People with spinal cord injuries and amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS) struggle both with their immobility and their hope for a cure. Biomedical Odysseys poignantly and engagingly describes the experiences of several of the thousands of spinal cord injury and ALS patients who have taken international journeys for experimental fetal cell transplantation in Beijing. The book introduces us to the complexity of contemporary Chinese medical entrepreneurship as Song documents the development and trajectory of fetal cell transplantation, a medical procedure shown to restore a degree of sensitivity or mobility for some patients. Bringing these narratives into conversation, Biomedical Odysseys elucidates the experiences of immobile patients who travel transnationally to seek treatment for their injury or illness, a doctor on the cutting edge of ethical research and medicine, and an anthropologist seeking to understand the intersections of medicine, globalization, and hope.

Song organizes the text into three sections focused, respectively, on an online community of spinal-cord-injury and ALS patients, the doctor who developed the fetal cell transplantation procedure (Dr. Huang Hongyun), and the ethics and mediated knowledge of cutting-edge, experimental biomedicine. In Part One, “Online Mediations,” Song introduces the reader to the CareCure, a resource website about spinal cord injuries with a vibrant chat-forum community, which is further utilized by familial caretakers and ASL patients. These chapters draw on Song’s extensive online ethnographic research on the CareCure website as well as content quotes directly from chat-forums. Crucially, Song cites this quoted material with the participants’ online handles, both acknowledging the quotes’ authorship and allowing the reader to trace them to their original online context. Mirroring this intersection of the “real” and “virtual” worlds (see Boellstorff 2008), the chapters in this first section focus on the mobilization of immobile patients through online forums. Bringing contemporary literature about transnationalism and online ethnography into conversation, Song contributes a critical understanding of the ways in which online spaces not only facilitate cybersociality but also serve as the catalyst for transnational mobilization—providing CareCure members with information about fetal cell transplantation as well as the support they need to undertake their biomedical odysseys.

Part two, “Chinese Experiments,” considers these CareCure members’ transnational, biomedical odysseys from the perspective of Chinese clinicians. Starting with a detailed account of the impact of globalization and capitalism on Chinese medical entrepreneurship, Song highlights the experiences of medical practitioners immersed in a rapidly changing medical system. She describes the career of Dr. Huang Hongyun, his development of fetal cell transplantation, and the factors that led Dr. Hongyun and his staff to treat primarily...
international, non-Chinese patients. Song utilizes the interplay between state-control and self-governing tactics as the narrative foundation for this section. She highlights the multi-directional impact of globalization on biomedical systems and the ways in which Western biomedical and capitalist pressures have influenced the Chinese medical market while simultaneously arguing for a critical evaluation of the ground-breaking, leading medical experimentation undertaken by Chinese medical practitioners.

Part three, "Heterogenous Evidence," raises questions about the ethics of clinical experimentation and considers the ways in which online-mediated knowledge becomes authoritative. Song considers "how new modes of validation are emerging as viable alternatives to the hegemonic discourse of randomized controlled trials" (159). Dr. Hongyun and his collaborators problematize the common practices of randomized trails and sham surgery, and position fetal cell transplantation as a more ethical type of experimental medicine. The following chapter takes this argument to the next level, suggesting that patients and their families draw on the CareCure forum and the experiences of other CareCure participants as ways of critically constructing knowledge of experimental medicine. These chapters connect to the extensive medical anthropological literature about authoritative knowledge (see Jordan 1997). They also trace how both Dr. Hongyun and the CareCure patients find meaning in their knowledge of fetal cell transplantation, spinal cord injuries, ALS, and their treatments, and contend with tensions between these types of knowledge-making and hegemonic methods of medical experimentation.

While the theoretical framework of her book is strongly developed and tied to contemporary discussions within the field of anthropology, Song does not engage explicitly with the well-established body of literature on (im)mobilities. In highlighting transnational flows of neoliberal ideas and practices, medical theories, and patients, Song treats (im)mobility itself as an assumed, static state while noting the various immobilities of those patients (i.e. physical immobility due to spinal cord injury or ALS; the difficulties some Chinese patients face travelling for treatment; the struggles associated with transnational travel when one is confined to a wheelchair, etc.). An engagement with mobilities theory, particularly the "new mobilities paradigm" (see Sheller and Urry 2006), might encourage Song to examine the roles gender, race, class, and ethnicity play in transnational experimental medicine, which are not given much space in her book.

This small critique aside, the vibrancy of Song’s ethnographic writing and the timely nature of her subject makes this book useful for anthropology courses at a variety of levels. Her discussion of cybersociality (Chapter Two) and the embodied experience of hope (Chapter Three) could be productively incorporated into Cyber-Anthropology and Cyber-Cultures courses to discuss the relationships among "real" and "virtual" worlds and the creation of subjectivity within online spaces. Likewise, her take on the culturally-mediated moral "tensions" of late-stage abortion and fetal cell transplantation could serve both to introduce beginning students to cultural relativism and ethnocentrism and as a nuanced foundation for upper-level students’ engagements with the intersections of incommensurability and biopolitics. Overall, Song contributes an exceptional ethnographic narrative about the mobile and transnational nature of hope by focusing on the experiences of CareCure patients and Chinese clinicians on the cutting-edge of biomedicine in Biomedical Odysseys.

WORKS CITED

