What does it mean that Korea’s national division—created and perpetuated by Cold-War hostilities—has outlasted the Cold War itself? What do these circumstances reveal about the temporality and “location” of the global Cold War?

Historians have identified the early escalation of the Cold War with the 1950 outbreak of the Korean War, characterized as the Cold War’s first hot conflict and catalyst for an unprecedented expansion of the U.S. military. Yet the Korean War’s ongoing lack of resolution is rarely figured into a commonly assumed periodization of the post-Cold War era. Nearly two decades after the fall of the Berlin Wall, and despite the demise of the Soviet Union itself, the persistence of Korea’s division confounds those assumptions. Meanwhile, Koreans have sought to understand their country’s continuing division amidst wider post-Cold War developments, particularly the waning of U.S. hegemony in Northeast Asia.

Memory and the spatial distortions of national division

My own research has concerned those who have been separated from their families across Korea’s geopolitical divide since the 1950-1953 Korean War. For separated Korean family members, the urgency of human biological frailty conflicts with the unpredictable and often halting rhythms of inter-Korean rapprochement. My project engages with the Center theme, “Figuring Place and Time,” by exploring how, in this period of continuing uncertainty on the Korean Peninsula, the spatial distortions of national division are being remembered, challenged, and reconfigured as many in the Korean War generation approach the end of their lives.

The “Korean War generation” is a term denoting Koreans in their 70s, 80s and 90s, who are old enough to remember the War as adults or students. For those unfamiliar with the background of Korean division, it may be difficult to understand why separated families among this generation have been unable to meet for decades.

Almost immediately after its liberation from Japanese colonial rule (1910-1945) at the end of World War II, Korea was divided at the 38th parallel by the Allies into two zones of occupation, whereby one side was controlled by the United States and the other by the Soviet Union. By 1948, the Republic of Korea was established in the south and the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea in the north. The fratricidal Korean War is periodized generally as occurring from 1950-1953, but historians have argued that a low-level civil war began as early as 1948. While civilians
were able to cross the dividing line at that time, subsequent hostilities hardened the border, and it became heavily militarized after the Korean War’s ceasefire in 1953. A permanent peace treaty was never reached, however, and technically the Korean War has still not ended.

During this period of irresolution between the two states on the peninsula—neither at war nor at peace—millions of Koreans were left unable to learn the fates of family members who have been missing since the war. Unlike in divided countries such as East and West Germany, where people could correspond and maintain contact, it was impossible for Koreans to re-establish ties amidst the complete cessation of civilian telephone service and postal delivery, and the prohibition against movement of persons across the border.

**Liminal subjectivity**

My current project will build upon research I did for my dissertation (“Liminal Subjects, Liminal Nation: Reuniting Separated Families and Mediating National Reconciliation in Divided Korea”) and it will also draw upon followup research I did in South Korea during the summer of 2009. My initial ethnographic fieldwork in South Korea took place during 2000-2001, a pivotal period in inter-Korean relations. In my dissertation, I analyzed a nationally televised series of emotionally fraught “separated-family reunions” (isan gajok sangbong), which began on August 15, 2000, the anniversary of Korea’s national liberation from Japanese colonial rule in 1945. At that time, delegations of North Koreans and South Koreans were permitted to visit the other side of the border to meet briefly with their kin for the first time in fifty years since they were separated.

I explore the concept of liminality—the state of between-ness or that of being on a threshold in space or time—which so aptly corresponds to Korea’s historical and political condition, and the subjective experience of indefinite family separation. I regard separated Korean family members as quintessentially liminal figures, caught between two sides of the divided nation and negotiating the uncertain ethical and moral issues of having a missing relative whose status is suspended between life and death. The events of the August 2000 reunions were particularly remarkable in that they featured the return en masse of those believed to have died in the war half a century earlier. With few exceptions, those who returned from North Korea to participate in the reunions were people who had been either presumed dead or reported as dead by their families since the war five decades earlier. The reunions therefore came to symbolize the long-deferred process of sorting out the living and the dead, a post-conflict process that had been arrested by division.

**Discrepant temporalities of the body and the divided nation**

Anthropologists have theorized how perceptions of time and its meaning often reflect varied experiences of temporality and diverse modalities of temporal markers, including personal narrative, myth, and ritual. Such “repertoires of time-keeping”—to borrow a phrase from anthropologists Andre Gingrich, Elinor Ochs and Alan Swedlund—can also take somatic form. For Korean separated family members, the survival of the body itself may be understood as keeping time, a physical witness to the traumatic impact of the persistence of division. The inescapability of mortality also opens a space for giving voice to suppressed narratives, as family members have sought to rectify their personal histories and record their stories before they die. Their narratives also reveal a self-consciousness of how separated families represent ties of blood and affect to a national past that preceded division.