

BOOK REVIEWS

Hearts of Pine: Songs in the Lives of Three Korean Survivors of the Japanese “Comfort Women.” 2012.

Joshua D. Pilzer. New York: Oxford University Press. 216 pp.

SHANNA LORENZ
Occidental College

Joshua Pilzer’s ethnography explores of musical lives of three women who were captured and forced to work as “comfort women” during World War II. This Japanese government-sponsored program, which established a network of brothels or “comfort stations” across the Indo-Pacific region between 1932 and 1944, institutionalized the internment and abuse of between 50,000 and 200,000 women, many of them Korean. While several studies have detailed the abuse of women during their internment, Pilzer approaches his informants as subjects with rich histories, personalities, artistic trajectories, political commitments, social engagements and strategies for healing. In particular, he uses music as a lens into the multifaceted lives of Pak Duri, Mun Pilgi and Bae Chunhui, three residents and activists from The House of Sharing, a South Korean rest home for survivors of the comfort women program, whom Pilzer interviewed over a period of eight years.

The three central chapters of the book explore the life trajectories and music-making of each of these women, while an introductory chapter and diminutive prologue help to frame the women’s narratives in relation to his-

torically shifting articulations of South Korean nationalism, calls for acknowledgement and reparation by protestors and their allies, and larger questions about the role of music in healing. Meanwhile, Pilzer’s well-placed rehearsal of Korean and Japanese folk and popular music histories provides key contexts and insights into the mosaic repertoires of his informants. The translated song lyrics included in the book are complemented by sound recordings of the informants’ songs and stories on the companion website (<http://global.oup.com/us/companion.websites/9780199759576/>). The website also includes colour photographs, as well as a pronunciation guide of several foreign language terms. A final appendix documents the testimony of Pak Duri as she relates her wartime abuses and bittersweet homecoming.

As is often the case when researchers immerse themselves in a body of source materials with an elaborate and distinctive aesthetics, Pilzer’s prose sometimes emulates the tone and form of the songs that are the focus of his study. Flowing back and forth across a continuum of academic prose and poetic speech, his language is saturated with metaphors, similes and rich descriptions of landscapes, echoing the bucolic musings of many of the songs of his informants. These rhetorical devices allow for a visual acuity that is uncommon among scholars of sound. Moreover, this fluidity of genre is similar to his informants’ mobilization of song conventions in everyday speech and vice versa, a phenomenon that

Pilzer discusses eloquently in Chapter Two. Similarly, Pilzer's wistful, humorous and occasionally impassioned prose gestures toward the emotional economies of his informants. It is perhaps in the celebratory tone of many passages that the author most fully individuates his own tone from that of his interviewees. While the redemptive optimism of his prose is sometimes heavy-handed, glimpses into the ragged edges of healing, moments when the strategies for self- and world-making used by these survivors break down, help to balance the affective valence of his narrative.

A key tenet of the book is that official narratives of comfort women in South Korea are so stereotyped and utilitarian as to erase the specificity and humanity of individual survivors, who become "assimilated into the pantheon of postwar victim archetypes that feed South Korean nationalism" (10). An important goal of his project, then, is to reflect deeply on the unique "endurance, ingenuity, healing and self-making" of survivors whose lives exceed the overly simplistic social roles that are prescribed for them (28). It is for this reason that instead of writing a "book of extended explorations of issues in the social sciences and the social study of music," Pilzer instead foregrounds the "voices and artistic achievements" of his informants (xi-xii). Meanwhile, by using a self-reflexive, autoethnographic voice shot through with moments of self-doubt and incomplete comprehension, Pilzer usefully complicates his own role as a listener, witness and relater of stories. And while some readers may wish for a more robust

engagement with the many important theoretical debates this study has the potential to enrich (most obviously in the fields of trauma and improvisation studies), Pilzer's theoretical restraint has the advantage of highlighting the rich creative output of these women.

Indeed, where this study shines most brightly is in its close attention to the improvisational virtuosity of each singer, whose nuanced performances are cast as important moments of self- and world-making. Accordingly, the author examines how the performers altered their repertoire choices and vocal stylings for different audiences, many of which are heterogeneous in terms of their language and musical competencies. Particularly compelling are the thick descriptions of performances for Japanese allies in the reparations movement, which serve as interesting and humanizing counterpoints to historical discussions of Japanese war crimes. Ultimately Pilzer convincingly argues that by reworking folk and popular song texts, these survivors use "modern folk culture" to find their "way through the maze of traumatic recovery," fashioning provisional selves and social worlds that are far richer than the roles and spaces that have been prescribed for them (62). The chapters that focus on Pak Duri and Mun Pulgi describe particularly ingenious revisionings of folk and popular song; Pilzer meticulously compares canonical song texts with those performed by these survivors, arguing that omissions, additions and repeated refrains help these singers shape inherited songs so that they may better reflect their emerging ontological perspectives.

The ideas of key trauma theorists, including Judith Herman and Dominick LaCapra, are applied competently in this book, particularly insofar as they illuminate the importance of empathic witnessing and “narrativization” for these women (52). However, Pilzer’s study also has the potential to raise important questions about the unique role music may play in trauma recovery. He theorizes this role most directly in his chapter on Mun Pulgli when he says, “the sensory nature of traumatic memory suggests that other expressive practices, such as song, may be more common tactics of recovery, as they live closer to the human sensory apparatus and the sensory nature of traumatic experience” (75). He also suggests that music may play a role in the repression of traumatic memory. It will perhaps be left to one of the “focused theoretical essays” the author aspires to write (which are mentioned in the preface) to tease out how music differs from other expressive forms when it is deployed in post-traumatic narrativization (xii). Moreover, Pilzer’s discussion of South Korea’s “wounded nationalism” clearly relates to the concept of “cultural trauma” as it has been theorized by sociologists Jeffrey Alexander, Ron Eyerman and more recently, the music historian Eric Hung, and it would be interesting to see that connection made more explicit (25, 28).

This dynamic, compelling study is accessible to both academic and non-academic readers, who will take away a sense of profound wonder in the resilience of human creativity. Further, Pilzer challenges us rethink our role as ethical listeners in a world where the

violence of the past continues to haunt the present. 🌿

REFERENCES

- Alexander, Jeffery C. 2004. Towards a Theory of Cultural Trauma. In *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity*, 1-30. Ed. Jeffrey C. Alexander, Ron Eyerman, Bernhard Giesen, Neil J. Smelser, and Piotr Sztompka. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Eyerman, Ron. 2004. Cultural Trauma: Slavery and the Formation of African American Identity. In *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity*, 60-111. Ed. by Jeffrey C. Alexander, Ron Eyerman, Bernhard Giesen, Neil J. Smelser, and Piotr Sztompka. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Herman, Judith. 1992. *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence—from Domestic Abuse to Political Terror*. New York: Basic Books.
- Hung, Eric. 2013. Sounds of Asian American Trauma and Cultural Trauma: Jazz Reflections on the Japanese Internment. *MUSICultures* 39 (2): 1-29.
- La Capra, Dominick. 1999. Trauma, Absence, Loss. *Critical Inquiry* 25: 696-727.
- . 2001. *Writing History, Writing Trauma*. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press.