

## Unlearning Our Privilege

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Mimi Harvey, our guest box writer, designed the following exercise for her students based on the fieldwork she did as student. Now a professor of communications studies, Mimi wrote this reflection when she was on a fellowship in Korea.

I spent a year with Indonesian migrant workers in Korea, sorting through issues of power and privilege. Korea has the money to employ laborers from other countries, and these workers were the focus of my study. I reflected on my identity as a white, Western, educated researcher.

I am, in certain ways, a "comrade"—introduced by the migrant workers as "someone who supports our struggle for legalization and for human and labor rights. She has accompanied us on all our rallies and struggle activities."

These are two sides of the same coin. My whiteness, socioeconomic status, and education create borders and boundaries, ones I cannot and would not want to cross. It is clear to me that there are certain ways my status is not open to change: "Mimi, sebagai seorang Barat, lebih peka, lebih sensitive" ("Mimi is a Westerner and therefore more refined, more sensitive"), Boedhi says to Samsul to explain why he must call me more often and be more polite and attentive to me.

I ask myself, "Am I a true border crosser? A Borderlands dweller?" I must always be aware of the possibilities and limits of such a position.

My dilemmas are directly tied to my ethical beliefs and commitment to the migrant workers I have marched beside. I am in solidarity with them in their struggle to force the government to give them legal status and to honor their internationally recognized human and labor rights. I cannot be neutral in this research. I am not neutral. I care. I am committed.

How can I give back to my participants beyond what I have done so far? Translating, urging of solidarity, witnessing and hearing the stories of the workers, a few treats, food occasionally. I regularly offer to teach English at shelters, churches, and the Myongdong tent city. But it is difficult for the migrant workers to find the time and the motivation to come to a class when they are working 14 to 18 hours, six or even seven days and nights a week.

Approaching fieldwork from this perspective demands a constant awareness of realities—power and privileges—for both the researcher and the informants. If I am working at the "hyphens"—at the Borderlands in Korea—I must be conscious of my multiple, overlapping, and contradictory identities. I cannot make the migrant workers into the "other." I will, indeed, only ever have a partial perspective. I will never be able to see the whole picture.

These issues and concerns stuck to me like cockleburs throughout my year of fieldwork in Indonesia and South Korea. They cling to me still at my desk here in the Western world. At least once a week, I get a phone call from one or another of the Indonesian migrant workers who shared their lives with me. When our talk of manhunts, deportations, and crackdowns becomes too depressing, they ask me about my life in *surga dunia* (earthly heaven)—their imagined picture of Canada and the United States. I try to tell them honestly that, while "heavenly" in some respects, it is certainly not perfect here. There is growing fear and suspicion of "illegal aliens" and legal immigrants here, too. Each time I weave their stories with mine, these words echo: we must always be "unlearning our privilege."