

Transcript for Episode 1 of H.E.U.N.G.: Prison Abolition and Korea?

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Kris [0:39]: Hello Everyone Under Neoliberal Garbage! Welcome to the first episode of the Heung Coalition's podcast. The Heung Coalition is a group of writers, students, and translators seeking to highlight more nuanced stories on Korea from a leftist, transnational perspective. We are committed to the ongoing struggle of redefining Koreanness with the goal of generating and sharing multiple narratives and perspectives on Korea. We do so in solidarity with the struggle for self-determination of implicated communities. For clarification, Hello Everyone Under Neoliberal Garbage is a name one of our members thought of using HEUNG as an acronym. Our coalition's name is actually taken from the Korean character "흥" to reference the animate quality of movements. Not only the pain and suffering, but the joy, excitement, anger, and possibilities engendered by collectivizing and fighting for change. In this episode, four of us gathered to think about possible connections between abolition in the North American and South Korean contexts. Recalling how abolition entered mainstream conversation during the George Floyd Uprising of 2020, we wondered about what difficulties prison abolitionists may face in South Korea and considered South Korea's penal history and ongoing militarism. We consider what role the public's attachment to punishment as a form of justice plays as an obstacle towards a world without prisons and police. We also considered the elements necessary for abolition, material conditions that support lives dealing with conflict, strong communities, non-punitive ways to address harm, and accountability. This podcast arose as a space for us to think through and think together. We're happy to have you with us. Thank you for listening.

[Music]

James [2:39]: Welcome to a discussion on the history of the South Korean carceral state, prison abolition, and trying to bridge some of these conversations with people who work in the Heung Coalition to bridge conversations between the US, North America, other places, and the Koreas. Today we are joined by Youngoh Jung, Alex Jung, and Kris Shin. Alex did you want to introduce yourself?

Alex [3:05]: My name's Alex Jung. I'm based in Toronto at the moment. I work a regular 9-5 at a library. My training is largely philosophical, but generally I spend a lot of my time organizing specifically environments where there is healthy, or that shape healthy communal and material support that is horizontal.

James [3:30]: Thanks so much for joining our discussion. And Kris Shin?

Kris [3:35]: Hi, my name is Kris. I'm joining everyone from Tongva land, which is Los Angeles, and I just work at an office job, but I do write sometimes. Very slowly, but that's what I do.

Youngoh [3:49]: Hey everyone I'm Youngoh Jung. I'm based in San Diego, or land of the Kumeyaay people, and I'm a PhD candidate in the UCSC History Department and the critical gender studies graduate specialization program. So, I work on the history of the Korean diaspora and its convergence with both US and Korean militarism. This topic of abolition, it intersects with a lot of what I work on and I think, I'm trying to find a way to bridge my academic interests to this larger idea of abolition as well. It's great to be here.

James [4:31]: Thanks so much for being here, and I am also joining from unceded Tongva land or Los Angeles. My name is James Hillmer and I'm a PhD candidate at UCLA studying Korean history and I am writing a dissertation about the development of the South Korean carceral system, looking at the formation of the system at the same time as the emergence of the Cold War system and division of the Korean peninsula. But I did want to open up discussion by asking each of the participants here today what brought you to a discussion of this topic, and maybe you might talk about your relationship to Heung Coalition as well. We could start with maybe Alex?

Alex [5:17]: Me...this discussion kinda came out of a series of discussion with Kris that I had begun a couple months back, around when some of the stuff around Rep. Jang Hye-young (장혜영 의원) - the aftermath of her coming out publicly with her own survivorship story of sexual assault within her party by Rep. Kim Jong-cheol (김종철 의원). Details of the affair aside, there were a series of personal statements by her that are really pivotal for just the idea of any sort of justice, or any sort of way to be a certain kind of person. A way to be a survivor, a way to be a victim, any of those kinds of things. And it was just not registering at all in the public consciousness. We saw that there was sexual assault in the party by a politician who was of authority in the party. Rep. Kim Jong-cheol...for folks that are somewhat following Korean politics, that name my register. After the abuse, Rep. Jang Hye-young had sought resolution within the party and after the perpetrator was found guilty she also publicly came out with the information, saying this is what has happened. Here are some of the things that I am doing to seek resolution. I will not be going ahead with seeking a lawsuit, for example. And she, from the get-go, was emphasizing that my priority right now is the repair of this relationship, the repair of trust. And a lot of these things have to do with what the perpetrator has shown in the aftermath, in the process of relationship-rebuilding, and based on the things that he has shown, I would like to seek a communal resolution as opposed to a legal, penal, carceral one. There were, once again, a series of personal statements to this effect, largely because there was so much backlash, just around how the only way for somebody to be honest as a party that is the victim is to seek legal resolution, that there could not potentially be difference or any sort of variation in the way that a victim or a survivor would feel about what they need to be okay, or what they need to return to daily life. And she had stated pretty up-front that those are her priorities. But long story short, even after this series of personal statements, a lot of these just everywhere were speaking to "This doesn't make sense." Some of the comments even very explicitly touched on this not belonging to the national temperament. That was very specifically the word that was used: 국민정서. There was a lot of talk about how that is the point of the law. It's supposed to be consistent, and of course if you are rightly the survivor, it is only consistent and only fair that for the sake of not only themselves but also everybody else - because supposedly

she is a politician, and the position of power that she, on behalf of everybody else, ought to be seeking a legal resolution to this circumstance. That's the sketch of the story and it was just striking me that a lot of these are mirrored in the conversations that we can see on this side of the ocean. I personally have come into touch with a lot of these conversations on this side of the ocean, North America. I think that it's something that needs to be talked about in Korean society for it to make sense, or start making sense at least. It will be a long road I think, but I think maybe that's part of what we're here to discuss today.

James [9:27]: Yeah, that definitely resonates with I'm sure what others will talk about, and especially for me, the issues of redress. A social, communal need for redress, and finding alternatives to penal or carceral methods for that I think is very needed and will find purchase in many different local contexts. I think next maybe we could hear from Kris. What brought you to this topic?

Kris [9:49]: It was hard not to think about abolition after the 2020 George Floyd Uprising. And before that, there's an ongoing and countless list of Black people that have been murdered by the police and the system, despite all these so-called police reforms, not changing or improving. I'm trying not to abstract abolition and trying to see how I can bring it closer to practice, and for me that's very much in the arena of interpersonal relationships but also my relationships to groups like Heung in the matter of conflict. There was a tweet going by @sheabutterfemme, an abolitionist social worker. They were basically saying how are you saying you want abolition but you're conflict-avoidant? So I was like uh...*(laughter)*. Now I've gotta reflect on why I personally have been conflict-avoidant. Prior to learning about abolition, I had a hard time not thinking that punishment was the way for people who commit sexual harm or "extremely violent crimes." But reading more, learning a little more, listening to what survivors say and what they want...The current legal system as it stands - the carceral system - it leaves people either retraumatized or it doesn't actually address the harms or the conditions that continue to perpetuate violence, continue to create this culture where people are afraid to take accountability, and if you cannot take accountability, there's no healing. I feel like you can't really approach healing for all the parties involved. These things I see as connected, and if we cannot even properly address conflict within our groups while we're organizing...what the fuck even is left unity when you're not willing to address conflict?

James [12:06]: Yeah I recall coming from very disparate experiences and backgrounds about having a common goal to organize liberatory movement in some capacity, some of us in very different levels and what that looks like. Youngoh, how are you coming to this topic? What interested you in the South Korean carceral state, prison abolition, those issues?

Youngoh [12:27]: I think I started to seriously think about abolition as I was really trying to approach my academic work differently, especially during this weird, fucked up time that we're all in. I would say the starting point would be the work I've done on the history of conscientious objection and the normalization of the universal male conscription system from 1945 to now. I really focused on what criminalization and punishment for those who object to military service entails for South Korean society. And I also saw clear limitations on what the role of a historian

and an academic can fulfill, and I think I really started to question my so-called expertise after actually meeting a conscientious objector, a South Korean conscientious objector who really just got out of prison back in 2014. I was this super excited nerd who just finished his MA, never really recognized the realities of what being a conscientious objector really entails, thinking that just reading and writing gives me some kind of authorship and authority. I just remember really blabbering some bullshit about numbers and years and stats, memorized, and the conscientious objector sitting next to me, just like, "Cool story bro," and expressionlessly nodding. I'm a bit ashamed to say that it took me a while to realize that a lot of what I've been doing as a historian - it really did nothing for the people I'm writing about, besides really exploiting their memories. I approached abolition from this perspective where there should be, there must be an alternative way to talk about these things without it being like my academic capital of knowledge. And in my case, learning more about abolition, because I honestly - I don't know what it is. I hear about it. Everyone talks about it, but to be honest it's also very foreign to me. At the same time I do believe that it's a way for us to imagine something different than what is presented to us and normalized, and I think for me it's a way to connect the histories of criminalization and punishment with the living present right now. And I also feel like this approach is also very related to what brought me to Heung, and what we collectively want to build together. Because whatever this shit right now is, it's not working. This isn't us, and a lot of us in Heung - we're diaspora Koreans caught up in this weird between-space. We accept and negotiate and compartmentalize the most fucked-up regulations and cultures with our wants and needs to kind of create our own Korea or whatever and our own identity, and I think just talking to you all about what abolition is, what we hope it can achieve, is a good start for me.

James [15:45]: I'm another person in academia so I came to this topic largely through my study of South Korean history. I was receiving this education about Korea's colonization by Japan, branching more into taking courses learning about my own country, the United States, and their involvement in really denying the will of the people on the Korean peninsula and dividing it, and then supporting authoritarian and military dictatorships up through South Korea's democratization process. So I was receiving this one education very naively as an undergraduate student, very upset about this and wondering about how I can study it further, and then feeling some kind of complicity or personal responsibility - a stake in this as a US citizen. And then studying abroad in South Korea, I really localized my introduction to the notion of the carceral when I visited the Seodaemun (서대문) Prison History Hall...is a history museum located in western Seoul that is in the former prison that is at the same site and built during Japan's colonization of Korea. And the prison at that time, or the museum, rather at that time - this was around 2009 or 2010 - very strongly put forth this narrative about Korea's colonial history but was very silent about the use of this prison, this facility in particular, and then other systems of social control, after 1945, after liberation, and just noting on a plaque there that the prison was used after 1945 and then was the Seoul Detention Centre (서울구치소) and then it was moved in 1987, with no real extrapolation about any of that history afterward. So I sort of carried that question with me of, I know that these things like the Gwangju Uprising happened later, the Park Chung-hee and Chun Doo-hwan military dictatorships, US military involvement in propping these up, but I didn't know how to connect the two experiences of Korea's colonial past and then its Cold War division and how the US and prisons might be implicated in this. Carried

that topic into my PhD dissertation, and I've been looking at the ways the US military dictatorship reinstated in many ways the same carceral system built under colonial rule and then amplified and changed it, going from prisons were essentially emptied upon Korea's liberation, the southern half, and then filled beyond capacity under US occupation and the subsequent Syngman Rhee regime. So that's how I came to the topic from a kind of academic standpoint, but all the while having this politicization and awakening towards an abolitionist position for the US context, coming to learn from different white anti-racist activists, different Black liberation activists especially in the Los Angeles area, so just trying to meld those two research and studies of mine about Korea, the US, and then starting to realize the ways that they're actually connected that we might not think of on the surface. So next I wanted to start to open our discussion of the challenges to bridging this discussion of prison abolition. What are some of the challenges for having this transnational conversation about prison abolition?

Alex [19:04]: Coming from experiences where you settle on certain norms, certain moors, certain codes, and there are ways that you decide to do things together. And it's not that much complicated, from my perspective, than meant, just that the idea of justice and what it means for somebody to be okay after a harm also should shift into that domain as opposed to necessarily being outsourced to something called the state or the institutions that are attached to it. And I had mentioned earlier the entrypoint for the Korean intersection of this, which for me came through Jang Hye-young, but I think there's an important logical piece here that we need to clarify. That it's not really going from the general to the specific, from the abstract topic of "Oh, there's this thing called abolition," and because there is this thing called abolition, that's why we need to have communal rules or communal codes or communities or some sense of how to do things, or who's important or whose needs need to be prioritized. It's really the other way around, where those things are already at play and a lot of the time it's important to prioritize the parties that have been harmed. It is important to prioritize why and what they might want out of a situation, and once we start prioritizing these things, we then realize that state solutions may be one of many ways of getting something that people need, but it 1) often can even stand in the way, and 2) does not absolutely constitute a monopoly on how things should be done. Except it does, somehow, because that's how our society is structured. So that's kinda how I'm seeing the really important logical pivot in this, where there is a certain need that is just not being met because things are just the way that they are. And we are coming to this idea of abolition in many different ways. Obviously, for historical reasons in huge part to the work of Black women writers and the political movements in recent months and recent years that have taken place, like the wider awakening around that, but really that the idea itself should not as foreign or as radical as some people make it out to be sometimes.

James [21:41]: Hm. I think I can kind of branch off of what you're saying and transition to—just as someone who, like I said, is kind of siloed into an academic discussion in the Korean Studies field, all the problems with it, kind of the Cold War genesis and continuation of this area studies field—I can kind of illuminate some places where, when I'm asked to link my very historical research with the present, both for the local context of South Korea and the present and the carceral system and then trying to make some kind of gesture toward commenting on things in the United States, where I'm located, I think some obstacles that come up are, like you said,

there is a need—a social and communal need—for redress. But it doesn't necessarily need to be punishment. So starting more conceptually, I've been inspired recently reading abolitionists like Mariame Kaba, who talks about: a world without police and prisons does not mean a world without accountability. There can be social formations, communities that decide that members of it have committed some kind of heinous act and there needs to be redress for what they've done. And you can be much more inclusive of the survivor, victim, however you conceptualize this, you can be more inclusive of their needs and wants in a way that, when you're just thinking about law and order and sort of going through a trial process, those needs may not be met even though largely people would say that Justice has been done. Kind of like capital 'J' Justice. This is not actually being carried through into people's actual lived experience. Another big sort of umbrella for these is what I've been calling Korea's postcolonial and Cold War specificities. So another one, and this may be a more academic issue, is that there is a large emphasis on colonial memory, like I said when introducing how I came to the topic. Thinking of incarceration as unjust, I think is very much monopolized by Korea's colonial memory. People have a very close touchpoint to think about this in South Korea when thinking about independence movement activists. Even if the person is maybe a little more progressive, thinking about student demonstrators and other political activists were imprisoned wrongfully during different authoritarian regimes and the prior colonial regime. But it's still quite a jump for people to think about the non-political prisoner. We might think all prisoners are political, but the way people study this academically is you might think there is something called social crime—people who have been incarcerated for committing some kind of economic crime or a crime of poverty, pushed to do this by social conditions—and then someone who's a prisoner of consciousness, or a political prisoner. And the system in South Korea after democratization, with an asterisk for the sort of ongoing democratization, many of the people in power—liberal bourgeois politicians—come out of a tradition of student activism or people who were imprisoned at one time. So I think there is a touchstone where people can think—where imprisonment and incarceration can be thought of as unjust, but not for the quote-unquote ordinary criminal. Additionally, I think another obstacle is thinking about this need for redress against people who have committed heinous crimes, so things like murder, sexual assault, and in some ways, you can think of large-scale fraud, white collar crime, corruption, corrupt chaebol members or CEOs—I think there's always a conversation in South Korean media crying out to see that justice be done and these people are punished. So the main example I'm thinking of on the political end of things for corruption is the downfall of the former president, Park Geun-hye (박근혜). In 2016-17, there was very much a cry to see her locked up or a political and public will calling for her literal imprisonment. So "구속하라" (gusokhara — tr. *Lock her up*) was maybe one of the phrases chanted in different protests, effigies of Park Geun Hye being put into prison, people dressing up as her in some kind of political theater on the street and different—I was just noticing this when I was in Korea at that time, seeing some of those protests. And there is a need to see corrupt politicians put into prison for different corruption. Another case and example would be the former Seoul mayor, who allegedly sexually harassed or assaulted different staff members. There's another call, then, to see some kind of redress. But I think liberal bourgeois politicians who are remembering, like I said before, the memory and legacy of people who were human rights lawyers and had different activist roles in South Korea's democratization, that sort of stops people's thought of where they need to see redress and maybe even punishment of

any kind. There's also whenever I see this issue of corruption, a widely held fear that, in South Korea, when people in power are dealt out some kind of punishment, if they are incarcerated, it's done so in a kind of white-collar prison, minimum security. They might have special access to their attorneys, as long as they can pay for their attorney, they can get time out of the normal conditions that another inmate would be put through, but you see there a need for retribution. If someone is imprisoned, it needs to be a terrible experience and it needs to be punitive. It needs to hurt them. And then coming from my political positions, like, I would agree that these people need to be held accountable, but I remain a prison abolitionist. I'd much rather see them and their assets seized and maybe their wealth redistributed in some way that they have to work to heal the society they've exploited rather than just be locked away. And then on this point, I think liberals and even progressives, and the further left you go on a spectrum, those kinds of commenters in South Korea are most stumped about how to respond. They're most stumped by this prison abolitionist position. It's like, "Then what are we going to do with all these historical criminals and people who are corrupt halting South Korea's democratization and so carrying over remnants from the dictatorships and former regimes?" And I guess the last example I'd give as another of these roadblocks to thinking about prison abolition in the South Korean case, especially in current events, is instances of interpersonal violence. You could call this, like, violence against community or famous cases of, say—there's recently been, and I'm not gonna give specific names because I'd have to just put the big 'allegedly' in front of all this and the South Korean libel laws are intense, so—there are these cases of, say, a mother who neglected her children to the point that they passed away, spousal murder, violent crimes that you'd probably want to address even with all the attendant problems from a perspective of mental health, this kind of interpersonal violence that does not necessarily—but you could make an argument—comes out of social conditions, these are things that might be dealt with very differently than the way people think of, say, social crimes. Let's say you abolish capitalism or you improve the system to the point where people are not driven to commit crimes of poverty, there's an idea that that type of crime would go away in your ideal society that you're envisioning without police and without prisons. But this interpersonal violence is something that is a little bit, is categorically different. So there's cases of conviction where people are incarcerated, people who have committed things like sexual assault, pedophilia, maybe murder of women and children, where there is a public reaction or outcry to their sentencing. It's seen as way too short. So there's another alleged recent case involving a global ring of websites. A South Korean citizen was running a global ring of child pornography and sex trafficking materials on his website, and then there was an extradition type of case, and this is when you see the resurgence of this call for retribution against these types of offenders, people who are hurting the community in these ways, and I think that those are very strong instances where we see people's need for redress, and it could be reframed away from a violent form of punishment, what they actually want to see is communities working together to create a society that makes such interpersonal violence unthinkable. And that is some of the language kind of inspired by and borrowing from Mariame Kaba, recently reading her book *We Do This 'Til We Free Us*, like just put that little footnote in there and I'm gonna refrain from giving a bunch of, you know, book titles and footnotes as one of these siloed-off, stuffy academics.

Youngoh [30:16]: This is more on the South Korean case, but thinking about what Alex previously mentioned with the example of Jang Hye-young, how prison is not the only form of rehabilitation, right? And when I heard Alex's example, the question I'm thinking about is like, why can't we kind of think of other ways of criminalization, punishment, right? And it just kind of really relates back to, like, what I've been studying with conscientious objectors. This whole binary of South vs. North, modernized vs. backwards, traitor/spy/빨갱이 (bbalgaengi, tr. *Commie, Red, etc.*) vs. citizen, good vs. bad has kind of really cemented what is criminal and what deserves a punishment in South Korean society. And I think—just to give a really short intro of the history of conscientious objection in South Korea, I think the first case was under Japanese colonization in 1938 when I think, like, 30 church members refused to be drafted in the Japanese army, and (*laughs*) they were regarded as heroes. And when the Korean War happened and some pacifists refused to grab their guns, you know, they were seen as traitors. And then after the 50s, when Park Chung-hee (박정희) came around, they were known as social deviants because they're refusing to go in the military. And what's interesting is their prison sentences also kind of increased after democratization, after democratization in the early 90s in South Korea when the military dictatorship ended with Roh Tae-woo (노태우) was the public kind of justification of "keep punishing conscientious objectors" was, you know, "you need to defend this democracy." (*laughs*) That was kind of the notion, like, *oh, we're not under military dictation anymore, so we need to defend this democracy*. This notion of militarism through the division of the two nations, which is also like this—when we look at it from the bigger picture, it has to do with U.S. military empire and American imperialism in East Asia and this idea of normalized militarism in this Korean peninsula that has really cemented what is good and what is bad, right? And what the prison represents. It's like—I think James really gave a good explanation of what the prison system entails, but it's also like a symbol, right? Prison, in a way, is a symbol—it really splits what is acceptable to be South Korean and what is not. I feel like it's something really similar to all of that. Right now, what's going on, I think it was last year, in 2020, the Moon regime finally legalized conscientious objection, but at the same time, the conscientious objectors still need to go through alternative services to the military service. And a lot of the activists are basically arguing, you know, that's just another word, this facade that covers up this continuous form of militarism. The conscientious objectors are objecting, more objecting violence, objecting military violence, but if they're doing alternative services, they're still partaking in those kinds of violence. They've been doing all of these— They've been just going to prison. They've been getting tortured in prison during the Park Chung-hee regime. They've been doing this—the state-sanctioned violence that is really normalized in the military, so why can't people see an alternative? How cemented this notion of good and bad and how it's symbolized through prison, criminalization, and punishment is, that was kind of what I was thinking about.

James [34:30]: This has come up a couple of times now, right? How a world without, or a society without prisons, without police, and how you'd extend it, seems unthinkable. And one of the lessons from Mariame Kaba is that because this is so baked into the way that people operate on a daily basis, the front for fighting it or for resisting it is literally everywhere. There are millions of possibilities of where you find yourself engaged in resisting this. We often think of that as a weakness, all those disparate ways that people are working—there's this coalition

doing that, and there's that group doing that, and they're working on this issue, but they're not talking to those people. That, of course, has to be organized wider out, but what better place for anyone to start but in their immediate, material, lived experience? So ...

Kris [35:11]: You, James, brought up that tie between capital 'J' Justice and punishment that I think people are still very much attached to. It's probably not, like, proper quote-unquote dinner table conversation, but I do—like, recently, I tried talking to my parents, my own parents, about prison abolition. And of course, they did not get it at all. Even though my dad was imprisoned at one time for, like, labor union organizing ...

[Music]

James [35:47]: Hey, listeners. Just a producer's note here. At this point in our call, Kris's internet was cutting out, so we didn't get all of what she said, so she wanted to put in this addendum and clarify what she said. And I think what she says really nails some of the issues that we're kind of going around at this part in the conversation, so here that is.

Kris [36:07]: Apologies for the technical difficulties on my end. What got clipped off as my internet connection failed was an argument one of my parents brought up about some form of prison having always existed. I then ask a rhetorical question about what prisons are for because personally, I find it difficult to not think about policing and the prison in tandem with the state. So much of what gets legislated as a crime is also about what threatens the state and ruling class ownership of private property. Through the legal system, the often uneven enforcement of laws, surveillance and threat of force, the state decides who's disposable, who's a criminal, who is quote-unquote violent. Something else I wanted to mention in response to Alex's previous comment about communal agency was that in order for there to be alternatives to policing and prisons or for people to believe that these alternatives are viable is that communities have to be strong, and what I mean by that is people within a given community trust each other and they've built relationships, but this all takes time, energy, and resources, as well as collective practices of addressing conflict and harm without relying on the police. And that's made more difficult when people are atomized and encouraged to see those they live next to as threats. Another possible obstacle is when people conflate safety with police presence. And that gets more muddled, I think, in the South Korean context when the general public may not view police there in quite the same way that people in the US view cops.

[Music]

Kris [38:14]: That's another thing I wanted to bring up. The history of political prisoners and anyone who's accused of being a communist or pro-North Korea being incarcerated at points in history. There was a leftist political party, the Unified Progressive Party (통합진보당), *[James: Right.]* that was dissolved by the Constitutional Court of Korea *[James: Mm-hm.]* years ago for—I guess the reason was for their pro-North Korea views, and it became a national security issue. So just thinking about that, how do you consider a nation a democracy if a court can just unilaterally dissolve a left party like that? And how there are people who could legally be

incarcerated for, I guess, at some point, reading banned material or having these views, right? So yeah, I'm just trying to see the thread so I can connect these things together. And how, as Youngoh said, the prison is also used as a method of dividing or punishing people who aren't being a South Korean citizen in the correct way.

James [39:38]: Yeah, I would just add that that's a major—I had kind of said an obstacle is South Korea's Cold War specificity, and then you brought it up, Kris. Just to give it some specifics, so the 국가보안법, the National Security Law, passed in late 1948 as a reaction to the Yeosu-Suncheon Rebellion. Basically, it made this state of exception where—if, in my research, I were to identify some place that you would say South Korea had a kind of mass incarceration, it would be after the passing of that law, where anyone construed as a leftist of any stripe and even people who just went to meetings to organize for their local causes but didn't really know about these larger party politics, were conceived of as communists and put into prison, with many, many more political opponents of the regime put into prison than ever under the Japanese colonial government, in this period from 1948 through the Korean War. That's what I would say to people, is that that's a major obstacle because the way that incarceration has been politicized in a specific way under a Cold War dynamic, that carries through into the present. So if we're talking about big, long-term, structural goals that can be actioned on on both sides of the Pacific Ocean here and thinking that finally and ultimately ending the Korean War and unification is a thing that people—it's hard to speak and say out because of its idealism, but I think is the goal that will have implications for dismantling carceral states as well.

[Music]

Youngoh [41:47]: I was actually—like Kris, you mentioned the difference between police—here, we fear cops because they can kill us, and I don't know, when I talk to people about cops in Korea, it just looks like they're driving toy cars and shit like that, so it's totally different and I don't really have a clear answer, but I always feel like it's related to how historically militarized Korea is. How every dude is trained to kill with the conscription system. That's something I don't really have an answer of why cops are less threatening, or I don't know how to put it. Like, everyone can play the role of cops, I feel, in South Korea. This kind of order through violence has kind of been cemented in Korean society, and I kind of see that through this never-ending violence against women we see in Korea, right? I just can't stop relating that to the military and how militarized Korea is, you know, how it trains all men to be violent, and if you don't agree to be violent, then you're going to be sent to prison. *(laughs)* You know, this kind of notion. There's that notion there, and does the legal system do anything to really punish those men? No, right? We see these ridiculous laws and how the court deals with it. Just yesterday, I'd seen other bullshit news about the spycam crime. I think the prosecutor played it in front of everybody in court when it's supposed to be observed privately, right? This kind of notion of perpetual gendered violence in South Korean society, that kind of reveals this notion of violence—having to be violent and how violence rules the society. See what's going on in the state, police violence, all this stuff going on, police violence is still in control and I feel like that's the same way with militarism in South Korea. And I feel like it's related somehow.

Alex [44:00]: Yeah, just on the point of language, that's where I think that's actually a really important point, where slogans like "All Cops Are Bastards" don't carry over well to Korea, specifically because there isn't that historical, experienced, perception-based division between these people who are cops who are in charge of that violence vs. average people, whatever that means. Like, I think that literally the fact of everything that you just said is why people partake in multiple degrees of violence all of the time, throughout the entire process of accountability finding or the justice process. And I think that when we're talking about bridging contexts or talking about these ideas about imagining different futures, I think that's where we really have to switch gears from thinking about *who are we resisting* to *what exactly are we trying to imagine*. And that actually leads to my second point, which is that like, life everywhere is pretty hard. *(laughs)* But life in Korea, at least—especially in terms of just, like, having the time and space to be present with other people ... anybody who's experienced Korea would be able to attest to how difficult that really, really is. There's no time. There's no space. And the thing is, imagination takes space and takes time, and I think we probably are all able to attest to that from just even personal experience. And imagining different ways of—even hearing the other person say, "This is what I need to be okay" and then being able to literally switch gears to prioritize that instead of whatever convenient heuristic I have in my head for what justice means—that takes a long time. At least it did for me. I know that I went through a very long—and continue to go through a long conversion process, almost, of all the logics that I have internalized through life in Korea. Which is also not to say those are inferior in any sort of hierarchical placement. It's just different and the values that I have and that I'm committed to look a lot more community-centered now as opposed to, say, even 5, 3 years ago. It really is important to connect these thoughts in terms of the average Korean person's life because, you know, you go to school, you go to work, you go through the military and at the end of that, what sensibility for being with other people and prioritizing their needs are left, exactly, when all you have time and space to really care about is—I don't know—unrelenting capitalism *(laughs)*? These are, I think, the very reasons why this transnational conversation is important because these are very connected struggles. But obviously with extra attention, possibly, to, I guess, the victimhood of all of the perpetrators in the entire process of revictimization. I think those are really important thoughts to connect so I'm glad that you made that observation. Thank you.

James [47:17]: I'm almost afraid to bring it up because a lot of times in an approach to analyzing a systemic view of all the places in someone's life like you're saying, Alex, where someone is either disciplined or just all the places where one might feel surveilled to kind of keep up, remain productive, also taking into consideration one's family obligations and the way that someone feels watched by different regimes of funneling someone into the type of person they are "supposed to be." This type of thinking this way, when put through a U.S. media perspective or even academic perspective, turns into a kind of culturalist argument. You see really crappy headlines. Says something about Confucianism and then that's why Korea is the way it is or something. But I do think there is something about Korea's Cold War specificity, militarist past like Youngoh was talking about, and then unrelenting capitalism like you said. There are specificities to life and its specific precarity in South Korea that does have a very regimented existence that is sort of diffused the kind of discipline and carceral state around—there's a lot of Foucauldian stuff we could say about this but I'm trying to keep it out of

the realm of, you know, just theorizing and mental masturbation, so yeah. One would feel very watched and disciplined anywhere, but I think specifically in certain ways in South Korea.

Youngoh [48:42]: Yeah what you just said really... I'm really close to this hyung who is a conscientious objector who went to prison. He's kind of like right now he's part of the Committee to Reform the Alternative Services Movement. I remember him telling me his experience in prison was, like, the same as all the stories you hear about 군대, about military service, the conscription service. The regimentedness and like what happens during break time 'cause like in prison he said it was like 5-6 [prisoners] per one room [James: *Mmhmm.*] How similar that is to barracks life. I hear this more in Korean culture, how gangsters refer to prison as 학교/school, right? [James: *Mm.*] I definitely think it's really related to what you just said about militarism and Cold War, how like things constantly change in Korea so fast. After the turn of 19th/20th century, after 1900, Japan, then U.S., then split, then militarization, then Park Chung Hee, then democratization—sudden changes. This regimentedness. I feel like it's also kind of tied to their survivalist mentality in a way, as well. I kind of feel that even during the age of COVID, it's kind of that regimentedness that gets Koreans to all wear masks and all follow these rules and COVID numbers go down and we see, like, right-wing American news media say, "Oh, they're doing that because they have communist origins." and say shit like that. There's something to that culture of regimentedness in Korea.

[Music]

James [50:40]: I think we can start to bridge our discussion into talking about how some of this culture of upholding a carceral regime as it exists, a police state, however different ways we'd want to define this is manifested in pop culture. Just kind of giving another avenue, another place where people might have an entry point to sort of see some of this at work and then maybe be critical about what they are viewing, consuming as different content from South Korea starts to come at a premium or be more talked about in the mainstream, North America and the rest of the world. I was thinking about what you were saying, Alex, about how police are seen and kind of the additional layer of that is another form of alternative service for people through military conscription. Some of them might be put as riot police. I think that's really an insidious system that [Youngoh: *Yeah.*] when there are large-scale protests, there's a sense that, you know, when you're pushing against the police bus and you're crushing someone behind it, *That's one of our boys there, that's someone's son.* There's sort of that effect. And then I was thinking about how so many popular South Korean films are kind of copaganda, but not just police, but the role of the prosecutor. The prosecutor in South Korea has such an important role in the judicial process, the legal process, and can be a hero in a different way in films. You know, you'd have that sort of image of lawyers and things in the United States, but this is a state employee, this is not just a defender. This is the state prosecutor [who] is the hero for fighting corruption and things. That's a common theme in lots of South Korean gangster movies, that kind of thing. But additionally, another layer that is very insidious but has some kind of points of education or contact is the, umm, there's a Korean drama called 슬기로운 감빵생활 or *Prison Playbook* is the title on Netflix in English. And I think this was made in production in cooperation with South Korea's 교정본부 (Korea Correctional Service) or the headquarters for the 교정

correctional system because where other dramas blur out or change the name, kind of shy away from a direct representation of a government entity, this is done in cooperation so you see very detailed processes in the prison system as the main character goes into prison for a crime he didn't commit. It shows very detailed—how they get their rations distributed, how this communal living situation works. You see all of the prison systems slogans on the walls, you see the different, uh, the South Korean correctional system has very cute looking mascots. And then also are attendant to these models about how one will rehabilitate themselves and change their life and move forward. All this is in the background as kind of the set pieces in this drama about this baseball player who gets caught up into prison wrongfully. And then it does actually admit that there are things, like, it does admit that there is violence in the prison, there are corrupt guards and everything. But at the end of the day, there are wardens and guards who are heroes who can fight against this corruption and will help you. And they see the true vision of a democratized South Korea and that this law and order system is there to protect democracy and people's constitutional rights. So we haven't talked about copaganda in the United States. I think there are two other kinds of things that are identified there which is sort of like, I don't know, the prosecutor-aganda and the correctional officer propaganda in those two examples. And I think Youngoh was also talking about this very new Netflix drama called D.P. Did you want to talk about that, Youngoh?

Youngoh [54:30]: Oh yeah, yeah. I actually, like, binged it on the plane 'cause I flew back from Korea a couple days ago. Yeah, what James said and it goes back to what Kris mentioned how, like, "Oh, it's just a few bad eggs, but there are these people who represent democracy fully," right? And so D.P. stands for Deserter Pursuit or something like that. So it's basically a new show. It just came out and it's basically about a unit of the South Korean military police where they track down and catch deserters. You know, there are a lot of deserters who try to escape those violences. But like for me, my criticism—I hope a lot of people watch it because what I was thinking while I was watching that was... there was a stage play couple years ago called <이등병의 엄마> or *The Private's Mother* and it was really short and short-lived and wasn't popular, I wish it was more popular because it was all on the mothers and their efforts to do something about their sons who died because of bullying, because of suicide, because of accidents, because of corruption. You know, stuff like that. It was more of a political statement and I think that's why it really didn't attract traction. It's the worst fear of like every parent sending their sons to the military and this happens. So, like, basically throughout the show the main characters are these two members of the military police. It's like an action-thriller-chase thing and that kind of bothered me, but that's how you gain popularity and it's fun, even though it's not supposed to be fun, you know? But I guess my biggest issue really relates to a lot of what we're talking about is that there is a clear bad guy—the bad sergeant who beats the new recruits, the corrupt officers. So, like, *Oh, once they change it's gonna be fine*. That's kind of the whole point of the show, right? Like how these soldiers who desert are not cowards. They're victims. Trying to portray them as victims who need to be rehabilitated. I hate that term, but *they need to be rescued and come back and the nation has to take care of them*. That's kind of the moral of the story where, like, *Oh there are these few bad eggs in the military. Look at these empathetic, D.P. officers who take care of the people they catch, how they humanely treat them*, you know and stuff like that. The bigger issue is the conscription system and what it does to

Korean society and how much it militarizes through this notion of violence and toxic militarized masculinity, how it creates what I mentioned before, like, murderers and rapists out of these men. They're capable of all of these things. There's... it's like a larger picture. And of course it doesn't—there's a complete disconnection between gender violence and military violence even though we kind of know how it relates. But the show, of course, doesn't touch anything about that. But yeah, I think my biggest issue with this show was... I read some articles from Korean former conscripts who got PTSD because they were bullied and beaten by their superior officers and all of these things. The show succeeded by saying that there's all these mean, bad people in the military. How they are bullies and how there's this hierarchy that really doesn't really do anything about all of these things that are going on. And yeah, I think the most memorable—one of the characters said, "My canteen says 1952. That's during the Korean War. Nothing will change." The canteen that person is using in 2020 or whatever is used in 1953. That really resonated. The earliest instance of these kind of hierarchical corruption and violences was the 국민방위군 사건 (National Defense Corps incident) which was the incident in the Korean War where they forced all these farmers into the military to fight North Korean soldiers. The officers, the generals, they basically embezzled the money, funds for clothing and food, so what happened was 200,000 forcefully conscripted Korean farmers ended up freezing to death. All these kinds of military corruption and always kind of trying to find the one person to blame and that's the reason of this corruption and like all these bad things that happen. That's kind of how it's been going on. In a way, this kind of show perpetuates that. It's just like— It reminds me of American liberal agenda. How it's like a "softer" touch, like *We need to take care of them, but we're still going to keep the system intact*. That's kind of what I felt with the show.

Kris [1:00:13]: Even prior to talk of abolition, I just remember from, like, a U.S. standpoint, like being very fascinated by these police procedurals. It's almost perverse. I think— I don't know when, exactly, it became more prominent, but I just noticed, like, TVN and OCN just pumping out these police procedurals, or, like, prosecutor and copaganda. Maybe part of it is that a lot of these shows were successful and pulled in viewership ratings and, as one does in capitalism, you just churn out similar things. But even when thinking about stuff like 비밀의 숲 (*Stranger*). They do go so far as trying to identify societal issues or there's clearly these conglomerates that hold way too much economic power in Korea. But then... It then again gets wrapped in this discourse around, *Oh, there's, like, corrupt officials or corrupt prosecutors and cops that we need to get rid of so that the system of justice runs smoothly*. Or other sort of shows where crime is, in some sense, pathologized through the character of a psychopathic or sociopathic serial killer so it's just very individualized like there's something wrong with this person so that's why they're a criminal vs. thinking about issues or material conditions that would have contributed to that person committing such heinous, sort of violent crimes, right? So, yeah. I think there's something we can analyze further by looking at these crime TV shows. I guess its relation to whether abolition is even in the— possible for the public imaginary.

James [1:02:10]: I think we're hitting a point where we can think about how to conclude this first of many hopeful conversations and we started from a very conceptual level, thinking about how this kind of conversation would even take place and then hopefully with more episodes and content from Heung Coalition, we'll get more voices in here. And thinking more concretely,

maybe looking at very specific examples of the type of cases and cultural productions that we're talking about, also amplify voices of people doing work on the ground is another ideal or goal that I have. Is there any sort of concluding remarks that anyone wants to make? Maybe, like, your wish for the future and things we left open?

Alex [1:02:56]: Kind of adds to the discussion about media portrayals, we've been talking a lot about the good actors, the bad actors side of things. Given more time and more discussion of things, I think it would also be interesting, though, to unpack, for example, uh, I think it was an episode of *Prison Playbook*. I didn't watch all of it, though. But one thing that stuck out to me in relation to the good actor/bad actor discussion is there's this dude that's supposedly corrupt, but he does everything right otherwise. Like he's a good performer and therefore it's okay. And that is a logic that makes such good sense in Korea. Like, you *know* what that means for somebody. There is a pretty heavy divide between what might be right from a personal standpoint vs. what is appropriate. And people— that's something that might cause more doubts elsewhere, maybe, but I tend to find that it's a very established logic in Korea. So, just concluding, I think that this is something that's interesting and worth reflecting on in the future, as well, that coming back to very different expectations on the Korean peninsula vs. like this side of the ocean, there are very commonly held expectations for what right or correct mean in different contexts in Korea and that there is a heavy separation between what one ought to do just as a general ideal vs. what one ought to end up doing. And while somebody might entertain something, an ideal that they may never cross the barrier of, that will still never be appropriate because that is not appropriate in the imaginary or it's something that is even worth imagining because things are so dire or otherwise. So I think that's a discussion that is worth fleshing out more in detail and probably one that will touch a lot of the points we make today.

Kris [1:04:59]: I think my hope for these series is that we could find some way to be connected to people who might actually— Like, I won't discount the possibility or any and all possibility of people thinking about abolition in South Korea because I simply don't know that for sure. What made me think was, like, while reading *We Do This 'Til We Free Us*, there was a section on the #MeToo Movement and how women and marginalized people have had to use whisper networks of who to, I guess like, people who have harmed and who to stay away from. Another person that was being interviewed in that portion mentioned that actually came, that practice can be traced back to trans sex workers who, for the safety of each other, had to keep that, use that method. So it's like, then you have to think about who has to have these violent exchanges with police all the time? And I would think whoever is doing sex work in Korea might have had to have violent exchanges with the police. Labor union organizers, I'm sure. Or whoever is protesting. And of course conscientious objectors and prisoners, as well. They might actually have already or already be thinking about abolition and it's just that we don't know and we haven't spoken to them. The task of building bridges with abolitionist thought here in the U.S. and in South Korea is, again, it's a matter of seeing who's on the ground and seeing who's being affected.

Youngoh [1:06:50]: I totally agree with what you all are saying. And also what James suggested on really educational for us to really listen to those voices. I think after just watching

D.P. I just kept thinking about what it means to reject and resist violences that are normalized and guaranteed, given power and privilege if you're a dude who was born in Korea in the military and you're granted this ability to commit more violences. The frontline, these multiple anti-war, anti-militarist groups like 전쟁없는세상/World Without War, I'm like their biggest fanboy. I just bought their t-shirt and just got one of their books and everything. But there are these people in the front lines. There's limitations, I think, this is, I think, also a part of me wanting to not just get documents and sources and numbers, but really see what was going on in the front lines. The solidarities that develop between conscientious objection movement activists and LGBT activists from the get-go in the early 2000's was really strong because very much militarist and masculinized labor movements and former minjung movements they were as militarized and masculinized as the authoritarian junta they fought against. They pretty much rejected conscientious objection, so how these solidarities form on the ground is— I would really like to learn about that. Something that's hopeful is that there are these people resisting there are a lot of people we can learn from like Dr. Kwon In-sook 권인숙 who was an activist, then a professor of feminism and militarism in South Korea and now she's a politician. And she just submitted the 4th version of the Equality and Anti-Discrimination Bill that keeps getting rejected by these assholes. I see that and I'm like, *Man, she's been fighting this shit since the 1980's*. She sued the police for sexualized torture they committed. And she won; they were sentenced to prison. That's really rare in authoritarian military dictatorship era, right? And she's been on this fight since the 80's and she's the one who submits this and I think a lot of us are pessimistic. It's yet again gonna fail to pass. There are these stories and people on the ground that for me, as an academic, supercedes a lot of the stuff that I read and I internalize as the real thing and knowledge that I need to memorize and write and publish and sell and all that shit. So I agree with all of you and what you're saying that we should try to gather these voices and try to also learn from them in any way we can, yeah.

James [1:10:14]: Awesome sentiments to end on and we'll be exploring these issues further, always with the idea that we're all coming with a learner's mind, but also giving what expertise and direct experience we have, that anyone can have. So this is in the spirit and the mission of the Heung Coalition. Yeah, thanks everybody so much for joining the conversation.

[Music]

James [1:10:38]: Thank you everyone, for listening to Hello Everyone Under Neoliberal Garbage. Podcast is produced by me, James Hillmer. Music is produced by Hellking. Heung Coalition is a group of writers, translators, scholars, and activists committed to the ongoing struggle of generating and sharing critical narratives and perspectives on Korea. You can learn more about Heung at heungcoalition.com. That's h-e-u-n-gcoalition.com. Please reach out to Heung by email at heungcoalitionpodcast@gmail.com. Stay tuned for more episodes. Thank you.