about establishing harmony with nature itself. The author argues that their concept and practice of biological peace should serve as a key framework for rethinking the relationship between humans and "nonhuman others and the Earth," to "imagine peace beyond merely human politics" (p. 29).

This book examines the DMZ's "impure and endangered but also cosmopolitical" (p. 27) nature, which thrives not despite but because of the division. Kim, a reflexive anthropologist, moves beyond a totalizing view of the DMZ, admitting hers is a limited multi-sited research mainly focused on parts of the Civilian Control Zone (CCZ), particularly at the DMZ Ecology Research Institute (DERI), north of Paju, Gyeonggi-do province, and Cheorwon, Gangwon-do province (pp. 24–25). In her multi-sited studies, the author directs the ethnographic gaze toward ponds, avian flyways, and landmines. These are framed as "alternative infrastructures," which are intricate "human-nonhuman-technical networks" that exist in relation to the state's "infrastructure of division" (p. 26). These networks "generate other flows, circulations, and temporalities" that "exceed the material and imaginative bounds of capitalist logics, sovereign power, ethnonationalist teleologies, and anthropocentric metaphysics" (p. 27).

The book's theoretical intervention is sharpest when critiquing what she terms "ecological exceptionalism" (p. 27). Kim identifies this as the pervasive discourse that frames the DMZ's nature as a pure, timeless, and symbolic representation of a future Korea. This exceptionalist narrative, she argues, has been politically weaponized by the state, becoming "stealth nationalism" that symbolically colonizes the DMZ's nature as singularly South Korean (p. 50). This critique is grounded in the author's own candid self-reflection. Kim recounts an encounter with migrant women from Southeast Asia that revealed her own biases as a "diasporic Korean American woman of considerable cosmopolitan privilege" (p. 56). The author reflects on how this position led her to realize her own "unreflective ethnocentrism" regarding the Korean

nation (p. 57). This reflexivity lends significant weight to the book's call to move beyond ethnonationalist frameworks and embrace a more inclusive, more-than-human community.

Kim advances her argument through three ethnographic case studies. The first, "ponds" (*deombeong*), based on fieldwork with DERI, reveals these sites not as a return to "primordial nature" but as a "mosaic landscape" (p. 79). This landscape now functions as a crucial refuge for species migrating northward due to climate change, directly countering the *pristine* narrative by embedding the DMZ in the global Anthropocene. The DERI's work to conserve these ponds is presented as a form of "commoning" (pp. 80–82), a practice that prioritizes nonhuman life-forms over property relations and resists the logic of market exchange. This concept is illustrated in a project for a cross-border crane habitat, where the birds serve as peace messengers. The author skillfully redefines the state-centric "exchange and cooperation" discourse to instead "include multispecies relations" and safeguard against development-driven "accumulation by dispossession" (p. 85).

The second alternative infrastructure, avian flyways, deconstructs the *unification imaginaries* often projected onto birds, especially in relation to the tragic story of the ornithologist family Won Hong Gu and Won Pyong-Oh (p. 28). The author steps away from well-known allegories to propose the concept of "strange kinship" (p. 92). This is not a sentimental projection but a "form of relationality" built from an "ethical praxis of paying attention." This praxis is embodied in the "decorporeal methodology" used by ornithologists during fieldwork to foster an "ethics of attentiveness" (pp. 99–107).

Meanwhile, the story of the black-faced spoonbill Gaksi-hiro E37 becomes a counter-narrative to the unification imaginaries. When the bird returns to its home in the North, it "renders the political division irrelevant" and "denaturalizes...human categories" (p. 115). The flyways are not just symbols of freedom; they are "human-avian relationships" and, more grimly, "our very own cartographies of the Anthropocene," which reflect the "dimming prospects for ecological recovery" (p. 117).

The book's last and most provocative chapter analyzes landmines as "rogue infrastructure" (p. 118). This framework moves beyond seeing mines

merely as "imperial debris" or "toxic remnants of war" (p. 126 and p. 130). Drawing on feminist philosopher of science Karen Barad's relational ontology, Kim theorizes landmines as "ecologically embedded actant" (p. 126) with posthuman performativity: agency is intra-active, as humans and mines "come into being through their concrete performative relations" (p. 131).

Mines, in this reading, are not passive tools but "unpredictable and deterritorialized" actors (p. 131). They become a "weaponized nature" that, while "anti-humanitarian," can also perversely "render[s] the environment safe for nonhuman flourishing" by repelling human passage (p. 133). This reframing is rooted in the unsettling story of a villager who felt "ecstatic joy" upon entering a minefield. Kim reads this not as abjection but as "joyful liberation," an "intra-action" where the non-detonating mine reconfigures the human-mine relationship (pp. 143–144). This sharply contrasts with the state's symbolic neutralization of mines, as seen in a perverse "gold mine of nature" (*jayeon-ui bogo*) pun on the government's promotional video about the DMZ (pp. 150–151).

The theoretical power and ethnographic depth of this volume are undeniable. Its interventions offer new vocabularies, such as "biological peace," "biological exceptionalism," "unification imaginaries," and "infrastructure of division" for critical DMZ studies (Hyun and Lee 2023). While the book's primary strength is its ethnographic analysis, for this reviewer, a historian of science, it seems that the historical contextualization could be further enhanced. The book contains a few minor historical points that, although not invalidating the core ethnographic analysis, are noticeable.

For instance, the author states that the 1992 Agreement on Reconciliation was the "first to propose... 'peaceful utilization' of the DMZ" (p. 36) and that zoologist Kang Yung Sun "first articulated the connection between the DMZ's nature and...peaceful utilization in the mid-1970s" (p. 39). This is historically inaccurate. Recent scholarship in the history of science has traced these discussions about the DMZ's ecological value and potential for peaceful use back to the 1960s. Proposals for creating a national park in the DMZ to reduce military tension were already being discussed in 1966, not by Kang, but by figures such as Harold Coolidge of the International Union for Conservation

of Nature (IUCN), which already had a wider interest in trans-border zones, including the Jordan–Israel borders in the Dead Sea region as potential nature parks. Following Coolidge's suggestion, political scientist Glenn D. Paige in 1967 and Lee Young Ho in 1972 also proposed establishing national parks in the DMZ for peace (Hyun 2024a).

Another factual error appears in the discussion of the famous ornithologist Won Pyong-Oh. The author states that Won "earn[ed] a doctorate from Hokkaido University in Japan" (p. 88) after studying there. This description of his career is incorrect. Won did not study at Hokkaido University in a residential program. He was a "dissertation doctor" (*guje baksa* 旧制博士 in Korean and *kyūsei hakase* in Japanese) under Japan's former system, which allowed established researchers to receive a doctorate based solely on the submission of a dissertation, without completing coursework (Hyun 2024b).

Despite these historical criticisms, I recommend this book as an essential read for DMZ studies scholars and broader Korean Studies researchers. The book offers thought-provoking insights that approach the history and present of the DMZ and related politics from a new perspective by decentering the human and thus defamiliarizing the alleged ideas of temporalities, spatialities, belonging, and politics in relation to this borderland.

The book ends with the statement that the "de/militarized ecologies" of the DMZ are "not ironic." They are the very sites where "the building and projection of state power" confronts "the privatization and securitization of space under capital," but also the liminal zones where "nonhuman life forms should find provisional refuge" (p. 156). In this context, Kim's work provides a profound counterpoint to the way the DMZ has been portrayed in a certain type of Anthropocene narrative, which typically depicts the DMZ's ecology as simply an *accidental* consequence of human conflict. Instead of viewing it as accidental irony, Kim reveals deliberate, complex, and ongoing negotiations within the Anthropocene. *Making Peace with Nature* thus redefines the conversation about the DMZ, shifting it from a human-centric story of past tragedy and future national unity to a more-than-human narrative of "strange kinship" and "biological peace" in our turbulent, shared present.

REFERENCES

Hyun, Jaehwan. 2024a. "Negotiating Conservation and Competition: National Parks and 'Victory-over-communism' Diplomacy in South Korea." *British Journal for the History of Science* 57.2: 239–255.

Hyun, Jaehwan. 2024b. "Science as a Family Affair: Won Pyong-Oh and the Transwar Origins of South Korean Ornithology." *International Journal of Korean History* 29.1: 5–55.

Hyun, Myung Ho, and Hyun Kyung Lee. 2023. "[On this topic] DMZ Beyond Inter-Korean Borderlands: Productive Contradiction from the Perspective of Critical DMZ Studies." *Korea Journal* 63.2: 5–15.

Thomas, Julia Adeney. 2012. "The Exquisite Corpses of Nature and History: The Case of the Korean DMZ." *Asia-Pacific Journal* 10:S2: 69–88.

Received: 2025.11.17. Revised: 2025.11.23. Accepted: 2025.11.23.