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compositional subjects

ENFIGURING ASIAN / AMERICAN WOMEN

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I will now move to a discussion of some visual tactics of composing Korean/American women in the works of Yong Soon Min and Jin-me Yoon. The prominent presence of the United States, especially in the uniformed bodies of its military forces, in the social and political landscape of post-war South Korea is also the focus of two artworks by Los Angeles-based Yong Soon Min, which appear in the anthology *The Forbidden Stitch*. The title of a black-and-white drawing, "Back of the Bus, 1953," invokes the pre-Civil Rights racial segregation in the United States. However, in the back of this particular bus, three Korean women are seated next to each other. In addition to the directional cue given in the title, the viewer's attention is drawn to these female figures by three other conspicuous bodies of uniformed American GIs. Though they are seated in front of the women, all three men have their heads turned back toward these women. In contrast to their rearwards gaze, the other Korean passengers are oriented toward the front in various angles, and it is unclear whether they are averse or simply indifferent to the peculiar dynamics of looking between the two parties of Korean women and American soldiers occurring behind them. The spatial positioning of the Korean women in a socially disenfranchised location at the back of the bus and the clear interest that they appear to hold for the GIs, whose actively looking bodies separate the women from the other Korean passengers, combine for a striking pictorial allusion to the sexual objectification of Korean women's bodies by the imperialistic military gaze and the social ostracization of Korean women who are sexually associated with American soldiers by other Koreans. Even as a patriarchal, nationalist ideology of chaste and loyal femininity would castigate these women as sexually and ethnically "contaminated," thereby relegating them to the social margins, a broad segment of the South Korean population has directly or indirectly benefited from both the sexualized construction of Korean women and the specific political-economic phenomenon of military prostitution. While pointing to this legacy of stigmatizing certain Korean women's bodies, Min's graphic representation resituates them as sharing a common Korean socioeconomic space with the GIs and the other Koreans. The year 1953 marks the official end of the Korean War, but this periodization often hides the fact of the continued physical occupation by the United States. By linking that Korean historical moment to a phrase associated with domestic racial segregation, the piece makes important transnational link-

ages between U.S. military imperialism abroad and structural racism at home.

"American Friend" is a mixed-media piece that appears to be a sketched reproduction of a photograph. Two rows of Korean figures pose in this image, six men and three women. All of the men except for one are dressed in army fatigues. At the center of the group portrait is a bespectacled and uniformed white male body, evidently the "American Friend" of the title. The phrase is stenciled in large capitalized and emboldened letters at the bottom of the image, suggesting a generic reproducibility of this subject-position. These benevolent words are contrasted to the smaller, barely legible Han-gul that runs in the right upper corner of the image. What may appear to be a decorative or at best descriptive inscription reads very differently to a bilingual reader. Unlike English which reads from left to right, then top to bottom, the directionality of Han-gul is reversed, reading from top to bottom, right to left. The Han-gul text thus creates a kind of directional tension to the more prominent English words incorporated in this image. This writing on the wall also disrupts the semiotics of the image in its content which is translated as:

Such a generous friend! You were our father's American friend who sponsored his immigration to the States after fighting together in the Korean War. Upon our father's request from America, you also got our mother a job on a U.S. army base in Seoul with which she supported her kids during the tough times just after the war.

This expression of gratitude turns to a sarcastic critique of U.S. military intervention in modern Korean history and politics in the second paragraph:

Since our liberation from Japan, you influenced our political development by supporting the autocrat Syngman Rhee, and the military dictatorships of Park and Chun. You continue to share with us your economic and military might. You've even given us your valuable nuclear missiles! You've given us far more that we bargained for. How could we ever reciprocate?

While it is not indicated in the English translation, the phrase "Dear Friend" is persistently repeated in the Han-gul inscription. This has the effect of denaturalizing and demystifying the purported humanitarian aims, so that this affectionate appellative becomes increasingly accusatory of the

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hypocrisy of the United States government's concern for Korea's national security. The final question both condemns the lack of reciprocity in this neocolonial hegemony and suggests the determination to formulate some contentious rejoinder. Considering that "American Friend" looks very much like an official group portrait, Min's imposition of this critical caption renders this redrawing as resonantly "unfaithful to the original" but twice over by stressing the tactically composed and ideologically charged staging of the photographic archives of U.S. military occupation.

Jin-me Yoon, a multimedia artist based in Vancouver, British Columbia, has provocatively tackled similar questions around positioning and movement, identification and representation, specifically through photography and captioning. In *Souvenirs of the Self*, a metal rack displays numerous copies of a six-panel postcard series. Priced at a dollar, these cards are meant to be purchased and circulated, blurring the lines of artistic production and tourism-gearred commodification, at once occupying a unique, localized installation and encouraging multiple, wide-ranging dispersals. In each of the six postcard images of *Souvenirs of the Self*, the same Asian female figure stands in various natural and constructed tourist sites in Banff, Canada, forcing the viewer to negotiate this raced and gendered body against some of the most sedimented signifiers of Canadian national identity. This project combines the conventional postcard photographs of widely recognized and picturesque locations and the conventional snapshots of individuals in these places. These are two distinct but related orders of the souvenir, which Susan Stewart separates out as "souvenirs of exterior sights, which most often are representations and are purchasable, and souvenirs of individual experience, which most often are samples and are not available as general consumer goods."¹⁴ Indeed, the two specific examples of each that Stewart provides, the postcard and the photo album, are the forms of visual representation, memorialization, and circulation that Yoon works through in *Souvenirs of the Self*. What makes Yoon's compositions so effective is the blurring and mixing of their distinctions between public vs. private and multiple reproduction vs. authentic original.

Several reviewers and critics have pointed out the incongruity of the Canadian national landscape and the Asian female body in these scenes.¹⁵ While both are the effects of selective and repetitive stagings, what is interesting about the perceived dissonance between the two is that the pri-