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### BOOK REVIEW

## Night in the American Village: Women in the Shadow of the U.S. Military Bases in Okinawa

Johnson, A. (2019). *Night in the American village: Women in the shadow of the U.S. military bases in Okinawa*. The New Press.

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For most people, the islands that make up Okinawa Prefecture in the southern tip of Japan, is an idyllic subtropical destination that invites domestic and international tourists, with its white-sand beaches and laid-back lifestyle. Okinawa though has a deeper story to tell. The islands that currently consist what is now known as Okinawa Prefecture was once an independent kingdom, the Kingdom of the Ryukyus, which had its own unique culture and traditions, as well as active trading relations with its East and Southeast Asian neighbours. In 1879, the kingdom was incorporated into the Japanese national polity and made into a prefecture, where the locals had to undergo assimilation that had repercussions on their

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society, culture, and identity. The main island of Okinawa was also the site of the Battle of Okinawa, said to be one of the bloodiest battles in the Asia-Pacific during the Second World War, leaving almost 200,000 civilians dead. The main island is also host to around 70% of the U.S. military bases in Japan, and this has been a controversial issue that oftentimes left people divided, as the bases have both been sources of livelihood—jobs and business opportunities—and danger and fear.

Journalist Akemi Johnson successfully tells the story of Okinawa in her book, *Night in the American Village: Women in the Shadow of the U.S. Military Bases in Okinawa*, in an engaging manner that links history, politics, social and cultural issues, as experienced by eleven women. Each woman has her own story to tell, as they navigate their daily lives in an Okinawa that continues to locate its place in the Japanese and the U.S. imaginaries. The book, however, is not only a biographical account of these women; Johnson shows how one can (and should) understand Okinawa through the eyes of these women—women who have lived their lives in the “shadow of the U.S. military bases”—as activists, military wives, bar hostesses, students, Amerasians (i.e. offspring of local women and American servicemen), and base employees. As Johnson takes her readers into the lives of each of these women, she also vividly discusses the complex story of Okinawa from its troubled relationship with mainland Japan, to its ambivalent relationship to its U.S. occupiers as signified by the presence of military bases dotting the main island.

The book begins with the story of Rina, the rape-murder victim that has triggered varying sentiments about U.S. military violence towards women and how such incidents have been occurring back from the early years of the post-war Occupation of Okinawa. Violence against women is one of the reasons for the formation of the anti-base movement, with Suzuyo Takazato—one of the women featured in the book—at the forefront of it. Takazato, an outspoken critic of militarism states, “I don’t condemn only U.S. soldiers, but also Japanese soldiers—the military system itself” (page 132). She became aware of Japanese soldiers’ atrocities in other Asian countries during the Pacific War when she studied in the Philippines in her younger years. During her stay in the country, she also witnessed how Olongapo, a town

in the central part of Luzon Island, which was once host to the Subic Naval Base, had similarities to some base towns in Okinawa. This led her to realize how issues in Okinawa regarding the U.S. military presence are shared by other base towns in Asia.

Among commercial establishments largely made up of restaurants and small businesses around U.S. military bases are pubs and bars that employ local and foreign women as bar hostesses to entertain U.S. servicemen. Akemi Johnson then tells the story of Daisy, a Filipina entertainer who went to Okinawa to work as a bar hostess in order to support her family back in her homeland. The inclusion of Daisy's story is testament to the fact that the presence of the U.S. bases in East Asia is not only an issue that is of concern to the host nation and the United States itself, as other actors are also involved in this "transnational project" (Zulueta, 2020) of military basing. Johnson tells the stories of other women that spoke of how these issues in Okinawa are intertwined with gender, class, race, and ethnicity, not to mention Okinawa's position vis-à-vis the Japanese mainland, as well as its position as the United States' "military colony" (McCormack, 2007) when it was brought under direct military rule during the post-war period. With the continued presence of the U.S. military in the island, it seems that the Occupation Period of Okinawa has not ended.

This book is recommended reading for people who want an introduction to Okinawa—its past, present, and future. It gives a comprehensive discussion of Okinawan issues from a feminist perspective, which provides the readers a fresh look into significant events in Okinawa's story as it weaves these into women's narratives whose lives have been influenced by the American presence in the prefecture. Akemi Johnson supports her work with key person interviews, archival research, and personal interactions and conversations with various people she met on her stays and visits in the southern island. Thoroughly researched and written in a language accessible to a wider audience, *Night in the American Village: Women in the Shadow of the U.S. Military Bases in Okinawa* is one important book in current Japan/Okinawan Studies, Asian Studies, and Women's Studies.

## References

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