Alegal

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Alegal: Biopolitics and the Unintelligibility of Okinawan Life.

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In 2000, around the time of the G8 summit in Okinawa, another important event was unfolding. Higa Malia, a woman born to an Okinawan mother and U.S. military-affiliated father on Okinawa, was in the midst of a modest yet powerful social movement. After a group of mothers established the AmerAsian School in Okinawa in 1998 in partial response to racial discrimination their children experienced in public schools, Higa inaugurated the Children of Peace Network in 1999 as the first network organized autonomously by such individuals. The network was momentous because the powerful anti-base culture in Okinawa, often evoking tropes of local women violated or exploited by American soldiers, had overshadowed mixed-race individuals to the point where it was difficult to share a conversation about this identity among those who experienced it firsthand.

Keenly aware of these dynamics, Higa focused on disassociating mixed-race identity from base politics and empowering individuals by helping them locate their long-lost fathers. However, a day before the G8 summit convened, she was taken aback by her young daughter’s wish to join in peaceful protest by forming a human chain around Kadena Air Base. In response, she wrote:

Personally, I wanted to oppose the bases and join hands with others, but I simply couldn’t. By participating, many kāfu will say, “Hey, Malia is opposing bases. If you go over there [to her network], you will be made to do the same thing. Opposing bases with an American face is embarrassing for Okinawans, so I don’t want to do it.” Feelings such as these keep me at bay. In other words, people in need of consultation will cease to confide in me, and no one will come to the network. Since my priorities lie with these more vulnerable individuals, I could not participate in the human chain around the bases. In spirit only.

Higa identified an incommensurable gulf between public anti-base protest and the private lives of those who intimately embody the reality of
U.S. military bases in Okinawa. Concerned with alienating the very individuals she was interested in starting a collective conversation with, she held back from her own daughter’s invitation to join the protest.

Shortly after the G8 summit, the network ceased to exist, and Higa moved to mainland Japan. She contributed a fourteen-segment series of short articles to the Okinawa Times newspaper over a decade later from July to December 2012\(^7\) and then posted a long poem on her public Facebook page entitled “U.S. Military Base” on July 19, 2013, that garnered more likes and shares than her publications.\(^8\) It was this poem, uninhibited by newspaper form, that hit a deeply entrenched cultural nerve. In it, she returned to the disconnect between mixed-race identity and the politics of U.S. military base protest. Only this time, she was not speaking as the representative of a social movement, but as an individual.

The question that drives this poem is, what happens when the insertion of the cold machinery of institutional violence (i.e., U.S. military bases) into the fecund soil of Okinawa produces a new life force that threatens to grow wildly into its cogs? Or, how will Higa, who was “born precisely because of [the existence of] the base” on Okinawan soil, whose life painfully trellised alongside its barbed wire fence, come to terms with this thing that names her poem, the “U.S. Military Base”?

The first part of the poem operates through a dialectic of mutual exclusion where she is either a product of institutional violence or a private individual completely separate from it. Each side—the Okinawan and the U.S. military—assumes one at the expense of negating the other, leaving Higa bankrupt of a way of articulating her own existence as simultaneously both.

From the Okinawan side, she problematizes the objectifying language she associates with anti-base sentiment.

A child sent from the base, a child who got dumped by the base\(^9\)
Those words that describe me
Could be heard even if I covered my ears
Those words that look down on my mother or other mothers like her as an Amejo\(^10\)
Flowed everywhere
Saying that my mother and I were a shameless and humiliating nuisance

Here, she and her mother are made to stand in for the U.S. military. She is either a “child sent from the base,” suggesting that is her original point of creation, or her mother is an “Amejo,” a woman of the Americans, suggesting that is where she belongs. With both being treated in this way as
objects of substitution, Higa responds by speaking of a life of unintelligibility. Born and raised in Okinawa, as products of Okinawa’s historical condition, by what sleight of hand do they suddenly become a stand-in for an institution from which they are both alienated? Is there any room in their existences to not be completely determined by the U.S. military? Could they be both victims of U.S. military violence and also women who had loved a G.I. at the same time? The sovereign power that is suggested here is not the cold machinery of the U.S. military base, i.e., its weapons of death and destruction, but the violence of substitution that works performatively through language to erase the irreducibility of her life force as she shudders in response to “Those words that describe me.” In other words, sovereign power here functions through the censorship, exclusion, and exception of the possibility of a life irreducible to institutional violence, which ironically operates through the very claim of its total victimization to sovereign power.

This drives Higa to the other extreme of a hyperidentification with her father as a stand-in for the U.S. military base to which she feels compelled to return. But when her father never comes for her as a young child, she pursues him during the summer of her final year of school and writes of her visit with her American family.

I couldn’t get through to them well with my shy English
I was made to realize that I was not one of the people from over there
The family with whom I was connected by blood was nice to me
on the surface
But I could not sense in them even a modicum of remorse toward me
My father, of course, was not a U.S. military base
He was nothing more than a completely ordinary man

Here, her American family cannot see how her life was impacted by the public institutional violence that her father partook in and reduces the business of her birth to a private family affair. She recognizes this as a privilege that neither she nor other Okinawans have. Hence, she is “not one of the people from over there” because they can monopolize a clean-cut distinction between the public and the private. The ability to carry on with the messiness of private life in America is a stark contrast to the unchanging reality of the U.S. military that awaits her when she lands back in Okinawa.

Even when her father visits her in Okinawa years later in her adulthood, he does not waver in this distinction. He expresses the civilian wish that “Okinawa goes back to being a quiet island,” but nonetheless surrenders his opinion on politics to the state.
Preface

“I do not have any words on the question of the U.S. military presence
And this is not something that I should talk about
Since this is a decision for the state
I have not lost my pride as a soldier”

The irony here is that while her father claims to surrender his words to the state, he can only do so by using words. His ability to act as a cog of state machinery is predicated on his capacity for language, which as he shows himself, takes on a life of its own to the potential dismay of the state. Yet he censors this life. Not only can we get a glimpse of the potential dilemma of a conscientious objector who does not self-censor, but Higa registers her own “disappointment” in her father’s statement. What is at stake here is not so much whether he supports or opposes bases in Okinawa as it is how he, too, exercises sovereign power by censoring, excluding, and excepting discrepancies not only within himself, but also within the relationship with his daughter by deflecting them onto the higher power of the state where they become neutralized. This is where he locates his “pride as a soldier” years after military service.

Higa is trapped by two mutually exclusive positions: one that diminishes the possibility for her private life to be undetermined by institutional violence, and one that diminishes the effects of institutional violence in her private life. Similar to the symbol “∞,” the two are like diametrically opposed circles that touch at a point. What connects them at this point is a logic that censors, excludes, and excepts the discrepancies internal to each side. But instead of owning up to the consequences of this act—of embracing a life that lives the contradictions of the here and now—it is instead deferred to a higher sovereign power that distracts with promises toward a utopian future. In this way, the anti-base sentiment that discriminates against Higa interprets any mark left by the U.S. military base in Okinawa as a mark of its victimization that must be erased for the sake of recuperating the homogeneity of an ethnic community that awaits liberation in the future. The U.S. military culture that Higa evokes interprets any mark of suffering it inflicts on others as a necessary sacrifice that must be made for the sake of protecting the integrity of a democratic state. Discrepancies that arise in everyday life are deferred to faith in the purity of this sovereign power and neutralized for the sake of internal coherence; in the absence of faith in this sovereign power, they would deflect back into the inner space of the circles of the ∞ symbol and implode from within. Precisely because she is foreclosed from accessing this transcendental notion of purity, Higa is left with no
way to ground her existence, and is driven to what some might call a “social death.”

“You shouldn’t have been born”
How could I go on living with my head up
I did not know
If I could even be here
I wanted to erase myself
I felt as if living itself were a shame

Yet Higa does the impossible and not only continues to live on, but continues to thrive in her thought. Fast forward to 2000 when her daughter wishes to join a peaceful protest around Kadena Air Base the day before the 2000 G8 summit. Her daughter exclaims:

“If grandpa was on the other side of the fence I would say Hi
I love grandpa but I hate bombs that kill people
That’s why I’ll say bases aren’t necessary
Even if you can’t go Mom, I still want to go!”

In this remarkable moment, Higa’s daughter allows for the coexistence of the “grandpa” whom she loves as a private individual with the institutional violence of the state that she hates. In failing to decide on one over the other, she refuses to ground her expression in faith in a higher power and instead grounds it in her own life force from within, in the here and now. Whether she realizes it or not, she exposes sovereign power as not merely the capacity to annihilate (although Okinawans have certainly been targets of military death and destruction), but also as the imperative to direct this life force away from the contradictions of the here and now to an abstract promise toward the future.

Once Higa is able to grab hold of this inner life force, things start to change, and her life starts to matter. In turning away from the logic of the exception, she refuses to allow her life force to be pruned back to ensure the smooth operation of the machinery of the U.S. military base and instead allows for it to grow into the cogs so as to threaten its composition with transformation from within.

Flowers will also bloom in the U.S. military base
Those seeds always go over the barbed wire fence with ease
They sprout on this side
And soon
They will bloom
Preface

Higa’s poem does not end triumphantly with the assertion of mixed-race or female agency predicated on the recuperation of a self-determining will, but enigmatically with the nonhuman agency of morphing matter. These seeds are the living matter that is not guided by any higher principle other than a life force internal to it. Although “[t]hose seeds always go over the barbed wire fence with ease,” they nonetheless haphazardly arrive there without premeditated direction. The U.S. military base is not something that is willfully taken down by a sovereign subject, but it is something that is disengaged by allowing a life force to change its composition from within.

Higa’s poem comes out of thirteen years of painstaking meditation on the contradictions of a short-lived social movement. Although much has been said about what is arguably the most contentious issue in U.S.-Japan politics—the presence of U.S. military bases in Japanese territory—her poem gives us a glimpse into the more intimate realities of life on both sides of the fence in Okinawa. What it demands is not so much that we put a softer human face to the cold and impersonal calculations of international politics. Rather, it demands a fundamental reconsideration of the nature of sovereign power based on the logic of mutual exclusion on both sides of the fence.

In their imagining of the trans-Pacific, Naoki Sakai and Hyon Joo Yoo suggest what such a reconsideration might look like. They urge us to turn away from focusing on the absolute power of individual sovereign states and instead turn to developing a better analysis of the systematicity of a network of states that they term the “global sovereign state.” Furthermore, this systematicity is driven by a logic of nationalism that discursively produces power from the bottom up through its dispersal throughout the population. In this way, they, like Higa, focus on how these macropolitics are channeled through the intimate and identify the common assumption of the United States as an imperialist institution of “oppression or repression” that, in turn, fans a very sexualized “victim fantasy” integral to “anti-colonial nationalism.”

Higa’s poem offers a powerful testament to the real-life implications of this anti-colonial nationalism for mixed-race individuals who can never become purely Japanese. But by identifying these limitations, she simultaneously stumbled upon the impossibility of Okinawa’s position vis-à-vis the global sovereign state. That is, Japan’s “victim fantasy” is a useful decoy that diverts attention from its role in securing Okinawa as a U.S. military fortress of the Asia Pacific. And hence, to what degree can Okinawans really partake in anti-colonial Japanese nationalism when Okinawans have
never been treated as first-class nationals by Japan in the first place? Higa
writes:

No matter how imperviously the U.S. military acts toward the locals
It is due to its diplomacy with Japan
Now I am able to see clearly
All that I have turned my eyes away from thus far

Okinawa is only intelligible vis-à-vis global sovereignty under representa-
tion of the Japanese state, yet the Japanese state fails to represent Oki-
awa, allowing the U.S. military to act “imperviously . . . toward the
locals.” Although Higa could only see Okinawa’s discrimination of mixed-
race subjects growing up as a child, through her long journey, she comes
to realize how this discrimination is informed by Okinawa’s precarious
position vis-à-vis not only Japan, but Japan in collusion with the United
States, in the formation of a global sovereign state.

The point here is not to argue whether or not Okinawans are really
Japanese. Rather, it is to show how the unintelligibility of Okinawan life
gets channeled into a national political platform whereupon it emerges as
evidence of the violation of a pure victim or the actions of a compromised
collaborator. Because the most direct and intimate point of contact be-
tween the U.S. military and Japanese state comes through sexual relation-
ships between U.S. military personnel and local women, their lives, as
well as the lives of their mixed-race children, are excessively politicized as
one or the other. But all this does is sanction the qualification of the “po-
litical” in terms of an intelligibility before the law. As suggested by Sakai
and Yoo, even the mobilization of the so-called pure victim in this “vic-
tim fantasy” tends to collaborate with “anti-colonial nationalism.” What
it neglects to consider is the politicality of the alegal, or that which is un-
telligible to the law itself. It is this life force that harbors the potential
of a more fundamental insurgency as that which dares to live irrespective
of its intelligibility to the law.

Higa’s poem, as a piece that somehow failed to reach published form
ready to be consumed by area studies knowledge producers, performs the
difficult task of articulating a sovereign power that is experienced most
viscerally in the intimate spaces of everyday life. It is the product of years
of struggle to find the words to articulate a life unintelligible to the state
in a way that circumvented the danger of being targeted by a censoring
violence. It forces us to consider the nature of sovereign power, not as the
wheeling and dealing of faceless organs of the state, but as the censorship,
exclusion, and exception of a life force that has always already been there.
Higa quit waiting to become intelligible to the norms of the publishing industry in order to exercise her own life force, but by writing of this unintelligibility, she took it back for herself. And it spread like wildfire. It is this life force that this book names the “alegal,” and it is this life force that this book attempts to unleash.