Book and Media Reviews

As the United States military once again shifts its gaze toward Oceania during what Hillary Clinton calls “America’s Pacific Century,” new questions are being raised about what this pivot could mean for Island communities. Addressing the question, “What is genuine security?” from the critical perspective of women’s voices and experiences, Gwyn Kirk and Lina Hoshino’s Living Along the Fenceline provides a welcome tool for understanding the lived experiences of those whose communities have had to bear the brunt of the US military-industrial complex’s emerging agenda. This documentary travels to Texas, Vieques (in Puerto Rico), the Philippines, South Korea, Okinawa, Guåhan (Guam), and Hawai‘i in order to highlight the different ways in which seven women are addressing the environmental, health, sovereignty, and sexual impacts of militarism in their regions. Rather than engaging such weighty issues through too easily depersonalized mass demilitarization movements, these women humanize the trauma of militarization by offering the audience a glimpse into their everyday lives. Through Living Along the Fenceline, this diverse group of women share compelling stories of how they combat the impacts of militarization in their homelands, making possible a narrative that challenges viewers to reconsider the repercussions of an ever-rising militarism within and around Oceania.

Kirk and Hoshino’s documentary not only meticulously maps out the problematic ways the US military affects the communities outside its bases but also draws much-needed attention to the experiences of women who reside within militarized spaces. By engendering a discussion of militarization across various countries that host the US military, and by sensitively addressing aspects of engagements, encounters, and entanglements, Living Along the Fenceline makes it easier to understand the nuanced yet related ways the military disenfranchises those outside their bases. Starting in San Antonio, Texas, Diana Lopez shows how her city is economically dependent on the surrounding eight military bases. This has meant not only high rates of recruitment from the city but also devastating impacts on the environment due to dumping of toxic waste into local waterways. With strong parallels and overlapping stories, Terri Keko‘olani of Hawai‘i and Lisa Natividad of Guåhan, as indigenous women of the Pacific, discuss the military colonialization of their Island homes, which has led to health disparities, loss of ancestral lands, and violations of self-determination. While many of the women’s experiences shed light on the environmental degradation of their homes, other stories focus on the sexual violence that women have experienced. In Okinawa, Yumi Tomita (an
Okinawan pseudonym) challenges the idea of genuine security for those around military bases by describing her own abduction and rape by two American soldiers. While each story is personal and subjective, together these accounts represent a larger history of the continuing use of the US military as a tool for colonization.

With striking sensitivity and frankness, Kirk and Hoshino have realized an accessible and thought-provoking film that powerfully examines the sociopolitical complexities of militarization. These complexities are revealed at points of contention where colonial histories rooted in military economies meet the environments and bodies of these women. Along with shedding light on all-too-often overlooked yet utterly significant moments of military violence, Living Along the Fenceline shows how these resilient women have become community leaders in their respective communities by fighting for healing among their people and pushing for a demilitarized future. Through her organization, Buklod ng Kabbaihan (Unity of Women), Alma Bulawan of Olongapo, Philippines, offers support to women who are facing the pressures of poverty by participating in a thriving prostitution scenario. This and comparable stories of individual and collective struggles and achievements in everyday contexts work well as interconnected pieces that challenge mainstream ideas of the security and necessity of the US military. This film is a valuable addition to conversations surrounding the growth of the US military-industrial complex and helping to create new dialogue about the specificities of how women are incorporated into this global project.

While Living Along the Fenceline is clear about the interconnectedness of these women’s stories, the film falls short of equipping its audience with the conceptual and contextual tools necessary to make sense of the larger colonial history that many of these countries share. For instance, there is no mention of how Puerto Rico, Hawai’i, Guåhan, and the Philippines were all acquired by the United States as prizes of war following the Spanish-American War, allowing the United States to expand its national borders. While Kirk and Hoshino focus much of their attention on educating their audience about the contemporary impacts of sexual violence in Okinawa, there is little discussion of how a shared colonial history will see the largest contemporary military buildup to take place in Guåhan through the displacement of American troops from Okinawa. These colonial links and shared histories today influence the movement of the US military and deserve a closer examination, which is perhaps not possible given the filmmakers’ constraints and entirely welcome perspective on some of the gendered dimensions of contemporary Pacific militarization.

Living Along the Fenceline’s release comes at a poignant time when the US military presence in Oceania is both dramatically increasing and perhaps changing in character as the United States prepares for its Pacific pivot. This film offers an often-overlooked perspective on the harmful impacts with which communities around military bases must deal. The strength of Kirk and Hoshino’s work is its ability
to interrupt the dominant discourse that US militarism enables security for the global community. These women’s stories make possible new conversations that address the multilayered ways in which militarism can have lasting impacts on communities both within and along expanding boundaries of command and control.

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Back in 1958, Pacific Islands Monthly subtitled one of its articles with the complaint “The Cargo Cult Won’t Die Quietly in the Pacific.” In years since, despite numerous similar predictions that cargo cults will soon give up their ghosts as the darker Melanesian corners are infused with new lights of education, economic development, and steadier rationality, cargo cult lives still. Actual culting in these islands has indeed faded away—or, rather, it has morphed into arresting forms of political organization, charismatic Christianity, health and wealth gospel, and global Internet scams. But cargo cult vigorously endures in popular literature, travel writing, art, music, and film. Despite anthropological unease and even firm repudiation of the label, cargo cult is proving impossible to kill. A quick check of amazon.com finds on sale three new Kindle cargo-cult novels (one about Tanna’s John Frum movement; another offering a dash of science fiction; and the third about the US Pacific Northwest); a cargo-cult travelogue (again about John Frum); and a full rack of cargo-cult music CDs.

To all this we can add Sacrebleu’s animated short, Cargo Cult. Sacrebleu Productions, headquartered in Paris, produces animated and live short films, features, and documentaries. Bastien Dubois, Cargo Cult’s director and co-writer, has completed several other short animation projects, including Madagascar, carnet de voyage, which was nominated for an Academy Award for best animated short film in 2011. This features a Malagasy ritual of reburying the dead. Apart from its being a similarly exotic theme, viewers may well wonder how cargo cult caught the animator’s eye. Gaia Guasti, who collaborated on the script, writes young adult novels.

Dubois’s animated cargo cult—drawn in lush island greens and blues—rewinds the story back to the Pacific War. Without much dialogue except for cargoist debate in an unspecified Melanesian tongue without subtitles, the film’s only plain words are an introductory epigram from science fiction writer Arthur C Clarke: “Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic.” The opening scene illustrates this conceit. A huge, hulking, black warship overtakes and overshadows an island canoe. We next see an American airbase as the film follows the familiar cargo storyline. An Islander has crept onto the base, dodging jeeps, planes, Quonset huts,