

### CHAPTER III

#### The Korean War and the Debts of Food: Negotiations of Benevolence in Cultural Forms

In the widely successful and internationally acclaimed 2014 South Korean film *Ode to My Father* (or 국제시장, literally “Gukjesijang,” the name of the famous marketplace in Pusan), elderly man’s personal story of struggle is portrayed through narrative flashbacks to key moments in his life. *Ode to My Father* charts the life of a character named Yoon Deok-soo from his departure from his hometown in North Korea in 1950 to his trials and tribulations in the South amidst a backdrop of historical change. The film chronicles the Korean War, the nation’s economic development, the anti-communist dedication to the nation state, the Gastarbeiter program to West Germany, South Korean involvement in Vietnam, televised reunions of families between North and South Koreans, and glimpses of the present day.

The film begins in the present with Deok-soo (Hwang Jung-min) looking out at the Pusan harbor with his wife (Yunjin Kim), speaking about how much things have changed. With his extended family home for a visit, Deok-soo reflects on his life and the generations of time dividing his experiences from those of his children and grandchildren. He considers the irony of his separation from his own father and sister in 1950, contrasting with a presentation of his grown adult children. The film’s protagonist views his children as selfish and disrespectful, stopping by briefly to “drop off” the grandkids so they can go on vacation childless with friends.

The very first flashback of the movie centers on the iconic Hungnam rescue of December 1950. Deok-soo remembers walking towards the Hungnam harbor in North Korea, with his parents and his little sister in tow to escape the bombings. At the harbor, there are thousands upon thousands of people waiting to board the American ship the SS *Meredith Victory*—a name which has since become synonymous with American rescue. Indeed, the rescue here is not only one of the most iconic scenes in the film, but also in Korean War history and in popular memory, with 14,000 refugees' lives saved by that ship alone on December 23, 1950.



**Figure 3.1** The Hungnam evacuation in *Ode to My Father* (2014) with the SS Meredith Victory leaving the harbor.

The film presents this actual historical rescue as one of pure American selflessness and generosity. As Deok-soo and his family head towards the harbor, bombs go off in the background. We hear shouts of “The Chinese are here!” indexing the entrance of Chinese intervention in the Korean War. Once aboard the ship, Deok-soo’s father turns around to look for his daughter; they are both left behind. As the SS Meredith Victory withdraws from the harbor, the camera pulls back to a panoramic view of the town with Chinese planes flying overhead and carpet bombing the village.

This Christmas time rescue in the first winter of the Korean War—often referred to as operation “Christmas Cargo”—has been publicly commemorated as a gift from the United States to Korea, gaining traction and significance over time. The saving of 14,000 lives by this one ship, dubbed “the ship of miracles,” has been chronicled in numerous documentaries, books, and even public memorials.<sup>1</sup> Today, on Geoje island, South Korea, a public monument portrays bronze statues of refugees before a reconstructed Meredith Victory. This film’s first flashback to Hungnam, as the origin point of the Deok-soo’s childhood memories, serves as a reminder that the memory of U.S. liberation lives on generations later.

Director Yun Je-kyun said one of the reasons for making the film was the desire to commemorate his father and his generation’s sacrifice—that is, an ode to his own father. Primarily, the director spoke about wanting to highlight the previous generation’s sacrifice and their struggles for younger generation: “Nowadays young people aren’t aware of just how poor this country was and how much older people sacrificed for our development.”<sup>2</sup> Given South Korea’s success today, the director speaks of the historical amnesia and plain ignorance of younger generations to the economic hardships their elders experienced.

One of the main criticisms of the framing of this event in the film is that it corroborates official U.S.-South Korean state historiographies of the Hungnam rescue, disavowing American complicity in the carpet bombing of villages as participants of the war. To portray the Americans in a purely heroic role is too simplistic and indeed dangerous in its political implications.

Additionally, the rest of the film presents broad sweeps of history as one of unproblematic

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<sup>1</sup> Commemorative cultural production of the famous evacuation includes *Hope in Hungnam: A Novel of the Korean War* by David Watts Jr. (2012), *Ship of Miracles* by Bill Gilbert (2000), or the documentary of the same name, *Ship of Miracles* (2011) by R. J. Mchatton.

<sup>2</sup> The director Yun is quoted within the review. “‘Ode to My Father’ stirs the box office and debate in South Korea.” Steven Borowiec. *LA Times*. January 31, 2015. <http://www.latimes.com/entertainment/movies/la-et-mn-ode-to-my-father-south-korea-20150201-story.html>

development and progress—without a single mention of the U.S.-backed conservative dictatorships and anti-democracy political landscape of the 1950s-80s under South Korean leadership. Another aspect likely to trouble critical viewers of the film is its sheer box office success, earning the title of the second highest-grossing film of all-time in South Korea. Despite the successes and triumphs within the film, glaring elisions in the construction of a seamless narrative remain deeply unsettling. For instance, martial law, protests, and the incarceration of dissenters are kept off-screen and out of the script.



**Figure 3.2** A movie poster of *Ode to My Father* (2014) includes the image of a father and son’s embrace and a scene of the Hungnam evacuation.

At the forefront of this film is a personal narrative of struggle, of a man attempting to just “survive” the hardships of life. Indeed, the Korean notion of *kosaeng* (“struggle”) is depoliticized throughout the film. Whether it is Deok-soo working as a day laborer in Pusan, mining coal in

West Germany, working as a contractor in Vietnam—the film crisscrosses the coordinates of South Korean state networks and forwards a narrative of personal struggle amidst a changing landscape of national history. Survival is all that seems to matter in this story, getting through and moving past the many travesties of this man's life.

Personal struggles, national hardship and hunger, and American assistance and rescue frame official state narratives, historiographies, and commemorations of the Korean War. But this is not a simple narrative. Survival here is invoked as just a means to remain apolitical. Within the context of this U.S. liberation history (from communism, the North) and the legacy of debt (food and development assistance history), we find a recirculation of a problematic Cold War state narrative. More than a fairytale film, this movie, in intertextual assemblage with family narratives—including those of my own family in diaspora—present the difficulty in recognizing and challenging these liberation narratives.

The trope of American rescue is still alive in Korean public memory, as are legacies of Cold War benevolence in the framing of a national historiography of indebtedness and gratitude to the United States for its sustained assistance. In contrast, explicit challenges can be found in Korean and Korean American cultural productions, specifically through the two novels I will discuss in this chapter. Close reading of novels such as *Silver Stallion* and *Fox Girl* next to official narratives and conservative nostalgia films show very different portraits of American benevolence.

A place where the Cold War never truly ended, the Korean peninsula serves as an epistemological and hermeneutic challenge to Cold War periodization and historical framings for Koreans living both within and beyond the boundaries of homeland. Essentially a *Rashomon* story, the significance of the Korean War and its aftermath depend on how one interprets and

frames events, history, and politics. It is often considered the first truly “hot war” of the Cold War, where the Soviet Union and the United States—former allies during WWII—coalesced into a confrontation and proxy war by way of containment discourses and power struggles in the postwar interim.

Often cleanly demarcated with the dates 1950-53, the Korean War remains a hotly contested topic and lived reality for many. June 25, 1950 serves as the proverbial “start date” when the Northern communists invaded the South and July 27, 1953, the armistice date when both parties agreed to disagree for the time being. These two bookends index the contradiction of a contained and enclosed conflict that, despite its unsatisfying resolution, is forgotten only through an act of active forgetting. To the expression of “the forgotten war,” historian Bruce Cumings has noted that the Korean war’s more fitting title should be “the unknown war,” for “if the war is never over, how can it be forgotten?”<sup>3</sup>

While on the front end, many consider the war effaced from the moment of the country’s arbitrary division at the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel in August 1945. A civil war that began with the division of the country at the close of World War II and through Koreans’ intellectual debates on the futurity of the nation, the Korean War and its simplified historiography are constituted by more than dates and its four million casualties.<sup>4</sup> On the later end of the war, like a misplaced landmine or “loose nuke,” a common fear during the post-Cold War 1990s,<sup>5</sup> the potential for nuclear fallout in the peninsula remains an active part of today’s political discourse, particularly within the United States’ anti-North Korean rhetoric. Indeed, the forgotten war of the Cold War is often

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<sup>3</sup> Cumings, *The Korean War: A History*, 63.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 35; The Korean war included 4 million casualties, including 2 million civilians. Of these, 36,940 Americans died, 92,134 Americans were wounded in action, and 8,176 still missing. Of South Koreans, 415,004 lost their lives, as well as 3,094 United Nations allies. North Korean casualties numbered 2 million, including 1 million civilians and 520,000 soldiers and an estimated 900,000 Chinese soldiers lost their lives in combat.

<sup>5</sup> To this reference of “loose nukes,” or what happened to nuclear weapons after the fall of the Soviet Union, I am indebted to conversations with Penny Von Eschen.

invoked with North Korea's inclusion in discourses of failed states, rogue nations, and mocking commentary of North Korean leaders Kim Jung Un and the late Kim Jong Il as deviant psychopaths whose excesses manifest in their corpulence and their lavish lifestyles.<sup>6</sup>

As scholar Jinxian Li has shown in her work on transnational remembrances of the Korean War, the outcome of this event invokes varied interpretations depending on who tells the story. That is, "who won" and which side claims victory indeed varies by storyteller, decade, and location. For example, on July 27, 2013, on the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Korean War armistice, U.S. President Barack Obama stated that the outcome of the Korean War was not a "tie for a tie," as it was assessed back then, but rather that war resulted in a "victory." In front of a large audience near the Korean War Veterans Memorial in Washington DC, he stated: "But here, today, we can say with confidence that war was no tie. Korea was a victory. When fifty million South Koreans live in freedom—a vibrant democracy, one of the world's most dynamic economies, in stark contrast to the repression and poverty of the North—that's a victory; that's your legacy."<sup>7</sup> This contrasts with the somber tone of presidents before him, such as Eisenhower in his radio and television broadcast to announce the news of the armistice back in July of 1953: "we have won an armistice on a single battleground—not peace in the world," and the U.S. "shall fervently strive to insure that this armistice will, in fact, bring free peoples one step nearer to their goal of a world at peace."<sup>8</sup> The idea of the Korean War resulting in a tie or a stalemate

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<sup>6</sup> Whereas Kim Il-Sung, founding father of North Korea, was seen at least by some Koreans across the political divide as a charismatic and handsome revolutionary, his offspring are not so much revered. Note also the political deviance of these communist dictators and the heavy discourse of Cold War retrograde backwardness whenever North Korea comes up in political conversation.

<sup>7</sup> Remarks by the President at 60th Anniversary of the Korean War Armistice, July 27, 2013, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2013/07/27/remarks-president-60th-anniversary-korean-war-armistice>

<sup>8</sup> Radio and Television Address to the American People Announcing the Signing of the Korean Armistice, July 26, 1953 <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=9653>

Jinxian Li explores how the Korean War is remembered in China as well, where politicians frame victory in a similarly unstable fashion. "Meaning Struggle: The Korean War, American Politicians, and the Shaping of War Memory." June 2015 Paper at SHAFR Arlington, VA.

was indeed viewed as a disappointment, especially since the division at the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel was nearly identical to the pre-war division by the U.S. and the Soviet Union at the close of WWII. The resultant division of North and South Korea—with the DMZ remaining one of the most militarized and policed borders of the world today, the Gaza strip of East Asia—presents a dilemma for any clear delineating of winners and losers. This shifting and unstable recounting of the past speaks to the constructed nature of history, and as Marc Gallicchio, Penny Von Eschen and other scholars have termed it, “the unstable past, or the unpredictability of the past.”<sup>9</sup>

As the critical scholarship on the Korean War by Bruce Cumings, Dong Choon Kim, William Stueck, Hajimu Masuda, and Heonik Kwon has shown, Korea continues to serve as a site of both physical and psychic traumas long after the armistice. Since the end of WWII, when Japanese colonialism officially ended in Korea, the process of nation-building has lain at the forefront of Korean struggles for an independent state. And yet, debates over the future political direction of the nation, under the auspices of Russian and American tutelage, hamper the anticolonial vision of any idealized Korean state. What does independence mean in the presence of Russian and American militaries, of “liberating” forces who arbitrarily divided a tiny colonized country with thousands of years of linguistic and territorial integrity and never left?

After World War II, the project of nation-building in a fractured postcolonial state was led by Syngman Rhee, the first president of the Republic of Korea, in alliance with the United States and reflected the economic, cultural, and military support of its American benefactor. The period was characterized by an enormous American influence, perhaps best exemplified by the

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<sup>9</sup> Marc Gallicchio editor, *The Unpredictability of the Past: Memories of the Asia-Pacific War in U.S.–East Asian Relations*. Duke University Press; 2007; Penny Von Eschen’s “Memory and the study of US foreign relations” in *Explaining the History of American Foreign Relations*. Third Edition. Editors Frank Costigliola and Michael J. Hogan. Cambridge University Press 2016.



ubiquitous presence of American military bases and G.I.s throughout South Korea, with U.S. servicemen acting as protectors against communism.

The United States provided substantial aid to South Korea from the period of American Liberation (of 1945) to the subsequent protracted years of American guidance: from the occupation years or what Franklin Delano Roosevelt termed a period of “tutelage” (from 1945 to the period leading up to the war) as well as after the armistice.<sup>10</sup> Much like the other “forgotten war,” the Philippine-American War (1899-1902), the discourse coming out of World War II in regard to Korea was that people were not yet ready for true independence. With the outbreak of the Korean War, the United States and the United Nations allied efforts provided a steady stream of aid in the form of food, medical assistance, and infrastructure-building for decades. Akin to the Marshall Plan that helped European recovery after WWII, the United Nations’ and United States’ aid to South Korea was very much a part of an early project of Cold War alliance building.<sup>11</sup> From the United Nations relief program during the war, which imported food and other aid materials for refugees and military alike, to the passing of Public Law 480 in 1954, the steady stream of food and aid dollars fed more than one generation of bellies. This was no small feat. Furthermore, it contributed to a protracted narrative of liberation.

This narrative of American liberation informed South Korea’s national narrative of hunger, particularly in the years of economic austerities and rapid modernization under Park Chung Hee (1961-1979). Historian and food studies scholar Katarzyna Cwiertka notes that “Famine, disease and hunger are close accomplices of war” and that “for the majority of the Korean population hunger constitutes one of the most powerful memories of the 1940s and

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<sup>10</sup> FDR did not view Korea as yet fit for independence, but as in need of a period under American tutelage. See William Stueck’s chapter, “The Korean War” in *Cambridge History of the Cold War*, p. 267.

‘50s.” Cwiertka points out that hunger has even been cemented as a “postwar national allegory” so ingrained in public memory that “hunger symbolically marks the mid-twentieth century as the common experience of *all* Koreans, despite the fact that not everybody went hungry.”<sup>12</sup> So a narrative of hunger plus a heavy presence of Americans literally handing out food cemented an image of the United States as a food savior.

Having examined archival literature and state-generated discourses of humanitarian aid and rescue in the previous chapter, I now delve into the missing element of Korean narratives regarding the Korean War. Here, I examine the voices of the Korean War and provide context for the period following the 1953 armistice in the works of Korean and Korean American fiction. I turn to literary sources here as way to think about the postcolonial literary genre as a manifestation of, an outcry from, and a window into the realities of both the war’s aftermath and its continuation.

This chapter examines a constellation of cultural and literary texts that challenge understandings of the Korean War, U.S. assistance, and its signification. I ask the following questions: What role, if any, does debt play in the narrative of U.S. liberation? And what is the significance of food in the framing ideas of debt and gratitude? What does it mean to be fed by and indebted to a benevolent, yet colonial friend? I examine Korean and Korean American fiction—*Silver Stallion: A Novel of Korea* (1986) by Ahn Junghyo and *Fox Girl* (2002) by Nora Okja Keller—focusing on interwoven tropes of American military and humanitarian assistance and the sexualized shadow economies that “base work” engendered to reveal the multidimensional aspects of Cold War benevolence. I argue that food becomes a metonym for

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<sup>12</sup> Cwiertka, *Cuisine, Colonialism and Cold War*, 79, 80.

For further discussion of famine, figures, and its legacies at the close of the war, see chapter 4 of Cwiertka’s “Wartime Food Management and Its Legacy” in *Cuisine, Colonialism and Cold War: Food in Twentieth-Century Korea* (2012).

the imagining of both America and its occupation.

### **Literary Legacies of Debt and Liberation: *Silver Stallion: A Novel of Korea* (1986)**

The 1986 novel *Silver Stallion: A Novel of Korea* presents a rich site from which to unearth the muddy and syncretic histories that inform Korean migration and cultural memories that grapples with issues of debt and liberation. Its author, Ahn Junghyo, is a South Korean writer, translator, and journalist who has taken up the topics of war in his work. He has written on both the Korean War as well as on South Korea's involvement in the Vietnam War.<sup>13</sup> His careful self-translations and his gift for nuanced storytelling have made him one of the most recognizable Korean authors in the western world.

*Silver Stallion* serves readers a complex tale of war and its fracturings. Set in the small farming village of Kumsan, South Korea in the year 1950, at the very start of the Korean War, the novel describes a town that from the surface is marked by little change—with peasants shown as living seemingly static lives throughout the course of generations. Composed of families working in farming, and milling—where neighbors know everyone's stories and whereabouts—Kumsan is presented as a typical prewar rural town. Without romanticizing village life, however, Ahn shows Kumsan as a place at once beautiful and calm, but with stifling patriarchy and rigid social mores that threatens the peace regardless of the war. With the outbreak of the Korean War and the coming of UN soldiers, Ahn's description depicts changes in the town dramatized in tandem with the political upheaval of the civil war.

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<sup>13</sup> His novel *White Badge* or *White War* (1983), which has also been adapted into a film, addresses South Korean involvement in the Vietnam War.

The novel focuses primarily on two sets of characters, adults and children, and the shifting narratives between them while the war (and actual battle) seems to be happening off-site in the background. In many ways, these present sites of contact are not entirely unrelated to the actual warzone battles. The adult world centers on a widow, Ollye, and her orbit of existence, which includes caring for her two young children, son Mansik and daughter Nanhi, in a place and time where little to no opportunities exist for widows. The war is most significantly inaugurated when UN forces arrive and set up camp across the river. Then, on a quiet evening, a couple of American GIs rape the widow, Ollye. Further violence ensues when the townsfolk turn their backs on her, shunning her, rather than assisting the widow as a community should, particularly in light of the townsfolk's suspicion of these outsiders.

The abandonment and silence that follows the rape then turn into outright spite and mockery of the widow as the novel progresses. This highlights the embedded patriarchal mores and structures of Korean society—a criticism Ahn spotlights through the sympathetic portrayal of Ollye and other “fallen women.” Part of this phenomena rests in the epistemological and tacit understanding of what constitutes a good Korean woman, nationally defined and understood: a Confucian conception of womanhood as motherly, chaste, morally upright, and representative of hetero-patriarchal conceptions of propriety. Defined against this is the shadow opposite: the G.I. prostitute, who becomes a stand-in for the corrupted (or “fallen”), disloyal, or bad woman.

Meanwhile, once the UN soldiers enter their village and dot the landscape of daily life, the children find excitement in the culture of war. From excavating the camp's junkyard to reenacting war scenarios, Mansik and his friends go on various adventures. In particular, they search the nearby mountain for the cave of the mythical general riding the “Silver Stallion.” According to legend, the Joseon dynasty hero will return one day to “save the whole nation with

his mighty sword” from invaders.<sup>14</sup> However, as the novel progresses, Mansik soon realizes his friends are ostracizing him due to his mother’s status as a raped and thus “fallen woman.”

Ollye’s fallen woman status leads her to navigate the shadow sex economy in order to survive. Instead of consoling Ollye, the town turns its back on the widow, seeing the rape as something that shames her. This type of judgment and hostility towards a rape victim stems from deep-seated patriarchal notions of proper womanhood, which includes propriety of chaste widowhood, something that an act of rape tarnishes—despite being a victim of a crime. Even the townswomen, who were friendly to Ollye prior to the rape, spread slander, saying horrible comments such as that she “wanted” the men and even “enjoyed it.”<sup>15</sup> The culture of a small town depicted here coupled with an internalized misogyny that maintains power for women within the confines of a patriarchal system (i.e. it protects them while slandering the abject and fallen) leaves no room for Ollye to sustain any sort of livelihood.<sup>16</sup>

As scholars Joohyun Park and Jungkyu Suh’s state in their article “The Subaltern Speaks: *Silver Stallion* as the Rhetorical Space for Yangkongju,” Ahn’s novel is a part of the genre of *Yangkongju* writing, albeit with a caveat. *Yangkongju*, translated literally as “western princess,” is a derogatory word in Korean for a certain stratum of “fallen women,” particularly those who labor in the disreputable work of G.I. camptowns. Whether women work as barmaids, dancers, or prostitutes, the women ascribed *yangkongju* status are seen as morally and politically banished from the boundaries of “respectable” Korean society.<sup>17</sup> Viewed as spoiled “princesses” (kongju)

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<sup>14</sup> Ahn, 10. A film based on Ahn’s novel was released in 1991 under the more ominous title, *The Silver Stallion Will Never Come*.

<sup>15</sup> Ahn 68.

<sup>16</sup> For critical analyses of gender and patriarchy in Korea, see Chong’s *Deliverance and Submission* as well as *Women and Confucian cultures in Premodern China, Korea, and Japan* and *Dangerous Women: Gender and Korean nationalism*, edited by Elaine H. Kim and Chungmoo Choi.

<sup>17</sup> There is a genre of literature detailing these women called *yangkonju* literature, which feminists have argued reinscribes stereotypes and is exploitative of women. However, scholars such as Park and Suh argue that despite depicting such “fallen women” in his novel, Ahn Junghyo’s *Silver Stallion* does not reinscribe the binaries typical of

by the westerner's (yang) affections and resources, these women are viewed as traitors and deviants by respectable Korean communities.

### **“UN Ladies,” Sex Work Economies, and Normative Gender Roles**

Cast out of her community and without any means of respectable employment, Ollye must find work to provide food for her children. Opportunity knocks when a couple of out-of-town prostitutes, known pejoratively as “UN ladies,” migrate with the moving of the UN front line soldiers and ask her to join their line of work “to become a U.N. lady and entertain” the G.I.s.<sup>18</sup>

Ollye agrees and joins these women at “Texas Town” across the river, the UN camptown built beside Kumsan where the soldiers eat and sleep. “Texas Town” is described as a walled-off zone across the river, as a cultural barrier between village life and the UN barracks, where western presence and international intervention are embodied in the shanty town of prostitution cubicles:

With broken planks from ammunition boxes, tin plates from beer cans and sturdy cardboard from C-ration cartons, a team of two or three carpenters worked a miracle, creating one shanty a day. Built wall-to-wall, the board shacks on the barren slope looked like one big beehive. As the shanties were completed one after another the Yankee wives, carrying big bulging suitcases, came to Texas Town. Soon the shanty town was fully occupied by the prostitutes.<sup>19</sup>

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its genre and, in fact, deconstructs stereotypes of said women, a point with which I agree given the nuance and complexity to the women and critique of the surrounding community in Ahn's story. And while feminist critiques often are wrapped up in anti-American and anti-colonial critiques of occupiers laying claim to native women's bodies—with the Korean woman's body as a site of battle, a site for nationalism—Ahn's text resists such a simplistic reading.

<sup>18</sup> Ahn, *Silver Stallion*, 122.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 109-110.

The camptown is depicted as a site of liminality, a virtual and spatial realm with a set of sexual and cultural mores different from the rest of the country. Texas Town also showcases the operations of a different labor economy with its own moral and legal jurisdiction, unpoliced by its neighboring Korean community and authorities. The “Yankee wives,” also called UN ladies, or *yangkonju* depicted, here make a living in the shanty town. These outcast women take on the role of breadwinning cultural ambassadors, as well as points of contact between cultures. Both the women and the makeshift shanty barracks, like many militarized zones, present a site of moral liminality and legal ambiguity. They are neither wholly part of the Korean community nor are they officially on the UN forces payroll.

The sex work economy follows the G.I. camptown and with it, the physical interactions and relations between American soldiers and local women and the material cultures left in its wake. The sex work done by “UN ladies” presents a sector of local women’s labor in war. The narrative of women’s labor to survive includes prostitution to UN soldiers, women who become perceived as “traitors” to the nation by fellow Koreans both during and in the wake of the war. The questions arise, why would any woman do this line of work? What drives women such as Ollye and her colleagues into these forms gendered and militarized labor? The prevalent term used throughout *Silver Stallion* is “survival.” Many of these women, as the novel reveals, become involved in this line of work because of social and economic reasons. Sex work, then, is portrayed as a means of surviving the war. For instance, Ollye’s friend Yonghi provides the reasoning that “she no longer believed in the virtue of chastity in the face of the need to survive. For food and transportation, she had slept, on separate occasions, with two strange men...She did not mind lying with a third man, if he could provide her with a room and a warm meal.”<sup>20</sup> This

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 115.

form of labor during wartime, a time of martial law and often even the absence of law, is an iteration of women's scant survival options.

The history of sex workers, G.I. prostitution, and US-South Korea agreements for the maintenance and monitoring of sex workers for American servicemen is something only recently documented and cited in contemporary scholarship. Military sex work has a fundamental place in the history of U.S. and South Korea relations as well as the history of economic prosperity of South Korea as postwar success story.<sup>21</sup> As studies of postwar Korean development by Jin Kyung Lee, Arissa Oh, and other critical scholars have noted, it is not a coincidence that economic prosperity coexists alongside brutal hardship and exploitation of certain forms of domestic labor. Feminist scholar and anti-base activist Katherine Moon's work *Sex Among Allies* presented a critical intervention in thinking about the state structures and state-to-state negotiations of militarized sexual labor. Moon notes that women who join such dangerous sex work economies do so because of a lack of family, resources, and social status. Such contexts and structures of inequality allow women to be marked as "impure," even when they are victims of rape. Meanwhile, a lack of state infrastructure protecting Korean women and families can be traced to the funneling of state resources to projects of development at the expense of social services and welfare programs.<sup>22</sup>

Katherine Moon and fellow anti-base activist Cynthia Enloe note elsewhere that state-to-state negotiations over sex workers and the maintenance of such structures within G.I. camptowns and rest and relaxation (R & R) sites are fundamental in understanding the nature of

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<sup>21</sup> Lee, *Service Economies*, 132-33.

<sup>22</sup> Arissa Oh's *To Save the Children of Korea* unearths the state's negligence of welfare services that contributed to the social problems of postwar South Korea's adoption market. Negligence included a disavowal in providing services and assistance for its needy and destitute people.



militarism's cultures in colonial spaces.<sup>23</sup> These sanctioned spaces (i.e. the camptowns) and these nationally recognized and monitored "entertainment workers," (i.e. the G.I. prostitutes) are a part of the structures of South Korea and U.S. alliance-building and modernity-making in the postwar era.

### **Canned Food and War in *Silver Stallion***

Food is sexualized in *Silver Stallion*, being always present in scenes of sexual economic exchanges and in invocations and images of women's labor. Symbolically, when the prostitutes invite Ollye to join their profession the inaugural dinner included western foods. There were "cans containing boiled sweet beans, juicy mashed meat, and potatoes dipped in gravy soup."<sup>24</sup> Ollye muses that she "had never tasted anything so delicious in her whole life."<sup>25</sup> The meal also includes coffee, cookies, and candies and a "can of honey-tasting jam," which she could take back with her to offer her children. Above all, this militarized c-ration military feast showed Ollye that "there were so many novel and palatable things to eat in the world."<sup>26</sup>

Whether accompanying the widow or her colleagues discussing their line of work over plates of canned beans and instant potatoes or in the scene where Ollye is raped, food, more importantly, American military foods, are ever-present in these encounters of violence. When Ollye is raped by two UN soldiers, a rice bag overhead spills onto the floor, as if marking the

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<sup>23</sup> Arguments made in both Enloe's *Banana, Beaches, and Bases* (1989) and Moon's *Sex Among Allies* (1997).

<sup>24</sup> Ahn, 122.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

moment where food becomes a scarcity for her family—of delineating when the war really began. As they leave her home, one soldier offers a candy to the whimpering daughter.

Food symbolizes wealth in Ahn's novel. As C-ration cans begin popping up in the pantry shelf of Mansik's home, despite his mother's lack of perceived employment, Mansik questions his mother about where the exotic food comes from. Once she is employed, the changes are palpable: the rice jar is always full and the family's meals consist of delicious side dishes. And yet he wonders "when she had managed to find time to go to town and where she got the money to buy them."<sup>27</sup> When he sees the c-ration cans, he asks his mother with suspicion: "Where did you get the rice and the Yankee cans, Mother?"<sup>28</sup> At this point, Mansik suspects his mother is working in Texas Town, but wonders, "What did she do there in the middle of the night to be paid with rice and cans? He was glad that they did not have to go hungry any more, but he was not sure if he should be happy."<sup>29</sup> In the eyes of a child, to be paid in food for any service, specifically in rice and canned C-rations, is a curious economy indeed. For the women, however, it requires a gendered form of sexualized labor and a militarized network that provides the food to feed her family.

Food in Ahn's novel also symbolizes the abject poverty and destitute living conditions of war. For instance, in one scene, the children go "dumpster diving" in the UN camptown's junkyard. As they are foraging for unopened cans, Mansik's friend says: I hope we find some meat again today. ... Do you boys remember what I found in a can last time? My uncle said it was 'ham.' It tasted really good when my mother made a piggie stew with it."<sup>30</sup> Piggie stew is then described, as everything collected from the camptown's garbage, "meat and cheese and

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 136.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 141.

chicken bones and everything—and boil them together in a pot. That’s piggie stew... Some people call it U.N. soup.<sup>31</sup> The dish referred to as “piggie stew,” in this scene, is most commonly known as *budae jjige*. Often translated today as “G.I. stew” or “Army stew,” it is composed of a mélange of canned meats such as ham, Spam, and sausages as well as beans—all boiled together in one pot. A dish born out of the Korean War, the *budae jjige* the children describe comes from discarded western food scraps, variously acquired canned foods, and C-ration goods smuggled out from the G.I. stations. *Budae jjige* has seen many variations since then, with added tofu, rice cakes, and even dried instant ramen noodles and a melted processed American cheese slice being served in contemporary iterations. At one point, the dish was even called “Johnson tang” (*tang* meaning soup), named after American President Lyndon Johnson, who sent generous tonnages of food aid to South Korea through the Food for Peace Program.<sup>32</sup> Significantly, the double entendre of “Johnson,” as interchangeable for a man’s penis, is not to be lost on the public in either Korea or in audiences abroad. That “penis” soup or *budae jjige* can be called Johnson/penis stew reflects and refracts the symbolic gendered, militarized, and (hetero)sexualized power relations between a feminized, receiving Korea and its munificent, masculine dominating provider.

A food originally found only near and surrounding United Nations military camptowns, a place often associated with black markets and other questionable labor economies, *budae jjige*, which translates as “G.I. stew,” began being consumed outside of the camps through the smuggling of goods through the black market.<sup>33</sup> As Asian American studies and food studies

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 141.

<sup>32</sup> For this reference to Johnson Tang, see “Uijeongbu Budaejjigae Street.” [http://english.visitkorea.or.kr/enu/SI/SI\\_EN\\_3\\_1\\_1\\_1.jsp?cid=822969](http://english.visitkorea.or.kr/enu/SI/SI_EN_3_1_1_1.jsp?cid=822969) (accessed July 14, 2014); for food aid under Johnson’s administration, see Mitchel B. Wallerstein’s *Food For War-Food for Peace: United States Food Aid in a Global Context* (1980). For the insight into this double entendre of Johnson for a man’s “Johnson”, i.e. penis, I thank Youngju Ryu.

<sup>33</sup> Cwiertka, 114.

scholar Robert Ku has noted of this South Korean dish, particularly due to its key military ingredient— Spam—*budae jjige* is emblematic of American militarism in South Korea from the history of its G.I. ration ingredients to its incorporation into Korean cuisine.<sup>34</sup> Sociologist George H. Lewis notes, how World War II brought Spam into the many Pacific and Asian diets. From South Korea, Okinawa, and the Philippines to Guam, Hawai‘i, and other locales in the militarized American Pacific, Spam by the Hormel company has a unique place in the memories of many people where it takes on a near cult status. The most militarized places in the Pacific are also home to the world’s highest per capita Spam consumers. In Korea, Spam has appreciated in value over time as a luxury gift item, often served to special guests and given as presents in beautiful gift boxes sold in department stores.<sup>35</sup>

Food studies scholar Katarzyna J. Cwiertka calls the dish a “reminder of the poverty-stricken 1950s,” as well as “the legacy of the militarized reality of South Korean life during the decades of Cold War tension.”<sup>36</sup> The history of *budae jjige* itself is an interesting one, and today there is even a street in Uijjongbu, the location of a key US military base close to the DMZ, dedicated to the dish. Travel websites even tout its significance: “*Budae jjigae* is one of Korea’s leading fusion dishes as well as a dish that embodies the memories of the Korean War; it was named *budae jigae* because it was most commonly found nearby American army bases.”<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Ku, *Dubious Gastronomy*, 212-213.

<sup>35</sup> For a great overview of spam and its consumption in Asia and the Pacific, see George H. Lewis “From Minnesota Fat to Seoul Food: Spam in America and the Pacific Rim.” In *The Journal of Popular Culture*. Vol. 34, Issue 2, pp. 83-105. Fall 2000. Print. Robert Ku also has a chapter on Spam in Asia and the Pacific, in *Dubious Gastronomies* (UH Press). For a coffee table book-style history of Spam, see also Carolyn Wyman’s *Spam: A biography* (Harcourt Brace & Company, San Diego, New York & London, 1999) and *The Book of Spam* by Dan Armstrong and Dustin Black (Atria Books 2007). For Spam’s place in Korean memory, specifically, see “Why is Spam a luxury food in South Korea?” by Lucy Williamson <http://www.bbc.co.uk/go/em/fr/-/news/world-asia-24140705> and [http://koreatimes.co.kr/www/news/culture/2010/06/135\\_68190.html](http://koreatimes.co.kr/www/news/culture/2010/06/135_68190.html).

<sup>36</sup> Cwiertka, 117.

<sup>37</sup> “Uijeongbu Budaejjigae Street.” [http://english.visitkorea.or.kr/enu/SI/SI\\_EN\\_3\\_1\\_1\\_1.jsp?cid=822969](http://english.visitkorea.or.kr/enu/SI/SI_EN_3_1_1_1.jsp?cid=822969) (accessed July 14, 2014).

The Korean War is sometimes referred to as “MacArthur’s liberation,” a reference made in novel. And the food cultures inaugurated with the arrival of Americans and other UN soldiers, and the larger food policies to come, are reflected in this novel with such complexity and breadth. *Budae jjige* for instance, indexes a form of national debt for many South Koreans and, in some cases, for Koreans in the diaspora as well.<sup>38</sup> It is a dish of militarism, hybridity, and nostalgia. The scene of Korean children eating the discarded scraps of what UN soldiers leave behind not only stand in for the real memories of many Koreans eating such food scraps and accepting assistance during the war, but also serves as a prescient forerunner of the American agricultural surplus—that is not quite “garbage” or trash, but undesirable “surplus”—of Public Law 480 for decades to come post-armistice. As I have outlined in my previous chapter, the agricultural bounty of American goods fed the bellies of Koreans both during the Korean war and the period after the 1953 armistice, when a formal pipeline and infrastructure of food aid were implemented in American-South Korean diplomatic relations. Such foods as *budae jjige* contribute to the memories and recollections of life in the wake of UN intervention, to the phenomenon of being intricately bound by a sense of debt—that is, the phenomenon of being both fed by and indebted to militarized benevolence, with all of the complicated and conflicting affects entangled with it. Such indebtedness invokes the military occupation, proxy war, poverty, and the sexualized economies enabled by such foods. *Budae jjige* is a product of militarism and serves as a prism to look at the refracted histories and narratives of American intervention in the Korean peninsula.

The reactions to the taste of foreign foods in Ahn Junghyo’s *Silver Stallion* echo other

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<sup>38</sup> In the diaspora, this dish is recreated in Korean restaurants in Hawai‘i, California, and even Midwest college towns in Wisconsin and Michigan. Furthermore, it is curious how a food can be so militarized and yet deemed so trendy in South Korea today, with stylish restaurants devoted to this one dish surrounding college campuses in Seoul.

narratives of receiving foreign treats: it is absolutely delicious. It is exotic, heretofore inaccessible, and something delicious and sensually desired after the first taste. For these children, the sweets—chocolate, jellies, chewing gum—become the holy grail of offerings. In one scene of sweets acquisition, one of the children receives a pack of Chuckles jelly candy, which they distrust: “The children warily watched the colorful pieces of candy wrapped in mysteriously transparent glass paper as if they were dangerous explosives.” One child eats one of the candies, noting, “It tasted good, sweet and gelatinous.”<sup>39</sup> Interesting to note, however, that these jelly candy offerings are likened to explosives. What kind of insights does such a comparison, of the image of candy as explosives, render for us as readers?

As argued in my previous chapter, “Food is a weapon” served as a slogan of the Eisenhower administration’s agricultural policies and the potential of what American food can do in a foreign policy context. That is, Cold War ideologies of America and the message of anticommunism can be delivered via the stomachs of hungry people in the third world through the “weapon” of food. Furthermore, the implication at the foundation of receiving food that is likened to dangerous explosives, is that this exchange serves as something akin to a social contract. That by taking the gift, one is thereby indebted to the gift-giver at some later date.

Asian American studies scholar Mimi Nguyen has explored the interwoven tropes of empire and imperial debt—specifically examining the “gift of freedom”—as a troubling ontology for Vietnamese American subjecthood. Specifically considering the figure of the Vietnamese refugee, as a Cold War “object of intervention” through the Vietnam War and as an “object of deliverance” in the passage to America, Nguyen employs “the gift of freedom” as an optic in examining how modern liberal humanism is deployed “as a system for reordering the

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<sup>39</sup> Ahn, 79-80.

world.”<sup>40</sup> If food constitutes a form of debt and becomes a metonym for foreign liberation, how then does violence figure in this benevolent project of UN rescue?

One final comment about food in this novel rests on the figuration of America in the context of the widow’s initiation into G.I. prostitution. There is an invocation of a release from this life of hardship, not one of the afterlife, but one in the hope of an exit to America. Yonghi tells Ollye:

If you find a really nice guy, your whole life changes overnight to an eternal feast. I hear they used to forbid Yankees to marry Orientals, but that law does not exist any longer. If you’re lucky, you can marry a Yankee and go to America. You don’t have any idea what paradise America is. Lots of canned food. Nice warm blankets. And they say almost every family has its own car in that big country, *Migook*.<sup>41</sup>

The almost heavenly qualities and mythic Garden of Eden imagery of the U.S. is something invoked even in the midst of the Korean War. America—as the land of canned food and warm blankets—is a place where people don’t ever go hungry or feel cold. *Migook*, or America, becomes imbricated as salvation and heaven in the sex work economy.

America—that dream world and land of plenty, the “eternal feast,” a canned-food buffet—is imagined as an inviting safe haven. There is a paradox at the heart of this novel, which is that America is figured as a veritable heaven, but present war realities show a living hell. Similarly, so called-liberators of MacArthur’s army feed Koreans, provide assistance, but also do so within in the wake of raping a village, both literally and figuratively. These contradictory images of America—as feeder and liberator, debtor and captor, savior and violator—coexist in this story, creating an unusual narrative for generations under Cold War ideology and its paradoxes.

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<sup>40</sup> Nguyen, *The Gift of Freedom*, 23, 25.

<sup>41</sup> Ahn, 123.

In the section to follow, I turn to a Korean American novel that grapples with similar issues of liberation and debt in the wake of the armistice.

### ***Fox Girl* (2002) and Cold War Hunger in South Korea**

Made famous with the publication of her debut novel *Comfort Woman* in 1997, the Hawai'i-born and-based Korean American author Nora Okja Keller writes about subjects deemed taboo by Korean and Korean American communities. Her first novel won accolades and many prestigious awards in addition to shedding light on a dark chapter of Korean and Japanese history that many wanted to keep in the shadows, that of Korean military sex slaves of the Japanese empire during WWII. While *Comfort Woman* presents a fictionalized, albeit well-researched and historically informed imagining of a comfort woman recalling her past, her follow-up novel *Fox Girl* presents an equally taboo topic, domestic sex workers in South Korea's military bases.

Set in the 1960s, Nora Okja Keller's 2002 novel *Fox Girl* centers on two female characters living in postwar South Korea. Hyun Jin, the novel's protagonist, is first introduced as a grocer's daughter living on the outskirts of "Americatown," a camptown outside of Seoul that caters to the American G.I.s of a nearby military base. Marked by a blemish on one side of her face, Hyun Jin is, at once, the apple of her father's eye and the bane of her mother's existence. Ignorant as to why she never received her mother's love and acceptance, she eventually discovers she is adopted: the child of the G.I. prostitute, Duk Hee, a friend of her father (her biological paternity is unknown). The novel's secondary protagonist is Sookie, the mixed-race Korean and African American "G.I. baby" and best friend to Hyun Jin who is raised by her



single mother, Duk Hee, thereby making the two protagonists half-sisters. This bildungsroman traces these young outcasts as they navigate from being high school students to making their own livelihoods in the camptown economies to finally finding a refuge in America.

Hyun Jin and Sookie become the new generation of sex workers servicing the G.I.s in “Americatown” in 1960s Korea, exchanging sexual services for food and shelter. Sookie, whose mother Duk Hee worked in prostitution, acts as an instructor to Hyun-Jin, telling her to learn from the Korean mythical “fox girl,” a magical and resilient ghost fox who wears the mask of a beautiful woman (in some versions, the skin of a dead girl), to obtain whatever she needs in order to survive. For Hyun Jin, this fox girl embodiment takes the form of a literal mask of makeup and provocative clothing, the costume of survival in Americatown. The story of Hyun Jin and Sookie takes them from the outskirts of camptown to its very heart where they work as prostitutes in “Club Foxa.”

*Fox Girl* portrays a story a coming-of-age story, where these young girls navigate the shadow sex economy of camptown Korea. They learn of the economic exchanges of one commodity for another, of sex for food. This specific exchange serves as a prism through which to think about the large scale of exchanges and negotiations occurring in the wake of the Korean War. Set in a country with a civil-war left in stalemate and a large presence of U.S. troops stationed indefinitely in South Korea as part of anti-communist diplomacy and U.S.-South Korean relations since 1954, the story of Hyun Jin and Sookie reveals much about a specific period of Cold War relations and South Korean history.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>42</sup>Moon, Katharine H.S. *Sex Among Allies: Military Prostitution in U.S.-Korea Relations*. NY: Columbia University Press, 1997.; see also, the PBS documentary *The Women Outside* (1996). For a fantastic study and ethnography on Korean GI brides in the wake of the Korean War and their stories of coming to America, see Ji-Yeon Yuh’s *Beyond the Shadow of Camptown: Korean Military Brides in America*. NYU Press, 2002.

As scholars Katherine Moon and Jin-Kyung Lee note in their work, while many contemporary activists pursued the war crimes of the Japanese government and the conscriptions of Korean “comfort women” or sex slaves during World War II, the domestic sex work economy of Korean women for G.I. stations across South Korea contained an ever-present silence and a disavowal. The 1990s saw many protests in South Korea, specifically from women’s movements, anti-base work, and calls for the Japanese government to redress Korean military sex slaves. The testimonies of Korean military sex slaves and the illumination of such silenced histories reflected political disavowals by both Japanese and Korean governments. While the images of wronged “Comfort Women-as-Martyrs” were politically mobilizing for the nation, women who worked in the shadow economies of G.I. camps were not seen as such saints.

### **The Cult of Food**

Food is omnipresent in *Fox Girl* and serves as a currency of exchange, as much as in Ahn’s *Silver Stallion*, with a similar motivation of survival. Food, specifically, name-brand American foods, are littered everywhere in this text. Chips Ahoy cookies and Hershey bars—the delicious American chocolates—are both fetishized and consumed by Hyun Jin and Sookie early in the narrative: these become almost metonyms for America. Early in the novel, the two schoolgirls eat sweet snacks from Sookie’s pantry, each bite morsel for morsel, savoring the taste of America: “‘Try some candy,’ Sookie said, unwrapping a bar. ‘It’s called Hershey’s.’ She broke off a piece and popped it into my mouth. Sweet explosion, dark and bitter as blood, erupted in my mouth. Delicious. American.”<sup>43</sup> Sookie’s apartment is filled with luxurious knick-

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<sup>43</sup> Keller, 13.

knacks, goodies, and snacks from the U.S. due to her mother's work in the G.I. camptown. The idea of the candy being both delicious and American, coded as an expensive luxury, go together. And while Hershey's chocolate may be sweet and delicious, the likening to blood becomes a symbol of the violence in the necessary exchanges for the opportunity to taste such treats. In other words, the sacrifice of one's flesh, of blood, of women's oft invisible sexualized labor go together in the attainment of American luxury goods. Here, the candy is provided due to the (invisible) labor of her mother's sex work. Just like Mansik's discovery of the canned goods in *Silver Stallion*, women's sexual labor is manifested through the presence of American foods.

American junk foods such as Ho Hos (the chocolate cakes by the Hostess company) become imbued with much more meaning than the filling of bellies in the form of a snack. Sookie says of Ho Hos: "It's a delicacy; you have to learn to like it. Really, really, it's American so you know it's good."<sup>44</sup> Upon eating the Ho Hos, Hyun Jin then reveals that she saves the plastic wrappers, mounting them on her wall as decorative art. The Ho Ho wrapper as wall art/souvenir/adornment after consumption speaks to the value of American commodities—as symbols of luxury, of dreams of escape, and also of the actual feeding of oneself in a time of hunger. The decorative aspect, or second life of the commodity upon consumption and the desire it represents, reveals the longing associated with the object. The Ho Ho wrappers here represent more than a mere snack, but also index the yearning by the subject for something more than what it is as a thing in itself. The fetishization or the valuation of a seemingly mundane and cheap snack such as Ho Hos may strike audiences in the United States as misplaced or out of proportion to their exchange value, but for these characters these "junk food" items mean so much more than simply chocolate snacks. They represent an exit, a better place, America. If we

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 11.

read *Fox Girl* intertextually with *Silver Stallion*, we find that the shanties of Kumsan's "Texas Town" of Ahn's novel are wall-papered with similarly repurposed metal tin cans from the UN army. Food in Ahn's novel is described as "explosive" in the mouth, likening the taste of Chuckles candies to the ingestion of a bomb. In *Fox Girl*, the "sweet explosion" of Hershey's chocolate echoes the linkages of sexual violence/sexual labor, military occupation, and the enablement of this sexual economy where food serves as the currency.<sup>45</sup> Both texts reveal American foods and named brand goods in sites where sexual violence is present.

Whereas these snacks appear as merely frivolous objects of desire for the young characters, the history of American commodities entering the Korean landscape and the lives of Korean citizens is really something to contend with. It is not only the luxury items of American commodities such as sweets and candy that entered the Korean diet through black markets and G.I. culture, but the history of American food aid complements this story of desire for American commodities and foods on the local level. In a way, these junk/luxury food snacks are a part the story of American food aid, the colonization of tastes, and consumption practices in Cold War alliance building. As noted in the previous chapter, PL 480 aid and development brought a tremendous amount of American food into the South Korean diet. Flour, milk, wheat, and corn, for instance, constituted the new aid diet of American diplomacy. With South Korea's government receiving millions of tons of U.S. food over the course of decades, these items transformed the local diets and generated new dishes that includes staple food items such as *sujebi* (dough soup), *kalkuksu* ("knife-noodles"), powdered milk, and cornbread.

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<sup>45</sup> Also, in a work like Heinz Insu Fenkl's memoir *Memories of my Ghost Brother* (1996) food is everywhere in the text, with American goods and camptown navigation an integral part of his childhood.

The food aid diet also includes the canned treat items and candies, those items were considered the extra “treats” found in the black market near American military bases as well as in interpersonal exchanges within shadow economies. Sociologist John Lie states that American aid to South Korean “reflected a faith that South Korea might one day become like the United States” and American generosity, he continued, “whether grain distributed under the P.L. 480 food aid program or chewing gum dispersed by G.I.s—left an indelible impression on many South Koreans.”<sup>46</sup> The U.S. showed its commitment and was its most generous donor, with 85% of the 2.3 billion in aid received from 1953-61 coming from the United States.<sup>47</sup>

### **Militarism, Sex Work, and Food**

*Chipusa-hoi ku-ki....Be-enna sa-sa-gi. Pow-da mil-ku. Cheezu Wheezu...He just gave you the food? All of this? For nothing?*<sup>48</sup>

Hyun Jin poses this question to Sookie, who has been hoarding food from her friend. Feeling betrayed by this secret, Hyun Jin is upset to find that Sookie has not shared any of her delicious American treats, especially given that Hyun Jin has gone out of her way to feed Sookie with whatever scraps she can spare from her home and her own lunchbox. Through this line of questioning—where did this food come from?—we learn that Sookie has provided the work usually done by her mother, i.e sexual labor, to her mother’s own boyfriend “Chazu” (Charles), an African American G.I. The Chips Ahoy cookies, Vienna Sausage, and Cheez Whiz she has received are here viewed as goods that even a young teen such as Sookie can now acquire to put

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<sup>46</sup> Lie, *Han Unbound*, 29.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

<sup>48</sup> Keller 64, 66

food on the table in the absence of her mom, who is away in the hospital. She has come to understand the logic of this sexual labor in exchange of food. This scene presents us with the realization that Sookie herself has now entered the sex work economy of the South Korean camptown, servicing American G.I.s.

From sweet candies to savory tinned meats, the young women of Keller's novel regard these items as both beautiful and delicious. These are procured through the means of gendered and sexualized labor, performed by mothers, aunties, and now young teens. American luxury items connote a transfer of goods for services rendered, and nothing becomes as blatantly sexualized and violently represented as the most prized meat items, such as hot dog and Spam. In a scene where Sookie's mother is providing a sex education for the young girls, she takes a hot dog wiener—what she refers to as *jajie* dogs—and demonstrates how to put a condom on properly. This scene of a hot dog with a condom, being referred to as a *jajie-dog* (*jajie* translates as the crass word for penis, or dick) sexualizes the food and makes blatantly obvious the connection between the two: one encounters the *jajie* to acquire the *jajie* dogs, linking female Korean sexualized labor with phallic American food. The logics of consuming such treats come with the economy of sex work made explicit in its acquisition.

When Sookie and Hyun Jin realize they both need to make their own livelihood, they begin working at the G.I. club, Foxa. Initially, their labor includes talking to men, flirting, kissing, and erotic dancing to make some money. This then quickly segues to a more explicit line of sex work, with the novel reaching a turning point with a brutal gang rape. In her first “paid job,” which results in the loss of her virginity, Hyun Jin recalls how the G.I.s mentioned a “sandwich,” about which she began daydreaming. Her mind wandered:

I knew what “sandwich” meant from Duk Hee. Once she had brought home a Spam and egg sandwich from the PX. I remember thinking that the fried pink

meat and bright yellow yolk folded between the crusty white bread was the most delicious beautiful food I had ever tasted. Better, even, than *jajie* dogs...I screamed. And then went numb.<sup>49</sup>

The chilling detail of Hyun Jin's gang rape punctuated by an image of a Spam sandwich in the midst of the violence and blood presents a seemingly bizarre juxtaposition. Images of white bread and pink slices of the revered luncheon meat present themselves in the oddest of scenes, momentary comforts amidst such brutal violence. The Spam sandwich and her servicing of the American G.I.s become imbricated within the sexual economy of the novel.

Hyun Jin's invocation or imagining of Spam is something to reflect upon, if only to consider its significance as a prized commodity in both South Korea and beyond in the postwar years. As stated earlier, Spam has a special history in the context of U.S. militarism in South Korea, much like in the history of the other American militarized spaces in Asia and the Pacific Islands in the wake of World War II.

The desires for survival, an exit to America, and for food in their bellies, link up with the historical conditions forged through U.S. and Korea's Cold War alliance. While Hyun Jin and Sookie are literary characters with a life in the novel of *Fox Girl*, their stories very much resonate with the historical agents of women much like them in the fabric of postwar modernity in Korea. On the one hand, these women are emblematic of a personal sacrifice (of morality, of Korean acceptability) in the quest for survival, and on the other hand, they are heroines and agents who are a critical component to the project of modernization of the Korean nation state, though they aren't given credit. This is a point that feminist scholars such as Katherine Moon, Jin Kyung Lee, and Hyunah Yang have raised in their work on nationalism and disavowal.<sup>50</sup> Moon

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<sup>49</sup> Keller 15.

<sup>50</sup> See Moon's *Sex Among Allies*, Hyunah Yang's essay in *Dangerous Women* and Lee's *Service Economies*.

work traces the gendered ideology instrumented by governments (the U.S. and South Korea) for foreign policy.

### **Migration from One Coordinate of U.S. Empire to Another: Transpacific Migrations**

Keller's novel ends with Hyun Jin and Sookie moving to Honolulu, Hawai'i, reflecting a common route of Cold War migration in the militarized networks within Asia and the Pacific Islands in relation to the U.S. Their moves enact overlapping, simultaneous, and often competing colonial histories within the militarized Pacific. This exemplifies what literary scholar Jodi A. Byrd calls a narrative of diaspora colliding with settler colonialism—Hyun Jin and Sookie's move from occupied South Korea to an analogically occupied Hawai'i. Byrd articulates how liberal multicultural discourse incorporates subjects into the fold of the democratic state on the premise of inclusion, emptied of an indigenous presence or disavowing that presence as the fundamental ontology of America's democratic promise.<sup>51</sup> The asylum of Hyun Jin and Sookie in Hawai'i, or "America" as it is conflated in this novel, is one premised on a transit to a place where a distinct colonial project has rendered such a space, Hawai'i, as one of American refuge. And sadly, when they arrive, Hyun Jin and Sookie are met with more trials and tribulations. Co-present with their movement, in addition, is the promise of empire's affirmation: that the inclusion of migrants, settlers, and refugees into the national body of the nation-state as soon-to-be citizens rests on an ontological point of indigenous exclusion in the form of Indian-ness (via federal policy, law, and origin story).

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<sup>51</sup>Byrd, *Transit of Empire: Indigenous Critiques of Colonialism* (2011), xix.



From the G.I. camptowns of a divided post-1953 Korea to the bars of 1960s/1970s Honolulu, the coordinates these characters cross reflect the broader historical migrations of women from one military installation to another within this grid of transpacific imperial circuitry, an extension of the U.S. colonial map that exceeds national borders.

Leaving Korea for “America. Hawaii. Paradise” here ironically brings these characters deeper into the mouth of proverbial empire. And Hawai‘i’s own history is one fraught with American colonialism (overthrow in 1893; annexation in 1898; as an unincorporated territory in to 1959; and statehood in 1959 which I expand upon in chapter five). This is not something that is fleshed out in the novel, but is instead left for us as audiences and inheritors—of migration and overlaid colonial histories—to ponder. The novel ends with an exit to America, a second stage of trials and tribulations that include sex work, but one that allows Hawai‘i to become the paradisiacal site of refuge from Korea.

### **Food Aid, Junk Food, and Sex work in Korean/Korean American Literature**

These two novels, one by a Korean and one by a Korean American author, crisscross the coordinates of Korea and Hawai‘i, both bases of U.S. empire in the nationalized American Pacific in the wake of World War II. Both stories focus on the lives of Korean women during the ongoing Korean War, from the 1950s to the 1970s. These texts track Korean movement and migration during the Cold War and present an alternate history from official historiographies of the Korean War.

From Korea to Hawai‘i to America, these cultural sites spotlight American food aid culture, militarism, and gendered sexualized labor economies and diaspora colliding with

indigenous spaces via comparative histories of colonialism. In *Silver Stallion*, the relocation is in Pusan, in *Fox Girl* we end with two women finding refuge in Hawai'i. Throughout these stories, we find threads of sex work, food aid, conscriptions and migrations via militarism during the Korean War as part of Cold War narratives. These two represent instantiations of American intervention in Asia and the Pacific, as stories that constitute U.S. militarism and Korean life narratives.

Food, military bases, and sex work are linked in the literature and history of the militarized American Pacific, specifically in the case of South Korea. "America" as imagined by two young women in the G.I. camptown of South Korea in Nora Okja Keller's novel *Fox Girl* (2002) symbolized by the processed imported foods from the nearby PX. Chips Ahoy! Cookies, powdered milk, and Cheez Whiz are viewed as the rarest of luxuries obtained only through G.I. boyfriends or the black market. These foods, mostly canned and boxed with distant expiration dates, not only represent American goods to be desired, but a better life in the U.S. to which these women in poverty and sex work aspire. Dances are exchanged for food, sex for an apartment, and a sacrifice of community dignity for an exit to America.

While many of the food items in the novels are brand-named American goods acquired through black markets and the shadow economies of the G.I. camptown, the fetishization and mass consumption of American foods in *Fox Girl* and *Silver Stallion* also index the food aid policies of the U.S. and South Korea alliance. From the generous food aid in the form of wheat being dumped onto South Korea's hungry peoples, PL 480 fed a generation of Koreans in the wake of the armistice with many people feeling indebted to the United States for the feeding it provided during tough times, particularly during the lean years of the Syngman Rhee and Park Chung Hee regimes. American surplus fed Koreans throughout the War, from 1940s to the

1970s.<sup>52</sup>

Keller's novel presents the U.S. as signified through food for these Korean women, and it presents the flipside of this image in representations of Korea and Korean women as saturated with hyper-sexuality—as the available female body. This novel is also a ripe site for examining the logics and mechanisms underpinning migrations of Asian female bodies into the U.S. The conditions of war, scarcity, and deprivation go hand-in-hand with alternative means of preserving the self and providing for one's family. Socially vulnerable women that are represented in *Silver Stallion* and *Fox Girl* provide for themselves in ways that showcase relations of inequality and discrimination—through their very statuses and their specific labor economies. Survival, food, shelter, and the access to such things through alternative economies created by the presence of G.I.s go together.

American food aid, the colonization of tastes—in the wake of Japanese and American occupation—and the articulated desires of these women are a part of that story. C-ration commodities and canned foods were intimately bound with the American-led UN intervention in the peninsula. In this story, we do not find the idea of an American liberation as unproblematic and clean, but through the sexualized economies of militarism and the sexualized foods exchanged, we find a picture more akin to a colonial project of a masculine American militarism shaping and coercing a feminized Korea. The U.S. in this novel has never left since the “end” of the Korean War. Indeed, South Korea and U.S. G.I.s have remained in each other lives long after the armistice.

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<sup>52</sup> Chung, Young-lob. *South Korea In the Fast Lane: Economic Development and Capital Formation*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007. Pp. 85, 226, 308, 310-12, 332. Also, p. 29 of John Lie's book *Han Unbound: The Political Economy of South Korea*.

In tandem with the novels, we find that food and other “gifts” from the U.S. (e.g. security and protection) are never free, but come at a price. There are affective expectations, particularly that of gratitude. And not only affectively constituted—in feelings of indebtedness—but a literal price in accounting. In the cases here, nothing is free, food is accounted for in sex work and food aid in South Korea’s political allegiance to the U.S.

With the case of *Silver Stallion*, no one is left unscathed by the coming of the UN soldiers. The shame of women like Mansik’s mother as well as her colleagues may follow them wherever they go. Likewise, the memories of those who left the town “respectably,” such as the patriarchs of communities, must leave and take with them memories of shame though of a different kind. From the macro-matters such as thinking about the interpellation of war, migrations within nations (while nations are being split, reorganized), the fracturing of communities, and movements out of native/autochthonous spaces—this novel fits both perfectly and uneasily in an assemblage of narratives providing insights into the Korean War and Cold War militarism. This novel also showcases the mobilization of the UN in the first hot battle of the Cold War, pulling soldiers from across the free and western world into a little peninsula waging a civil struggle, striving for alternative political futures in the wake Japanese occupation, and its division by the United States and the Soviet Union.

Speaking to the debt-debtor relationship cultivated through acts of giving and exchanges of Cold War relations, President Ronald Reagan’s speech on November 12, 1983, before the Korean National Assembly in Seoul symbolized the expectations between the nations. Thirty years after the signing of the armistice, President Reagan spoke of an encounter between then U.S. President Eisenhower and former Korean head of state Syngman Rhee: “In response, your first President expressed his country’s deep, deep appreciation for what America had done. He

concluded by saying, “I tell you, my friends, If I live hundreds of years, we will never be able to do enough to pay our debt of gratitude to you.’ To this, Reagan continues his address:

Well, I have come today to tell the people of this great nation: Your debt has long been repaid. Your loyalty, your friendship, your progress, your determination to build something better for you people has proven many times over the depth of your gratitude. In these days of turmoil and testing the American people are very thankful for such a constant and devoted ally. Today, America is grateful to you.<sup>53</sup>

Reagan’s invocation of Rhee’s gratitude reveals the conscientious acknowledgement of South Korea’s debt to the United States, despite saying that the debt has been paid. This reminder reveals a friendship with an underlying stinginess; that is, the United States keeps an account of American benevolence and charity, despite saying otherwise—a throwback to the receipts of American rescue documented in the previous chapter.

## **Conclusion**

The history of American commodities entering the Korean landscape and the lives of Korean citizens is something to contend with in thinking about the imagery of food in such Korean and Korean American texts. It is not only the luxury items of American commodities such as sweets and candy that entered the Korean diet through black markets and G.I. culture, but the history of American food aid both during and after the Korean War Armistice that complements this story. From Japanese Occupation to American and UN Liberation, civil assistance and food aid policies, the picture of Koreans’ relationship to US influence is a complicated one.

Violence, trauma, and sexually imbricated economies are part and parcel of this American benevolence and assistance. From the perspective of the United States archives and

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<sup>53</sup> Address before the Korean National Assembly in Seoul; Nov. 12, 1983.

official narratives, we find a self-proclaimed project of humanitarian aid and goodwill with regards to the war. The aid, the help, and the continued military presence speak to a narrative of dedicated two-way cooperation and allegiance, whereas in sharp contrast in Korean cultural production, we find contradictory imaginings and tensions of this legacy of debt and gratitude. This juxtaposition of food aid, military documents, and literary sources form a constellated portrait of colonization, debt, and violence.

Foods peppering the pages of Asian American letters, of Korean fiction, index something greater than a detail of war; these images and seemingly minor details of food represent colonial legacies. For the Korean War context, a legacy of the United States as liberator from the Japanese remains a powerful narrative frame—as a protector from communism and creator (or paternalistic overseer) of the modern nation-state. Continued American goodwill through food and development dollars fed the bellies of generations, indelibly marking the cultural history and memories of those who lived past the war.

To return to the idea of a nation creating another in the image of itself, nothing resounds with the success story such as KOICA, the Korean International Cooperation Agency, a government agency that provides aid and relief to developing nations in Asia, Africa, Latin America, and the Middle East. What does it mean that Koreans are in a sense repaying their debt by paying it forward, passing on the tradition of benevolence by becoming the benefactor and distributor of aid themselves? They have become just as munificent and generous as the colonizer. The participation of South Korea in the Vietnam War was indexical of not only Korean complicity in fighting a war to sustain American dominance in the Cold War, but also reminds people that contract labor and its bidding constitute a form of interpellation into acts of militarized mimicry. The mimicry of aid culture, specifically through humanitarian aid missions,

development projects, and Peace Corps-like programs, reveals not only colonial mimesis, but the transformation and success of becoming a colonial master.

In the next chapter, I turn to examining a place that has been both included and excluded from U.S. political incorporation: The Trust Territories of the Pacific Islands in Micronesia.