

BOOK REVIEW

Elisabeth SCHOBER. *Base Encounters: The US Armed Forces in South Korea*. London: Pluto Press, 2016. 224 pages. ISBN: 9780745336053 (Paperback). 30.60 USD.

In *Base Encounters*, Elisabeth Schober weaves together history, anthropological theories, and ethnography to reveal how US militarism has shaped social relations and practices in South Korea. Drawing on the theories of Appadurai and Sahlins, Schober formulates the concept of “violent imaginaries” to explain the amplification of individual US soldiers’ acts of violence into “matters pertaining to the nation” (15) in the context of Korean people’s growing disenchantment with the US military since the Kwangju Uprising in 1980.

The first three chapters lay out the historical and theoretical tenets of the book. In Chapter 1, Schober opens with the controversy caused by the 2007 case of a US serviceman’s assault and rape of a 67-year-old Korean woman in Hongdae, an area that has a history as a home for university students, alternative artists, and activists. The figure of the GI as perpetrator of violence has seeped into most Koreans’ imagination, standing at the nexus of concerns about US militarism and domination in Korea, American soldiers’ sexual liaisons with Korean women, as well as the failure to contain the US military within the environs of camptowns (*kijich'on*). Chapter 2 traces the complex history of the Korean peninsula from the pre-modern era to the division into North and South Korea after the Korean War, and the tumultuous process of democratization alongside capitalist development in the 1980s and 1990s. The rise of anti-Americanism in “the most US-friendly nation in the world” has to be traced to the US military’s failure to prevent the Korean military’s brutality in suppressing the Kwangju Uprising in 1980.

In Chapter 3, Schober provides an analysis of the construction of US military camptowns as an “endangering and endangered” area exposing the limits of Korea’s national sovereignty, and camptown women as a “symbol of the nation under duress” (84). Through both a close analysis of the narratives around the brutal murder of a camptown woman, Yun Kum-i, by 20-year-old US private Kenneth Markle in 1992, as well as the minor genre of camptown literature by *minjung* writers who deploy the figure of the camptown woman as a symbol of the ravaged nation that emerged in the 1980s, Schober argues that while violence against camptown women has existed for decades, the rise of anti-Americanism post-Kwangju made these constructions powerful symbols to communicate the inequalities between the US and Korea.

Chapter 4 analyzes the dynamics between GIs, Filipinas, and Korean women in the camptown of Tongduch'on within the broader context of American militarism in the Asian region. The framework of analysis allows Schober to consider the tensions between migrant women and Korean women in the clubs, as well as their overlapping “preoccupation” with American servicemen—whether for fulfilling their drinks quota or for love and marriage. It would have been useful to compare the stigma of miscegenation for children born between local women and

American soldiers in both Korea and the Philippines.

In Chapter 5, Schober examines how the violent imaginary of GIs operates in the area of Itaewon, right next to the Seoul US Army Garrison. A “quasi-carnavalesque territory of make-believe that lies outside of the social, geographical, and temporal parameters of ‘Korea proper’” (110), Itaewon was first established around a Japanese military base during the colonial period that was later taken over by the Americans. In tracing the development of Itaewon as a *de facto* buffer against dangerous foreign influences, Schober explains us why we can find Korean gay men, transgender sex workers, and young people who want a taste of the “American Dream” side by side with American soldiers whom they have come to increasingly resent, along with migrant workers, African traders, as well as Muslims who have found a home there.

The last chapter shows Schober at her best as an ethnographer and a writer using various snapshots and stories to bring together her different analytic threads. In examining the operation of violent imaginaries in Hongdae, Schober discusses how GIs found themselves unwelcome guests at the headquarters for left-wing youths, and how over time in the public imagination Hongdae itself has come to embody the corruption of foreign influences. Firstly, the control of access to the area became a major bone of contention: many venues started to ban American soldiers after the deaths of two teenage girls run over by a military vehicle in 2002, while the US Armed Forces also put Hongdae off limits out of “force-protection concerns” (142). Secondly, the sexuality of women again became a vehicle for demarcating the boundaries of the nation—this time around Hongdae “western princesses” who were accused of seeking out sex with westerners in the area. Thirdly, the alternative entertainment zone has come to attract increasing scrutiny as a source of foreign and moral corruption, exemplified by the outrage after two Hongdae punkrockers “exposed their genitalia” (148) on a live TV music show in protest of corporate culture. Within these multiple axes of contradiction, Schober tells the story of a group of punkers in their early 20s who were economically and socially marginalized as school dropouts and informal workers. They cultivated their own anti-militarist and anti-capitalist beliefs, and soon found themselves standing next to famers in Taechu’ri protesting against the relocation of the US military there, while finding little to talk about with GIs in Hongdae.

Conducting a project across different sites is always challenging, not to mention bringing them into the same analytic framework. Firstly, there is the problem of access. As Schober explains in the first footnote of the book, her ease of access to Itaewon and Hongdae contrasted with camptowns like Tongducheon, where she required the help of a local NGO to gain sufficient access to conduct her work. The depth of affective and analytic engagement in discussions of the urban entertainment zones is distinct from that of the camptown. Secondly, the overarching critique of militarism may sideline other possible perspectives. For example, Schober believes that the Filipina and Korean entertainers’ “intense preoccupation” with their soldier-clients takes shape “in the midst of a heavily militarized environment” (108). This could be further discussed in relation to US colonial and postcolonial influence in the Philippines, both causing the large-scale

displacement of Filipino nationals overseas, but also maintaining a certain US superiority that goes beyond militarism.

Overall, Schober shows convincingly how the “violent imaginaries” of GIs are translated into social practices for different populations, shaping their relationships with the US military and the Korean nation-state, on the bedrock of militarism and a “notion of failed national history” (30). It is an engaging read and is suitable for use in Anthropology, Asian Studies, as well as Women’s Studies courses.

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