

## The Whispering Voices of Women in the Base Camps

The story begins in the late 1950s in South Korea, a country that was then considered a periphery of Asia. After the Korean War ended, the United States built army bases near the military demarcation line that separated North and South Korea and stationed troops there. To provide entertainment for American soldiers and to earn foreign currency, the South Korean government systematically managed sex workers around the bases. South Koreans called them “Yanggongju,” a derogatory term meaning Yankee princess.

South Koreans, who maintained a patriarchal culture, despised those who sold their bodies—and probably their souls—to foreign soldiers. Dressed in glamour, in and out of clubs, and accustomed to American lifestyle, they were to Koreans a symbol of their powerlessness and the loss of their women to the West. Korean society, which depended on the dollars they earned for its household economy, was unable to make sense of the situation and exploited and loathed them at the same time. The women were exposed to multiple layers of violence. Repeated abortions, beatings, government testing for STIs, and subsequent sterilization left many of them with permanent physical and economic damage. A handful of women who married US soldiers and relocated also suffered domestic violence and mental illness in isolation. Their stories are so tragic that they seem far removed from us.

But are they really? In her recent lecture, Silvia Federici acutely pointed out that we are not living in an era of post-colonialism, but rather under a colonialism that is being exacerbated and reinforced by global capitalism. The people currently providing ‘entertainment’ for US troops stationed in South Korea are mostly women who have immigrated from Southeast Asia or Eastern Europe. They enter South Korea on E-6-2 visa, which is for ‘those who plan to engage in performance or entertainment activities at hotel business facilities and adult entertainment facilities in accordance with Tourism Promotion Acts.’ As a cog in the wheel of global capitalism, South Korea officially facilitates their migration but bears no responsibility for abuses they suffer. The jobs of the Korean women who lived in the base villages in the 1960s are being outsourced to other countries as South Korea no longer remains on the economic periphery. While these changes make it easier to look away from their lives, the violence is still reproduced. It is hard to deny that we are all part of that system.

Rondi summons the time and space of those women by inviting us to listen to their most intimate stories in a small tent the size of the room they lived in. Their voices, not unlike our own, expressing aspirations, hopes, despair, daily boredom and small excitements, are carefully extracted from a repository of interviews. They instantly connect us to the Korean women of the US military bases of the past, and to the countless women who are now replacing them. We may not be able to visualize them, but we can feel their breath and bodily presence in front of the fragile yet living structure that holds their whispers.