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Reading Cold War Ruins in Bong Joon-ho's *Parasite*

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Writing in the time of the War on Terror, Amy Kaplan in her 2003 presidential address to the American Studies Association asserts that the US empire is a form of transnationalism that demands examination in both national and international frames. US imperialism, Kaplan contends, is “an interconnected network of power relations, which entail engagements and encounters as well as military might and which are riddled with instability, tension, and disorder.”¹ Cautioning against repeating the Cold War uses of the field for teaching American nationalism, Kaplan urges American studies scholars to interrogate US exceptionalism without losing sight of the US empire’s centralized power. Kaplan notes that one of the ways to do so is by investigating the Americanization of global culture as “a process of transnational exchange, conflict, and transformation, which creates new cultural forms that express dreams and desires not dictated by empire.”² In underlining the boundless yet non-totalitarian US presence in cultural forms, Kaplan invites us to complicate our reading of cultural texts produced in the US and abroad.

Kaplan’s call for the interrogation of Cold War legacies of American studies continues to resonate in recent scholarship. Scholars of transpacific American studies have theorized US imperial expansion, military interventions, and economic neocolonialism in Asia and the Pacific while further decentering US-dominant knowledge production through investigating intertwined US imperialism and Asian imperialisms.³ In their introduction to *Transpacific Studies: Framing an Emerging Field*, Viet Thanh Nguyen and Janet Hoskins propose to decenter both US-based scholarship and East Asian-centered knowledge production by drawing upon insights from American studies, Asian studies, and Asian American studies. Transpacific studies, Nguyen and Hoskins contend, “acknowledges the importance of American power but stresses the necessity of foregrounding Asia and the Pacific. Hopefully by doing so, transpacific studies can avoid being another imperializing intellectual gesture from the west,

wherein an oppositional method also reasserts the dominant subjectivity of western practitioners.”⁴ Tracing a genealogy of the transpacific as an analytic in her essay, Lisa Yoneyama underscores the importance of transpacific entanglements between Japanese colonialism and US supremacy in the post-World War II era. For Yoneyama, the transpacific as an analytic is particularly effective in revealing how US postwar ascendancy is predicated on turning Japan into a client state. In addition to examining US postwar hegemony, a transpacific analytic necessitates “a critique of knowledge production about Japan’s colonial empire and what its imperializing practices meant varying to modernity, race, and visions for the new world.”⁵ The transpacific as an analytic thus offers a space to illuminate intertwined US imperialism and Asian imperialisms—a focus otherwise obscured by a sole focus on US empire.

Bringing Asian American cultural critique into conversation with transpacific American studies, this essay proposes that reading cultural texts produced outside of the US yet whose conditions of production are intertwined with US imperial violence urges us to develop a more complex way to engage with US empire *and* to read cultural texts that represent transpacific entanglements between the US and Asia. I argue that reading Bong Joon-ho’s *Parasite* (2019) *simultaneously* in the contexts of US Cold War military interventions in Asia and South Korea’s postwar state violence enables an investigation of the intertwined remnants of US war in Korea and South Korea’s postwar economic liberalization. I first examine how reception of the film in the US and Asia reveals the difficulties involved in reading the haunting presence of the Korean War in *Parasite*. The latter part of the essay analyzes how Bong’s film represents the haunting memories of the Korean War and the US as a figure of modernity by placing the film in longer histories of the development of the South Korean film industry in the 1950s, South Korea’s rapid industrialization and the US support of South Korean military regimes in the 1960s and 1970s, and the following social movements against the unequal class structure in the 1980s. In addition to examining the afterlives of the Korean War represented in the film, my reading also highlights how *Parasite* depicts what Jodi Kim terms as “an aesthetics of settler imperial failure” through intimacies that are not totally determined by the violence of the US military empire and settler colonial capitalism.⁶

Unpacking a Long History of Capitalist Development in *Parasite*

Set in contemporary South Korea, *Parasite* represents three families divided and yet intertwined by economic disparity. Centering on the Kim family’s change of fortune as the son Kim Ki-woo becomes an English tutor for Da-hye, the daughter of the wealthy Park family, the film develops as the Kims gradually infiltrate the Park family by posing as workers unrelated to each other. Just as the Kims’s plan seems to succeed, taking over the positions of housemaid, tutors, and chauffeur, the story suddenly spirals down as the Kims discover the former housemaid Moon-gwang’s secret: Moon-gwang’s husband, Geun-sae, has been living for years in the bunker—a legacy of the

Korean War—underneath the Parks’s house. *Parasite* has been critically acclaimed, winning four Oscars, one Golden Globe, and one BAFTA. Yet, the global praise for the film often overlooks US Cold War interventions and multilayered colonial histories in South Korea that are importantly represented, however briefly, in the film.

Many in the news and social media have interpreted the film as a story about the universality of capitalism. One of Bong’s most-quoted comments is from his acceptance speech at the Golden Globes. At the ceremony, Bong remarked in Korean, “Once you overcome the one-inch-tall barrier of subtitles, you will be introduced to so many more amazing films.”⁷ Switching back to English, Bong concluded, “I think we only use one language: the cinema.”⁸ Bong’s code switching between English and Korean, accompanied by Sharon Choi’s smooth translation, was interpreted by many in the audience as an invitation to cross the language barrier and view foreign-language films as a universal story comprehensible for all.⁹ This tendency to read *Parasite* as a universal story was reinforced by Bong’s comments in an interview. Answering the question about what makes *Parasite* specific to Korean culture yet universal, Bong explained that “Essentially, we all live in the same country called Capitalism.”¹⁰ Bong’s remark later became a viral meme as international audiences read *Parasite* as a critique of capitalism.

While the violence of capitalism is central to *Parasite*, reading the violence as a universal and recent phenomena risks erasing longer histories of capitalist development in Asia. Postwar economic development in Asia was implicated in US Cold War interventions and the Korean War served as a key engine enhancing the political economic significance of Asia. As Jodi Kim indicates, the Cold War was “one particular phase in the much more established Western trade wars in the globalization of capitalism and the competition for markets and resources both natural and human.”¹¹ Kim notes that such globalization of capitalism made Asia a significant region through neocolonial restoration of trades and reliance on military Keynesianism. The Korean War resolved post-World War II economic crisis by boosting Japan’s economy and increasing militarization. As Thomas J. McCormick points out, the Korean War inaugurated “the second Cold War, the Vietnam era, and the Long Boom.”¹² The war was part of two decades of rimland war through which the US fought to keep “the Asian periphery open to the Japanese economy and thus insure Japan’s retention as a functioning member of the world-system and, conversely, to prevent Japan from drifting into the Sino-Soviet external world.”¹³ Along with increasing militarization, the period coincided with and “helped produce the most sustained and profitable period of economic growth in the history of world capitalism.”¹⁴ Within this context, as I will elaborate further in my analysis of *Parasite*, the bunker underneath the Parks’s mansion points to the occluded role of the US in shaping South Korea’s postwar economic boom.

The focus on capitalism in *Parasite*’s reception reflects the difficulty of accounting for the continuation of the Korean War and post-Cold War economic liberalization. To highlight the traces of historical continuity in my reading of the film, I

borrow Yoneyama's account for the "transwar continuities" of US competition over discourses of anticolonialism during World War II and the Cold War Americanization of racial justice.¹⁵ In her investigation of post-1990s redress movements for Japanese colonial violence as a genealogy of how the US transformed into an empire for liberty, Yoneyama indicates that the Cold War persists through amnesia of US colonial violence. The Cold War's ruins, in Yoneyama's formulation, are "traces of geohistorical violence."¹⁶ In light of South Korea's comfort women redress activism, Yoneyama indicates that the activism's account of historical connectivity of Japanese colonial legacies, US Cold War political economy, uneven processes of industrialization, and suppression of progressive movements counters Cold War productions of history. Yoneyama's notion of Cold War ruins provides a deeper critique of the entangled pre-war colonialism, Cold War US hegemony, global capitalism and decolonization activism. Yoneyama's stress on "transwar connectivity" thus helps in reexamining the lack of attention to the traces of the Korean War and US presence in the reception of *Parasite*.¹⁷

In *Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics* (1996), Lisa Lowe argues that the distance between Asian American culture and national culture is not so much a failure of integration. On the contrary, this distance "preserves Asian American culture as an alternative site where the palimpsest of lost memories is reinvented, histories are fractured and retraced, and the unlike varieties of silence emerge into articulation."¹⁸ In defining Asian American culture as a site of critical memories and forgetting, Lowe's notion can be pushed further to apply to texts that critically represent "the palimpsest of lost memories."¹⁹ Furthermore, Lowe underlines that Asian Americans are "determined by the history of U.S. involvements in Asia and the historical racialization of Asians in the United States."²⁰ In highlighting US global interventions, Lowe indicates that Asian American critique is a method that contests US nationalist histories and instead attends to the mutually constitutive histories connecting the US and Asia.

Furthering Lowe's view, Jodi Kim reframes Asian American critique as an "unsettling hermeneutic," which for Kim functions as an interpretive method that aims to unsettle US nationalist histories and to read Asian American literature as critique of the genealogy of US empire rather than as a form of ethnic literature.²¹ By considering the Cold War not as a historical context but as an ongoing "knowledge project" that generates an ontology through which Asian Americans are known as an identity category whose history of formation is rendered irrelevant to US imperialist projects in Asia, Kim's reenvisioning of Asian American critique disrupts a US nationalist understanding of the Cold War.²² Kim's formulation of Asian American critique highlights the interconnected histories between the US and Asia, and the inadequacy of approaching Asian American as only an identity category situated in the context of the US civil rights movement.

The US discourses surrounding *Parasite* erase the intersected histories between South Korea and the US that Lowe and Kim point to. Reviews of *Parasite* in the US and

Asia can be roughly divided into two themes: a concern for Asian American representation and attention to economic disparity. Reviews that specially attend to issues of Asian American representation vary and do not present a coherent narrative. For some reviewers, the celebration of *Parasite* as an Asian American success risks perpetuating the myth of Asian Americans as permanent foreigners as well as ignoring Asian Americans' distinct sense of alienation in the US.²³ Other reviewers such as Eng-Beng Lim, however, see *Parasite* as a critical text for Asian American studies to broaden its scope of analysis instead of focusing solely on identity politics.²⁴ Still other Asian American reviewers see the film as a challenge to model minority discourse as well as a proof of Asian American long-term support for Korean cultural productions.²⁵ Some Korean American reviewers appreciate *Parasite* because it relates to their immigrant experiences.²⁶

Despite their different approaches to *Parasite*—addressing the issue of Asian American representation or offering an alternative Asian American critique of capitalism—these reviews share the tendency to obscure historical linkages between the US and South Korea in their discussions. South Korea, in these reviews, remains either as a country under capitalism like the US or as a place of origin for Korean Americans. That is, South Korea represented in *Parasite* is made legible to the US audience as either analogue to the US or rendered as a disparate site of cultural roots. In this framing, South Korea becomes a place without historical connections with the US.

Reviews not specifically concerned about Asian Americans tend to read the film as a portrayal of class conflicts. Yet in reading *Parasite* as a critique of capitalism, these reviews overlook how US postwar military and economic aid and the Vietnam War conditioned South Korean economic growth.²⁷ Erasing US interventions in Asia, this reading sustains what Jodi Kim calls an epistemological project of the Cold War. Such a Cold War lens is more explicit in the few reviews that do mention South Korea's complex colonial histories. For instance, reading *Parasite* as a story about “class set in an unequal country,” Bo Seo attributes South Korean economic disparity to the rapid economic growth in the wake of devastating Japanese colonialism and the Korean War.²⁸ Seo contextualizes the South Korean economic boom in the state's development strategy of rewarding the moneymakers. However, Seo overlooks that South Korea's development into an economic miracle is, as Bruce Cumings elucidates, implicated in US hegemony in Asia.²⁹

Reception in East Asia also tends to render US presence in *Parasite* absent. In general, reviews selected from Taiwan, Hong Kong, and China mainly focus on class and capitalism but also lack attention to shared inter-Asian colonial histories and US presence in Asia. Reviews in Taiwan and Hong Kong in particular tend to view *Parasite* as a representation of the underside of capitalism.³⁰ It is worth noting that compared with the reviews in the US, more reviews in East Asia mention US interventions in South Korea and its multilayered colonial histories. For example, Liu Hsin points out that Geun-sae's respect for the Park patriarch is a metaphor of the parasitic relation

between South Korea and the US after the Korean War. Liu observes, “[p]arasitic relation captures the current situation of South Korea, which cannot break away from US control Both South Korea and the US benefit from such a relation. Who is the real parasite?”³¹ More reviewers in China make sharp observations of the presence of the US and North Korea by attending to South Korea’s multilayered colonial histories.³² Contextualizing *Parasite* in US military occupation of South Korea after the Korean War, Mars contends that the film is not so much about class division as “parasitic relations between nations and contemporary Korean histories.”³³ Another Chinese reviewer, Kung Li, points out that the Parks not only represent capitalists but more specifically pro-US capitalists. Kung further indicates that the Park boy’s playing Indian is a metaphor of US colonization of Indigenous peoples and lands.³⁴

The discourses surrounding *Parasite* discussed above reveal that the Cold War, as Kim underlines, is not simply a historical context but also a lens through which US presence in Asia is rendered implicit. However, while the selected reviews in the US and Asia share a tendency to erase US presence in reading *Parasite*, such absence offers a space to examine the difficulty of grasping US Cold War interventions in Asia. As discussed above, some reviews, particularly in Asia, attend to the multilayered colonial histories of South Korea, thereby foregrounding the otherwise implicit US presence represented in *Parasite*. If the cultural archive of the Pax Americana in the Pacific and Asia demands, as Christine Hong underlines, “a flexible geopolitical reading practice that critically mirrors the supranational penetration of U.S. war and police power beyond and within U.S. territorial bounds as well as in sites not typically understood as arenas of war,” reading *Parasite* and its discourses as mutual historical resources for Asian American cultural critique generates a form of cultural archive of the entanglements between US hegemony and South Korean state violence.³⁵ In the following section, I adopt a geopolitical reading practice by analyzing how *Parasite* represents the afterlives of the Korean War *simultaneously* in the contexts of US Cold War military interventions and South Korea’s postwar economic development.

Reading Cold War Ruins in *Parasite*

To highlight the traces of US geohistorical violence in *Parasite*, I first situate my reading of Bong Joon-ho’s film in longer histories of the South Korean film industry in the 1950s and 1960s. In analyzing Bong’s *Memories of Murder* (2003) and *The Host* (2006), Christina Klein argues that Bong’s reworking of Hollywood genre conventions embodies “an ambivalent relationship to Hollywood that bears the marks of the equally ambivalent relationship between South Korea and the United States.”³⁶ Klein indicates that Bong’s hybrid aesthetic derives from the culturally and stylistically hybrid films of Korea’s Golden Age cinema in the mid-1950s. During the Golden Age, directors worked on USIS newsreels during the Korean War and enhanced their skills through the film technology and equipment provided by foreign aid programs after the war.³⁷ Bong, growing up watching Hollywood films on the Armed Forces Korea Network, is influ-

enced by such a stylistic hybrid tradition, which is entangled with US military interventions in Korea. As Klein indicates, Bong's cinematic style derives from a historical continuity of "an ongoing desire among filmmakers to grapple with the costs and consequences of Korea's experience of modernization."³⁸

While not totally determined by US interventions in Korea, the development of the South Korean film industry is embedded in state policies of South Korean regimes and Cold War US military occupation and anticommunist ideology. In her investigation of postwar South Korean films as an instrument of propaganda and resistance to military and civilian governments, Sueyoung Park-Primiano points out that "at no time in the history of Korea since 1945 has the local film industry not been under military and authoritarian control, that is, not until the 1990s that witnessed another rebirth of the South Korean cinema to expand beyond the national borders into Asian and Western territories."³⁹ From 1945 to 1950, at the request of the temporary United States military government, Korean filmmakers produced newsreels and "Liberation films," which were based on themes of Korea's liberation from Japan and patriotism.⁴⁰ During the Korean War, most filmmakers and cinematographers were trained in military-based documentary production and became active in commercial film production after the war. In the 1960s and the 1970s, the South Korean film industry experienced restrictive policies implemented by the US-backed military regimes. Drawing on ideologies of "developmentalism, anticommunism, industrialization, and national security," the Park Chung Hee regime strengthened censorship and enacted the Motion Picture Law in 1962.⁴¹ The law was based on Motion Picture Regulations and Motion Picture Approval that came into being "during the nine-year period that the United States military government had controlled film-related regulation."⁴² Ae-Gyung Shim notes that under the regime's anticommunist policy, filmmakers of anticommunist war films developed genre-blending traditions to accommodate the nation's anticommunist ideology while taking advantage of popular commercial Hollywood-genre filmmaking. Shim indicates that the adoption of varied genre conventions to negotiate "political and commercial agendas" paved the way to the hybrid filmmaking practice of the New Korean Cinema in the 1980s.⁴³ With the increasing public discontent with the military regime and growing anti-American sentiment critical of US support of Chun Doo-hwan's dictatorship in the 1980s, filmmaking constituted part of a cultural movement called the *minjung* movement and attended to social inequality. Terming the New Wave filmmaking in the 1980s and the 1990s as "a second South Korean film *renaissance*," Jinhee Choi points out that there is "a continuity between these two cultural eras in that the reimagining of the national divide persists in contemporary South Korean cinema, although in a weakened and commercialized form."⁴⁴ Placed in histories of US postwar interventions and the successive South Korean regimes, the development of the South Korean film industry cannot be understood in isolation from broader Cold War politics.

Klein's analysis of Bong's film style elucidates the significance of reading Bong's social critique in his films, which must be read in a historical continuity of South Korea's

grappling with modernization, of which the US has been an integral part. Furthering Klein's analysis, I contend that in addition to style, Bong's social critique in *Parasite* should be placed in longer histories of US–Korea relations. Critics have indicated that Bong's previous films, such as *The Host*, subvert narratives of Korean capitalist development as a peaceful process through foregrounding the ongoing US military presence and the underlying violence of South Korea's authoritarian past.⁴⁵ Critics have also analyzed the success of Bong's films as a case of "localized globalization" of the South Korean film industry's mobilization of nationalist sentiment and reorganization of the industry.⁴⁶ While discussing *Parasite* in relation to Bong's larger oeuvre offers insight of trajectories of Bong's critique of US imperialism, in this essay I focus on *Parasite* to better analyze how its comparatively more implicit US presence illustrates the difficulty of knowing Cold War afterlives in postwar Asia. Critics tend to see *Parasite* as a departure from Bong's previous films in terms of the shift of focus from an explicit US-Korea government system of power to neoliberalism. Nam Lee, for instance, reads *Parasite* as a "new beginning" that illustrates "a social commentary and a warning about the possibility of the total catastrophe neoliberal capitalism might cause on a global scale."⁴⁷ However, the economic disparity in *Parasite* can be traced to South Korea's rapid industrialization and how the US secured its economic interests through supporting South Korean military regimes since the 1950s.

In post-Japanese colonial years, the South Korean economy depended on a private monopolistic capitalist class that relied on US aid. In the 1950s, the Park Chung Hee regime revived the economy through foreign loans. Against the background of the anti-Japan sentiment of the South Korean public—and the ongoing student movements—the regime boosted the domestic economy by pushing through the 1965 Korea–Japan agreement and dispatching troops to Vietnam. In return, the Park regime secured loans from the US as well as a "rapid capital accumulation in the field of light industry through the ensuing special procurement boom for the Vietnamese conflict."⁴⁸ In the 1960s and 1970s, South Korea experienced rapid economic growth through economic development plans that embraced an export-oriented economy, subordinating the country's economy to foreign loans from the US and Japan. Meanwhile, the large-scale import of US surplus agricultural products destroyed South Korea's rural economy, precipitating to a significant extent the 1980 Gwangju Uprising and the following democratization movements. As Ahn Jean underscores, South Korea's high growth in the 1960s was based on "cheap labor and a low grain price policy, which brought about the impoverishment of the rural economy and deepened the relative poverty of the working class."⁴⁹

The rapid industrialization in the 1970s also significantly changed South Korea's class structure, which saw the growth of the monopolistic capitalist class and the working class and a decrease in the farming class. Myung-Ji Yang observes that the deepened social inequality in the 1970s was driven by the state strategy of nurturing chaebols and maintaining cheap labor.⁵⁰ While the income levels for the whole population seemed to increase, the state policy of unequal distribution widened the

gulf between the rich and the poor. Moreover, the Park regime suppressed oppositional movements by stigmatizing activists as communist radicals and part of a North Korean threat. As Yang indicates, “[b]y constantly mobilizing the threat of invasion from North Korea, the state capitalized upon the uneasiness of the population and made them feel powerless during a time of a crisis.”⁵¹ Such unequal economic distribution seeded anti-Americanism and neoliberalism in the 1980s. As Georgy Katsiaficas points out, during the 1980s the US supported liberalization of the South Korean economy while constraining political liberalization to maintain economic stability for foreign investment.⁵²

The legacies of US interventions in South Korea continued to shape neoliberalization and class restructuring in the late 1980s and the Asian financial crisis that followed in the 1990s. With the fall of the Soviet Union and the weakening of democratization movements, post-Cold War South Korea witnessed the emergence of a “pro-US, pro-capitalist tendency packaged as if it were the only alternative.”⁵³ With the launch of the World Trade Organization in 1995, the Kim Young Sam administration relaxed financial regulations to attract foreign loans. However, the sudden surge of transnational capital led to an overheated economy and the 1997 financial crisis. The US blocked South Korea from obtaining loans from Japan and forced the intervention of the International Monetary Fund. The IMF restructured South Korean industries to cater to the free market, which resulted in mass lay-offs and an increase in irregular workers and precarious work. Liberalization of the market furthered with the Korea–US Free Trade Agreement in 2007. Despite South Koreans strongly resisting the Free Trade Agreement, the Noh Moo-hyn government pushed forward the passage “not only for economic reasons, but also in an attempt to take advantage of the US political–military strategy of blocking China.”⁵⁴ The ongoing US military occupation played a significant role in the rushed passage of the Free Trade Agreement because of a “US-friendly ideology” and “belief in the supremacy of the US and resignation that it is inevitable for the sake of the South Korean–US alliance.”⁵⁵ As Jodi Kim points out, US militarist settler imperialism imposes metapolitical authority through “debt imperialism,” which installs a financial and affective economy that compels nations and vulnerable populations to go into debt.⁵⁶ Economically, the colonized are turned into the indebted who “must pay it back at often-usurious interest rates under threat of discipline and punishment and the imperial protocols of international financial institutions such as the IMF or the gendered racial predatory lending practices of banks and payday lenders.”⁵⁷ Additionally, debt imperialism extends colonial relationships with the US military occupation of territories in Asia and the Pacific by imposing an indebted subjectivity on those who owe their liberation and security to the US.

The class conflicts represented in *Parasite* cannot be understood properly without accounting for broader contexts of neoliberalism in South Korea and the significance of the South Korean middle class to South Korea’s postwar nation-building. The rise and downfall of the middle class is embedded in the South Korean government’s attempt to rebuild a national identity and to distance itself from the

nation's authoritarian past. Tracking the downfall of the South Korean middle class in the twentieth century to the 1960s, Myungji Yang indicates that the South Korean middle class is a key national project for the Park Chung Hee regime after the Korean War. The middle class was part of the regime's project of remaking a national identity against "Westernization and foreign powers as well as communism."⁵⁸ As Yang points out, "[s]ocially responsible and politically compliant, the middle class was an ideal partner for the authoritarian state, which wanted to promote rapid economic growth without disrupting social stability."⁵⁹ With the regime's promotion of heavy industries and expansion of chaebols in the 1970s, educated white-collar workers emerged as an urban middle class representing "a self-sufficient economy, modernization of the fatherland, and national revival."⁶⁰ As South Korea experienced neoliberalization in the 1990s, the middle class was promoted to shift the focus of social movements in the 1980s to liberal values. In examining South Korea's transformation into a neoliberal welfare state in the post-Asian financial crisis era, Jesook Song underlines that a key context for the neoliberal turn is the transition to the Kim Dae Jung presidency (1998–2003). As a key figure of the democratic movement in 1987, the Kim Dae Jung government was driven by "the necessity of establishing a capitalist state regime distinct from the authoritarian legacy of the developmental state."⁶¹ The other key context is the coeval process of democratization after 1987. Song observes that, as social movements shifted to civil movements in the postdictatorship era, activism turned to individualist values and positioned the middle class as the legitimate object of social activism. Song indicates that the post-1987 era is an "epistemological transition" to aspiration for liberal values.⁶² As Song explicates, "Korean people who lived through the democratization movements strongly aspired to a liberal ideal of less state intervention and more individual freedom; thus the democratized era provided an opportunity to explore such freedom both within and outside social activism, as both consumers and entrepreneurs."⁶³ Song's account of South Korea's democratization and liberalization as coeval processes points out that neoliberalism in South Korea is part of the genealogy of US imperialism in Asia. Situated in the continued US military presence and South Korean democratic movements, neoliberalism in South Korea can be reviewed as an unfinished decolonization process hijacked by economic liberalization.

Placed in these contexts, the class conflicts in *Parasite* thus cannot be easily read as a new phenomenon of neoliberalism. Although the film does not explicitly depict the histories of US interventions, the representation of economic disparity cannot be understood without accounting for the complex US–Korean relations. Two scenes in the film foreground such historical traces. The first scene is the revelation of the secret basement. The juxtaposition of the Kims's semi-basement and the secret basement where the former housemaid Moon-gwang hides her husband leads viewers to see their shared economic position. However, the spatial parallel between the two basements cannot be easily read as shared economic struggles because Moon-gwang reveals that the basement is a secret bunker built in rich households "in case North

Korea attacks, or if creditors break in.”⁶⁴ Moon-gwang further explains that the bunker is kept secret even from the Parks because the former house owner and architect, Namgoong, was “a bit embarrassed about this.”⁶⁵ This scene of sudden revelation is important in that it makes explicit the ongoing Korean War that is otherwise obscured. Moreover, the historical reference to the militarized basis underlying the mansion indicates that the Parks’s wealth is not simply based on transnational capital but also on a militarized economy heavily implicated in US military interventions in South Korea. Rather than a general class clash that results from capitalism, the bunker reveals deeper histories of militarized economy implicated in US Cold War interventions in Asia. The implicit US military presence in the film and the more explicit depiction of capitalism reflect how the Korean War is rendered as a forgotten war. Underlining that the Korean War is “a protean structure, at once generative and destructive,” Christine Hong indicates that war is crucial to US empire-building and global capitalist hegemony.⁶⁶ The Korean War, Hong underscores, has “fostered a formidable, crisis-generating, self-perpetuating, institutional architecture—the national security state, the military industrial complex, and the perpetual war economy, all cushioned within a self-serving regime of forgetting.”⁶⁷

The other scene is where the Kims and Moon-gwang and her husband finally encounter in the secret basement. The scene illustrates longer histories of South Korea’s class restructuring through the two families’ shared experiences as failed middle class. It is worth noting that the Kims and the Moon-gwang couple meet in the bunker, which gestures to how the Korean War restructures South Korea’s postwar economy and class structure. As Moon-gwang begs for Mrs. Kim’s mercy, Geun-sae recalls “[m]y Taiwanese Wangshui castella shop went bust. I was overwhelmed by debt.”⁶⁸ Geun-sae’s memories reveal that he shares with Mr. Kim, whose fried chicken shop and Taiwanese castella shop failed within six months, the experience of losing one’s middle-class status.⁶⁹ While the failed small businesses imply the aftermath of the 1997 financial crisis, the bunker as the site of revelation of the shared memories points to the entangled histories of the Korean War and postwar South Korean state’s construction of the middle class. As discussed above, the rise and downfall of the South Korean middle class are part of the historical process of South Korea’s postwar nation-building and neoliberalization, in which the US has been involved. In uncovering the shared experiences of downward mobility in the bunker, the scene foregrounds how the obscured afterlives of the Korean War continue to shape postwar economic disparity and class restructuring in South Korea.

In addition to illustrating the conditions of the making of the South Korean middle class, the scene also positions Mr. Kim and Geun-sae’s shared precarious middle-class status in the obscured historical linkage between the Korean War and neoliberalism in South Korea. It is worth noting that the Parks live in a mansion rather than an apartment. The mansion’s hidden bunker foregrounds the conditions of the soaring housing prices otherwise obscured by the absence of such a space in apartments. The emergence of apartments as a symbol of middle-class lifestyle is

entwined with postwar state–chaebol complicity in the explosion of the real estate market since the 1960s. According to Yang, in the 1970s state-sponsored home ownership programs significantly elevated the nascent urban middle class’s living standard. As the state implemented massive apartment complex construction projects targeting affluent families, chaebols profited from land speculation through obtaining confidential information from state officials. With state policies such as the 1977 lottery system favoring the middle and upper middle class and developers, affordable housing became unobtainable for the lower-income classes. Moreover, as the residents of apartments became mostly educated, middle-class families, apartments became a symbol of “‘civilization’ and modernity, an advance on old and dusty traditional neighborhoods.”⁷⁰ Unlike apartments, which obscure the material conditions of the South Korean middle class, the Parks’s mansion reveals the erased reality of social inequality produced by US military interventions and postwar Korean state-chaebol alliance.

In addition to the bunker, traces of the unending Korean War can be seen in the absent presence of North Korea in the film. As Hong points out, the Korean War is an “unending” structure that renders militarization as quotidian while generating a knowledge project that forgets US Cold War interventions.⁷¹ For instance, when Ki-woo’s father, Ki-taek, is interviewed during the test drive, Park Dong-ik is impressed with his familiarity with the roads and ability to drive without a GPS. Ki-taek proudly replies, “Anything below the 38th parallel.”⁷² While Ki-taek’s comment might be interpreted as nothing but a joke, what makes this joke work is the ongoing tension between North Korea and South Korea. Furthermore, Ki-taek’s lack of knowledge about anything above the 38th parallel suggests how the Korean War perpetuates an epistemological project that obscures US interventions in creating North Korea in the first place.

The presence of North Korea gestures to the continuation of war and violence even though there is no military battle in the film. The ongoing wartime is reinforced later in the scene where Moon-gwang and her husband threaten to expose the Kims’s secret to the Parks. Poised to send the Kims’s video with a touch on the smartphone, Moon-gwang’s husband remarks, “[i]f we threaten to push it, those people can’t do anything. It’s like a North Korean rocket. A North Korean missile button!”⁷³ Moon-gwang carries on her husband’s comparison by imitating the famous North Korean news anchor Ri Chun-hee. She announces, “[t]herefore our Great Leader in this age of denuclearization has commanded that the nation’s last remaining nuclear warhead be driven down the throats of this wicked family!”⁷⁴ While this scene is often read as hilarious or simply ignored in the selected reviews, it crucially reveals that the seeming peace at the Parks’s mansion is not simply based on class hierarchy and working-class labor but also on a nuclearized tension between the North and the South. In addition to making visible the obscured wartime, the scene also elucidates how the Korean War transforms into a structure obstructing an otherwise possible class alliance between the Kims and Moon-gwang and her husband. Rather than recognizing their shared

position under South Korea's militarized economy, the two families' competition over surviving capitalism cannot generate a shared class consciousness. Instead, the scene poignantly represents how such potential class alliance is displaced and transformed into militarized tensions among the South Korean working class. The violence between the two families thus provides a space to see how the Korean War is perpetuated through "an inversion of cause and effect that enables its present-day consequences, including North Korea's steps in the past half-decade toward nuclear self-defense, to be decontextualized as 'provocations' that call out for potentially catastrophic preemptive violence."⁷⁵

The following scenes further uncover how such militarized tensions undergird the aesthetics of the mansion. Reprimanding the Kims for creating a mess in "this home suffused with Mr. Namgoong's creative spirit," Moon-gwang bursts out "[w]hat do you know about art?"⁷⁶ The scene then cuts to Moon-gwang's husband's reflection on a day when the couple basked in the sunbeams in the spacious living room while dancing and drinking tea. Moon-gwang's husband remarks, "[a]t such moments we could feel his artistic touch."⁷⁷ In solely focusing on the aesthetics of the house, the couple decontextualizes the home from the unsettling history of the bunker. Their identification with Mr. Namgoong, who was "embarrassed" about the bunker, suggests how the Korean War is buried by dehistoricized art.⁷⁸ Despising the Kims's ignorance of art, the couple transform their appreciation of Namgoong into a form of cultural capital that ultimately forgets the military violence on which the house was founded. Their aspiration for a cultured middle-class lifestyle also resonates with the Park Chung Hee regime's promotion of the middle class as a "political and cultural project."⁷⁹ As Yang notes, the project celebrated "modern, 'civilized' middle-class lifestyle" as "evidence of successful economic development and material progress" that ultimately justified the regime.⁸⁰ The fighting scene immediately following Moon-gwang's flashback gestures to the underlying Cold War tensions that constantly threaten to subvert the seeming peace.

In addition to being converted into cultural capital, the Korean War is also displaced by a desire for capital and economic mobility. Juxtaposed with Moon-gwang's admiration of art is her husband's identification with Park Dong-ik. During his confrontation with Geun-sae, Ki-taek is shocked by the former's daily ritual of paying respect to Park Dong-ik by sending a Morse Code message with the lights in the hallway. Geun-sae proudly tells Ki-taek that the encoded message is "Mr. Park, you feed me and house me. Respect!"⁸¹ Geun-sae's message, however, is never delivered to Mr. Park, who simply thinks the flickering light is broken. Unnoticed by Mr. Park, Geun-sae's labor in producing the military-coded message is erased. Using a militarized language and gesture to pay respect to Park Don-ik, who represents the figure of a successful capitalist, Geun-sae's daily ritual is a conundrum for Ki-taek. However, when placed in the context of the unending Korean War, Geun-sae's ritual elucidates the conversion of militarized language into capitalist modernity. The Korean War and US Cold War interventions in Asia are rendered implicit by East Asian nations such as South Korea's economic

success in the postwar era. As Hong points out, incorporated into a progressive economic narrative, Americans' "vaunted 'bonds forged in blood' with their South Korean ally are naturalized in a triumphalist account of South Korea's capitalist modernity; those on the receiving end of US aggression, both north and south of the 38th parallel, see, by contrast, a 'single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage and hurls it in front of [their] feet.'" ⁸² In making visible such militarized language underlying the Parks's wealth, this scene illustrates how militarization is rendered implicit by capitalism. Moreover, responding to Ki-taek's bewilderment, Geun-sae replies, "[s]omeone of your age should know [Morse code]." ⁸³ This reference to the shared language of the Korean War generation significantly links the bunker and the Kims's semi-basement not simply through class hierarchy. Rather, it reveals that both the Kims and the Moon-gwang couple share an economic position deeply embedded in militarized economy.

In addition to elucidating the obscured militarized economy, Guen-sae's daily worship also highlights another invisible presence of the US. Shouting "Respect" in English rather than in Korean, Guen-sae draws attention to the absent presence of the US throughout the film. Just as militarization is rendered invisible, the US is also rendered implicit by aspiration for economic mobility. One example of the absent presence of the US is the scene where the Kim siblings review their fake profiles before meeting Mrs. Park for an interview. Before they ring the doorbell, the siblings hum a tune with adapted lyrics: "Jessica, only child, Illinois Chicago, classmate Kim Jin-mo, he's your cousin." ⁸⁴ On one level, in adopting an English name and forged American credentials to gain the Parks's trust, the Kim siblings show that the US is transformed into an object of aspiration. On another level, this scene also reveals how the Cold War obstructs decolonization because the tune is a well-known Korean song called "Dokdo is Our Land." The 1982 song promotes Korean sovereignty over Dokdo, which is an island in the Sea of Japan. While South Korea controls the island, sovereignty over the island has been contested by Japan. The lyrics of the song claim Korean sovereignty over the island by referring to Japanese colonial histories. However, such attention to Japanese colonialism is displaced by the Kim siblings' new lyrics. The replacement of Americanness with memories of Japanese colonialism gestures to the postwar shift to US hegemony.

The US presence also transforms into a figure of modernity in the film. An indication of this are the controversial scenes of appropriation of Indigenous culture throughout the film, such as Da-song's obsession with the replica of a Native American headdress and tepee. The appropriation of Indigenous culture not only shows the Parks's obliviousness to the settler-colonial histories underlying the products, just like their obliviousness to the working-class labor that sustains their daily life. Furthermore, the repeated misuse of Indigenous cultural works reinforces the vision of the US as a figure of progress. In response to her husband's concern about the quality of the tepee, Mrs. Park assures him that "[w]e ordered from the US. It will be fine." ⁸⁵ Standing alone in the Parks's spacious backyard, the tepee shines like a colorful

decoration in the dark. While the tepee seems small and out of reach, it is framed by the screen and the floor-to-ceiling window as the focal point symbolizing the Parks's possession. Mrs. Park's comment further frames the tepee as a property illuminating American progress. Decontextualized from Indigenous culture, the tepee is recontextualized as a symbol of the Parks's wealth and cultural capital representing American modernity. Cherokee critic Shea Vassar notes, "[t]hough clever in the execution, this element only works if the audience, from any cultural background including Korean or American, are educated on the historical oppression and legal genocide that has occurred in the United States."⁸⁶ Vassar thus suggests that while *Parasite* foregrounds traces of US hegemony, it is difficult for the audience to grapple with the US as a settler state.

Indeed, as Vassar indicates, with the audience's lack of knowledge about US settler-colonial histories and Indigenous histories, the recurring Indigenous theme may be simply read as a symbol of Americanness. In Bong's interviews, he discusses how the Indigenous commodity shows the Parks's ignorance of the complex histories behind the products. Bong remarks, "[a]nd so basically, she purchased all these Native American goods from Amazon, and it's kind of like how a lot of people wear those [Native American] T-shirts—it's like a piece of fashion. And the actual history of Native Americans is very complicated, but the mother and the boy don't care about the complexity at all."⁸⁷ In addition to the teepee reducing Native Americans' "very complicated and long, deep history," Bong further notes that the Native American theme in *Parasite* cannot be "a commentary on what happened in the United States, but it's related in the sense that this family starts infiltrating the house and they already find a family living there."⁸⁸ In making Indigenous subjects an analogy to the family in the bunker, Bong's comment problematically casts Indigenous peoples as a floating metaphor—an erasure that Jodi Byrd terms as transit.⁸⁹ Also, in positioning the Kims as the settlers, Bong overlooks that the Parks also indirectly participate in US settler colonialism as they benefit from the South Korean militarized economy conditioned by US Cold War interventions.

However, if we also account for the longer histories of the emergence of the South Korean middle class, the representation of Indigenous culture in *Parasite* foregrounds the difficulty of grasping the at times implicit US presence in East Asia. As discussed earlier, apartments as a symbol of modern middle-class lifestyle are a historical outcome of the US-backed regime's project of recovering from the Korean War. Apartments also became vehicles through which residents distinguished themselves from the less privileged. Yang indicates that those excluded were "natives" (wŏnjumin), those who had lived in the neighborhood before apartments were built."⁹⁰ Involved in low-waged occupations, the original residents were stigmatized as "poor, uneducated, and uncultured."⁹¹ It is precisely such a tendency to overlook the US as an absent presence that makes *Parasite* a productive text to rethink the complex interconnections between the US and Asia. Rather than representing explicit US military occupation in South Korea, *Parasite* illustrates neocolonial relations with

Asia in the postwar era. If the US, as Setsu Shigematsu and Keith L. Camacho point out, “defined its national interests not along the borders of the continental United States but in Asia and the Pacific,” reading the Cold War’s ruins in *Parasite* helps us to address otherwise unrecognized inter-Asian and transpacific linkages that constitute as well as challenge the boundaries of intersecting empires.⁹²

My reading of *Parasite* has tried to highlight the Cold War’s ruins in the film, including literal ruins such as the bunker and more implicit ruins such as references to the Korean War haunting the characters. My analysis so far has tried to make explicit the traces of geohistorical violence in *Parasite*. Yet, Yoneyama also notes that when critically illuminated, ruins are “repositories of debris that in the present offer wisdom associated with failed strategies, unrealized possibilities, and paths that could have but were never taken.”⁹³ In this framing, ruins are potential ways for envisioning alternative futures. To conclude this essay, I would like to read the final scenes of *Parasite* in this line of ruins.

Parasite ends with Ki-woo’s and Ki-taek’s divergent envisioning of capitalism. A key turning point is Da-song’s birthday party. The party turns into a gruesome mayhem as Geun-sae, seeking to avenge Moon-gwang, attacks the Kims. The scene shocks the guests while giving Da-song another seizure. Meanwhile, witnessing her daughter’s death, Chung-sook fatally stabs Geun-sae with a barbecue skewer. Upon seeing the dying Geun-sae, Mr. Park reacts to his smell with disgust and orders Ki-taek to drive Da-song to the hospital. Mr. Park’s revulsion at the dying Geun-sae’s smell kills Ki-taek’s dream of economic uplift. Mr. Park’s revulsion alerts Ki-taek that no matter how well he plays a “bad Indian” with his employer, he will never be rid of the smell that “crosses the line.”⁹⁴ By stabbing Mr. Park, Ki-taek critically aligns with Geun-sae’s class position as he refuses to pay respect to the capitalist. In contrast, Ki-woo clings to the failed dream of becoming a successful entrepreneur as the film ends poignantly in the semi-basement. As Ju-Hyun Park indicates, this failed dream critically questions positioning capitalism as the only solution while suggesting that “the liberation of Korea flows through the liberation of all peoples from capitalism and colonialism.”⁹⁵

Ki-taek’s critical disidentification with capitalism further challenges Cold War militarized division. It is worth noting that Ki-woo’s failed dream is interwoven with Ki-taek’s letter to his son. While the letter is coded in Morse Code, this use of militarized language significantly departs from Geun-sae’s respectful tribute to Mr. Park. Rather than adopting the militarized language to aspire to economic mobility, Ki-taek seeks possible connection with his son in the future as he writes, “maybe someday you’ll see it.”⁹⁶ In this sense, the militarized language—ruins of the ongoing Korean War—becomes a way to build intimacy. This intimacy is significant not simply on a private level because the letter also enables communication between those living in the bunker and those living in the semi-basement. This communication and intimacy were not realized, as we have seen previously how the two families residing in these two spaces enact militarized tensions between North Korea and South Korea. Furthermore, in remembering Moon-gwang’s name in the letter and offering her a proper

burial instead of aspiring to take over the mansion, Ki-taek's letter generates a form of intimacy that is not limited to his family but extends to care for others who were rendered as war enemies. The militarized code used to produce the letter reminds us of how such intimacies are made possible by US transpacific militarization, thereby making explicit the otherwise obscured intimate histories entwining the US and Asia.⁹⁷ Reading such intimacies between subjects occupying seemingly unrelated positions and between seemingly distinct continents in *Parasite* thus offers us a form of what Kaplan calls "transnational historiographies and cartographies" that allow us to rethink US imperialism in Asia.⁹⁸

Notes

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¹ Amy Kaplan, "Violent Belongings and the Question of Empire Today: Presidential Address to the American Studies Association, October 17, 2003," *American Quarterly* 56, no.1 (2004): 7, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40068211>

² Kaplan, "Violent Belongings," 7.

³ See Viet Thanh Nguyen and Janet Hoskins, "Introduction: Transpacific Studies: Critical Perspectives on an Emerging Field," in *Transpacific Studies: Framing an Emerging Field*, ed. Janet Hoskins and Viet Thanh Nguyen (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2014), 1–38, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvsrfxo>; Yên Lê Espiritu, Lisa Lowe, and Lisa Yoneyama. "Transpacific Entanglements," in *Flashpoints for Asian American Studies*, ed. Cathy J. Schulund-Vials (New York: Fordham University Press, 2018), 175–89; and Lisa Yoneyama, *Cold War Ruins: Transpacific Critique of American Justice and Japanese War Crimes* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016).

⁴ Nguyen and Hoskins, "Introduction: Transpacific Studies: Critical Perspectives on an Emerging Field," 24.

⁵ Lisa Yoneyama, "Toward a Decolonial Genealogy of the Transpacific," *American Quarterly* 69, no. 3 (2017): 473, <https://doi.org/10.1353/aq.2017.0041>

⁶ Jodi Kim, *Settler Garrison: Debt Imperialism, Militarism, and Transpacific Imaginaries* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2022): 3.

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- ⁷ NBC, “Best Motion Picture, Foreign Language,” *YouTube*, January 5, 2020. <https://youtu.be/mX3obZolXoU>
- ⁸ NBC, “Best Motion Picture.”
- ⁹ In “South Korea’s *Parasite* Crashes the Subtitles Barrier” (2020), Thelma Adams quotes Rajendra Roy, who observes that *Parasite* is able to cross the language barrier because it represents “a story [the crisis of late-stage capitalism, which is a global phenomenon, and puts it in a microcosm of Korean society] that could have been told in any number of advanced countries.” *Parasite*, in this view, is foreign and yet universal for US audience to understand and relate. Thelma Adams, “South Korea’s *Parasite* Crashes the Subtitles Barrier,” *Variety*, February 3, 2020, <https://variety.com/2020/film/awards/south-koreas-parasite-crashes-the-subtitles-barrier-1203488979/>
- ¹⁰ Birth.Movies.Death, “Bong Joon-ho Discusses *Parasite*, Genre Filmmaking and the Greatness of Zodiac,” *YouTube*, October 16, 2019, <https://youtu.be/dXuXfgquwkM>
- ¹¹ Jodi Kim, *Ends of Empire: Asian American Critique and the Cold War* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), 24.
- ¹² Thomas J. McCormick, *America’s Half-Century: United States Foreign Policy in the Cold War and After*, 2nd ed. (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 99.
- ¹³ McCormick, *America’s Half-Century*, 100.
- ¹⁴ McCormick, *America’s Half-Century*, 99.
- ¹⁵ Lisa Yoneyama, *Cold War Ruins: Transpacific Critique of American Justice and Japanese War Crimes* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), 19.
- ¹⁶ Yoneyama, *Cold War Ruins*, 210.
- ¹⁷ Yoneyama, *Cold War Ruins*, 49.
- ¹⁸ Lisa Lowe, *Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996), 6.
- ¹⁹ Lowe, *Immigrant Acts*, 6.
- ²⁰ Lowe, *Immigrant Acts*, 16.
- ²¹ Jodi Kim, *Ends of Empire: Asian American Critique and the Cold War* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), 10.
- ²² Kim, *Ends of Empire*, 8.
- ²³ See Walter Chaw, “*Parasite* Won, but Asian-Americans Are Still Losing,” *The New York Times*, February 10, 2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/02/10/opinion/parasite-oscar-best-picture.html>

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- ²⁴ Lim argues that the representation of predicaments of capitalism in *Parasite* enables a transnational critique of global inequality. Lim contends that just like the capitalist crises in the film are not limited to South Korea, Asia/America should be understood as a geopolitical space to consider “inter-continental and inter-Asian predicaments that may in fact be countryless.” See Eng-Beng Lim, “Living in Parasite Country as Asian/American,” *BLARB*, February 24, 2020. <https://blog.lareviewofbooks.org/essays/living-parasite-country-asian-american/>
- ²⁵ Asian American critic Viet Thanh Nguyen celebrates the winning of *Parasite* by tweeting “‘We do not have enough movies about poor Asians ... who want to overthrow a system of global capitalism that enables the lifestyle of wealthy ... Asians who would be just as problematic if they were white.’ PARASITE! And the need for narrative plenitude.” See Kimmy Yam, “Asian American Members of the ‘Bong-hive’ Share Significance of *Parasite* Win,” *NBC*, February 10, 2020, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/asian-america/asian-american-members-bong-hive-share-significance-parasite-win-n1134256> See also Brian Hu, “Commentary: *Parasite* Became an Oscars Success Story Overnight Because of Years of Asian American Support,” *The San Diego Union Tribune*, February 13, 2020, <https://www.sandiegouniontribune.com/opinion/story/2020-02-13/parasite-oscar-bong-joon-ho-best-picture>
- ²⁶ See Mike Choi, “Thread by Mike Choi,” *Twitter*, February 10, 2020. <https://twitter.com/mechachoi/status/1226936856350056450?lang=en>; and Inkoo Kang, “Critic’s Notebook: The Liberating Power of the *Parasite* Oscar Win,” *The Hollywood Reporter*, February 10, 2020, <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/general-news/critics-notebook-liberating-power-parasite-oscar-win-2-1278595/>
- ²⁷ Bruce Cumings, *Parallax Visions: Making Sense of American-East Asian Relations at the End of the Century* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999). Cumings provides a succinct account of the different historical experiences of colonialism in Korea, Taiwan, and Vietnam. Cumings underlines that “postwar economic successes in northeast Asia have roots going back well before the Rostovian period of ‘taking-off’ in the early 1960s.” Cumings indicates that northeast Asian nations such as Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan are “semisovereign states” enmeshed in a US-dominant “hegemonic web.”
- ²⁸ Bo Seo, “*Parasite* and the Curse of Closeness,” *The Atlantic*, October 22, 2019, <https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2019/10/parasite-and-curse-closeness/600385/>
- ²⁹ Bruce Cumings, “The Origins and Development of the Northeast Asian Political Economy: Industrial Sectors, Product Cycles, and Political Consequences,” *International Organization* 38, no. 1 (1984): 1–40, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020818300004264>. Cumings underlines: “The United States, of course, did not just give military and economic aid to Taiwan and the ROK but deeply influenced economic programs and the societies themselves. Often it was difficult to know if natives or Americans were writing the plans and policies; the aid missions pushed through land reform on Taiwan and forced it through in Korea; here, in

short, was by far the best example in the world of what Wallerstein has called ‘development by invitation.’”

- ³⁰ The translation of the title of *Parasite* in Taiwan and Hong Kong already reveals a focus on class strife. In Taiwan, *Parasite* is translated as “寄生上流,” meaning “living on the upper class.” Similarly, the translation in Hong Kong is “上流寄生族,” meaning “parasite of the upper class.” See also Huang Hsiang [黃香], “*Parasite: Cohabitation of the Rich and Poor in Basement* [地下室貧富共生寄生上流],” *Funscreen*, June 26, 2019. http://www.funscreen.com.tw/review.asp?RV_id=3256 and Sunny Wu, “*Parasite: The Prevalence of Class Society* [上流寄生族——無形卻無處不在的階級社會],” *Medium*, July 1, 2019. <https://medium.com/@yhwusunny/%E4%B8%8A%E6%B5%81%E5%AF%84%E7%94%9F%E6%97%8F-parasite-%E7%84%A1%E5%BD%A2%E5%8D%BB%E7%84%A1%E8%99%95%E4%B8%8D%E5%9C%A8%E7%9A%84%E9%9A%8E%E7%B4%9A%E7%A4%BE%E6%9C%83-789e32926ea0>
- ³¹ Translation mine. The original text reads, “所謂寄生，就是不能擺脫其中的關係，也就是現在南韓無法擺脫美國控制的田地... 在韓美的關係中，雙方都互有好處，所以究竟誰才是真正的寄生蟲呢？” Liu Hsin [劉欣], “*Parasite: Not Simply a Class Issue* [上流寄生族：導演眼中豈止貧富階級問題？],” *Standnews*, June 21, 2019. <https://www.facebook.com/filmlover852/posts/873531159647417>
- ³² In China, *Parasite* is translated as “寄生蟲,” which literally means parasite.
- ³³ Translation mine. The original text reads, “這部電影講得不是”階級寄生”，而是”國家寄生”，這分明是一部韓國近代史。” See Mars, “*Parasite: Reflection on Painful Modern Korean Histories* [寄生蟲：韓國近代史的反思與慘痛，埋在心中那根最深的刺],” *Zhihu*, February 17, 2019, <https://zhuanlan.zhihu.com/p/88780326>
- ³⁴ Kung writes, “In some sense, the US is the largest colonial country in the world. The first generation of settlers in the US seized lands and resources through massacring Indigenous peoples.” Translation mine. The original text reads, “某種意義上，美國是世界上最大的殖民地國家，當年來到這片土地的人們，屠殺了原住民，獲得了大量廣闊的土地資源。” Kung Li [孔鯉], “*The Parasitic Korean Histories behind Parasite* [寄生蟲背後的韓國寄生史],” *Douban*, August 12, 2019, <https://movie.douban.com/review/10399910/>
- ³⁵ Christine Hong, *A Violent Peace: Race, U.S. Militarism, and Cultures of Democratization in Cold War Asia and the Pacific* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2020), 20.
- ³⁶ Christina Klein, “Why American Studies Needs to Think about Korean Cinema, or, Transnational Genres in the Films of Bong Joon-ho,” *American Quarterly* 60, no. 4 (2008): 872, <https://doi.org/10.1353/aq.0.0041>

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- ³⁷ For a more thorough study of Korean commercial films during the Golden Age, see Christina Klein, *Cold War Cosmopolitanism: Period Style in 1950s Korean Cinema* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2020).
- ³⁸ Klein, “Why American Studies Needs to Think about Korean Cinema,” 894.
- ³⁹ Sueyoung Park-Primiano, “South Korean Cinema Between the Wars: Screening Resistance and Containment under U.S. Intervention and Influence, 1945-60” (PhD diss., New York University, 2015), 346.
- ⁴⁰ See Eungjun Min, Jinsook Joo, and Han Ju Kwak, *Korean Film: History, Resistance, and Democratic Imagination* (Westport: Praeger, 2003), 39.
- ⁴¹ Min, Joo, and Kwak, *Korean Film*, 47.
- ⁴² Min, Joo, and Kwak, *Korean Film*, 47.
- ⁴³ Ae-Gyung Shim, “Anticommunist War Films of the 1960s and the Korean Cinema’s Early Genre-Bending Traditions,” *Acta Koreana* 14, no. 1 (2011): 179, <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/804803>. In *Cinema and the Cultural Cold War: US Diplomacy and the Origins of the Asian Cinema Network*, Sangjoon Lee argues that the emergence of the first intensive postwar film producers’ network in East Asia and Southeast Asia, that included among others the Philippines, Indonesia, South Korea, Japan, and Taiwan, was the product of US anticommunist cultural politics. US agencies, in particular the Asia Foundation, actively intervened in Asia’s film cultures and industries in the 1950s. The aim of the Asia Foundation was to “construct an alliance of anticommunist motion picture producers in Asia and to use the network as an anticommunist force to win the psychological war against the Soviet Union and China.” See Sangjoon Lee, *Cinema and the Cultural Cold War: US Diplomacy and the Origins of the Asian Cinema Network* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2020).
- ⁴⁴ Jinhee Choi, *The South Korean Film Renaissance: Local Hitmakers, Global Provocateurs* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2010), 6, 27.
- ⁴⁵ See Hye Seung Chung, “Monster and Empire: Bong Joon-ho’s *The Host* (2006) and the Question of Anti-Americanism,” *Oakland Journal* 20 (2011): 59–69, https://oakland.edu/Assets/Oakland/oujournal/files-and-documents/20_monster_and_empire.pdf. See also Jisung Catherine Kim, “The Intimacy of Distance: South Korean Cinema and the Conditions of Capitalist Individuation” (PhD diss., University of California, Berkeley, 2013).
- ⁴⁶ Nikki J. Y. Lee, “Localized Globalization and a Monster National: *The Host* and the South Korean Film Industry,” *Cinema Journal* 50, no. 3 (2011): 60, <https://doi.org/10.1353/cj.2011.0031>. Jinhee Choi argues that the 386 Generation directors, a generation of directors who went to college during the 1980s and experienced the drastic social change and relaxation on production by the new civilian government, borrow Hollywood film style and “utilize the unique aspects of Korean culture and history

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- for commercial gain.” See Jinhee Choi, *The South Korean Film Renaissance: Local Hitmakers, Global Provocateurs* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2010).
- ⁴⁷ Nam Lee, *The Films of Bong Joon Ho* (Rutgers, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2020), 139, 150.
- ⁴⁸ Ahn Jean, “The Socio-Economic Background of the Gwangju Uprising,” *New Political Science* 25, no. 2 (2003): 164, <https://doi.org/10.1080/07393140307187>
- ⁴⁹ Ahn, “The Socio-Economic Background of the Gwangju Uprising,” 165.
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- ⁹⁵ Ju-Hyun Park, “Reading Colonialism in *Parasite*,” *Tropics of Meta*, February 17, 2020. <https://tropicsofmeta.com/2020/02/17/reading-colonialism-in-parasite/>
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- ⁹⁷ I borrow the notion of intimacies from Lisa Lowe’s examination of the entwined histories of slavery, colonialism, imperial trades, and Western liberalism of Europe, Africa, Asia, and the Americas. Lowe uses the concept of intimacy as a “heuristic, and a means to observe the historical division of world processes into those that develop modern liberal subjects and modern spheres of social life, and those processes that are forgotten, cast as failed or irrelevant because they do not produce ‘value’ legible within modern classifications.” See Lisa Lowe, *The Intimacies of Four Continents* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015).
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