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Suhi Choi. *Embattled Memories: Contested Meanings in Korean War Memorials.*
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Memories, Meanings, and Memorials

The Korean War, in some ways more devastating than the war that followed in Vietnam, is relatively understudied in American history. Happening between two events that received at the time and continue even today to receive far more attention—WWII and the Vietnam War—the Korean War is remembered primarily as “the forgotten war.” Indeed, as Suhi Choi reminds us, “Unlike other wars, the Korean War resides not in the collective memory but in the collective amnesia of the American public consciousness” (p. 53). *Embattled Memories* thus serves as a welcome contribution to the study of the Korean War. At the same time, it also adds to the growing area of memory and memorialization studies. Choi, associate professor of communication at the University of Utah in Salt Lake City, describes herself as “a part of the postwar generation of the Korean Peninsula” and was educated both in Korea and the United States (p. xi). She is well positioned for the tasks she undertakes in this volume.

Using five distinct sites of memory located in Korea and the United States as case studies, Choi “examines the collective memory of the Korean War” (p. xi). These sites include textual, cinematic, and physical representations of traditional monument structures. As indicated by the book’s subtitle, *Contested Meanings in Korean War Memorials*, Choi represents these sites as places of struggle between dominant and counter memories of the Korean War. The sites represent “the ways in which diverse narratives” compete for hegemony in our acts of

remembering” (p. xi). Her approach is similar to that of authors who have tackled issues around the Vietnam War Veterans Memorial in Washington, DC, specifically Maria Sturken (*Tangled Memories: The Vietnam War, the AIDS Epidemic, and the Politics of Remembering*, 1997) and Kristin Hass (*Carried to the Wall: American Memory and the Vietnam Veterans Memorial*, 1998). In many ways, issues surrounding memory of the Vietnam War, which have been explored far more extensively than memories of the Korean War, serve as models for several of the sites about which Choi writes.

The first two chapters of *Embattled Memories* deal with the atrocity at No Gun Ri, an incident frighteningly predictive of the My Lai killings that occurred in Vietnam less than twenty years later. At No Gun Ri, US soldiers massacred several hundred South Korean civilians (largely women and children) in July 1950. While it is unclear exactly what occurred, it is known that the victims were taking refuge under a bridge, and the US troops (purportedly thinking they were the enemy) fired on them. Unlike My Lai, the incident at No Gun Ri did not come to general attention until almost fifty years later, in 1999. As Choi points out, this is because “My Lai was told through pictures, whereas No Gun Ri was recalled through oral testimonies.” The coverage of the No Gun Ri incident had no similar eyewitness photo” (p. 9). Choi goes on to compare US press coverage of this atrocity with oral testimony she elicited from survivors, women

who managed to escape the massacre. Her point in doing so is to give voice to the previously voiceless and to decenter the dominant narrative, as she states, "by unearthing plausible narratives from the silenced, forgotten, yet enduring repositories of counter-memories" (p. 29).

In the third chapter, Choi moves from text to moving images. She cites "the absence of iconic images of this period in history" as one of the factors leading to the general "forgotten" nature of the Korean War. One could argue that in fact there are many iconic images from this war, for example David Douglas Duncan's moving portraits of marines such as Captain Ike Fenton. However, these images have lost their specificity in terms of time or location. Choi notes the general paucity of American cultural productions dealing with the Korean War. Much of what does exist tends to accord with official narratives. In this chapter, Choi "undertakes a textual analysis of *Battle for Korea*" a Public Broadcasting System (PBS) documentary film produced in 2001 (p. 56). Of particular interest to Choi are two factors: first, the presumed authority of PBS as "the producer of somewhat authentic representations of historical as well as cultural events" (pp. 56-57). Second, through its use of archival, previously unseen images of the war, the documentary creates the sense of cultural and political credibility as it presents "the truth." Choi maintains convincingly that this film also maintains the dominant and hegemonic view of the Korean War. Moreover, in another echo of American approaches to the Vietnam War, the film presents a story in which Americans and American lives are front and center. Choi exhorts us to "critically deconstruct historical texts that the media structure and circulate" to find possible counter-narratives embraced in archives from the past (p. 69). Choi is not alone in examining the role of the use of archival material in cultural productions. A similar process is taking place within modern art—for example, in the catalog and exhibition, *Archive Fever: Uses of the Document in Contemporary Art* (2008). The title of this exhibition references the Jacques Derrida work *Archive Fever* (1996); in both cases, as is the case with Choi, readers are prompted to investigate the use (or misuse) of archival materials in the construction of cultural memory.

In the last two chapters of *Embattled Memories*, Choi considers two particular Korean War memorials: the Utah Korean War Memorial in Salt Lake City (erected 2003) and the statue of Douglas MacArthur in Jayu Park in Incheon City, South Korea (1957). The juxtaposition of these two memorials is telling. The memorial in Utah is

seen as typical of later memorials to the Korean War in the United States that embodied three "myths" about the war created fifty years previously and identified by Choi as "resilience, local pride, and the good war" (p. 73). Choi also tackles the coupling during the 1950s of McCarthyism with the Korean War as a fight against communism. She also draws the inevitable parallels between the realities of Korea with those of Vietnam, since both were areas of intervention by the United States. Ultimately, for Choi, the Utah Korean War Memorial, insofar as it continues to reflect uncontested official versions of events, "tends to promote acts of forgetting, as opposed to acts of remembering" (p. 94). Perhaps in the future, this same memorial will promote alternate interpretations.

The statue of MacArthur in South Korea, on the other hand, has been the site of various contestations and reimaginings over the many years of its existence. Although it has neither been changed nor damaged (nor brought down, like the statue of Saddam Hussein in Iraq), Choi points out that it nonetheless serves the purpose of transforming popular Korean views of the Korean War. That is, it has "been transformed rhetorically from a reservoir of dogmatic memories to a site of contested memories where history is recalled through inconsistent, contradictory, and tentative narratives" (p. 97). In particular, the statue has served as a site where protests and anti-American demonstrators clash with Korean War veterans who view the memorial as testament to their struggle, regardless of the previous US intervention. Thus the memorial at the one time supports the tradition view of the soldier as hero and contemporaneously "provides a subversive space for new generations to perform their counter-hegemonic actions (i.e., downplaying the hero)" (p. 107).

While a slim volume (150 pages), *Embattled Memories* provides ample material for scholars and readers wishing to do further research. It includes well-sourced notes and an extensive bibliography. One hopes that Choi's work will impel others, especially those working on issues of war, memory, and the role of recent wars in American cultural productions, to look more closely at the Korean War. Choi's purpose throughout the book is reiterated in the epilogue. Through her close, analytic examination of five sites of Korean War memory, she attempts (and succeeds, for the most part) to bring "our attention to the recent surge of counter-memories that has significantly influenced the ways in which we remember the Korean War" (p. 115). Even though the United States has witnessed an upswing in commemorative events that reconsider the Vietnam War as it approaches one of its sev-

eral fiftieth anniversaries, there is no similar activity in regards to the Korean War. This makes Choi's contribution that much more critical as she brings much-needed attention to the "forgotten war."

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