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Introduction

Violent Imaginaries and Base Encounters in Seoul

"A Certain Neighborhood …"

In mid January 2007, Private Geronimo Ramirez, a then 23-year-old United States (US) soldier deployed in South Korea, was arrested for the repeated rape of a Korean woman in the Seoul entertainment district of Hongdae. Together with another soldier friend of his, that weekend Ramirez had made the one-and-a-half hour ride from his US military base located in Tongduch'ŏn all the way to central Seoul. The team tried unsuccessfully to check into the Dragon Hill Lodge, a military hotel located within the premises of the Yongsan US Army garrison in Seoul that was booked out that evening, and then decided to go to a motel in Hongdae instead. After a night spent drinking and partying, Ramirez's buddy went back to the motel alone, while Ramirez continued to walk through the streets of the neighborhood, pouring down more beers bought from convenience stores nearby. In a deserted area, he encountered a 67-year-old Korean female in the early morning hours, who was on her way home from a cleaning job. Ramirez would beat and rape the woman repeatedly, on the street, in an alley and inside a building, until he was taken in by Korean police forces that had been alerted by the woman's screams. Ramirez, in his public letter of apology, stated that he had no memory of the sexual assault; and he asked the victim not to "think bad of americans [sic] for everyone makes mistakes and this was mine." He added that "I was suppose[d] to go home soon & get married[,] but now i can't[,] i will stay here & pay for my mistakes" (Slavin and Hwang 2007).

When I arrived in Seoul in the fall of the same year,[1] this brutal incident was still much discussed among locals and foreigners alike. Besides fulfilling certain expectations that many proponents of the nationalist left held about GIs,[2] namely that all US military personnel were potential

Figure 1.1 Map of the Korean peninsula

perpetrators, the event had also brought to light a recent development that posed a challenge to both US Forces Korea (USFK) and local authorities: many of the nearly 30,000 US soldiers[3] stationed in South Korea no longer seemed to stay in the remote red-light districts close to their base facilities that they had informally been assigned to. These so-called camptowns (*kijich'on* in Korean, also known as "villes" among the soldiers) are entertainment areas catering primarily to US military personnel. The GI bars and clubs in the area are typically run by Korean entrepreneurs who employ a number of female "entertainers" to look after the needs of the US servicemen. They are tightly regulated spaces; the US Military

Police send their own staff to patrol the area and go after US soldiers who are found to be in violation of US or South Korean law. However, now that plenty of servicemen increasingly seemed to party in entertainment districts in central Seoul as well—in downtown neighborhoods often far removed from their bases—the challenge of keeping these young men[4] in line increased disproportionately in difficulty. Many Korean citizens, I was to learn, including those locals left behind in the economically struggling and socially stigmatized areas nearby US bases, would like to contain GIs in the camptowns they emerged from.

I got to know Jay,[5] a 22-year-old US Army member also stationed in Tongduch'ŏn, in late 2007. He had been in Korea for a little under a year, and was about to be relocated to the Middle East over the coming few months. Walking into a popular bar in the downtown district of Chongno with Jay, his Korean girlfriend, and a Korean friend of hers, I became aware of the many stares that the young serviceman, tall, muscular and with short-cropped hair, attracted in this venue. While his friends quietly talked in Korean next to us—politely but decidedly ignoring Jay who would occasionally ask, "What the fuck is it that you are saying?", Jay was entertaining himself by returning some of the stares he received from the neighboring tables until the young Korean people seated there shifted their eyes away. After a while, he started to noisily grind the beer bottle that he had just emptied at the edge of the table we were sitting at, causing additional concerned looks in our direction. He only visibly relaxed when our food arrived; we had ordered grilled chicken, as Jay had ruled out any meal containing *kimchi*,[6] asking me earlier on, "You really eat that shit?"

After some initial remarks by Jay that he would most certainly not be a good conversational partner for me—"I'm not a good guy to talk to, in case you haven't noticed yet. I don't know how to deal with students. I only know how to deal with soldiers, got that?"—Jay began to talk about his life in Tongduch'ŏn where he was stationed. The US military, he argued, invested a lot every year in "good publicity projects," such as sending soldiers out to help with teaching English at Korean schools for a day. "The idea behind this is, of course," Jay added, "that there is already plenty of bad press about us out there." The "ville" of Tongduch'ŏn, he said, was the area that most of his co-workers spent their free time in, going to the bars, clubs, and restaurants catering to their needs.

Asked what his friends did when they had a bit of time to kill, he replied: "Go to whores. Sorry, but that's just how it is. Nothing else to do up there anyways." Filipina "entertainers"[7] (who have for the most part replaced the local women), Korean bar owners, and local taxi drivers are

the only civilians that they ever got to meet, and getting into fistfights with cab drivers, Jay bragged, had become almost a competition for some of his comrades, who tended to have run-ins with the typically older, male Korean drivers. The language of communication in Tongduch'ŏn was a mix of broken Korean and English, and Jay himself quickly learned how to say "Fuck off" and "I'll kill you" in Korean; "That's usually enough to drive guys away who wanna fuck with me," he added.

Finally, he brought up Ramirez, and gave me a description of the occurrence that reflected the extreme social and geographical distance that separates him and his soldier friends from the inner-city Korean student space of Hongdae:

> There was this guy who was charged with raping a 60-year old woman. I know the guy; he still claims he didn't do it. Well, I'm sure he came on to the woman, but … They were in one of *those* neighborhoods, you know. Where the only women you meet are prostitutes. But then, you know, the Korean media, they said that normal people are living in these areas, too. But of course, the soldiers, they don't see it that way. If you are in a certain neighborhood, you gotta be a hooker. That's the way they see it.

The crucial error underlying Jay's justification of Ramirez's actions—the woman may have been a prostitute after all—not only implies that violating a sex worker somehow constitutes a lesser crime than the attack on a "decent" female. In the particular context of Seoul, it also points to a gross misreading of a complex social urban space that Jay, with his limited knowledge of South Korea, is unable to fully grasp. Hongdae, in fact, is not one of "*those* neighborhoods" where sex is for sale; rather, it is an entertainment area popular with young Korean adults, in which, as a Korean friend of mine once put it, on your typical Saturday night out you have to "hunt for sex" rather than buy it. Jay's superficial knowledge of Hongdae—an area which he had visited only once—resulted in his conflation of the red-light districts near remote US military bases with this lively inner-city entertainment area mainly frequented by Korean students, artists, and unruly youth.

What is perhaps more interesting than his ignorance on the matter, though, is that Jay is embedded in a structure that *allowed* him not to care all that much whether the student district of Hongdae was, or was not, one of "*those* neighborhoods" where sex is for sale. His idea that any Korean woman he came across in "a certain neighborhood" necessarily needed to be sexually available to his comrades speaks of a certain kind of

Figure 1.2 Chongno entertainment district in downtown Seoul

dis-location of decades of GI experiences and behavioral patterns in Korea into the unknown territory of an experimental Korean student neighborhood in Seoul. It also hints at the gendered power relations in which this (mis-)understanding is embedded, structures of power which have—incidentally—come under heavy contestation over the last few decades.

An Anthropology of Militarism

The Korean peninsula today is one of the most heavily militarized regions on the planet, where the armed face-off between the northern and southern half has now entered its 66th year. At the end of the Korean War (1950–53), an armistice was signed—an old ceasefire that is broken

at regular intervals when smaller fights erupt at land or sea between the contestants. The lack of a real peace treaty between the opponents has resulted in a permanent lock-down along the dividing line ironically named the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ). Once described by Bill Clinton as "the scariest place on earth" (Havely 2003), militarization around this particular border has reached such intensity that it has turned the buffer zone into the most heavily fortified space on this planet.

The Korean People's Army today consists of over 1.19 million soldiers, with an additional 7.7 million people in the reserve, which makes it the fifth largest armed force in the world. About 70 percent of North Korea's troops are stationed in close proximity to the border with South Korea (Bermudez 2001: 1ff). The South Korean Armed Forces, situated on the other side of the DMZ, currently have around 655,000 people as standing troops and another 3 million in the reserve, with a majority stationed in this border region as well. For the year 2007, it has been estimated that more than 30 percent (about $8 billion)[8] of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea's gross national income went into the defense sector, at a time when South Korea, with its $26.3 billion defense budget, actually spent a sum three times larger than its opponent (Moon and Lee 2010).

In the midst of such incredibly large local troop contingents, and the dispensing of such huge financial resources, which together have led to the ever increasing militarization of the peninsula, the number of US soldiers deployed in South Korea, which currently hovers around 30,000, may seem rather inconsequential. However, the continued presence of US troops in the South is of huge symbolic significance, pointing to the vast breadth and depth of US political, economic, and military engagement in Korea since the 1950s.[9] What is more, US bases in South Korea do not stand in isolation, but function as vital spatial nodes of geopolitics and US empire-making in the way they are connected to other US military installations worldwide.

As Catherine Lutz, in her seminal work on the topic, *The Bases of Empire*, points out: the "global omnipresence and unparalleled lethality of the US military, and the ambition with which it is being deployed around the world" are unprecedented in human history (2009a: 1). In this particular universe the United States has created, 190,000 US troops are joined by an additional 115,000 civilian employees, who populate 909 military bases worldwide. In 46 countries and territories, the US military has 26,000 buildings and structures valued at $146 billion to its name (Lutz 2009a: 1). "These official numbers," Lutz claims:

> are entirely misleading as to the scale of US overseas military basing, however, excluding as they do the massive building and troop presence in Iraq and Afghanistan over the last many years, as well as secret or unacknowledged facilities in Israel, Kuwait, the Philippines and many other places. (2009a: 1)

The network that the armed forces of the United States have spun around the globe is truly staggering, certainly providing an ample field for potential research. During the last decade, there has been a growing interest in militarism and the soldier as a subject for a critical anthropology, with the US Armed Forces, in particular, coming into sharp focus in a number of articles and books (see, for instance, Baca 2010; Forte 2011; Gutmann and Lutz 2010; Lutz 2001, 2002a, 2002b, 2006, 2009a, 2009b; Network of Concerned Anthropologists 2009). The tremendous global presence of the US military and of its soldier representatives on the ground is not exactly a recent manifestation, however, so one may wonder why the US Armed Forces have only become an area of anthropological research as of late. To be sure, the current interest was partially sparked by the wars in the Middle East that the United States launched in 2001 and 2003. The large-scale mobilization of many sectors of US society in order to pursue the "War on Terror," as it were, did not come to a sudden halt at the doors of academia. In the wake of the US military engagement in Iraq, the Pentagon sought to actively recruit anthropologists into its war efforts via the Human Terrain System (Forte 2011; Gill 2007; González 2009; Schober 2010)—a recently deactivated (Jaschik 2015) program of the US Army that employed social scientists to provide cultural and social insights about the populations to be conquered. As a response to such massive cooptation attempts,[10] calls have been made by a number of anthropologists for researchers to turn their gaze onto the military instead (Gusterson 2007), a task which is to contribute to a larger investigation into the workings of a US empire sustained by its global network of military bases (Johnson 2004). The ensuing ethnographies, it was argued by Catherine Lutz (2006), would be complementary to more systemic writings on empire, as ethnographies have the potential to "question the singular thingness that the term *empire* suggests by identifying the many fissures, contradictions, historical particularities, and shifts in imperial processes" (2006: 593).

Very few anthropologists working on military issues seem to have sought to define the key term of "militarism" as a concept, a phenomenon in which the subject of the soldier is vitally embedded. Other social scientists

have been more precise in their usage of the term, however (for a review, see Stavrianakis and Selby 2012). Historian Alfred Vagts, for instance, in an early definition from 1937 in his book *A History of Militarism*, points to an important facet of militarism in the way it "ranks military institutions and ways above the prevailing attitudes of civilian life and carries the military mentality into the civilian sphere" (1937: 11). Sociologist Michael Mann, in his *Incoherent Empire* (2003), speaks of militarism as "a set of attitudes and social practices which regard war and the preparation for war as a normal and desirable social activity" (2003: 16f). Feminist writer Cynthia Enloe, on the other hand, argues in *Does Khaki Become You?* that:

> militarization can be defined as a process with both a material and an ideological dimension. In the material sense it encompasses the gradual encroachment of the military institution into the civilian arena. [...] The ideological dimension [...] is the degree to which such developments are acceptable to the populace, and become seen as a "common-sense" solution to civil problems. (1983: 9f)

Perhaps the most expansive definition to date comes from sociologist Martin Shaw, however, who argues that:

> the core meaning of "militarism" should be specified not in terms of how military practices are regarded, but how they influence social relations in general. [...] Militarism denotes the penetration of social relations in general by military relations; in militarisation, militarism is extended, in demilitarisation, it contracts. (2012: 20)

While all the definitions above point to militarism as a process that involves an encroachment and expansion of the military into civilian terrain, Shaw, in particular, puts the emphasis less on discourse or ideology, but instead focuses squarely on social practices. Indeed, such an emphasis on *practices* lends itself to anthropological inquiries, and is crucial for my own understanding of the phenomenon as it may allow us to also make sense of the rather distinct situation in South Korea.[11]

GI Crimes and the Public Imagination

Images of US soldiers continue to haunt modern Korea. In the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK), depictions of long-nosed, villainous

American troops (often pictured in the act of torturing and murdering Korean women and children) serve as one of the stock characters in the state's manifold propaganda repertoire (Myers 2010: 131ff). While it may not come as a surprise that a sworn enemy of the United States would make use of such depictions, in the allied nation of South Korea, too, images of US troops as offenders and criminals can easily be found. In the Republic of Korea (ROK), however, it is not the state that functions as the main disseminator of such images, but civilian actors hailing from a leftist-nationalist spectrum. A brief glance at popular South Korean movies released during the last decade, for instance, will reveal a number of films made by progressive film directors that have at times been labeled "anti-American" (Ryan 2012) for their depiction of the US military presence in the country.

In the wildly popular film *The Host* (*Koemul*, 2006), for instance, an actual event, when an employee of the US Armed Forces dumped a large amount of formaldehyde down the drain,[12] is taken as the movie's starting point. In this fictional world, the chemicals have now caused the rise of a monster living in Seoul's Han river. In *Welcome to Dongmagkol*, a movie released in 2005, US troops are seen attempting to bomb a secluded, peaceful village miraculously left untouched by the Korean War, where a renegade team of North and South Korean soldiers join forces to prevent this mass murder at the hands of Americans. And *The Case of It'aewŏn Homicide* (*It'aewŏn Sarinsakŏn*), which attracted a sizable audience in 2009, is a movie based on an infamous murder of a Korean college student in Seoul's It'aewŏn neighborhood, with two Americans as the prime suspects of the crime. Faced with such images depicting murder, misconduct, and lawlessness surrounding the US military, one impression inevitably takes shape: in South Korea's popular imagination, too, the contentious figure of the violent US soldier will not go away.

To be sure, images such as these—representations of some of the negative aspects resulting from the complex encounter between US troops and the South Korean population—are only one part of a larger story I wish to tell here. I set out for Seoul in September 2007 on what would become a 21-month-long journey with the idea in mind of finding out more about both popular imaginaries about GIs *and* the actual encounters between US military personnel and locals. My main motivation in going to the capital of the Republic of Korea was one curious puzzle that I wanted to look more deeply into: South Korea was for a long time known as possibly the most US-friendly nation in the world, with the Republic of Korea being, as Bruce Cumings once put it, "one of the few countries that

never said 'Yankee go home'" (2005:102). But over the last few decades, South Koreans seem to have had a drastic change of heart.

On December 14, 2002, for instance, an estimated 300,000 people attended candlelight vigils across the country to protest the death of two 13-year-old schoolgirls who had been run over by a US military vehicle (Cho 2013; Min 2002). In 2006, violent clashes erupted between farmers and activists, who faced thousands of Korean riot police when their rice fields in the village of Taechuri (near P'yŏngt'aek) were seized for the expansion of a nearby US base (Yeo 2006). Two years later, in 2008, during another round of candlelight rallies that erupted in Seoul, hundreds of thousands of protesters attended a series of protests after a ban on US beef imports was lifted, with anti-American sentiments running high once more (Lee J. 2012; Lee S. et al. 2010). And finally, over the last few years, the completion of a Korean naval base on Cheju Island has been delayed due to a number of protests. The opponents of this project argue that the US military will also have access to this ROK Navy-run facility, which may turn it into a key outpost for American attempts to keep maritime hegemony in the region intact (Kirk 2013; see also Pae 2014). These are just a few instances of recent public anger in South Korea over issues pertaining to the United States and its entanglement with the fate of the Korean peninsula.

Within this heated context, "GI crimes" (*migun pŏmjoe*) were repeatedly taken up by actors of the nationalist left as examples of the quasi-colonial nature of the long-term alliance between the United States and Korea. The National Campaign for Eradication of Crimes by U.S. Troops in Korea, for instance, a non-governmental organization (NGO) founded in the early 1990s that is opposed to US bases estimates that tens of thousands of crimes were committed by US soldiers against Korean citizens,[13] as approximately 1,100 to 2,300 crime cases involving US servicemen were reported annually between 1976 and 1991 (Moon 2010a: 354). Clearly the issue of violent soldier behavior, with those living and working in or near US entertainment areas predominantly affected, has often been a weighty matter of concern, made worse by the fact that addressing it publicly could very well land a person in jail until the years of the military dictatorship (1961–88) came to an end.

There was one particularly heinous offence, I was to learn, that over the years would become viewed as the quintessential "GI crime": the gruesome murder of a young Korean prostitute by the name of Yun Kŭm-i who was killed by Private Kenneth Markle on October 28, 1992—an event that, to this day, seems to represent people's imaginations in South Korea of what US soldiers are potentially capable of. In the months and years

after the murder, the incident was turned into a central symbol of US domination within left-wing narratives; and the controversy caused years later by the rape case in Hongdae also needs to be read in light of the massive fallout caused by this brutal murder in 1992. At that time, as we shall see, the death of Mrs. Yun served as a starting point for widespread public agitations that would reappear with each new transgression of US military personnel or their dependents.

Undoubtedly, public outrage over violence committed by GIs against local civilians is not a scenario that is unique to South Korea. Wherever US troops have been stationed on foreign soil, controversies over the unlawful behavior of some soldiers have followed, with rape and murder cases, in particular, often sparking great shock among the affected local populations. Images of tortured Iraqi prisoners and of smiling US soldiers dishing out unlawful punishment in the Abu Ghraib prison spread throughout the world in 2003, and became emblematic of the larger injustice that the 2003–11 war in Iraq represented to many. Perhaps less well known is how individual crimes that were committed in the context of the peacetime stationing of US soldiers overseas have also frequently been turned into symbols of greater grievances by local anti-base movements. On September 4, 1995, for instance, three US servicemen stationed at Camp Hansen (Okinawa, Japan) kidnapped and raped a 12-year-old girl whom they encountered walking by the side of the road, an incident which led to large-scale anti-US military protests on this Japanese island (Angst 1995, 2001). In a similar, much publicized case in late 2005, a Filipina woman accused four US marines of gang raping her at the Subic Bay Freeport, with Lance Corporal Daniel Smith found guilty of rape a year later. Smith was eventually released from prison in 2009, after the accuser withdrew her statement, possibly in exchange for a US green card (Lacsamana 2011; Winter 2011). The disputed death of Alexander Ivanov, a Kyrgyz truck driver killed on December 6, 2006 by 20-year-old US airman Zachary Hatfield during a security inspection, led to many discussions about the Status of Forces Agreement under which US troops operated in Kyrgyzstan at that time (Cooley 2008). And, most recently, the death of Jennifer Laude, a Filipina trans woman, who in late 2014 was found murdered in a motel that she had entered together with US sailor Joseph Scott Pemperton, has put strains on the renewed military alliance between the United States and the Philippines (Talusan 2015).

In all these instances, violent acts committed by US servicemen against local civilians have altered the circumstances under which US American military personnel operate abroad. The South Korean case, however, is

perhaps distinct in that the controversies over GI crimes had a rather limited impact on the actual security alliance, but still led to an immense loss of support among the civilian population. Additionally, these prolonged struggles over the US military presence in South Korea that were fought out over the terrain of violent incidents have had an unmistakable urban component that was largely missing from similar cases elsewhere, which is a point I shall turn to next.

Figure 1.3 Partial panorama view over Seoul

The Urban Setting of Seoul

The story I wish to tell here about the presence of US troops in Korea is not only about public sentiments over (gendered) violence committed by US soldiers, but also one in which the city of Seoul plays a rather central role: South Korea's capital has about 14 million people living within the actual city boundaries; Seoul's satellite cities in the Kyŏnggi province that surrounds the capital, however, seamlessly blend into this core metropolis, thereby forming a huge urban field (Friedmann and Miller 1965) marked by high infrastructural integration and extreme polycentricism.[14] The population of this Greater Seoul area, as of 2015, stands at 25,144,000 people,[15] which makes Seoul one of the largest urban areas in the world. In Mike Davis's terminology (2006: 5), this qualifies Seoul for the moniker of

"hypercity" (that is, 20 million inhabitants or more), a kind of urban space that puts the "megacity" with its 10+ million residents to shame. Today, more than half of the population of South Korea lives in this Greater Seoul area, where population density is eight times higher than that of Rome (*Hankyoreh* 2009).

In addition to the nearly 30,000 soldiers permanently stationed in the country these days, the US military on occasion brings in hundreds of additional troops during military exercises. Over two-thirds of the US military bases inside South Korea are located within or close to the Greater Seoul area (Moon 2010a: 348). In this massive urban context, the number of military employees amounts to such a minuscule presence that US soldiers more resemble the proverbial needle in the haystack rather than the sizable troop contingent they would be in a less populous city. To complicate matters further, US soldiers are no longer staying put during their free time in the particular entertainment zones nearby US bases (kijich'on) catering to their needs. As one unintended consequence of rapid infrastructural development in the Greater Seoul area, previously significant distances between peripheral towns and inner-city areas have shrunk into manageable (albeit hefty) commutes. This is one explanation for why inner-city entertainment areas such as Hongdae have grown increasingly popular among American soldiers since the mid 2000s: these adult entertainment zones have simply come within easier reach through the extension of Seoul's public transportation network. The influx of GIs that this has caused has led to a number of symbolic dislocations affecting the particular inner-city entertainment district of Hongdae. This can perhaps be most acutely observed in the appropriation of the term *yanggongju* ("Western Princess," a derogatory expression for women working in camptowns), which was now used in order to label young female partiers who got mixed up with foreigners in Hongdae, a discussion that will be explored in chapter 6.

In reaction to the increased mobility of American soldiers in the midst of such a vast field site (that is, the Greater Seoul area), I opted for a research strategy that involved seeking out US servicemen and the disparate groups of people they encounter in various neighborhoods in and near Seoul. In addition, as my fieldwork progressed I also became more interested in those citizens of the area who had barely ever (or never) come into contact with US soldiers, but who seemed to be acutely aware of their presence in the city. So many of the Seoulites I met had never personally encountered US military personnel up close, but they still had many striking things to say about them, which is why "imaginaries," that is, a

mediated kind of knowledge not based on first-hand experiences, became crucial to my understanding of US–Korean relations. Indeed, face-to-face encounters with GIs were by no means a prerequisite for holding rather strong opinions about them, I was to learn.

Beyond the mediated aspects of the at times fractious relationship between the US and South Korea, another goal of mine was to learn more about how people *do* engage directly with US soldiers when they encounter them in the vast urban terrain of Seoul. The widespread focus on violent acts, a frame[16] first utilized by the nationalist left, who sought to criticize the existence of US bases in the country from this particular angle, necessarily supersedes alternative stories of how civilians in South Korea come to encounter US military personnel in their daily lives. The actual meetings between soldiers and ordinary people that occur every day and night in Seoul are as manifold as the vast array of actors that engage in them: extraordinary or banal, antagonistic or smooth, erotic or dull, orderly or unrestrained, fleeting or lengthy, the potential is nearly endless. What the stories that will be told here have in common, however, is that the violent imaginaries that surround the US military presence in the country do function as the very backdrop, the imagined terrain, so to speak, against which actual relationships between US soldiers and civilians do take shape. And while the more hostile environment that GIs are stepping into these days has not necessarily narrowed the script of everyday possibilities, rarely did the people I spoke to entirely forget how contentious the US military presence in the country had become over the last few decades.

Adult entertainment areas as material spaces are crucial to my analysis as the sites for these encounters, as they are *the* prime locations where South Koreans and US military personnel actually do meet. Not only are inner-city entertainment districts (such as Hongdae or It'aewŏn), or more remote red-light districts (such as Tongduch'ŏn, Songt'an, or Anjŏng-ri) the locations in which a number of "critical events" (Das 1997) took place that pertain to the US military's contentious public standing in the country. They are also, significantly, the first terrains in which South Koreans can actually replace thoroughly mediated imaginaries about US soldiers with actual, first-hand encounters. And as I learned more about the historical differences, social complexities, and local specificities of these areas, I came to attend to the Greater Seoul area as an urban space made up of particular neighborhoods in which the US military's influence cracks, fragments, and is often altered into something new that is very much bound to the particular location I found myself in. In short, my journey

also became a project about how places such as these entertainment districts are constituted, shaped and altered by those who find themselves in them, and how soldiers, local and foreign entertainers, Korean students and business owners, NGO people and anti-base activists all hold rather different stakes in them.

Violent Imaginaries as Social Practice

In *Base Encounters*, I will attend to the consequences of a particular, by now largely historical problem: how and why did South Korea go from being a country that was known as one of the most US-friendly in the world to one where the US military presence has become largely contested? Actors from the nationalist left, I was to find, have strategically utilized negative images of US soldiers as a counter-hegemonic discourse and a popular frame that later trickled into other sectors of Korean society. The details of this contingent process, which turned unfavorable depictions of US soldiers into a key component of a political project that allowed the positioning of the United States within a long historical line of intruders, will be further laid out in chapter 2. Before attending to the historical particularities, however, it seems appropriate to say a few more words about a theoretical notion that I call "violent imaginaries," which I use in order to make sense of this change of heart and its lingering after-effects.

Based on the historical and ethnographic context to be deciphered here, *violent imaginaries* will refer to *the social practice that describes how people make sense of US militarism through the reconfiguration of individual acts of violence into a matter that pertains to the nation*. In utilizing this term in such a way, I do not wish to make a claim to fictitiousness and call into question the widely distributed crime statistics published by Korean NGOs that point to rampant GI crime. Instead, I want to highlight that (a) violent imaginaries, in their materialization during a particular moment in history, constitute an *action* that is aimed at political change;[17] (b) much *mediation* goes into conjuring up such negative images of US soldiers, as most Koreans will rely on information provided by others rather than first-hand experience; and that (c) such depictions have become integral to a *nationalist frame* through which US–Korea relations are assessed. Such a definition, I believe, requires some additional clarification by way of a brief literature review. What do anthropologists actually mean when they say "imagination"/ "imaginary", and how is this connected to another, equally ubiquitous term, that of "violence"?

"Imagination" was for a long time a phrase that was largely limited to the field of philosophy. The preoccupation of philosophers with the complex relationship between reality and imagination has been traced as an idea from its very beginnings in the works of Plato and Aristotle, through medieval times and into the Renaissance in J.M. Cocking's *Imagination: A Study in the History of Ideas* (1991). In 20th-century philosophy, the term has been picked up by Jean-Paul Sartre, among others, who in his book *The Imaginary: A Phenomenological Psychology of the Imagination* (2004 [1940]), sought to solve long-standing philosophical questions as to the nature of human consciousness by utilizing this term. And, in recent years, Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor has written much on *Modern Social Imaginaries* (2003), which establish the kind of multiple modernities he is interested in, with social imaginaries standing for "a commonly shared understanding of how things go, as well as how things *should* go, in the collective life of a community" (Williamson 2004).

Taylor, like many other scholars working with the twin-terms of "imaginary" and "imagination," took many cues for his own work from the doyen of nationalism studies, Benedict Anderson. Anderson's magisterial book *Imagined Communities* was first published in 1983, the same year that also saw the appearance of two other classics on the subject: Hobsbawm and Ranger's *The Invention of Tradition*, and Gellner's *Nations and Nationalism*. While liberal philosopher Ernest Gellner showed that nations were entirely modern constructions, with nationalism in his view "primarily a political principle, which holds that the political and national unit should be congruent" (1983: 1), Marxist historian Eric Hobsbawm concentrated on how such modern nationalist movements were in fact excellent at fabricating myths and histories that served their own agendas.

Benedict Anderson, instead of focusing on concoction and fabrication, put his own emphasis on the question as to why nationalist movements are so effective at creating popular support. Anderson found one answer in the potency of communities not actually based on face-to-face encounters, but on thoroughly mediated and imaged belongings. Association via imagination, he argues, became ever more important with the onset of "print-capitalism," a period of modernity which allowed the reconfiguration of disparate populations into members of a nation as they were now becoming dimly aware of each other's existence. Thus, the nation is imagined, Anderson famously wrote, "because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of the communion" (1991 [1983]:6).

Anderson's intervention showed how nations can be built on such seemingly fleeting stuff as the collective imagination, and it was just a matter of time until anthropologists would also claim this terrain for their own investigations into various (trans-)national social phenomena. While the literature on imagination in anthropology is a vast and burgeoning field these days (for recent contributions, see for instance, Gibson 2014; Graeber 2015; McLean 2007; Salazar 2011, 2012; Severi 2015; Skinner and Theodossopoulos 2011; Strathern et al. 2006), the term is perhaps most firmly associated with the work of Arjun Appadurai, who turned "the imaginary" into a key phrase in his intellectual endeavor about how to make sense of globalization. In *Modernity at Large* (1996), Appadurai lays "the imagined" out as a potent field of practice that deserves more attention in our globalized day and age:

> The image, the imagined, the imaginary—these are all terms that direct us to something critical and new in global cultural processes: the imagination as a social practice. No longer mere fantasy (opium for the masses whose real work is somewhere else), no longer simple escape (from a world defined principally by more concrete purposes and structures), no longer elite pastime (thus not relevant to the lives of ordinary people), and no longer mere contemplation (irrelevant for new forms of desire and subjectivity), the imagination has become an organized field of social practices, a form of work (in the sense of both labor and culturally organized practice), and a form of negotiation between sites of agency (individuals) and globally defined fields of possibility. (1996: 31)

Appadurai further argues that the realm of the imagination may also help us to link "the play of pastiche (in some settings) to the terror and coercion of states and their competitors" (1996: 31). In his own work, however, Appadurai largely stayed clear of violent issues such as terror and coercion, and focused on more tranquil terrains opened up by his global ethno-, techno-, finance-, and other scapes. Given these choices, Appadurai may not be the best of all contenders to help us answer a number of questions related to violence and the US military, such as the following: How we can make sense of violent images that have been pertinent to shaping a social movement against US bases in South Korea? And why are negative depictions of US soldiers as violent (sex-)offenders on the loose so widespread in a country that is also an ally of the United States and heavily dependent on its economic, military, and social contributions?

Anthropologist David Graeber, in his article "Dead Zones of the Imagination" (2012), makes a more substantial attempt to analytically bring violence and the imagination together. In the broader literature on violence in anthropology,[18] Graeber notes that much attention has been paid to a kind of "poetics of violence" (for example, Caton 1999; Whitehead 2004: 55ff), that is, the focus has been on how violence is a kind of language that is utilized in order to communicate. This is a perspective that Graeber rightly critiques:

> Yes, violent acts tend to have a communicative element. But this is true of any other form of human action as well. It strikes me that what is really important about violence is that it is perhaps the only form of human action that holds out even in the possibility of having social effects *without* being communicative. (2012: 116)

"Violence," Graeber further argues, "may well be the only form of human action by which it is possible to have relatively predictable effects on the action of a person about whom you understand nothing," which allows the perpetrator to cut through all the "subtle work of interpretation" that goes into most human relations (2012: 116).

Another salient point made in "Dead Zones of the Imagination" is that regimes of violence create "highly lopsided structures of the imagination" (2012: 119). Whoever has the upper hand in a relationship, Graeber claims, rarely needs to ponder on the motivations of the people they dominate. "Those on the bottom of a social ladder," on the other hand, "spend a great deal of time imagining the perspectives of, and genuinely caring about, those on the top" (2012: 119). Hence, while violence is a tool that allows the more powerful to get away without knowing much about the Other at all, it forces the weaker component in a relationship ever more deeply into guess-work to render the seemingly arbitrary decisions made at the top more meaningful.

As will be analyzed in detail in this book, individual moments of violence can occasionally be turned into grand metaphors for the larger power structures that have allowed these events to occur in the first place, a process that anthropologist Marshall Sahlins has termed "structural amplification" (2005). In the South Korean context, Graeber's notion of the imagination as a one-way street of meaning-making may help us understand the commotion around incidents such as the Yun murder or the Hongdae rape case. These and similar occurrences were turned into moments that spoke to Koreans of the greater stakes involved in

the US–Korea alliance precisely because ordinary people in South Korea have had to invest so much into the daily functioning of this relationship, while most US citizens have been (and still are) blithely unaware of the contingencies created by the presence of US troops in Korea. Violent imaginaries, I believe, arose as a powerful social practice in South Korea out of the sudden disturbance caused by a particularly heinous crime (that is, the murder of Yun Kŭm-i); they were constituted as a framework through which US soldiers could be perceived once the interpretative work that routinely greased US–Korea relations during less turbulent days was suddenly interrupted. In the aftermath of the brutal Yun murder, the incessant guess-work that went into building the asymmetrical relationship between the USA and Korea seemed to become meaningless for a while, as the murder starkly laid bare the power structures underneath that had made the event possible. It was only this stoppage, caused by a particular event and the public responses it triggered, I contend, that allowed for US–Korea relations to eventually tip over into something new.

To be sure, the timing of these contestations over the collective imagination pertaining to the US also had to be right: the conflict, we will see, gained heat at a particular moment in South Korea's history, that is, in the midst of the stormy period of democratization in the early 1990s, which allowed the rescaling of these imaginaries into the realm of larger political struggles. During preceding decades of military rule in South Korea, benevolent notions held about GIs had gradually been undermined by a growing sense of anger over the virtual immunity provided to US military personnel through the Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) between South Korea and the US. But, even more damaging than unequal legal frameworks that, as we shall see, may have implicitly encouraged social irresponsibility among GIs on the ground, proved to be the daily US *Realpolitik* surrounding Cold War Korea, during which the American allies repeatedly placed security concerns over those of democracy. In such a way, violent images involving individual US soldiers were forged into a deliberate tool to fight a war over grander matters; the small was amplified into the large, the individual reconfigured into the structural, all with the goal to muster further outrage for a growing nationalist movement to redress decades of putative oppression.

This rise of violent imaginaries has also had an interesting spatial ingredient to it that will be further delved into throughout the book. The actual spaces where encounters between GIs and local or foreign women usually do take place—that is, the entertainment areas close to US military bases—were labeled as spaces of domination for the first time after the

infamous Yun murder occurred. Areas next to US bases, where GI bars and clubs are typically clustered, became imagined territories of national shame, where American hegemony seemingly touched ground in its most violent manifestation. Fueled by a number of critical events involving US soldiers, debates over these camptown areas quickly escalated to such a degree that the American ally could undergo a metamorphosis into yet another unwelcome intruder.

Undoubtedly, "violent imaginaries," cast in such a nationalist form, also entailed a sacrifice of nuances and gray zones, and the eradication of alternative narratives and visions concerning the contentious encounters between soldiers and civilians. Whatever did not fit into the tale of violence and exploitation was filtered out, and the consequences of such a loss of complexity in the way camptown areas and their inhabitants have been imagined are still evident today. For one, it means that the voices of foreign sex(ualized) workers in camptowns—who by now make up the vast majority of entertainers in these areas—are practically silenced, as they do not fit into nationalist understandings of what these contentious zones stand for. To be sure, even in the most remote and marginalized camptowns, murder, rape and other forms of violence are by no means a daily occurrence these days. During field research, in fact, I found that for the (mostly Filipina) women employed in the GI clubs, it is not their clients that they fear the most, but the costly suspension between different countries and legal regimes that is negatively affecting their lives as migrant workers in South Korea.

Soldiers and Contentious Sexual Encounters

Access to foreign women, writes feminist author Cynthia Enloe, is one of the unspoken perks that come with joining the US military:

> Without a sexualized "rest and recreation" (R&R) period, would the US military command be able to send young men off on long, often tedious sea voyages and ground maneuvers? Without myths of Asian women's compliant sexuality would many American men be able to sustain their own identities of themselves as manly enough to act as soldiers? (1992: 23)

Enloe's work on the US military (see, for instance, Enloe 1983, 1989, 2000) has inspired and informed legions of social scientists to start to

think outside the box, and to conceptualize the military as something other than a mere natural fact. Countering a peculiar omission in social scientific research that is possibly related to the fact that national security institutions are still among the biggest financial donors to the American academe (sponsoring much research *for* the military, and very little research *on* the military), a number of (largely female) authors have placed the issue of gender and the military at the heart of their work (see, for instance, Cohn 2012; Elshtain 1987; Shigematsu and Camacho 2010; Sjoberg and Via 2010; Stiehm 1996; Witworth 2004). In their writings, they have sought to fill the gaps in our knowledge of the numerous effects that the US military's global expeditions, expansion, and extensions have had on the existences of millions of people living through and around them, with local women and their engagements with foreign soldiers, in particular, coming into sharp view.

In some of these feminist contributions, the asymmetrical encounter between male US soldiers and females employed in the sex industry has served as the most important vantage point to approach the explosive issue of US bases overseas (e.g. Enloe 1989; Hoehn and Moon 2010; Moon 1997; Sturdevant and Stoltzfus 1992). US imperialism, in this context, is seen as a project that is vitally held in place by a form of virulent masculinity that is enacted by soldiers in the everyday contact zones near US military installations with the aim of dominating the local population via the bodies of women. Out of all institutions, the military is most closely associated with the formation of hegemonic masculinity (Shefer and Mankayi 2007: 192), hence the entertainment areas that US troops in Seoul primarily inhabit in their free time are understood as realms that have been critical in the spawning of poisonous gender relations imbued with violence among nations allied to the United States.

The value of this pioneering work should not be underestimated; yet there is at times a certain tendency to eradicate nuances evident in this body of literature. It is implied in some of these writings, for instance, that military people necessarily need to be seen as the perpetrators in what has widely been called "militarized prostitution." Local brokers of prostitution who run the GI bars and clubs near US bases (often former sex workers themselves) do not figure in the picture very much, as the acknowledgment of their role could potentially complicate the underlying binary opposition of foreign military perpetrator on the one hand and local female victim on the other. Casting the women in the role of victim, however, is an analytical move that may run the risk of denying them the agency to manage their own lives and fortunes. The equating of all

types of sexual encounters involving GIs with acts of violence also tends to level out differences and subtleties that can be found in the wide range of encounters that take place between civilians and soldiers in the urban space of Seoul. The blurring of boundaries between consensual sex and violence is, of course, not a unique feature of writings concerned with gender issues surrounding the US military, or, for that matter, of the discourses utilized by anti-base activists in South Korea. Rather, it is symptomatic of many scholarly debates on the subject of prostitution itself (on this discussion, see, for instance, Agustin 2007; Berman 2003; Doezma 1998; Kempadoo 2005; Kempadoo and Doezma 1998; Weitzer 2000, 2005).

For the purposes of this book, these discussions raise the question as to whether there are alternative ways available for us to make sense of US soldiers in relation to the women they become sexually involved with near US bases overseas. One possible way out of such binary victim–perpetrator scenarios is offered by literary scholar Lee Jin-kyung, who argues that it may be more useful to understand US soldiers as both agents and victims "of the state's necropolitical power" (Lee J. 2009: 656). Lee believes that the agentive power of soldiers is significantly held in check by the inflexible labor circumstances in which they find themselves while serving in the US military. Difficult labor conditions also inhibit the "entertainers," who need to play by the rules laid down by the clubs they work at. The women laboring at these entertainment facilities these days come from the most marginalized sectors of Korean society, or, more frequently, have been recruited through work agencies in the Philippines or the former Soviet Union (a topic that anthropologist Sealing Cheng has examined in her monograph *On the Move for Love*, published in 2010).

The soldiers, on the other hand, often hail from impoverished ethnic minority sectors in the United States, or other social strata of US society where access to higher education and better-paying jobs may not be readily available to them. Both the sex(ualized) workers servicing GIs and their lower ranking US military clients can thus perhaps be described as part of a globally mobile working class, who find themselves thrown together in a third location, that is, the (sub-)urban peripheries of Seoul, South Korea, where they have been brought in order to perform their work-related duties. In a provocative move, Lee Jin-kyung has called this parallel convocation of male and female labor in camptowns expressions of a "sexual proletarization," which "defines the process of mobilizing respectively gendered sexualities into various working-class service

labors, such as military labor, military and industrial prostitution, and other sexualized service work" (2009: 656).

While the point is well taken that foreign entertainers in kijich'on may represent something like the quasi-natural counterpart of the American soldiers in the sense that these protagonists all hail from the lower ranks of the global workforce, the labor mobilization of female sex(ualized) workers in the end *does* involve a much more pronounced invocation of their sexualities than the mobilization of military labor. The specific expression of the soldiers' sexualities in the camptown areas, which is what in the end keeps the system of prostitution in these neighborhoods alive and well, is certainly fundamentally shaped by the constant emphasis on strength and virility during working hours inside the base. At the same time, the fact that soldiers seek out foreign entertainers is for the most part an unwanted byproduct of the work regimes they are subjected to, an unintended consequence, if you will, that is to be held in check by military authorities, rather than an integral part of the labor tasks performed, as it is the case for the women in camptown. In a similar manner, sociologist Linda McDowell, in her book *Working Bodies* emphasizes that for men, "the main attribute associated with the masculine body at work *is not its sexuality* but its strength" (2009: 129, emphasis added). Masculinity, she further claims, is a highly class-specific matter, with men hailing from working-class backgrounds often finding that the strength of their bodies is indeed the only commodity they can viably sell in a rapidly de-industrializing nation like the US. "Sports and the army," McDowell says, "are often escape routes for young men brought up in relatively deprived circumstances with few educational credentials and ever fewer options in the feminized bottom of the service sector labour markets" (2009: 130).

The virility of the soldier, however, is certainly not a static characteristic, but rather, like so many expressions of gender, may best be understood as "a dynamic and emergent property of situated interaction and in need of ongoing accomplishment" (Pyke 1996: 528). If these forms of masculinity indeed only arise through effort and interaction, then camptowns near US Armed Forces installations serve as crucial terrains outside of the world of the military base in which various forms of masculinities and sexualities are (con)tested, shaped, and occasionally subverted. This is what makes *encounters* such a fascinating terrain to study in the context I have sought to make sense of: while shaped by the larger structural forces that have brought US troops to reside on a permanent basis on Korean soil, at the same time the specific meetings between individuals outside these facilities always include an instant of open-endedness, ambiguity, and

surprise. Some agentic moments in the encounter between soldiers and sex(ualized) workers, then, may also emerge from their acknowledgment of their similarities, and from their attempts to shape romantic or other alliances in spite of a system that only encourages the commodification of their encounters through the exchange of sexual services for dollars.

The Structure of This Book

Before delving into the world of US camptowns in South Korea, in the chapters to follow, I will deploy an analytical perspective on Korea's history that foregrounds the critical conjunctures between politics, the economy, and the social. Looking at the crucial moments that have inaugurated the drastic change of heart that saw South Korea move from being one of the most US-friendly countries in the world to a place fraught with controversies over the American military presence, the perplexing trajectory of the national question in Korea will come to the center. Starting with the country's early encounters with colonial projects that eventually forced Korea to become part of the capitalist world system, the reader will be guided up to the moment of division after World War II, and to the eruption of armed conflict that culminated in the Korean War (1950–53).

The repressive Park Chung-hee era that followed in the 1960s gave rise to what I call "capitalism of the barracks": South Korea's double strategy of massive labor exploitation at home, and the interweaving of big business with the US military build-up in Korea and abroad. It was during this time, also, that the gradual realization among ordinary South Koreans would first emerge that the USA was not going to help facilitate the full package of democracy that it had promised the local population since its involvement on the Korean peninsula began. The most significant moment that led to the accelerated dissemination of such sentiments came in 1980, when the Korean military dictatorship sent troops against protesters in the city of Kwangju, which left hundreds of people dead. After Kwangju, key leftist actors would increasingly express their anger over the United States' involvement with a series of regimes that ruled the country with an iron fist until the early 1990s.

Chapter 3 will be dedicated to an account of the camptowns (or kijich'on) next to US military bases, and the social and imaginative role they have come to play in South Korea's post-war history. The Yun murder and its ramifications will be laid out in detail, with special attention paid to the nationalist discourses that emerged around the event. In particular, I will

explore the social and economic factors that have shaped Tongduch'ŏn's ville. This small GI entertainment town, where the Yun murder took place, has always figured centrally in the imagination of some writers of the so-called *minjung* democratization movement. Actors from the left had set themselves the goal of wresting the definitional power over the nation out of the hands of the generals who had been in charge of the country's fate for so long, with a kind of camptown fiction—a popular genre of writing focusing on the lurid details of daily sexual exploitation in these neighborhoods—being utilized among disenfranchised, predominantly male leftist authors during the 1970s and 1980s. In an attempt to make sense of such imaginaries, anthropologist Marshall Sahlins' notion of structural amplification will be applied to explain how the GI red-light districts in the early 1990s came to be understood as the very locations where US domination touches ground. The prostitutes employed in these spaces, I shall argue, were shaped into symbols of a ravaged nation, and their actual experiences were silenced in favor of a streamlined nationalist narrative that proved easy to think and act with in the midst of a crisis over sovereignty.

Building on these insights, in chapter 4 I will tell the stories of some of the women living and working in these spaces today. The impoverished South Korean females of earlier days have by now largely been replaced by Filipina and Russian entertainers, who dream of a ticket to America as much as their Korean predecessors did, and many of whom, in the meantime, squeeze a meager living out of prostitution in these deeply claustrophobic sex-scapes. I shall focus on the strategic and romantic alliances shaped between women and soldiers by utilizing Sandya Hewamanne's (2013) notion of "preoccupation," which I believe captures well the intense emotional and sexual involvement of the women with US soldiers in the villes. While violent escalations occasionally affect the women's lives, the focus will be placed on the fearful suspension between different countries that the entertainers experience. Their uncertainties are heightened by the deeply precarious working conditions and the strict visa regimes that they must submit themselves to, and that add further pressure to their already vulnerable state as transnational female workers in South Korea.

In chapter 5, we will leave these peripheral spaces behind and move into the capital terrain. It'aewŏn is an entertainment area that is adjacent to the largest US military base in the country, the Yongsan US Army garrison in central Seoul. In this urban setting, the US military presence has had many unintended consequences that have turned the neighborhood into an unlikely incubator for social (ex-)changes. While during the military

dictatorship a local containment strategy of sorts was at work that sought to keep US influences under control and within the boundaries of the "special district," nowadays It'aewŏn attracts impossibly diverse crowds outside of the military orbit. The arrival of sexual and ethnic minorities in the neighborhood has completely changed the urban landscape of the district. I will look at a distinct ambiguity that characterizes the neighborhood today: the uneasy positioning of the area between allure and repulsion which seems to dominate many people's imaginaries, and which is a phenomenon that I shall call It'aewŏn *suspense*. The at times very rowdy practices that take place in It'aewŏn prove to be both dangerous and creative, and have simultaneously engendered the destruction and production of social meaning and order. It'aewŏn's freedom—the counterintuitive liberties that some groups such as homo- and transsexuals, Muslims and other migrant communities have found next to the base—arises out of a suspension of the area between competing sovereignties, which have turned it into a loaded transnational terrain where images of coercion and persuasion reign with equal force.

In chapter 6, I shall finally focus on Hongdae, an inner-city student neighborhood that has ascended to nationwide fame ever since the early 1990s, attracting economically and politically disenfranchised groups such as Korean students, artists, and other rebellious young people. The progressive mixture to be found in Hongdae has also drawn in quite a few US soldiers, alongside other foreigners who have come to frequent the bars, clubs, and outdoor areas of this neighborhood. While GIs enter the urban space of It'aewŏn on an equal or privileged footing compared to other entertainment seekers, they are much less welcome in Hongdae, as we shall see, where many clubs have in the past refused them entry.

Unlike in the camptowns, sex in Hongdae is usually not for sale, but rather, one has to "hunt for it." Due to the ever increasing numbers of foreigners "on the hunt" for Korean men and women, Hongdae has become a bone of contention for the wider public, with the controversies around the neighborhood at times spiraling into a veritable panic over the putative moral corrosion of young Koreans by outside influences. The figure of the "Western princess" (*yanggongju*)—an old, derogatory term used for the sex workers laboring at the GI clubs in the remote camptown areas that we encounter in chapters 3 and 4—makes an unlikely reappearance in the geographically distant space of Hongdae, where anxieties over national purity and contamination at times have loomed large.

Finally, zooming out again from these battles over the meaning of a Seoul entertainment district "contaminated" by the presence of male

foreigners, in my conclusion I will summarize in broad brushstrokes the ways in which the contentious history of the camptowns has figured in the South Korea of today. While the days of unassailable US supremacy in the region may have ended for good, the violent legacies, perilous imaginaries, and ambivalent encounters that the US military presence on Korean terrain has given rise to will possibly besiege all parties involved for many more years to come.