

Tell Us More, Grandmother!

Korean “Comfort Women”

Re/constructing and Re/presenting
the “Truth” and Memory of Survival
through **Narratives**

by Young-In Song

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Supervisor: Diane Nelson

Committee Members: Heather Settle, Mark Driscoll (UNC)

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To the voices that will continuously speak to us and humble us

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Chapter 1

Introduction: Her Story, My Story, and Our Story- “Comfort Women” Speak

All I wished for was to be part (if but a millionth) of the massing, and that I pass through with something more than a life of gestures. And yet, I see now, I was in fact a critical part of events, as were K and the other girls, and the soldiers and the rest. Indeed, the horror of it was how central we were, how ingenuously and not we comprised the larger processes, feeding ourselves and one another to the all-consuming engine of the war.

Chang-rae Lee, A Gesture Life

“You aren’t gonna have a nervous breakdown, are you?”

I was in the public restroom right outside of Griffith Theater thirty minutes before the event was starting, staring at my reflection in the mirror. “What am I gonna do?” Despite having spent more than five months to prepare the event and having been committed to the issue of “Comfort Women” for three years by then, I was still nervous. The event for which I was the main coordinator finally was going to happen in just half an hour. I was a typical twenty-year-old who was trying to figure out what was going on in her life. Yet at the same time, I was also a twenty-year-old who was so passionate about “the others” and was naïve enough to plan to bring Ms. Kim Ok-Sun (Grandmother Kim or Kim Ok-Sun *halmoni*¹) a 85-year-old survivor of military sexual slavery from Korea for the university’s Sexual Assault Prevention Week. I was trying hard to re/present a part of human history that is

¹ In Korean, the term for an elderly woman is “grandmother” (*halmoni* in Korean), whether she is a family member or not. Therefore throughout my writing, I’ll use the term grandmother and halmoni often while I refer to the survivors.

personal, political, uncomfortable, upsetting and essential to myself and, ultimately, to *my* people.

The reason I became so particularly interested about the re/presentation of the “Comfort Women” survivors has a lot to do with the way I have established myself in the past several years. I came to the United States in the summer of 2001. I was a fifteen-year-old who had had almost no major difficulties in her life before, and my relocation to a whole different culture became a crucial and challenging turning point in my life. I came to be marked as a foreigner, a person of color, and a minority. I became “the other,” and the cultural and linguistic barriers created a sense of isolation and loneliness in me. Even living with the privilege of studying at a private boarding school, I had always struggled to find a sense of who I was as “the other” in the land of strangers. Painful, terrifying fragments of memories from this period still come back to me from time to time even now as an adult who has spent almost a decade in this country. However, I know that it was only after these challenging experiences that I got to develop a compassion for others, my pursuit of social justice, and a strong sense of my *self*. My personal pain was not insignificant; however, I learned how to relate to others and their unspoken pain, instead of internalizing agony and pitying myself.

The more I actively pursued relationships with others, the more I learned about myself. I got to add different elements to whom I was becoming. Participating in a writing contest celebrating the birth of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., promoting multicultural dialogues among students, and marching in downtown Birmingham as a part of a multicultural club and gay-straight alliance, I felt that

activism became my avenue for self-exploration, self-construction and self-expression. This is when I started to become interested in the issue of military sexual slavery, which occurred several decades ago and thousands of miles away, yet was so close to my heart and my origin as a Korean woman. I also realized that I had been so busy developing my American-self as a teenage girl who was trying to fit in but be different at the same time. My Korean-self was something to be found and explored within me.

In the spring of 2004, as a high school junior, I decided to look for ways to connect to my Korean roots. Pondering many different possibilities for my summer, I decided to complete some sort of research project, though I barely knew what “research” was. I just wanted to learn about different issues that modern (South) Korea faced as a quickly developed nation over only a few decades, achieving a “miracle.” However, the Korea that I had known had more problems than the glory of such a miracle because it had been still recovering from the wounds of Japanese colonialism, the Korean War, multiple military coups and democratic struggles and movements against its military regimes. Complex histories and stories were left behind while people were busily living in the present and running away from the past history of injury and pain. I wanted to know *why*. Why did we leave our history behind, knowing it would come back to haunt us with the ghost of shame and injury? Why did we keep trying to escape from such enormous and real violence that had lived among us? These were the questions that I wanted to *explore*; I wanted to know whether there was a possibility of getting the answers or

not, because understanding my position within Korean context and where my *Koreanness* is placed within me were important tasks in understanding myself.

Among many of the issues that were related to my questions, the “Comfort Women” issue appeared to me as a very unique, heartbreaking research topic. I had vaguely known about it before, and the thought that women of my age several decades ago suffered something so horrifying and unimaginable made me upset about the tragic history of early 20th century Korea. In addition, I hated Japan for causing such a pain to “us.” It was the “Korean mentality” telling me that I should not like “them,” as I had been taught all my life to dislike Japan. Such sentiment was almost “natural” since at school and through the media, I was exposed to very patriarchal and patriotic discourses. The long enmity and nationalistic sentiments were not completely unreasonable. Japan had never appeared to be sincere for the aftermaths of colonialism, and Japan had not been willing to take responsibility for its war crimes. Such hatred against Japan (or rather, the idea of Japan) has always been an essential element of modern Korean identity.

However, what directed me to the military sexual slavery issue was not simply *Koreanness*. It was my American-self, which had witnessed and experienced various forms of discrimination in the U.S. as a woman of color, that motivated me to pursue passionate reactions towards the issue as well. Without knowing it, I wanted to develop my feminist-self and cross different national, cultural and ethnic borders. I found feminist scholar Laura H.Y. Kang’s point of view rather intriguing since it somewhat explains my position as a person of multiple identities. She observes and problematizes various representations of “Comfort Women” as subalterns who do

not hold any power to form their own collective action unless there is a conscious effort from outsiders. Many of them are Korean-American artists and scholars, and analyzing their positions, Yang quotes Elaine H. Kim's words in her article "Dangerous Affinities: Korean American Feminisms (En)counter Gendered Korean and Racialized U.S. Nationalist Narratives":

"Korean American women may be interested in comfort women and sex workers because as Asian women living in the U.S., they too are marginalized and suspect as possible traitors to the Korean nation, and because they too feel subject to the processes of racialization and sexual objectification."² (31)

As a child, I had a simple-minded sense of justice. I wanted to establish a sense of the innocent and the guilty clearly at least in my head, and I wanted to re/present the issue for the people "who did not have their own voices." Of course, it was not until recently that I have considered the agency issue of the military sexual slavery survivors, and I will discuss it a later chapter. So, I contacted the Korean Council for the Women Drafted for Military Sexual Slavery by Japan (the Korean Council, from here on) which is the primary advocacy organization for "Comfort Women." They welcomed a teenager as a community member of the Korean women's movement, and through just being in the office surrounded by the activists, I got to connect with different parts of me that wanted to make this issue *mine* for the rest of my life. I have maintained a very close relationship with the organization ever since.

Several years later, through my connection to the Korean Council, I organized a "Comfort Women" tour in the Research Triangle Area near Duke University.

² Laura Hyun Yi Kang, "Conjuring "Comfort Women," *Journal of Asian American Studies* 6 (February 2003): 31. Kim's article is available on *Hitting CRITICAL MASS*, 6:1 (Fall 1999): 7-8.

During the short trip lasting one week, Ms. Ok-Sun Kim (Or Kim Ok-Sun *halmoni* or Grandmother Kim) testified at Duke University, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and North Carolina State University. She was also interviewed by Dick Gordon of *The Story* (NC Public Radio WUNC) as the Committee on Foreign Affairs of the U.S. House of Representatives was reviewing a resolution regarding the human rights issues of “Comfort Women” at the time.³ Even after two years, the experience remains a powerful and humbling experience in my memory. And the first event, which happened at Duke, was the most challenging —emotionally and intellectually— and most memorable of all. I did not realize how overwhelming this task could be. With the naivety and foolish bravery to organize this event, I also volunteered to interpret what Ms. Kim would narrate, not realizing what an important “performance” interpretation was until half an hour before the event. How could I re/present such a history and pain in such limited time?

The military sexual slavery system imposed by Japan, or the “Comfort Women” system, during World War II was one of the most horrendous parts of human history and could be compared to the Holocaust against European Jews during the same period. Unfortunately, neither the “Comfort Women” system nor the cruelty of it are well-known outside of a few East Asian countries with survivors who bravely have come out in the last two decades. The system encompasses several broad issues anthropologically, including sexism, colonialism, nationalism,

³ I am grateful for the support of the university communities, especially Duke University Women’s Center, NC State University Women’s Center and UNC School of Social Work, and WUNC for the opportunity to address this issue.

and most of all, power exercised through broader racial/ethnic and patriarchal systems.

After Japan took over Korea in 1910, the colonizer fully exploited Korea's resources, especially labor. Korean people were often used as manual laborers producing war necessities, especially before and during the Second World War period between the late 1930s and 1945 as Japan was participating in the war full-force. Women were not exceptions although they traditionally did not hold jobs outside of their family realms. According to sociologist Chin-Sung Chung, "[t]he Women's Voluntary Corps for Labor and the Women's Voluntary Corps (for the most part, the names were used interchangeably) mobilized women to work in munitions factories both in Japan and Korea beginning in the early 1940s."⁴ Most young women who "volunteered" to be part of the corps were from poor peasant families. Many people use the term "Comfort Women" and *chongshindae* (a Korean term for volunteer corps) interchangeably, because there has been evidences that the volunteer corps women were mobilized not only as manual laborers but also as sex slaves. Chung also found that there was a group called "Wartime Special Voluntary Corps for Japanese Troops in Manchuria," and it was comprised of "Comfort Women" who were organized by the Japanese military and stationed in Manchuria.⁵ While going into dangerous areas to earn money for their families, the women, who expected to participate in the manual labor for the war time production lines, did

⁴ Chin-Sung Chung, "The Origin and Development of the Military Sexual Slavery Problem in Imperial Japan," *Positions*, 5 (1997):220.

⁵ Chin-Sung Chung, "The Origin and Development of the Military Sexual Slavery Problem in Imperial Japan," *Positions*, 5 (1997):221.

not have any idea about what kind of horrifying labor and suffering were waiting for them.

Statistical facts show how cruelly the women were treated. Initially the “Comfort Women” were Japanese sex workers who were employed to “entertain” soldiers. However, the limited number of Japanese prostitutes and their hesitation made the government gradually replace them with destitute women from the colonies.⁶ Ahn found a record showing that 80-90% of the slaves were Korean women while there were also women from various countries, such as Japan, Taiwan, China, the Philippines, Burma, the Netherlands and Australia.⁷ Since most of the records were destroyed around the time the war ended, it is very difficult to estimate exact or even the approximate numbers of “Comfort Women.” However, the sex slaves were derogatorily nicknamed “Ni-gyu-ichi” which means 29 to 1 in Japanese since each sex slave had to “receive” about 29 soldiers per day or per shift. Based on this, there were about 80,000 to 200,000 women who were sacrificed for military sexual slavery.⁸ Choi also gives different possibilities utilizing various arguments and historical materials. He mentions George Hicks’s conservative estimate of 139,000 military sexual slaves, considering one woman had to deal with 50 soldiers while many other records present different numerical possibilities, from 30,000 to 400,000, based on the recorded numbers of condoms provided by the military.⁹ The age range is even more shocking. The “official” minimum age for the

⁶ Deok-Su Choi, “The Introduction to ‘Comfort Women’ Issues.” Center for Korean History, Institute of Korean Culture (Korea University and The Ministry of Gender Equality, 2002), 25.

⁷ Yeon-Sun Ahn, *Making Sex Slaves and Soldiers* (Seoul: Sahn-In, 2003), 16.

⁸ Yeon-Sun Ahn, *Making Sex Slaves and Soldiers* (Seoul: Sahn-In, 2003), 16.

⁹ Deok-Su Choi, “The Introduction to ‘Comfort Women’ Issues.” Center for Korean History, Institute of Korean Culture (Korea University and The Ministry of Gender Equality, 2002), 25.

Japanese women was 18 and for the Korean women, 17, according to the data that Ahn found. Yet she claims there were many women who were much younger than 17 years old, like Ms. Lee Kyong-Sang, who testified that she was 12 years old when she had been dragged into the war as a “Comfort Woman.”¹⁰

The Japanese government and military used many different methods to recruit the women. Many women were from poor rural families that struggled with daily survival. In addition, sons and males were much more valued assets than female children —culturally and economically— and therefore daughters were the ones forced into the “Voluntary Corps” so that their brothers did not have to join the Japanese military. The Korean documentary film *The Scars That Are Not Cured Yet* presents a painful history through the sex slavery survivors’ testimonies, and some of them testify that they were kidnapped while they were playing with friends. “Some Japanese soldiers came with military trucks, and they just took [us] away from [our] hometown,” a survivor says.¹¹ The women were also actively recruited by “Comfort Women” brokers. The Korean economy was heavily based on agriculture and collapsed when many young men who used to contribute to their families were drafted as soldiers and manual laborers. With the loss of its workforce, Korea’s rural young women had to leave their villages to get jobs in more urban areas, although traditionally, women usually did not work outside of their homes. Although they hoped to get jobs in the factories, there were not enough jobs for unskilled women. Many women eventually came to be involved in prostitution, and the recruiters — both private and governmental, Korean and Japanese—

¹⁰ Yeon-Sun Ahn, *Making Sex Slaves and Soldiers* (Seoul: Sahn-In, 2003), 83.

¹¹ Hae-Ryong Ahn, *The Scars That Are Not Cured Yet* (The Korean Council, 2003).

targeted these women.¹² They were transported in military trucks and ships and treated as military supplies while they were placed in a section with a sign saying, “Prohibited – Do not use in the ship” and they were addressed as “military purpose materials” in paperwork.¹³ It is ironic that Japan, in 1925, joined an international treaty prohibiting trade of women and children, yet the same policy was not applied to the citizens of the colonies.¹⁴ Japan justified its invasion by claiming that it was protecting and “liberating” Asian people from Western colonialism,¹⁵ yet it treated its colonies’ peoples as subhuman objects that did not deserve any protection from international measures.

Having learned about such cruelty and growing as a feminist through my passion for the military sexual slavery issue, I simply felt that it was *my* duty to do the interpretation during the events that I planned. As an activist, *I* had a strong urge to deliver the message to other people, as much as Ms. Kim did. However, I later realized that it was not a simple process of changing one language to another. I had to deliver Ms. Kim’s language, message, pain and history all together, and I had to be ready for any spontaneous events and reactions from the narrator and the audience. And it was not just translating between two different languages. It was going to be a total process of interpreting the historical context, wounds, pain and healing process so that everyone –Kim *halmoni*, the audience and myself— could truly connect and communicate with one another and overcome different barriers of

¹² Yeon-Sun Ahn, *Making Sex Slaves and Soldiers* (Seoul: Sahm-In, 2003), 19.

¹³ Yeon-Sun Ahn, *Making Sex Slaves and Soldiers* (Seoul: Sahm-In, 2003), 86.

¹⁴ Yeon-Sun Ahn, *Making Sex Slaves and Soldiers* (Seoul: Sahm-In, 2003), 16.

¹⁵ Yuki Tanaka, *Japan’s Comfort Women* (London: Routledge, 2002), 3.

languages, cultures, histories and experiences. I was going to be the linguistic and cultural bridge between the audience and the narrator. Something that hit me so hard in the bathroom was the fact that what I was going to do was make someone else's painful experience mine. I would be translating from the language that I had not spoken on a daily basis since I left Korea as a fifteen-year-old into my second language that I was more used to now. In a way, I was going to perform a narrative of my own so that the audience could comprehend —not just hear— what Ms. Kim wanted to say. I was scared that I might make a mistake in speaking both of the languages that I was by no means perfectly fluent in. I was even more scared that my misinterpretation might lead to misinforming the audience who would take my word as the real testimony. The fact that hundreds of eyes would be watching me for 90 minutes did not help, either. In the awfully quiet bathroom, I was fighting against my vulnerabilities.

When I came out of the bathroom, I saw many people who were gathered around to look at the photos of military sexual slavery history and activism. The photos were brought by the coordinator of the Korean Council, Ju-Hye, who came with Ms. Kim to represent the organization and, more importantly, to take care of *halmoni* during the tour. The Women's Center program coordinator Claire and I had put the exhibit together earlier in the afternoon. The photos were an introduction to the history that the audience was were about to learn. I stared at the temporary wall where the laminated photos were hanging. My eyes were browsing through the historical and current activism photos, just to see if they were put in the right place in an appropriate order, and I regretted the last minute hustle in the

afternoon. I always have such a hard time looking at historical photos of “Comfort Women.” Many of the women were probably helplessly “posed” by some male journalists or soldiers, and they satisfied the men’s voyeuristic desire. They are not just historical photographs that provide visual proofs but are symbols which inflict pain and anger in my heart. My eyes stopped at one specific photograph. There are four sex slaves —one of them fully pregnant— and a soldier with no date or title. Two of the women are staring at the exhausted, unhealthy looking pregnant woman with worried expressions, also looking very ill and tired. The other woman is staring at the camera with a blank expression. The soldier next to them is quite a contrast to these women who are full of pain. He is well-dressed and healthy, and he poses for the photographer with cheerful expressions. This black and white photo has become like a living memory of my own. To me, it is the epitome of the cruelty that was imposed on military sexual slaves, and it always sends chills down my spine. So I turned my face away and quickly walked into the auditorium. And lo and behold, I saw that half of the 500 seats were filled, and I felt a little dizzy. Why are people so curious and hungry to hear this story?

The auditorium was filled with the nervousness, liveliness and even excitement of the people who were curious about what this *halmoni*, an eighty-something-year-old survivor of military sexual slavery, would have to say about her life during one of the most gruesome periods of human history. Perhaps, the presence of the survivor herself was fascinating and incredible enough, though the storytelling had not even started yet. People were already imagining stories that would come out of the body of a living history. They seemed to be willing to

re/construct their memories about this chapter of human history that they had never learned from ordinary textbooks. Or was I just imagining all of this because I had been in their shoes once as a person who was full of curiosity and compassion? Or was it because I wanted them to *really* learn about the history that powerful people —intellectuals and politicians— chose to ignore and forget collectively?

Bruno Latour introduces the concept of *black box* through his work *Science in Action*. According to Latour, it is the concept that “is used by cyberneticians whenever a piece of machinery or a set of commands is too complex.” No matter how complex the machinery or the commands are, only “their input and output count.”¹⁶ While *blackboxing* has helped defining and simplifying numerous scientific concepts throughout history, it also has limited other possibilities as new black boxes were built upon another. Proving that one of the black boxes is inaccurate would cause an enormous upset in a well-established system and a dethronement of firmly believed scientific “truths.” People have been made to fear that the machine (or what they believe in the machine) would simply break down if they choose to question it; therefore, they have simply believed what has been established as authoritative sources. Latour says that “[b]uying a machine without question or believing a fact without question has the same consequence: it strengthens the case of whatever is bought or believed, it makes it more of a black box,”¹⁷ and he cautions against the danger of such blackboxing.

¹⁶ Bruno Latour, *Science in Action* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987), 2.

¹⁷ Bruno Latour, *Science in Action* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987), 29.

Black box or blackboxing has not only been applied to science, but also to interpretations of social phenomena. Many interpretations are built upon principles that are based on blackboxing. Not only has this limited scientific creativity, but it has also caused tragic ignorance for humanity because much of context is compressed and underestimated during the process. The input-output analogies of blackboxing are mono-directional, killing the possibilities of variables, questions and challenges from different angles. Such simplifications deny the diversity of a human fabric that has been richly woven throughout history, and therefore, black boxes deny and threaten humanness. Society has become a machine based on “truths” constructed by those who control the core of “the machine.” This machine is a structure that is intricate yet simplistic, consisting of humans yet often inhumane. It seems that the dominant discourses of it have been derived from the black boxes while the “little people” have become simple parts in the operation, not having much agency in the operation as a whole.

In the matter of “re/creating” the history of violence and specifically the history of military sexual slavery during the Pacific War, a monstrous machine was constructed to write credible, “unbiased” history by those who had traditionally held power under patriarchy, and blackboxing contributed to the silence and silencing of the powerless. Latour encourages us to break out of such a simplistic, brutal way of thinking and to challenge ourselves to dive into the world of the uncanny, the world that allows seemingly contradictory values to coexist and come together as we find ways to connect them intimately. Challenging us to “reopen the

black box, break it apart and reallocate its components elsewhere,”¹⁸ he wants us to defeat the violence of silence that has often been imposed upon human beings.

While human and nonhuman “actants” work together, people can create their own manifestation of what can be done outside of black boxes.

The people who were present in the auditorium, intellectuals, students, activists, Koreans, non-Koreans, women, men, and sexual assault survivors, were willing to walk through the private and public memories of the once-powerless person who was battered and ignored by systemic violence. They were willing to break out of the black box(es) that they have been living in. The space felt so sacred that evening. For 90 minutes, the theater, which is usually used for big lecture classes, concerts and movies, was a special space where people came together to listen to, learn about and understand the “other’s” suffering, directly narrated by the very person who survived it. It was a place where different times, histories, stories and memories came together to be re-made.

I slowly walked down to the front of the auditorium near the stage where I needed to be in several minutes. Every step down the way was a nerve wrecking moment as the stage got closer and closer. I took plenty of paper out of my bag as well as three pens, in black, blue and red, to put down on the table that was set on the stage. “OK, it is happening,” I thought. Ms. Kim was sitting at the very front row, and she looked rather calm, perhaps from the years of storytelling experiences that she has had. Soon, 7 o’clock came. I greeted some of the familiar faces and chatted a little bit. Just like any other event on campus, we waited for about 10 minutes until

¹⁸ Bruno Latour, *Science in Action* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987), 29.

people got settled, and the program coordinator of the Women's Center, Claire Robbins, went up to the stage, and the event got started. While listening to her brief introduction of the event, in my head, I nervously went through the little speech that I was going to give before the short documentary movie and Ms. Kim's testimonial. The time finally came, and I had to walk up to the stage. Walking that distance that was not even twenty-feet-long, I had thousands of thoughts and doubts going through my head. What gives me the authority to stand in front of hundreds of people and tell them "This is the story that the survivor (or I) would like to deliver to you?" In every step, I felt the urge to turn back and tell the audience, "Sorry, I can't do this." After all, what did I know about the issue that I was trying so hard to address? How could I possibly deliver someone else's life story filled with enormous pain as if it were my own? I felt as if the voices of the past were questioning me, asking if I really knew *the truth* of this particular piece of history that I was about to interpret from my mother tongue to my second language.

I somehow managed to make it to the podium. Now looking at the space from the other angle, I was able to see numerous faces, mostly of strangers, that filled the entire space with curiosity, as if demanding, "Tell us some stories. Tell us the truth." I felt a sudden and ironic comfort while looking at the people's faces. Yes, I might only be a twenty-year-old kid with not much life experience, but whether I wanted to be or not, I was the messenger between the survivor and the audience, the narrative and the people, and the past and present time. The pressure from my earlier preoccupation about the "performance" itself and self-doubts about my ability did not stop me from being passionate and caring about *my people's*

issue. My surge in confidence somehow helped me manage to finishing my three-minute long speech, and I was not scared anymore.

After I came down from the stage, the lights were dimmed for a short documentary film on the history of military sexual slavery and activism. It initially presented the shocking history of women as young as thirteen were forced into the gruesome system. Perhaps from the visual shock of such a tangible cruelty, several people in the audience started to sob and sniff, just like I did when I first watched it. I had seen the movie several years before, when I was introduced to the issue the first time. So fortunately, I was able to hold myself together throughout the emotional, upsetting film. It also contained several clips from the Pacific War period in the late 1930s and early 1940s as Japan invaded numerous Asian countries: photos of “comfort stations” and the sex slaves in and near military barracks and stations; testimonies of the survivors who were (and are) active in the movement; and scenes of the global movement to address the “Comfort Women” issue which is an unresolved, government-led war crime that should be condemned as a serious human rights violation. The film also featured the survivors who are actively participated in the movements through testimony tours and the Wednesday Demonstration, the weekly protest in front of the Japanese Embassy in Seoul. When the film was over, I felt that the atmosphere of the auditorium was one filled with sorrow. It was silent for a while as people dealt with their sadness, anger, and shock.

That is when Kim *halmoni* and I went up to the stage to present her story. When we sat down, Ms. Kim, who had been in the audience watching the film about

her inhumane experiences, could not stop sobbing. Her emotional breakdown was something that I did not expect, because I thought that she would present herself as a strong, brave survivor who was not afraid of anything. Perhaps the courage that helped her to survive several decades of suffering built her —and other survivors’— social image as a fearless warrior, not a survivor of so much pain and trauma. I held her hands, not knowing what to do. Her hands were rough and dry as if they were telling me the story of her life that was filled with painful injuries and memories that tortured her daily. My heart ached and eyes turned red. What was I to do in this extreme moment of emotional rupture? Soon, the Korean Council’s coordinator who came along with her came up to the stage to help calm her down. She gently reminded Ms. Kim of the reason why she came such a long way to be there. Ms. Kim was someone who truly was devoted to educating the public about the issue, and soon, she got herself together. The story finally began.

Listening to, understanding and simultaneously interpreting the heart-wrenching narrative was transformative for me. In some ways, her story became real —as opposed to surreal and distant— and became mine. As her words became my words through interpretation, her experience over the century felt as if it became my experience. And over the intense ninety minutes, in a way, I became her. While she was courageously making her private story public, I also had to run between the uncanny boundaries between the private and the public, the emotional and the factual, the U.S. and Korea, the past and the present. The age gap between us was more than half a decade, but the connection —or rapport, anthropologically speaking— that I had with *halmoni* who has experienced all the suffering possible

that a human being can experience in this world, was something inexplicable in any kind of human language. There was something surreal yet so tangible about this bond, as women, as activists, as Koreans, and as human beings. The unbelievably tragic and gruesome words, which I had tried so hard to desensitize over the past several years while translating the survivors' testimonies and official documents, became so real as the words started to dig into my heart instead of just staying at the tip of my tongue unemotionally.

I am not telling this little story of mine with these details to draw attention to myself. But I have to admit that I am writing for myself as well as for the survivors of "Comfort Women" system. It is a political issue that is so personal to me. I am very attached to this specific part of history, because it motivated me to think about who I am as a woman, Korean, anthropologist and a feminist scholar. Therefore, the survivors are not simply my "research subjects." They are the teachers who have taught me so much through telling their life stories. These stories, filled with fear and scars, have become so close to my heart and became part of my life story as well: the issue is the greatest passion of my life. Therefore my position is that of an activist who wants to represent and advocate military sexual slavery's historical importance and contribute to bringing justice to the survivors.

As I mentioned earlier in this chapter, my initial motivation for becoming involved in the military sexual slavery issue was the strong sense of Koreanness that has existed explicitly and inexplicitly throughout the first fifteen years of my life. At the beginning of the research for this work, I had a hard time explaining or

understanding the concept myself, because I did not feel confident enough to claim what *my* culture was *really* like. How would I explain what Korea and its culture were like, while I still struggle with my own personal culture that is so Korean and so American and so jumbled with all these integral parts of me? As an “American” feminist, my initial approach was blaming the vague yet powerful institution of patriarchy. This perspective made me run into a conflict right away because patriarchy is ingrained in Korean culture which heavily emphasizes a sense of the collective “us” through nationalism and patriotism. Whether people are cheering for *our* team in the Olympics, purchasing Korean cars rather than imported ones, or participating in protests against American military occupation and their violence against civilians, people were always living with the collective feelings, which are a lot more powerful than the individualism that Western/American culture strongly upholds. Most importantly, Koreanness is the very sentiment that promoted the “Comfort Women” movement—which was also a powerful, counter-hegemonic feminist movement—nationally among civilians. Therefore Koreanness came to me as a very uncanny concept. It is not the name for a monolithic, “second world,” or “the other” culture. It is not simply about patriotism or nationalism. The rich, collective sense of *us* has been formed based on multiple elements, and the narratives of the “Comfort Women” survivors prove why the language of Koreanness is inextricably connected to their feminist discourses.

Another concept that is important and intimately related to Koreanness is *han*. It is a complex concept that needs much description, especially since there is no equivalent English word or concept for it. It is a Korean word for internalized,

inexpressible anger and sadness, but this short explanation does not encompass the very particular, cultural sense of anger and sadness that is reflected in the word, and it may be impossible for those who are foreign to Korean culture to fully understand its meaning. *Han* is an essential element in Koreanness. In Korean folktales and literature, it is often reflected in difficult feelings of a woman who endures the loss of her loved one (family, fiancé, husband, etc.). Not only does she have to suffer the sadness, but also has to live with a certain social stigma, as if she is guilty of the tragedy. She has to bear the hard emotion deep in her heart and avoid showing it to others. She does not (and cannot) say a word about it to others, and no one needs to or wants to know what her pain is like. The others just admire her ability to tolerate the inexplicable. Such enormous tolerance towards her pain is what develops her *han*. Under the constant self and cultural —internal and external— pressure, she accumulates *han* towards what is lost and what she cannot have as a woman who lost the one who is supposed to provide guidance in her life. She covers it up, moves on with her life, and yet the feeling of sorrow never goes away.

Han is permeated throughout Korean history as well. On the one hand, it seems to symbolize “feminine” characteristics and gender roles. On the other hand, it is not just Korean women’s cultural possession, but rather an important part of ethno-national history of struggle and survival. Korea has been a country without much power as surrounding countries and colonialism have pushed the country around for hundreds of years. China, going through different monarchs by different ethnic groups, had much power over the Korean monarch while it treated the nation as its inferior and invaded it at different times. From the South, Japan’s pirates

constantly robbed the poor, while the country officially invaded Korea in the late 16th century. As Japan grew and rapidly opened up the West in the early 19th and early 20th centuries, it rose up as the most powerful country in Asia, defeating Russia and invading Asian countries. While being stuck in between China and Japan geographically and politically, Korea never had a chance to be a “powerful” entity in the international arena. Meanwhile Korea’s internal politics divided the country and caused internal chaos for many years, under the Chosun Dynasty (Chosun was the monarchy that ruled Korea for 519 years right before Japan’s colonialization) and during the Japanese occupation. In addition, in the post-WWII period the U.S. military occupied South Korea and corrupted democracy was imported under the influence of the Cold War politics.

Korea’s constant struggles due to lack of a voice in its own representation and internal and external conflicts have produced tremendous silence/silencing and internal injury while the nation endured much suffering. Korea has been “feminized” and stigmatized as a mediocre nation. Its patriarchal culture lost the power even to its own people. In consequence, it has internalized a sense of humiliation throughout its history. The imposition of patriarchy within the nation upon its own powerless people (women and the poor) has become only more severe over time, creating a constant cycle of victimization and *han* among its people. So in this sense, *han* is not only personal but also national, and I argue that *han* is caused by a broader sense of lacking much autonomy over one’s re/presentation and lacking agency.

While *han* is not exclusive to women, it is often portrayed in describing Korean women's oppressed position as subaltern. According to Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "[s]ubalternity is a position without identity."¹⁹ Applying Marxian notion, she defines subaltern as an entity without "a consciousness of class," one who does not even have the power to recognize its own powerlessness.²⁰ It would take much more detailed explanation to understand what subalternity is, and I will not go deeply into it at this point. I am trying to make a point that subalternity was the position of women who were subjected to the military sexual slavery draft since the women were under multiple patriarchies that allowed them few choice. One patriarchy that was imposed upon them was from Confucian social values within Korean culture. Women had to be obedient and sacrifice themselves for men of the family if necessary because fathers and sons were more important members of the family that carried family tradition. In doing so, women often had to give up their dignity while they had to work outside of their families, and some were sacrificed as sexual laborers and military sex slaves. The culture blamed women (while making them blame themselves) for losing their "purity" (or virginity) which they had to guard with their lives. In the meantime, Korea was suffering under Japan, which oppressed and humiliated the people of the nation. While the Korean patriarchs suffered under Japan's colonial patriarchy, the weight pressed down on the women even more because they were subaltern to the subaltern. The pattern continued even after the independence when the nation was reorganized by the will of

¹⁹ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Scattered speculations on the subaltern and the popular," *Postcolonial Studies*, 8:4 (2005): 476

²⁰ *Ibid.* 476-7

international power players, not its own. The weight of patriarchies all together was too great for poor, uneducated women.²¹ The culture of internalization has led to and produced an oppressive weapon. The incommunicable pain and injury of women has been suppressed even more and eventually produces more *han* in survivors' and victims' lives.

As we look into this multilayered, uncanny subject, we have to constantly question the history that is written and constructed by our ancestors and listen to the voices that were often ignored, so that we can construct a new kind of history that challenges the "old" history that has been dictated through patriarchal conventions. And while the survivors narrate, we have to really *listen* to their *stories* that are coming from private and collective experiences as women, as Koreans and as survivors who now are finally becoming part of a larger community instead of staying in the margin. As we are having a conversation with a survivor of great suffering as she shares her memories, we are simultaneously facing an individual of the past, present and future: first, a present individual who might be worried about paying for her rent (a *real* person who is just like us); a past individual who was once a victim of systematic wartime rape violence and aggressive silencing (a historical figure who educates us); and a future-oriented individual who is weaving a history and leaving legacy for the future generation who

²¹ I do not wish to put down all Korean women as oppressed, poor and uneducated for there were a few women who were well educated and influential to the Korean independence movement. However, most women who had to labor and were dragged into warzones as sex slaves were from underprivileged background.

will read, learn and talk about, and remember “Comfort Women” as historical figures.

Chapter Structure

The first chapter is the introduction. It is the most personal chapter of my thesis while I convey my personal history and identity development process as a Korean feminist through the political issue of military sexual slavery which became my current academic interest. I describe the space and atmosphere that I witnessed through hosting the testimony tour of a military sexual slavery survivor from Korea during the Sexual Assault Prevention Week at Duke University and the Research Triangle area two years ago. I then go further back to explain how I initially got interested in the issue and the painful history of the beginning of the “Comfort Women” system. I examine how powerful the survivors’ narratives are as a method of re/constructing social memories and how this issue has influenced my personal development as a Korean feminist scholar who wants to advocate the issue and to present the significance of the narratives.

The second and third chapters are about the framing of the individual narratives which have become a public discourse and a social memory. To explore how the personal became public and political eventually, I will explore the history of the “Comfort Women” system while I present my interviews and other interactions with two active survivors (Ms. Gil Won-Ok and Ms. Lee Yong-Su) based on my fieldwork in the summer and winter of 2008. The uncanny reality is that the individual stories of the survivors who bravely decided to go out to the public are

not only very private but also public, especially considering their influences on historical and political discourses. I will examine the mutual influence between the narratives and society's interpretations/reactions of them as the survivors deliberately chose to talk or not to talk about certain aspects of their experiences, depending on the audience.

The fourth chapter is about the politics of re/presentation of the military sexual slavery issue. I will explain and examine Korean modern history which has had several stages of evolution which have added more complexity and layers to the issues of the survivors' agency. From decades of silenced, victimized history to the images of empowered survivors, "Comfort Women" activism had different phases in representing the survivors. I divide the periods largely into two: the first half as the early phase (in the pre- and early 1990s) that emphasized the "victim" identity of the survivors which received much criticism of essentialism; and the second half that actively utilizes the survivors' memories through testimony while the survivors are re/presented as empowered. However, I eventually claim that the survivor's "Comfort Women" identity, which is very much mediated through their narratives and the audience's reactions, is not either that of victim's or that of victor's but of a storyteller who continuously makes and remakes her re/presentation in the world.

I will conclude with a note that the "Comfort Women" narratives are not strictly about victimization or about empowerment. The stories continuously evolve along with the survivors' identities and representation. They are stories of individuals who suffered personal and national tragedies, yet try hard to bring healing and reconciliation through continuous storytelling. The stories have been

generated throughout the society through the establishment of a strong relationship between the survivors/narrators and the audience.

By working on this thesis project, I am not establishing any new *truths* about the history of “Comfort Women.” The system was undeniably evil, gruesome and horribly disgusting, and similar incidents happen even today while we claim to possess heightened consciousness, political correctness, cultural awareness, and (arrogant) moral superiority over our ancestors as we judge their dishonorable past and try to reestablish justice. More than half a century after this awful slavery was “over,” everyday, even right now while I am comfortably sitting in my room writing about “the others”’ heartbreaking stories, some people who are considered less valuable suffer through the ugly reality of human trafficking, slavery, and sex work. Therefore, the “Comfort Women” issue, which is still unresolved in many ways, is not only a matter of the past, but also is of the very present that we are living in right now. Such historicity and timelessness have compelled me to go back and forth through human stories and observe the painful yet gradually healing presence of the past during the modern times.

As an “other” —who is very much Korean, very much American and very much neither— studying mostly American and European thoughts and ideologies (which are valuable to me but are not inclusive of the kinds of language, values and history that I grew up with as a child), I am studying the very history of my (or as Korean language often says, *our*) mothers and fathers as if my own kind is “the other.” Some people may find some “new truths” from my reflection of *our* history,

our kin and *our* identity. As a Korean woman educated in America, I am honored to begin the journey as the “interpreter” of narratives of our mothers yet I know that I am given the responsibility and privilege to re/present all the survivors, the entire history, and the entire Korean population. And we all know that that would be impossible.

The story is about the “Comfort Women” survivors’ narratives. It is about forgotten, ignored history. It is about feminism. It is about Koreanness. But most of all, it is about the formations of identities of the brave women who have changed my life. Their rich, courageous stories that are about seven decades old have been so crucial to my personal growth. An introverted girl who was curious about her country’s tragic history became an activist, academically pursuing her kin’s stories. As much as this is the story of the “Comfort Women” survivors, it is also my story of conveying and transforming my identity as a Korean, a woman, a feminist, and a human being. I will narrate a story that is not a “his-story” but a “her-story” and “my-story.”

Chapter 2

The Story of Ms. Gil Won-Ok: Telling the Stories That She Wants to Forget

I don't even want to think about them. I'm... trying to forget.

Ms. Gil Won-Ok, in her testimony

It was another summer day in Korea. The late July weather in Seoul was unbearably hot and humid as it was every year, and the heat from the paved asphalt road added 5°C more to the already hatefully high temperature of 32°C. I had woken up in a sweat around 7 o'clock in the morning, knowing that the 80-minute commute by subway to the shelter would not be so pleasant this morning, again. And now, after getting off the crowded subway, I was climbing up a steep hill to get to the Shelter for grandmothers, *Woorijib* (our house, in Korean). It is the shelter where several "Comfort Women" survivors live together, run by the Korean Council. It is located within a walking distance of the Council's office and has a residential caretaker, Ms. Son Young-Mi. It is located in a typical lower-middle and middle class neighborhood. While there are a lot of apartments all over the city (where richer people live), this neighborhood is filled with smaller *villas* (lower-middle class apartments, usually five stories high) and houses, although there are a few taller buildings as well. There are small grocery stores, an all-boys' middle school, a university, restaurants and small shops on the way to *Woorijib*. I stopped by a convenience store to pick up some melon and caramel flavored ice cream that the grandmothers liked, knowing that I probably should not for their health and that Ms.

Son would not welcome my purchase. Ms. Gil Won-Ok, my interviewee for the day, would need to be especially careful due to her diabetes. She is usually very careful with her diet, not eating much fatty meat and sweets, although she occasionally rewards herself with some pork or melon-flavored ice cream.

Ms. Gil knows that she has to remain healthy, especially because there are only 93 “Comfort Women” survivors left in Korea (although probably many more in other parts of the world) and fewer to tell their stories to the world. She takes a walk everyday around the neighborhood and does basic house chores, such as cleaning the house, washing clothes, and doing dishes, despite needing to visit doctors regularly. When I finally arrived at the shelter, I rang the doorbell, and she greeted me with her usual welcoming smile. I walked into the house, and compared to the temperature outside, it was surprisingly cool inside, with just one fan running in the living room. There were a couple of other grandmothers watching television, and they greeted me with the same kindness as usual. I handed them the ice cream that I bought earlier, and they seemed positively giddy, just like little kids. Ms. Gil said that she did not want it, so I just put it into the refrigerator so that she could eat it later. I hung out in the living room with other grandmothers, watching the music show that they were enjoying. But my head was filled with some worries, nervousness and excitement since I had to conduct my first interview with Ms. Gil. It was my first interview with a survivor as well. I was excited, because I felt that it was, in a way, my debut as a “real” anthropologist. I had always romanticized about doing fieldwork with “the others,” people who really interested me as anthropological “subjects.” However, at the same time, it was a terrifying moment

as well, because my interviewees were not just “research subjects,” but the people who have experienced so much pain and suffering throughout their lives, people that I really care about. What if I asked a “wrong” question that could emotionally scar them? In addition, I just did not want to face the awkward silence if I ran out of questions or cope with the possibility of not being able to come up with spontaneous/brilliant feedback questions as the interviewee shared with me the interesting narrative of her life. So while sitting with the grandmothers, I kept reviewing the questions written on my notepad, reassuring myself that I did enough preparation for the interview and Ms. Gil would know what to do since she is a very experienced interviewee as a vocal activist.

Ms. Gil Won-Ok is a military sexual slavery survivor who was born in 1928 (81 years old). She was sent as a “Comfort Woman” twice, the first time in Harbin when she was 13 and again when she was 15 in *Sukgajang* (*Shijiazhuang* in Chinese; a region in He Bei Province in Northern China). She came back to Korea through the Incheon Port in 1945. She worked in different “places that sold alcohol,” —which seem to be similar to bars— and did anything and everything simply to survive after returning to Korea. Although she has faced many economic and health challenges throughout her life, she adopted a son in 1958 and raised him to be a pastor. She “came out” in 1998, and since then, she has gradually become an activist for military sexual slavery survivors’ rights. She is currently living at the Shelter, *Woorijib*, and

her son and his family visit her frequently. She enjoys singing and dancing very much.²²

I have known about Gil Won-Ok *halmoni* for several years. She seems relatively younger and healthier than other grandmothers. She is very vocal and active about representing “Comfort Women” survivors; therefore she often travels with the Korean Council domestically and abroad to give testimonies. The first time that I actually got to meet her was during the summer when I was doing my fieldwork. Before I conducted interviews and read her testimony from published materials, I did not know any details about her life-long suffering, besides the fact she had been a “Comfort Woman” when she was young. Gil *halmoni* always seemed so calm and peaceful. She is the one who takes care of a lot of house chores and other grandmothers at the Shelter, and she loves to take care of and watch her fish. She is an “average-looking” grandma who seems a lot healthier than she actually is right now. She always has a graceful smile on her face and always talked to me in a formal way in Korean, rather than in the casual way that many other grandmothers adopted when talking to younger people or to her friends. In Korean culture, respect is an important value, and in Korean language, one has to use the respectful format to elderly people and strangers. I found her ways of talking interesting since, at first, I thought that it was a mark of distance that she wanted to maintain with me. Yet, after spending several days with her, I found that she talks the same way with

²² The survivors’ personal histories are taken from my fieldwork interviews, testimony books, and on-line testimonies available on the Cyber Memorial page of the Korean Council website at <http://www.womenandwar.net/bbs/index.php?tbl=M04012>. I will try to distinguish the information that is obtained through my interviews to my best ability. Ms. Gil’s testimony is in testimony book 6 which was published in 2004, and she was interviewed multiple times by Kija Choi (one of my other research interviewees), Ju-Hyun Nah, and Yeonju Oh.

everyone, including other grandmothers who live in the Shelter together, younger visitors, and even the Korean Council workers who have maintained close relationships with her for the past decade. Although I once tried to convince her that it is OK to talk to me less formally and with less respect in her tone, it really seemed that such linguistic formality was a way for her to form respectful human relationships with others.

I failed to interview her in my first two attempts due to her poor health on one day and a visit from her son on the other day. So for the first interview, although she still seemed a little nervous, she seemed to be “ready” to tell her story.

Q: I will ask you “broader questions” at the beginning. Just keep telling me your stories. OK? [...] So, *halmoni*, please tell me how you grew up.

G: When I was young... growing up... It’s hard to remember... since it’s been so long.

I felt some hesitation on her part, so I started to ask specific questions.

Q: Where is your hometown?

G: It’s Pyongyang. (I had noticed her Northern Korean accent beforehand).

Q: And... your family?

G: My family... When I was there... There were mom, dad, 2 older brothers, 1 younger brother, and me and a younger sister. 2 daughters and 3 sons.

Q: You were the 4th one, no?

Did you play with your sisters a lot? Who were you the closest with?

G: I don’t really remember if I was close to anyone... who I was closest to. But my second older brother was 2 years older than me and the older sister 4 years. I would act badly, and my brother would chastise me and hit me. And I would over-react, and tell my parents (I laughed). They would scold him.

Q: You were a brat, huh? (laugh)

G: Yeah... They would tell him, “Why do you hit your little sister? If she’s acting badly, you should tell us.” Yeah, this was a repeated pattern. I’d act badly, and he would hit me, and then I tell my parents so that he gets scolded.

During this first interview, my primary purpose was getting to know her as a person, not necessarily as my “research subject” or a victim/survivor of military sexual slavery. The interview did not happen until 3 weeks into my fieldwork and

research for that for this reason. I primarily “hung out” at the shelter *Woorijib*, sometimes helping out with cooking, eating lunch with her, scrubbing the floor, watching television with the grandmothers and chatting. Our first several exchanges of our conversation were to learn about what kind of place the traumatic experience as a “Comfort Woman” holds within *her* course of life rather than within the realm of Korean history; I wanted to know her as an individual. I wanted to see her not as a small element of the larger history of sexual slavery (or even “the trauma” itself), but as the *owner* of the traumatic memory and history who narrates and interprets her experiences from her perspectives. I wanted to see how she located this traumatic part of her memory while not confining her to my preconceived idea of a military sexual slavery survivor who is willing to be interviewed.

She is very experienced in giving testimonies and having interviews with academics, journalists, moviemakers, artists and others. We were acquaintances, and she tried hard to be helpful and help me fulfill my academic responsibility. She did not insist on leading the interview in a certain way, though she certainly had her way of directing the interview based on numerous experiences. I also wanted our interview to be more organic, so I tried hard not to regulate the conversation with a set of specific questions (which probably would have been based on assumptions that could limit the materials that Ms. Gil would want to talk about). It was, in a way, another one of our daily interactions, just like having lunch together or watching the fish that she took care of; however, at the same time, we both knew that “the talk” would need to be done with my iPod recorder was running. But I wanted to give her

as much autonomy as possible over what would be talked about and what would not be talked about, because I firmly believed (and still do believe) that I wanted her (and other survivors') voices to resonate throughout my writing, not just my interpretations and opinions.

It was interesting to notice how she chose what stories to tell me. She obviously had some episodes and memories in mind; however, she kept saying that she did not remember much or it was hard to remember. When I asked her to tell me what she remembered about her hometown, she said " I had lived in Bucheon (where she had lived raising her son) for 40 years, and I don't even remember that so well," implying she could not possibly remember much from the past —her past— when it was so far away from present. I felt a little "stuck" at this point after asking several questions tracing back to her childhood memories. I had just started the interview, and I did not expect her to be so short with her answers.

My first thought was that she was a little shy about talking openly with me, especially for the first interview. But perhaps it was because I was impatiently trying to get to know "everything" about her —learning who she is as a whole— within the first several minutes, while she was trying to gather different memories of her, some clear and some not so. Lambek and Antze points out how much people consider memory as the essential element of identity construction while "ambiguity is the rule" for memory. Therefore, people often consider that a clear sense of memory is connected to a clear sense of one's identity,²³ and it is assumed that one who "knows her identity" can re/present herself clearly. Considering how obscure

²³ Michael Lambek and Paul Antze, "Introduction: Forecasting Memory," in *Tense Past: Cultural Essays in Trauma and Memory*, ed. Paul Antze and Michael Lambek. (New York: Routledge, 1996), xvi.

certain memories can be, it is dangerous to assume that clear memory always leads to a clear sense of determining who she is, and in the case of military sexual slavery, what this monstrous system was. It was challenging for the survivors who initially came out, because, in denying its responsibilities, the Japanese government has argued that the survivors do not have clear memories due to their old ages and while it had been several decades without socially remembering (public discourses). Consequently, the survivors were considered as not having a clear sense of who they are, and therefore not able to re/present themselves. And during the first several minutes of my interview while feeling challenged about unclear memory presentation, I made the same patriarchal mistake, unconsciously considering her as having an unclear identity presentation as well.

Fortunately, she opened up and gradually was able to articulate certain parts of her memories that were more than fifty years old surprisingly well. In sum, what really interested me was not just her “hesitance,” but the fact that she seemed to assume what I “wanted” to hear while she was constantly juggling with different parts of her memory, deciding which stories and how much she wanted to share with me. She was already aware that the interviews would eventually contribute to writing an academic paper regarding her experience as a “Comfort Woman,” and overall, she seemed to try to gear the direction of the conversation towards “the” experience. At the same time, that particular part of her memory was too painful and traumatic to talk about. I noticed that she wanted to make her memory of being a military sexual slave —ironically, the part that I “wanted to” hear— fairly short.

She kept shying away from detailed descriptions of certain elements that I was interested in hearing about, which often made me feel awkward as an interviewer who was not the best conversationalist in Korean language, especially with elderly people. Asking about the sensitive issues of sex, especially sex to a young unmarried person, I felt a little inappropriate to ask to begin with. On top of that, the linguistic barrier was not necessarily derived from my lack of knowledge of the Korean language, but more from my feeling of inadequacy due to cultural and generational differences. It was an unexpected challenge that I faced throughout the interview, and the below question that I asked was the first time that I had such a feeling.

Q: Do you... remember... back in the day... Do you remember anything about Japanese people in your hometown?

This was the first time that I brought up anything remotely related to her experience as a “Comfort Woman,” and I constantly had to reframe the question in my head and verbally since I did not want to upset her due to the linguistic challenge. At the same time, I knew that I was working on a very sensitive topic to begin with, and this moment had to happen. Although I was very nervous, she did not respond too emotionally.

G: That was... He lied to me that I would go to a factory, but he put me in as a “Comfort Woman.” Then I was sent back home once I got a disease (STD) and they could not fix me. Near my house, there was a Japanese military station. The people from the station... in the morning, they would pick people to work in there. People lined up, making a *long* line. If you’re there early enough, you can get in. When you get in, they give you a little thing to put on your waist (an identification tag that signified a worker). When you get in, there’s something to do, even scrubbing their floors...

Q: So what did you do there? Washing clothes and stuff?

G: Not just washing clothes... It was different everyday. They will look at the people in the morning, and decide what each person will do. If you're a man and strong person, they make you clean the bullets. For us... we were... like thirteen, twelve...

Q: You were really young then!

G: Yeah, so they made us clean their offices. Washing clothes was for older people, adults.

At this point in the conversation, I wished to hear more about her youth and her her experiences with and/or impressions of Japanese people, hoping that it would lead to her sex slavery. However, she unexpectedly jumped into a memory from a time that was right after she came back from her first experience of being a sex slave. At that point, I was not ready to hear her experience as a sex slave, and the "abruptness" made me to change my direction for following questions. I felt that she mentioned the unspeakable very briefly to avoid possible emotional difficulties of having to talk about "it." It may sound ironic since she is an activist who often gives her testimony in front of numerous people. However, Ms. Gil and other military sexual slavery survivors, who seem so brave and audacious, are still surviving day to day with their weak bodies; it is difficult enough for them to agree to participate willingly in physically and mentally exhausting tasks. I heard from the Korean Council workers that after giving testimonies to a large public, many of them cannot eat or sleep for days because the memories that they had to revive haunt them.

In addition, the atmosphere in the Shelter was very different from a large group setting with dozens of people. Our interaction was one-on-one which was very intimate. There was no formality or pressure of public speaking, which has to

be concise. However, personal interviews impose different types of challenges on the survivor. During the interview that I conducted, there was no time limit, and she had more room to think and format the conversation on her own terms. This could have imposed more pressure on the survivor, who was already struggling to do as she wanted to (or was obligated to) and provide information that gives more details regarding her life experiences. She has to juggle how far she wants to/should tell the interviewer who will write something that other people may have access to in the future.

It was not until later when I realized that she did not just “jump to” the story that was in-between her two experiences of being a “Comfort Woman.” The time of Japanese occupation (anytime between 1910 and 1945) was certainly a difficult period for many working-class Koreans (mostly poor peasants) economically, so many people had no other option but to volunteer competitively every morning for manual labor in the military station, the powerhouse of the colonial Japanese government. Gil Won-Ok *halmoni* was not an exception as a child of a peasant family. Even after suffering the unspeakable from Japanese soldiers, Ms. Gil, then a 14-year-old girl, had to volunteer everyday to go into the space that was owned and controlled by the people who violated her. She had no choice but to try to survive as best as she could. The enormous fear that she had to face probably cannot be verbally described by anyone, not even by Ms. Gil herself. While telling this part of the story using everyday incidents, Ms. Gil probably mentioned her experiences and feelings, because to her, they were what was worth mentioning. The systemic violence towards colonial citizens, destitution, desperation and powerlessness led

her to more suffering throughout her life. This part of her life was the reason why she had to “go there,” to the place that broke her life into pieces, again.

While she was telling me this story for five minutes or so (out of a 45-minute interview), I did not see the significance of this two-year period as I do now. During this part of the interview, I was caught in the moment and I did not want to interrupt the flow of her story, so I let her talk continuously about that experience that she clearly remembered (as opposed to the part that she claimed that she did not remember). Now, I feel that it was a good decision, because going back to the interview several months later, I have drawn significant meaning out of her statement. To me, this was the ultimate moment that the personal history was coming together with the larger national/ethnic history of suffering colonialism. I realized why personal memories regarding a particular period of her life are significant when discussing national/ethnic history. Throughout the period when she was laboring in the intimidating and humiliating space under the constant surveillance of the dominant Japanese, most of Korean people also had to suffer through the similar types of violence. Her personal history reflected the history of colonial Korea, and of a time when the nation was powerless and its ordinary people were suffering even more. Through paying attention to a survivor of the historical trauma, I got to feel a more personal attachment to *our* history that once seemed distant and impersonal.

We continued our conversation, and this time, she mentioned how she was forced into military sexual slavery the second time.

G: So I was working there (in the Japanese military station in her hometown) for a while... And then the person who took me out of the first place appeared again. I thought he would never appear there again... On the way out of work, one day, that person called me. "*Hanako!*" That made me really nervous all the sudden.

Q: They gave you the Japanese name Hanako?

G: Yeah, "Yoshimoto Hanako" was my name then... And I got really, really nervous, remembering what I had to go through before. I was about to run away, but then he grabbed me. Later, he put me in a train... I was thinking of my mom and dad, could not even see my friends...

Q: So the second time, they kidnapped you?

G: Yes, while I was staring at him for a second, he just grabbed me and put me in a train...

Q: Do you remember where you went? Where did you go for your first time (referring to her first experience)?

G: First place... I think it was Manchuria (Harbin, the city that she was placed, is part of Manchuria which is North of Korean Peninsula. The area was occupied by Japan as well). The second place, it was Bukkyong (Beijing), it can't be wrong (speaking with much certainty). [The place was] A little away from there, in a countryside, they called the place *Namachang* or *Sukgajang*. I went there, and then I came out after the Independence.

Here, again, she did not mention anything about what she went through while she was in China. It was not that her experiences during the period were not significant enough for her. I believe that it is quite the opposite. For her, her life there had been too terrifying, too gruesome and too painful to re-verbalize. During this part, she seemed as nervous as her described fifteen-year-old self. I saw the same fear and anxiousness in her eyes and feared that she might have an emotional breakdown. I already knew all the potential terrible things she had experienced at this point of in her life, and I did not want to push her to remember the pain and terror.

After hearing her talking about how got to go to *Sukgajang* —although this point of the interview was brief— I figured that she would be able to talk about how

she was initially led into sex slavery, so I decided to go back chronologically and ask her how she arrived at the location of her first “Comfort Women” experience.

Q: How did you go there... for the first time?

G: The first time... I sort of knew the person. [He said,] “Why do you just play? Go to earn some money. If you learn something from factories, you will earn a lot of money and become rich later. So I was tempted, and without telling any adults (her parents), I just went.

Q: How old were you then?

G: I think I was thirteen... Thirteen, probably. [Silence] It happened to a child who was too young, so I had to have surgery for my STD.

Q: Did you have your periods yet [when you were thirteen]?

G: No, I didn't. [...] They removed my entire tubes, cutting off the life of a woman.

Although she did not have any choice or control over the poverty or Japanese domination of the country, she continuously expressed feelings of regret and self-blame. She connected the first and the second time intimately, not only because they are chronologically only one or two year apart, but also because the former experience was the reason for the latter in her memory. She believes that if she did not “volunteer” the first time, she would not have had to go through the second time, and perhaps would not have to go through the life-long suffering in poverty, silence and oppression. She regretted the choice for even more reasons: because due to this experience, she could not live a “normal” woman’s life by getting married and having biological children. She believed that she had not achieved much in this world, because she could not do a woman’s duty as she had become physically incapable. The “life of a woman” —her fallopian tubes— was cut short through the surgery. For her, it was not just a surgical procedure that altered (“fixed”) her body

parts, but an act permanent damage which burdened her with a sense of shame and guilt.

As the interview continued, she gave me more details about what she experienced while she was a “Comfort Woman,” and I witnessed her tremendous courage and boldness in this part of her narrative.

G: They put me in a train and took us to Harbin. What did I know as a little girl? They would take off my clothes and hit me really hard. And when I cry, and someone who is the “administrator” would come in, yell at me and drag me out.

Q: That was a soldier?

G: No, it was a woman who was the owner of the place, give us food and stuff.

Q: So an older woman?

G: Yeah, a grandmother.

Q: She was a Japanese?

G: I didn’t know if she was a Korean or Japanese person, because I did not hear anybody using Korean around. Because I did not understand Japanese, the *unnis* (unni means older sister, in Korean, referring the older girls in general) would tell me something in Korean, and when they found out about it, they would beat us up really badly. [silence] And after a while, I started to menstruate. I did not even know what it was, and I just thought it was because I was touched (continuously raped). The older girls taught me how to deal with it. They asked me give them some money so that they can get pads. I did not get even a little bit of money [while being a “Comfort Woman”], so I just gave them the money that I brought to the place [from home]. The girls taught me how to use them, wash them, keeping them clean. They took care of me and taught me, like they were my parents.

Q: You were the youngest?

G: Yeah, of course! And I thought that they were not going to send those people (soldiers) in since I was bleeding. But there was no exception. I would just clean myself, and then receive the next one... The time passed just like that. And then after a long while, we (Korea) got Independence.

Considering her reservation at the beginning of the interview, I was very surprised by the development of such openness in her narrative. I actually expected not to hear anything regarding her experience during her slavery, because she seemed to be so reserved about sharing details, at least for the first twenty minutes or so.

However, Gil *halmoni* shared several very intimate experiences with me during this dialogue. First of all, she actually mentioned the very experience of “receiving” Japanese soldiers without any direction from my part. She took initiative in bringing her experience forward to me while she had to go back actively and seek specific memories of trauma and fear, which was a painfully courageous action. She verbalized it fairly clearly, while it was in lieu of other experiences, such as facing the intimidating elderly woman who was in charge of the “comfort station” and having her first menstruation. Although I did ask her a question regarding if she had menstruated before being in Harbin previously, it was she who actively remembered and told me this personal experience of going through puberty. Ms. Gil talked without any hesitation or embarrassment, although in popular (and traditional) discourse, menstruation is often considered as something that is “dirty” and should not be talked about in public. Her straightforwardness in discussing this powerful moment was especially significant, because this personal experience was a way for her to connect with the other girls in the “comfort station.” Through her storytelling, she found a way to integrate some heartwarming memories of sisterhood with other young Korean women who were in the same situation as her. The existence of *unni* meant having a “family” and forming human relationships in insanely inhumane, violent environment. It made her miserable experience a little more bearable and helped her survive during the war, and even after the war when the military abandoned all the military sexual slaves. The friendship and support that she received from the “older sisters” who risked getting beaten up were something so unforgettable to Gil *halmoni*, even after many decades later.

While listening to her deeply personal experience, I became emotional as well, imagining Ms. Gil—or myself— suffering this sort of gruesome treatment while there seemed to be no hope. This emotional exchange established stronger rapport between us: we were no longer just an interviewer and an interviewee, but one woman and another acting as “sisters” in the same movement. I noticed that she concluded the story as the war being over, which was not “logical,” because she was talking about her first time experience, and the Korean Independence came much later after her second slavery experience in *Sukgajang*, China. In a way, she was mixing both of her experiences to tell me a more convincing story about the very brutal reality she had gone through. I do not need to problematize it as an untrue, fictional narrative, because the story that she told me was definitely real and reflected how she has coped with the trauma while reconstructing her memory of suffering terror and violence. The reconstruction was a self-protection mechanism; she was trying to make sense of the extreme violence and injury that can never make sense to anyone, in any logical terms. Whether she hit puberty at the age of thirteen or fifteen is a minor detail that does not affect the degree of seriousness of the brutality; however, the fact that a girl who had not yet hit puberty was dragged into the systemic rape camp is absolutely real and gruesome, and sadly proves how far war can drive human brutality and impose illogical pain on others. How can we blame the survivor for not being accurate and for being illogical when what she suffered will never make sense to her?

The constant theme that came through her testimony was extreme poverty. The cycle of poverty has challenged her for more than half a century. As mentioned

previously, Gil Won-Ok *halmoni* “volunteered” to become a “Comfort Woman” because she simply wanted to get out of the poverty that haunted her family for so many years (and she did not know for what she was volunteering). When she came back to Korea after the Independence, she took a job in “places that sold alcohol” although she was aware of the negative connotation of the position (almost like that of a prostitute), because she was so desperate.

They took me to a public bath so that I could wash. Then gave me new clothes. They asked me “what can you do?” and I said “I don’t know anything. I don’t have any skills.” They ordered me to sing, and... Back then I had a really good voice. After hearing my singing, they were all clapping and treated me differently (better). So I worked there, at the place where I poured alcohol and sang. [...] I was there for a while. [...] I was trying to go home (Pyongyang), but because of the 38 parallel line (between the North and the South); I couldn’t.

She had no choice even when she came back after miraculously surviving the journey of returning to Korea. She was still a powerless woman, poor and uneducated, while all the political changes were happening. She had to do anything and everything that could support her, and her will to survive was stronger than her pride, which had suffered after going through major defeats over the first three decades of her life. She also had been a mistress for twice in her life, and thought that doing this would at least prevent her from starving to death, and keep her “safe” with the existence of a man and/or a family in her life. I was not able to obtain all the detailed factual information through our conversation, perhaps due to the fact that she had had to tell me a very difficult story already, which probably

exhausted her emotionally. I wanted to hear and write about what she *wanted* to talk about.

Feminist scholar Kija Choi participated in the testimony project that was led by the Korean Council and feminist scholars between 1999 and 2004. The scholars and activists obtained testimonies from dozens of survivors to publish a series of books so that the public would better understand the lives of the military sexual slavery survivors. Choi interviewed Ms. Gil between 2002 and 2004 to publish her story in the series. She notes in the testimony book that everyone was so shocked about the fact that she had been a “Comfort Woman” twice, and expected to hear some “new” historical facts from her testimony. But the extent of her memory that she was able to verbalize was so limited and “too weak, considering the serious degree of traumas that she suffered.”²⁴ During the interviews that I conducted, I, as well, sometimes felt that her statements were not detailed enough to obtain factual knowledge about what she “actually” suffered. During the interviews, she did not want to tell me certain parts of her experiences that she felt too painful (or shameful) to verbalize. However, as the conversation went on, she opened up more and shared specific memories, such as her interactions with the older girls, the fear when the Japanese soldiers came in, and having first period. These were crucial in helping me understand how those memories affected Ms. Gil’s life. Over an extended period, Choi witnessed a tremendous personal (and social and political) transformation in Gil Won-Ok *halmoni*. A woman, who used to be so ashamed of her sex slavery experience at the beginning of her “coming out,” gradually came out of

²⁴ Testimony Book 6.

her shell and became open about sharing her memories with others by connecting to the other survivors and support network, and recovering her memories that she had to get out to the world, however painful it might have been. She states that Ms. Gil has become so active, expressing her “happiness” when she tours around to give testimony and open people’s eyes.²⁵ To me, Ms. Gil’s attitude towards her life makes her a true survivor and an activist.

It was quite interesting to consult published materials to complement the limited (yet very valuable) information that I obtained through my interviews. While going through published materials on Ms. Gil’s testimony, I wanted to understand *halmoni*’s history not only based on the short-term interactions that I had with her over one month, but also based on the specific information that she revealed to other scholars and researchers who had established years of experiences with her. It was like putting jigsaw puzzle pieces together to complete the “whole picture.” However, the weaving of the sensitive stories imposed a huge dilemma on me as an interviewer and an anthropologist. On the one hand, I had a desire to retell and re/present her story “well” to others with more clarity through delivering her “complete” life story. On the other hand, by doing this unintentional “fact-checking,” I am rebuilding her memories for our (my and the audience’s) understanding’s sake which might be disrespectful towards the effort and honesty of Ms. Gil, who tried her best to communicate with me during the interviews. Does reviving and “knowing” all the possible facts increase the value of her effort and courage to communicate personally with me? How do we know what we know is

²⁵ Testimony Book 6.

true? How can I judge which information is truer and more trustworthy? I constantly questioned myself as I was conducting the interview and after.

Georg Gugelberger argues that “a trace of real”²⁶ has come to redefine what is real. The violence of the systemic war crime and trauma that she has had to suffer have caused the survivor to “lose her basic sense of self.”²⁷ She had to silently rebuild her selfhood and her relationships to the world. And now as she talks about the experience from her memory, she is dependent on the little traces that have made her the person she is now. These traces are real, because they are present with Ms. Gil’s life and her re/presentation of herself. However, they are not tangible values, but rather amorphous elements that contributed to who she has become. Therefore I would like to side with Gugelberger regarding Ms. Gil’s narratives, which are not always clear and comprehensive to the audience. I know that in every sentence that she has told me (and other scholars), there is a trace of real that reflects the “truth” about the incredible violence that certain human beings imposed upon others. In my position where I have to trace the meaning of individual narrative, this trace of real —how the survivors are now bearing and reflecting on the memories of being violated physically, sexually and mentally— is perhaps the most essential element that I need to focus on so that I can re/present the survivors’ narratives comprehensively.

In addition, a “complete” remembering is often an impossible task for the narrators who went through extreme personal and social traumas. Interviewing

²⁶ Georg Gugelberger, “Introduction: Institutionalization of Transgression- Testimonial Discourse and Beyond,” in *The Real Thing: Testimonial Discourse and Latin America*, ed. Georg Gugelberger. (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997), 5.

²⁷ Judith Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*. (New York: Basic Books, 1997), 52.

campesinos living in a community in postwar El Salvador a decade after the civil war throughout the 1980s and early 1990s was over, Julia Dickson-Gómez found that “[the] experience of the uncanny —[feelings of uncertainty and crossing boundaries of contradicting realities and thoughts]— represents a dialectic between remembering and forgetting.” People often commented that “He who hasn’t experienced war doesn’t know anything,” expressing the difficulties of verbalizing what happened several decades ago.²⁸ Their emotional difficulties and foggy memories due to the extreme shock and trauma only let the victims/survivors remember fragments of the period, reconstructing the memories as the products of both present and the past. This lack of concreteness may make it difficult for the audience to obtain historical facts from a survivor who gives a testimony of her trauma. As a scholar *and* an activist who delivers *halmoni’s* words to people, I firmly believe that whether the narrative is “complete” or not, while listening to the heart-wrenching history of military sexual slavery and the survivors’ individual testimonies, the audience would be able to feel the pain and suffering of the narrator. The narrative eventually becomes a *real* fact as people develop empathy and compassion. Again, my reconstruction process through this thesis is not at all to diminish the importance and reliability of personal memories, but to understand and sympathize with the painful social memory that we in the human race have to carry on together.

Since my goal was to understand her life story in re/creating the survivor’s narrative, I thought it was essential to understand her relationship to her kin,

²⁸ Julia Dickson-Gómez “‘One Who Doesn’t Know War, Doesn’t Know Anything’: The problem of Comprehending Suffering in Postwar El Salvador,” *Anthropology and Humanism* 29: 2 (2004): 145.

especially to her son who has spent the last five decades with her. Throughout Ms. Gil's life, childbearing was impossible, especially since her physical condition was extremely poor after the sexual slavery. However, she adopted children whom she raised with all her heart despite physical and economic difficulties. She is very proud of and attached to her son. She refers him as "the pastor" or "Pastor Hwang," and when I asked her if the gentleman that I saw the other day with her was her son, she immediately brightened up. "Yes, did you see him? The pastor?"

He has given much meaning to her life. She considers him as a "gift of God." When he was born in a local hospital, she visited and took care of his biological mother who was not able to raise him. Therefore, at the age of thirty, Ms. Gil decided to adopt him and made him a part of her then-husband's family on his official birth certificate (she could not give her family name to him since only husbands/men were considered the official heads of families during that period). "Because of my son, I started to sell things on the street (instead of working in bars), to raise him," she said during the interview. She had to work very hard to provide the means to ensure his education and happiness, and she loved making this tremendous sacrifice. She tried to provide him with things that she had never had in her earlier life, especially education, monetary support and protection. The experience of motherhood —living as a "normal woman"—was an unexpected gift, something that she had thought she would never have after the traumatic experience of sexual slavery. Through raising her own child, she had seen a sense of hope while believing that he could become anything, as long as he had her continuous support. She thinks that she is "only a poor uneducated woman," but she

put her son through college and graduate school, and it is a great achievement and pride of her life, as much as it is his. He is her extended self, realizing her dream that never came true for her. She confidently claims, “There is no other ‘Comfort Women’ survivor who is as happy as I am. I have a family of six. And my son has become a pastor, who fixes people’s souls. I feel that I am the happiest person in the world.”

Her traumatic experience of military sexual slavery did not defeat her spirit and will to live. She is leading a happy life as a mother and as an activist with a strong sense of agency, although she is physically extremely weak. At the same time, to “be better,” she goes back to the memory of the extremely painful part of her life and tells the story, which is mentally and physically burdensome on the 80-year-old woman. I asked her how she feels when she is done with her storytelling in front of people towards the end of our conversation. She said:

If I would talk about being sick and stuff (her life story as a whole), it would probably take more than several days. It would be endless... I just talk about whatever I can think of. If I remember every single detail (when I talk that day), I can’t fall asleep that night. I try, but I can’t sleep well. (Q: Because you spent so energy telling your story?) No... Not because I’m energy-less, but when I close my eyes, I can remember everything that I talk about earlier the day. So when I travel around to give testimony, the people who sit by me would be frightened, because I would talk in my sleep. I try hard to live in this hard world, still, and I’ve survived. [laughter]

And her response was something that kept me thinking about the meaning of this ironic situation where the survivor has to revisit the very pain and reinjure herself to “be better.” According to her, she is “unfixable” now in terms of her present physical status. But it seems to me that she still lives with a sense of hope that

something in her has been becoming healed. Although she had repeated through her testimonies that she wants to forget about the horrible experience, she could not throughout her life, because it was ultimately not her choice to repress such a harsh memory which kept becoming clearer and more violent everyday. The systemic pressure of patriarchal culture that looked down upon women who were sexually violated (assuming the women had done something “bad” to suffer violation of their bodies and more) did not give Ms. Gil a choice; she had to let through everyday as if nothing happened, while thousands of other military sexual slavery also lived like this in silence.

In her interviews and testimonies with the testimony team in the past, she kept saying that she wanted to “forget it all.” She had tried so hard to erase her memory throughout her life to ease her pain, and yet her method of coping with the pain was talking about that very pain to others, sometimes to individual scholars in a form of a conversation and other times to hundreds of strangers on the stage. To forget about it, she has to reveal her very gruesome injury. She usually suffers through several days and nights after giving her testimony, because of the vivid suffering that she re-experiences. However, to me, it seemed that such suffering has made her stronger and more willing to talk about her memory as a political activist. She knows that she cannot forget, but she also knows that the only way she can make a difference is by challenging people’s consciousness while re/membering and engaging herself in that very history. Gil Won-Ok *halmoni*, once a timid victim with unclear memories, has emerged as an agent of her political community who actively seeks dignity and justice.

Chapter 3

The story of Ms. Lee Yong-Su: A Fierce Story of *Han* and Survival

*I can't live like this any more
With so much anger.
Bring my youth back,
Apologize and pay reparation!
Apologize and pay reparation, Japan,
For dragging us into the war
And stepping on us all over.
Mother and Father, can you hear me?
Can you hear our cry?
Don't worry.
Now, the Korean brothers and sisters together
Are trying hard to resolve this han for us.*

A song lyric made by Ms. Lee Yong-Su (translated from Korean)

Ms. Lee Yong-Su is an owner of much *han*, a culturally specific term for the internalized, inexpressible anger and sadness, as explained in the first chapter. She once was a subaltern, as a woman who had to live a life that was designed by the patriarchies of her lifetime; however, now, she is a tough survivor who is fighting against oppression and expresses feelings that she developed throughout her life by writing her own song lyrics. Lee *halmoni's han* has been an essential element of her identity. Throughout her life, she had internalized such extreme feelings of anger and sadness, hoping that it would eventually help her to live a “normal” life. Yet such *han* became the very core energy of her political activism.

I interviewed Ms. Lee Yong-Su on the same day that I interviewed Ms. Gil. Since it was my second interview, I was not as worried about the possibility of awkward moments. Although Lee *halmoni* did not officially live at the Shelter, and I

did not get to interact with her very much, I still had some experiences with her. But what I was more worried about was coping with her assertive, sometimes intimidating personality which is based on her regional origins. Although Korea is a small country, historically, it has experienced significant regional division, and each regional group has been stereotyped with certain personalities. Korean women from the Kyongsang Province are famous for being aggressive, go-getters, and Ms. Lee is from this province. I have had plenty of experience with this region's people throughout my life since my paternal family is from that region. Growing up with them, I had always been a little intimidated by this active personality, although I often find myself being "one of them." Of course, I know that as an anthropologist, I am not supposed to depend on stereotypes, yet based on my life experience and the interactions that I had with Ms. Lee before, I knew what kind of personality she might show throughout the interview. I had seen her assertiveness throughout several years at the Wednesday Demonstration every week, and I clearly remembered that she had always been fearless. I did not see the timid, scared girl she was when she was sixteen years old while being shipped to China to be a "Comfort Woman."

Ms. Lee Yong-Su was born in 1928 in Daegu, North Kyongsang Province. She was born as the only daughter of a poor family of nine. She could not get much education due to poverty, and she "raised all of [her] younger brothers" while her mother was often gone to be a nanny for a rich family. She worked in a textile factory owned by a Japanese when she was only nine. When she was sixteen, she was recruited to become a "Comfort Woman" with her friend, without being

informed of where she was going or what kind of work she would do. She was shipped to Taiwan, and on the way to the country, in the ship, she was raped the first time, along with other women who were there. She was constantly raped, tortured, and physically abused while she was at the “Comfort Station.” After the war was over, she came back home to her family, although there was much pressure from her parents (who did not know what their daughter had gone through) to get married “just like a normal woman,” but she was never able to when they were alive. She did many things to support herself economically, selling food on the street, working at bars, and working as an insurance saleswoman. Now she is living in Daegu and comes to Seoul for the Wednesday Demonstration (the weekly protests in front of the Japanese Embassy that has lasted for eighteen years until today) almost every week. She stays in the Shelter often.

The heat was even more brutal in the middle of the day. I was sweating profusely from the trip back and forth between *Woorijib* and the Korean Council’s main office. When I stepped into Ms. Lee’s room, she was taking a nap, also exhausted by the weather, and I felt terrible about bothering her. Fortunately, she was expecting me, and I just gave her a few minutes to get ready. She took out two photo albums and some documents that she wanted to show me. She proudly spread them out on the floor where we were sitting. They were the pictures of her, touring different countries to participate in international conferences and give testimonies to different audiences. In every picture, she was dressed well in her *hanbok* (traditional Korean dress), and although I never heard her public testimonies, I was able to see her eloquently presenting her story. There were some

magazines and pamphlets in Japanese, which I assumed they were the programs and articles regarding her visit to the location. They were not simply records of her activities, but proud memorabilia that celebrate her active self since 1992. I went through the pictures and materials, in awe of different moments that represented a living history.

I started a conversation with her, by asking her if she came up to Seoul every week for Wednesday Demonstration. She said that although she wanted to, it was too expensive to take the KTX train (express train) every week, so she tried to stay as long as possible in Seoul to participate in the weekly protest.

Lee: I came out 17 years ago, in 1992. [It's been so long that] It's so hard...

It's difficult to talk. [silence]

Q: If so, let's just make the interview short. You can just talk as much as you want.

L: But still, it should be helpful [for your project].

Q: [laugh] That's true...

L: You're writing your thesis, so I'll tell you what's important. You're studying a living history, so please listen carefully, and tell this story as it is and represent well.

I was able to see that she was very tired and not in the condition for such a difficult story. However, since she had a strong sense of responsibility and ownership to her cause, she actively participated in the interview for almost an hour. Her manner was very authoritative while she insisted how she wanted the "living history" to be represented in an academic paper. I was glad that I was able to feel strong affinity right away while she seemed to accept me as an "insider" regarding military sexual slavery issue. I felt that I was truly a member of the activist community at the moment.

We continued our conversation regarding her childhood.

L: I had little brothers, and our family lived with our grandmother. [...] I had a younger sister, but she died when she was young. [...] I had an older brother, too, and she was active in the independence movement, studying in Japan. [...] I had 4 brothers. [...] Because I was the only daughter, I was loved a lot. I didn't know anything back then.

Q: So you were born in Daegu?

L: Yes. The area was Kumjung-Gu. Daegu Kumjung-Gu, Ijungmok, 153... I don't know. [...] Because there wasn't television or anything, kids would just play around outside, and we became friends like that. I went to school until third grade. I stopped because the grandmothers in the village would say "That family sends their daughter to school while they have plenty of sons [that need to be educated]." That hurt my feelings a lot.

Throughout the interview, I was surprised by how she was able to provide many details, even something that happened before she turned 10. This was one of many moments during which I encountered her clarity in memory. She presented a clear anecdote about how she did not get to go to school anymore, and how she felt about it as a child. However, as I read the written testimony from several years ago, I found that some of the details that she talked about before were not congruent with what she told me, such as the degree of poverty that she suffered through. However, since I had a ground rule that I would not interrupt what the survivors talk about, trusting their statements to be all "true," I decided not to interrupt her storyline. Her narrative has been constructed over the course of her life, and she has built up her skills as a narrator for the past 17 years as she came out. I believe that the survivor consciously and unconsciously adds "fictional" elements, because there is an inexplicable reason and logic for it. I argue that such parts are not created as "lies" but as a way of coping with and re/constructing her memory and selfhood. Even if she might have gone through extreme poverty, she feels the necessity to

protect herself from living the awful memory that everyone in the family suffered. Or perhaps it makes more sense to her to say that her family was modest instead of being absolutely poor, because although she suffered very much from the poverty, she now probably thinks that everybody else was poor as well. Of course, I do not know which part of her story is contextual and which part is not, but as I argued in Ms. Gil's case, I do not think that small details need to be nitpicked while we hear the narratives on the experience of being subaltern.

She also gave me an anecdote on visiting her friend's house one day.

L: There was this girl that I met from my night school (school operated privately by volunteers for people who were not able to afford formal education). We were playing one day, and I visited her house. Her mother had a place that sold alcohol. [...] She was remarried to this man, and she wanted to send her daughter off to somewhere.

Q: Where?

L: I don't know. It seemed like she didn't want to have her around. She said, "You know, why don't you go as nannies? They'll give you money, and you can eat white rice all the time." So I came back home that night and told my mom how crazy that sounded to me. My mom scolded me for playing with her and told me that I shouldn't play with her again. My friend's name was Boonsoon or something...

Q: And how old were you?

L: I was about twelve, I think.

Her friend had been the one who encouraged her to volunteer as "Comfort Women" with her, so through telling her childhood story, Ms. Lee gave me a lead on how she became a sex slave. During that time, since everyone was so poor, "eating white rice" meant that the person was rich since it was more expensive than any other grain. Although young Ms. Lee thought that her friend's mother was a weird person who wanted to get rid of her daughter, it also could have been that she wanted her

daughter and her daughter's friend at least to eat well, by living in rich families' houses.

Lee *halmoni* had a very specific memory regarding the day that she left home, heading to a "comfort station."

L: [She drew a specific map of how her house looked like and what the atmosphere was like.] [...] And there was this window towards the back of my room. I heard a weird sound through the window. I saw a girl and a soldier. And I thought they were just kidding when they told me I should come out. I didn't know what it was about, but I did. The moon was so bright that night. And I followed them to the train station. There were 3 girls and a soldier. They gave us a small bag, and we took the train at Daegu Station. It was my first time riding train, so I had a really bad carsickness. [...] I was beaten up a lot. [...] I thought they will send us back after we got of the train at Pyongyang, but we got into another train. [...] When us five girls were put in a ship (to Taiwan), we went through numerous things... We passed the new year's. The ship we were in was attacked a couple times, but we got there eventually.

In the written testimony, she described what was in the small bag. It had a red western dress and a pair of leather shoes. "When I looked into the bag, I saw those things, and as a child, I was so excited about it," she said. As a fifteen-year-old girl from a poor family who never had a chance to enjoy any luxury, she "did not know any better." And this shows one of many cruel methods how Japan recruited sex slaves by lying and tempting them as if promising "wealthy and comfortable" lives. This method makes the women as "volunteers" who made a choice to come to the warzone, giving Japan an excuse to not to take any formal actions for current survivors while they can claim that it was the women's fault, but not the recruiters. However, this human rights violation was not a matter of choice but one of exploitation and not having any choice.

She did not explain the details of what happened in the ship when she “went through numerous things.” It seems that she was implying that she and other girls were raped for the first time. Through a previous interview that she had with a different interviewer, she gave a very detailed description on what happened.

L: One day, our ship was attacked. All the other ships were destroyed, and our ship was also damaged at the front. Things were so crazy, and people panicked, running around and screaming. Because the ship was shaking so much, I had a headache and was throwing up really badly. I crawled to the bathroom, and this one soldier grabbed me. I tried to run away from him, biting his arm. However, he was so much stronger than me, just a little girl. I was dragged like that and then raped. I didn't know who that was. That man did that to me, and it happened to me for the first time in my life. I didn't even know what it was back then. I just had a quick realization that “This is why they took me away from home.”

Unlike Ms. Gil, she used more direct words in describing specific situations. If I wanted to obtain concrete facts regarding what happened, perhaps I would have much preferred Ms. Lee's direct, specific way, perhaps giving more credit to her. However, I consider such a difference to be a stylistic one in their narratives, especially considering each individual's different experience and take on what she had suffered. In each style, I found and heard different stories through what and how the interviewee expressed verbally and through silence. Ms. Gil had a more reserved personality to begin with, so I did not get to hear too many details about the horror and difficulties that she had been through. But that is the way she has understood her terror for several decades. Ms. Lee, although she was more articulate and specific presenting her memory, also managed to keep silence about certain parts of her memory, in this case, she kept quiet about what happened specifically on the ship during our interview. I believe that their silence actually

signifies more than what we tangibly hear and consider as “the true” history. It is an intangible, yet a more powerful narrative as the survivors resonate their pain through keeping silence in certain parts of their memories. And each survivor obviously has very different ways of maintaining (or expressing) the silence. While Lee *halmoni* was talking about how difficult it was to get to Taiwan, she seemed even more exhausted than earlier, with her voice toned down and staring at the floor mainly. She did not want to stop talking, but I was clearly able to see her change of feelings as she started to talk about the suffering. She probably felt the necessity to skip a certain part of her memory as a way of maintaining herself and continuing her story, and I consider this as a way of improvising during her performance of memory.

While she was placed in Shinjuk, Taiwan, she also had to experience much physical abuse as well as sexual slavery.

L: There was a house... that they put us in. There, I suffered through so much (she was quieting down even more)... I was electrocuted and tortured, and they beat me up really badly. It's been sixty years... or how many years? (showing me the scars on her stomach) Look at this. Here and here... [...] I even got malaria and almost died from it.

She also noted that the violence came more from the owners of the “comfort station” rather than the soldiers, starting the first day. It seems that it was a method of intimidating the women who had just arrived so that they would be obedient and not run away. She was threatened and cut with swords, and she showed me the awful scar that she obtained. When she lifted her shirt to show me the scar, I could not believe how any human being is possibly cruel enough to torture someone that

cruelly. Her skin was covered with scars, and she was tortured just enough so that she would not die, but suffer and have fear of people who owned absolute authority over her body in the foreign land while she was already being exploited sexually.

Interestingly, she did not reveal any negative experiences and feelings towards the soldiers that she interacted while she was stationed. She remembers that her station was next to the Kamikaze soldiers —the suicidal aviators from the war time against the Allies— who were training. She talked about a somewhat romantic encounter with a soldier who was going into attack the next day. She remembered the song in Japanese that the soldier sang for her.

The fighter plane leaves
Moving away from Taiwan
While the clouds make noises
No one but Doshiko cries for me.

Doshiko was the Japanese name that was given to Ms. Lee, and she remembers that this soldier had made the name for her when she arrived. For a young girl who was forced into the war and a young man who is heading to kill himself for the imperial mission, this little “love ” developed in the warzone does not simply appear to be romantic, since they were under the desperate, life-and-death situation. Although their positions were polar opposite, one as a “perpetrator” and the other as a “victim,” the sympathy that they had for each other was greater than the ideological animosity. After all, both were being treated as simple, disposable parts of the “great” war machine, and the two individuals created a way to escape temporarily from such a cruel reality. By telling me this powerful memory, she blurred the boundary between who is *really* guilty/evil and who is innocent. After all, the

soldier was an ordinary man with an extraordinary mission given by the emperor, and while he was systematically educated to become a brave soldier who would willingly die for the imperial Japan, he also reflected the absolute human fear in front of a woman who was the weakest in terms of the power structure within the warzone.

This anecdote and my immediate reaction to it troubled and contradicted my initial view towards the soldiers' inhumane treatments of "Comfort Women" during wartime. Japanese historian Yuki Tanaka analyzes the soldiers' position during wartime, and due to my activist position, I certainly did not feel comfortable with his opinion. To me, it sounded like he was defending and even justifying the Japanese soldiers' position. As a son and a nephew of former soldiers, he appears to be sympathetic towards the individuals who imposed sexual violence, using Hannah Arendt's theory of "the banality of evil."²⁹ Arendt, a German-born Jewish American political theorist, argues that everyone is a "potential perpetrator of atrocities against others"³⁰ in the time of extreme violence such as WWII period. In other words, there are very few "monsters," while the exercisers of atrocity are very much average individuals working under orders, and therefore the concept of the "evil body" is actually not clearly definable, but rather uncanny. Tanaka, therefore, argues that the soldiers were "victims," too, as they were exploited by their Father, the divine emperor of Japan.

My reaction towards his argument was that of discomfort and even anger, and based on a clear black and white logic that whoever was part of the violence,

²⁹ Yuki Tanaka, *Japan's Comfort Women* (London: Routledge, 2002), 3.

³⁰ Yuki Tanaka, *Japan's Comfort Women* (London: Routledge, 2002), 3.

even the person who was at the very bottom of the hierarchy, was absolutely evil. One cannot simplify the criminality of the tangible violence and horror by saying that the soldiers were no monsters but humans who exercised poor judgments under the extreme situations. While it may be unfair to blame each individual, I believe that such justification gives a leeway to war crimes. It was not always their choice to participate in the war; it was their Nation's call to risk their lives and fight for their country. However, they were given monstrous power, and they chose to exercise that power upon others who were absolutely powerless.

However, I now feel a little ambivalence in terms of moral judgment against the soldiers. As much as the "Comfort Women" were victims of systemic war violence, serving the purpose of expanding Japan's international influence in Asia, many Japanese soldiers were mere tools of war as well. The soldiers who violated the women were responsible for their immoral judgments and behaviors, and I definitely cannot side with the men who raped the sex slaves regularly. Yet my point is not to blame individual irresponsibility, but to critically perceive the immorality and bestiality of the systemic violence of war that made ordinary women and men become essential parts of the disturbing patriarchal history. Certain humans permitted others to exercise gruesome brutality upon the unprotected who had no power because they were born with a certain sex/gender and nationality/ethnicity. Japanese soldiers were granted legitimate power to do anything to those who were considered "no-bodies" while the daily violation of their bodies became ritualized. While we cannot question the each individual soldier's choice, we have to seriously question the morality of the monstrous systemic power

that was completed by each individual's actions. I do not mean to be too sympathetic towards the soldiers' position as they were the main body that exploited and exercised power over military sex slaves. However, considering different questions —such as who *really* owned the power during the war, who was ultimately responsible and therefore who should be punished in the context of global justice— Lee *halmoni's* example of seemingly normal human relationship development between the “perpetrator” and the “victim” presents interesting challenges to consider.

She has had a particular attachment to the song, not only because of the romantic memory regarding it, but also because it revived her history within the larger context of Korean people's history under the Japanese colonialism. It contains specific information regarding the location and the kind of military station in which she was placed; therefore she was able to help out a research team that went to collect and verify the historical evidence of military sexual slavery in Shinjuk area. “I'm very proud that I still remember it after hearing it only 3 times, more than fifty years ago,” she said. Her memory became a clue that “legitimized” her suffering as a military sex slave and acted beyond that of an “official” public memory. Now people were able to tangibly place her within *our* collective historical timeline, understanding why she has not had a “normal” woman's life. She had evolved as a historical figure, “a living history” as she says, instead of an anonymous person, a no-body, living through her pain silently. Her attachment to the song also inspired her to make a song lyric describing her feelings as she came out of Taiwan

in 1946, a year after the war was over, and the lyric goes with the melody of the song from her memory.

I am returning,
Returning to my homeland.
How much did I miss *mugunwha* (the national flower of Korea)
How much did I call for *taegukgi* (the Korean flag)
The seagull cries,
The wave dances,
The ship coming back home is filled with hope.

I made the song with the special event for the Independence Day this year in mind. I will perform it there. [...] I suffered this without knowing what it was, and I have lived through it. For 65 years. [silence]

It is interesting to notice the political/patriotic statement that she is expressing through the song, especially considering that the song originated from the oppressor's side. One could consider it strangely ironic. However, it seems that she does not necessarily consider the song from the agent who damaged her ("Japan" – the nation, the soldiers, the oppressors, and its past and present government), but from a particular individual with a nostalgic sentiment, although the two cannot be separated. Her creation is a way of decontextualizing and recontextualizing her experience as her own. She is claiming creative ownership over her experience of pain to actively seek other people's engagement in the military sexual slavery issue.

Lee Yong-Su *halmoni* came back to her hometown, Daegu, in 1946, and she clearly remembers the day that she came back from Taiwan. Unlike many other survivors, she fortunately was able to make it home and to her family, and she still keeps in touch with her brothers and cousins.

My parents thought I was dead since I disappeared at night. So they were having *jesa* (traditional service for the ancestors or dead members of family). It was one of those *jesa* days [when I came back], and my mom had a candle light on a table. People say the ghost comes back when they do these things... They thought I was a ghost. I was like a ghost! I was starved. My face was dirty, and I was bleeding since I fell on the ground on the way. It was around May, so I was sweating badly... I didn't look like a human being. My mom was like, "The ghost came!" She didn't seem to believe I was real.

Here again, she vividly remembers the details of her physical status, and what the interaction with her mother was like, as it was obviously a significant moment in her life. The surreal moment when they encountered each other seemed to be engrained like a photograph in her life. Her expression was dynamic as she was replaying the moment that was very much like a dream; it was a strange instance in which her mother thought that she was a ghost that came to communicate with her. Ms. Lee expressed several times throughout the interview that she had a close relationship with her mother as she was the only daughter of the family. On the night that she left home, she was sleeping with her mother in the same room, and the day she came back, her mother was the first person that she saw. This dramatic memory explains how her mother takes a very special place in her life as her life's guardian. Lee *halmoni* also elaborated very much on a ring that she had obtained around that time of which she was wearing the ring and showing it to me during the interview. She said that she got the ring with the money that her parents gave to her. For her, the ring is the keepsake of the happy moment of reunion, and it symbolizes the love of her mother who prayed for her every night under the candlelight, although Ms. Lee was not able to tell her what she had gone through during the war.

She briefly explained the period before she came out in 1992. She had much internal conflict and fear about coming out.

L: I was so young, so I didn't know what war was. I don't know what it is. I don't know why Japanese people came and such. [...] After the war, in the village, [the local government officials or village leaders] wanted the people who suffered specific crime by Japan to come out, but I didn't even know I was in that category. Eventually, I learned... [...] I tried to go to newspaper agencies several times [to tell the story while I saw advertising on papers], but I couldn't.

Q: Why not?

I intentionally asked her this question, because I wanted her to explain how she felt, and how she directly faced her fears. I knew it was a very emotionally difficult subject, but I already communicated with her that I wanted to know more than her factual memories, and at this point of interview, I was sure that she was emotionally stable enough to articulate her feelings during the period, so I decided to take a small risk.

L: I was scared... I was really scared! What was I supposed to say? I was worried if they would take me again. Even after I got older, I still lived with so much fear and insecurity. I couldn't say anything to anyone, keep questioning myself, "Why did I do it? Why?"

Her tone was very expressive and assertive while she was expressing her fears towards the world that had continuously betrayed her, and there was no resignation about it. Her ability to show such vulnerable emotions was quite powerful, and she was extremely courageous. However, even at this moment of self-empowerment, she still imposed self-guilt for following her friend to go become a "Comfort Woman," while she was not the one who "did it," who chose to go to into the war as

a “Comfort Woman.” She felt that if she had made a different choice, her life would not be without such regret now.

She made a decision to finally “come out” when her younger brother had a car accident.

I was having a hard time, deciding if I should come out or not. And then one day, like four in the morning, I got a phone call saying that my younger brother, who was 6 years younger than I, had a car accident. When I went to the emergency room, my brother was lying there, with a lot of blood on his head. So I told him that I suffered under the Japanese military back in the day, and I asked him if I should tell people about it. He said, “Yes sister, you should do it.” And he died.

After the tragic loss of her brother whose last wish for her was telling the world about what she had gone through, she finally got the courage to knock on a newspaper company’s door.

I told them. “I’m not Lee Yong-Su. I’m her friend, and she is downstairs. She wanted me to tell you the story.” I was really nervous, and they said it’s OK and I shouldn’t be nervous. I kept telling them, “My friend Lee Yong-Su is right downstairs. I’m not Lee Yong-Su.” They called the Korean Council, and Yoon Mi-Hyang (the current Director of the Korean Council then a staff member) answered.

Again, she presented how she felt hesitant and fearful when she was trying to tell others. Her constant denial at that time shows that she was afraid that she would be stigmatized again while she had lived a life with much social stigmatization while she did not (and could not) live a normal woman’s life in Korean society for many years. The war that did not make any sense to an individual who was part of social trauma made the survivor develop so much insecurity about herself. Ms. Lee had to survive with an extreme defense mechanism, being silent and hiding. Since then, the

manner how she re/presents herself now shows that she had gone through a significant transformation in perceiving her identity.

Now, she feels confident about the fact that she is able to talk about her personal pain —which she was extremely ashamed of and afraid to remember— in public. She is proud that she can represent herself on her own, instead of letting other people judge her based on what they see on the surface. She talks to numerous people, educating the general public how Japanese colonialism exploited powerless individuals, and how individual testimony is an essential element in re/establishing justice.

Q: You go to the Wednesday Demonstration almost every week, right?

L: Of course! Every week.

Q: And you travel abroad a lot to give testimonies, right?

L: Yes, yes.

Q: Then, how do you feel when you go around the world, talking to many people, publicly?

L: I like it a lot! I like that I can openly talk about it. But when I have to talk [to people] about it, it hurts my feelings. How else can I let people know about what I suffered during the war, if not the protests and the testimony tours? So I just tell people everything. In 1999, I went to Washington [DC] in America along with 6 other survivors, and we received a human rights award. We accused the Japanese emperor for war crime.

Ms. Lee was very proud that she got rewarded for the efforts on behalf of the survivors. Until then, she had barely been recognized for anything in her life, yet this time she got attention for her leadership and good work for the society. The social recognition she received as a human rights activist became an integral part of her self-esteem and identity development in the past 17 years. Now, she knows that she does not have to make excuses to hide from people, because this current active-self *is* who she is. Despite the expense and long trip between Daegu and Seoul, she

comes to the regular protest every Wednesday every week. Active re/presentation has become an integral part of her life. To hear more about this part of her identity, I asked her a more evocative question.

Q: Why do you still go to the Wednesday Demonstrations and tours while it's so hot during the summer, so cold at night, and your health is not great? Why do you want to do it so badly?

She answered with much determination.

L: I'm not doing it because I want to do it. I'm doing it because I *must* do it. There are not very many of us who come out and talk in public. They are all old and dying. We don't have that much time left to speak up for this issue to the world. So I have to do it. It's my problem, and *I* want to solve my problem.

She obviously takes a personal ownership over this issue. At the same time while she emphasizes the personal-ness of the issue, she is trying hard to represent other survivors as well, because she is part of the collective "us," which is a powerful movement in itself.

Lastly, I asked her general political opinion about what she thought about the current Korean and Japanese governments who are not working putting much effort to resolve the issue of military sexual slavery.

L: It's really frustrating... Back then, we didn't have a country. But now, we do have a government. We have a president. But he can't even say a word directly. And the Korean Foreign Ministry doesn't say anything, and they let the unfair Korea-Japan treaty pass in the 60s.³¹

³¹ She was referring to the diplomatic treaty between Korea and Japan in 1965, which reestablished the trade relations between the two countries after 1945. Korea, which was under severe economic struggle during the post Korean War period, accepted Japan's conditions which basically required unfair and hurried conclusions on the post-colonialism matters in exchange for economic investment.

Q: If the Japanese government provides official reparation and apologizes, do you think you can forgive them?

L: There's no "if." I can't forgive them until the Japanese Prime Minister Kneels down in front of me asking for forgiveness. There's no "if." That's absurd. When I die, I'm going to be cremated. If he comes there after I die, I won't forgive him. He has to do it while I'm alive. I'm a living proof regarding this history. This history has been dragged this far, and that's why I'm still working. Japan still says that it never happened, and that makes them more unforgivable. As we think about our descendents... We cannot pass down this issue to them. We cannot pass down the pain. [...] We are trying to finish it at our generation.

Her personal devotion is reflected through her political commitment, and she is politically very well informed. I was surprised about how articulately she presents herself within the political and historical context, giving specific examples of the past treaty between Korea and Japan and the current foreign relations. She has often utilized her political skill in international activities and conferences regarding "Comfort Women" and other human trafficking issues. The Japanese government often has discredited the survivors' statements not only because they are "subjective" accounts but also because the stories have come from uneducated, elderly women's fuzzy memories. Though she has not gotten much formal education, Ms. Lee establishes a good example of a survivor that has clarity, intelligence and assertiveness in narrating her stories.

Through the interview with Ms. Lee, I have come to redefine the individual agency of military sexual slavery survivors. They are not a monolithic entity whose major identity is from being former "Comfort Women." In a way, I have created something "new" or added different voices to each narrator's story. Each survivor's narrative is a woman's story that has been told multiple times in different manners

to different types of audiences. Each time she retrieves her memories which have been broken into hurtful shards and gotten stuck into different parts of her life's suffering, she had different stories to tell us. Some were based on her clear memories, others perhaps from her awful nightmares that she has had for the past several decades while she was repressing her memories, because she "just wanted to forget" the shameful history that is, in fact, not just her own, but also shared by numerous daughters of the nation under colonialism. Her shameful feelings were kept her memories to be locked in a box that was to be never opened. But in the end, they all came together as the story of *our* historical pain that miraculously became verbalized and realized through her courage. My next chapter places the survivors' position within the historical and social context of Korea and how the activism has evolved to create different stages for the survivors' narratives. The survivors' identities have been deconstructed and reconstructed with political/legal, feminist and contemporary approaches and discourses.

Chapter 4

How Do “We” Re/present “Comfort Women”: Deconstructing Layers and Re/constructing Social Memory

Mouths don't empty themselves unless the ears are sympathetic and knowing.

-Zora Neale Hurston, Mules and Men

Until I had to participate in the process of storytelling –as a language interpreter of a testimony event and a cultural translator who re/presents “the others” stories— I did not realize what a complex process it is and what kind of courage it takes to be a storyteller/narrator. Storytelling, especially that of violence and trauma, is a meticulous —yet also very evocative— art of memory re/production. As we have explored from the previous two chapters, even if the survivors have gone through a common historical violence and oppression (military sexual slavery), each individual has various memories, perspectives and different styles of narrating.

The “Comfort Women” issue has become *my* issue over the past several years, and therefore throughout my fieldwork and writing, I have found my position as the interpreter (of the language, culture and the issue) to be a rather complex one. Much as the issue is. The personal truly became political (and academic) as I got to observe the multilayered issue as an anthropologist, an activist, a Korean, a woman and a narrator of the survivors’ narratives. I wanted to be the bridge between the survivors and those who are not very aware of the issue, and during that process, I was not only the interlocutor, but also the narrator of my various

stories and experiences as well as the survivors'. This re/construction process is also based on my memories of being an activist side by side with the survivors for the past five years: doing research for my high school independent study, volunteering at the Korean Council's office, observing the crowd attending testimony events and interacting with the survivors after the protests.

Through re/constructing the survivors' stories as part of my memory (and writing about it), I have witnessed a constant evolution of the survivors' narratives and the interpretations of the two decades of activism and studies. Different social, political and academic atmospheres largely influenced the way military sexual slavery and its survivors were perceived and reflected within the social context. Although the narratives and interpretations have had the theme of generating human rights discourse, there have been many different approaches to how the stories are told, what the survivors have talked (and not talked) about, and how the stories and the survivors' identities are interpreted throughout the period.

Studying the narratives of the military sexual slavery survivors, I have approached the issue from a human rights activist's perspective based on what I have witnessed throughout many years. I still believe that international justice and righteousness have yet to be established (in a legal sense) to prove that what the Japanese colonial government did to the destitute young women throughout Asia was absolutely wrong and violent, and the similar pattern of crime should never be allowed to happen again under any circumstances. However, as I mentioned in the Introduction, there are numerous uncanny layers. The narratives are extremely personal yet are also public. Some survivors "made choices" to follow "Comfort

Women” brokers so that they could work and earn money for their destitute families (although it turned out that they did not earn any money), but they did not choose to be poor and be subjected to gruesome systematic sexual violence. They wanted to be independent, “modern” women by providing for themselves, but such illusions were exploited by the colonizers who, in turn, exploited the women. The “Comfort Women” narratives are proofs of oppression from multiple patriarchies (the colonizers and the Confucian cultural basis of Korea) throughout history yet are often the subjects of patriotism and nationalistic discourses of today. Japan —more exactly, the ideologies it employed to dominate— was the absolutely evil entity that created the monstrous system, but the Japanese kamikaze soldier who shared romance with Ms. Lee was just another individual being sacrificed by the system. Some survivors claim that they want to forget about what happened to them, yet they have to remember and verbalize the gruesome memories so that the history will not be completely forgotten and ignored by the public. Can we, as the modern audience, make absolute statements, such as “The grandmothers have been (or are) absolute victims” or “No, they are empowered, victorious individuals”?

The initial approach in the 1990s (especially the earlier period) was mostly establishing the ground for the “Comfort Women” issue, creating support networks for the survivors and finding facts through encouraging narratives. It was driven with the purpose of “finding and accumulating the truth” to format political and legal discourses to bring “resolution” to the issue as soon as possible. It is essential to place this initial drive for fact-finding within the context of Korea’s historical suppressions of war crimes testimony. During the period of post colonialism and

the Korean War, Korea struggled with establishing a new government/ governance. The country was divided by external powers into two parts before establishing a nation, being part of the international politics of the Cold War between the U.S. and the Soviet Union.³² Throughout the late 50s and 60s, the nation suffered spectacular poverty while the U.S. military occupied certain areas (and it still does) and the Peace Corps members were spreading the “gospel” of America throughout the rural and urban areas. Then the industrialization came with the incessant governmental effort under the revolutionary dictator, president Park Chung-Hee, a military leader who led a successful coup against the incompetent government. He is often perceived as a controversial figure. He initiated tremendous economic development through industrialization and rural development projects for the nation, which eventually led South Korea out of awful poverty. However, while constantly holding on to power for almost two decades through changing the Constitution, he violently suppressed the development of democracy. The ideological and political competition against North Korea was a part of the government’s challenge, especially since North Korea was initially better off economically. The government had to prove that South Korea had a better political system while spreading the “red scare” through school textbooks and nationalist campaigns. Meanwhile, as part of the economic development effort, the Korean government resumed its trade relationship with Japan in 1965 through an unequal agreement which had a clause

³² When I mention Korea, I usually refer to South Korea since I only intend to talk about the military sexual slavery survivors’ lives within South Korean context which I (and other scholars) know the best.

that says Korea would not ask further questions on wartime crimes.³³ While the state chose to give up its national memory for economic development (which is intimately connected to the political power of the nation in the world), there was no room for the “Comfort Women” survivors to have any voices in this turbulent period of history.

President Park’s 16-year domination ended with his death through assassination in 1979. During the period of chaos, a powerless president was elected, and he was soon overthrown by a military coup. Chun Du-Hwan was another dictator who had a previous relationship with the deceased president through the military. During his reign, he oppressed the freedom of speech, including governmental control over media and prohibited protests of any sort. The entire nation was controlled as if it were a huge military organization. In the midst of the dictatorship and absence of freedom, in 1989, a labor activist, Ms. Kwon In-Suk “came out” with the fact that when she was being investigated, she was tortured in a sexually abusive way. In this case, Ms. Kwon In-Suk was not legally allowed to take a manual laborer’s job, because she was considered “too educated” therefore could lead the uneducated, powerless female laborers to question authority. So she forged her social security documents, and soon, she was arrested. During the police investigation, two head officers accused her of being connected with student protesters, and during the process, they could not get much out of her, therefore, as an intimidation method, the officers sexually abused her. She did not step back, and publicly accused the police officers of sexually abusing her during the investigation,

³³ This incident was mentioned in Ms. Lee Yong-Su’s testimony in Chapter 3.

risking the “end” of her womanhood in Korean society, and being stigmatized as a “contaminated woman.” After many years of fighting, Kwon, who teamed up with 166 civil rights lawyers led by Mr. Cho Young-Rae and women’s organizations, won her case.³⁴

The “Kwon In-Suk Sexual Torture Incident” marked the beginning of the Korean women’s and feminist movement. It challenged society’s view, which stigmatized women who were sexually assaulted. It oppressed them to remain silent if they did not want to bring shame to herself and to her family. The incident encouraged women who were also part of Korea’s democratization movement to begin a separate movement, instead of playing submissive roles in the male-dominated activist groups. In addition, around the same period, Ms. Yun Chong-Ok, who almost had become a member of the Women’s Voluntary Corps under Japan, was active with the Korean Church Women’s Federation, opposing Japanese sex tours to Korea in the 1980s. She found the sex tourism to be historically connected with the “Comfort Women” system that she witnessed as a young woman and she mobilized research and activism along with the church women to find survivors, encourage them to come out and support them.³⁵ In this way, the atmosphere of the late 80s and early 90s established a firm support ground for the “Comfort Women” movement, while the survivors started to come out in 1991.³⁶

³⁴ The information about the sexual torture incident was obtained through various Korean internet sources, including excerpts of the book which contained Ms. Kwon’s writing, called, *Reasons for Appealing: From 10 Prisoners of Conscience* and documentary film, “Lawyer, Cho Young-Rae.”

³⁵ Chin Sung Chung, “The Origin and Development of the Military Sexual Slavery Problem in Imperial Japan,” *positions*, 5:1 (1997): 234

³⁶ Chin Sung Chung, “The Origin and Development of the Military Sexual Slavery Problem in Imperial Japan,” *positions*, 5:1 (1997): 235

Making a safe space for women to have an option to talk about sexual violence without stigmatization was a significant progress in Korean history, considering the cultural and political atmosphere that was hostile to sexual violence survivors. However, it does not mean that the general atmosphere changed to be friendly to them. The post-war Korean governments have not been supportive of the cause, rather discouraging the activism. "Considering the 'Comfort Women' issue a nuisance, government officials continued to ignore and discourage women activists who tried to expose wartime rape as a gender/sexual-based war crime."³⁷ They rejected the proposal to establish a memorial monument dedicated to women who were sacrificed during the war within the Independence Memorial Museum, saying that they did not have sufficient land for it and "the landscape around the memorial building' would make construction difficult," blatantly refusing to commemorate the women's suffering.

It is interesting to see how the nation tried to establish a national memory in a very limited scope which would preserve a certain level of male/patriarchal dignity for the nation/government. Lambek and Antze claim that "[a]s an 'imagined community,' based on a sense of wholeness, coherence, and continuity, the nation often likens itself to a person [...]."³⁸ The museum tries to present that all Korean people as a singular unit have suffered and were victimized due to the evil deeds of Japan, yet the only suffering that is universal, and therefore worthy of visual

³⁷ Hyun Sook Kim, "History and Memory: The 'Comfort Women' Controversy," *positions*, 5:1 (1997): 90

³⁸ Michael Lambek and Paul Antze, "Introduction: Forecasting Memory," in *Tense Past: Cultural Essays in Trauma and Memory*, ed. Paul Antze and Michael Lambek. (New York: Routledge, 1996), xxii.

representation is that of males during the wartime, manual labor and the small-scale military activists who fought courageously against Japan. Women's suffering does not fit into the neatly organized categories and the "hypernationalist ideology" that the Korean government pursued.³⁹

Kim presents another example of such an ideology reflected in Korean history education. Even though, in the early 90s, military sexual slavery was proved as a crime committed against Koreans during the Pacific War, the textbook for high school during that period, which was written and published by the Ministry of Education (therefore reflecting the national agenda), did not include more than a few sentences regarding "Comfort Women." In contrast, there are several chapters devoted to the male, therefore universal, suffering and heroic deeds of some men.

In addition [to the effort to obliterate Korean culture and creating Student Volunteer Corps], even the women became the object of sacrifice for the war under the name *chongshindae* ("Comfort Women"). In such a way, not only our raw materials but our labor, too, was forcibly mobilized for the Japanese war of invasion.⁴⁰

The description above defines the terms *chongshindae* (Women's Labor Volunteer Corps) and "Comfort Women" (which was sexual slavery) as the same entities, although they have been used interchangeably until now. However, what shocks us the most is the fact that human (women's) labor during the period is presented as just another material exploitation that does not require further elaboration or attention. Meanwhile, the description right before this passage elaborates on

³⁹ Hyun Sook Kim, "History and Memory: The 'Comfort Women' Controversy," *positions*, 5:1 (1997): 90

⁴⁰ Hyun Sook Kim, "History and Memory: The 'Comfort Women' Controversy," *positions*, 5:1 (1997): 91

Japan's incessant, evil effort to eliminate Korean cultural roots, prohibiting the learning of Korean history and the usage of Korean language.

To counter the patriarchal national agenda and other conservative male opposition in society, the activists and scholars of this period heavily focused on collecting and compiling tangible and quantifiable evidence through the survivors' narratives. It was to form a type of national memory, not led by the state, but to effectively oppose established power. Rosalind Shaw studies the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) in a community in Sierra Leone that was devastated by the violent eleven-year civil war. She finds that "social memory is a process (and always a contested and debated one) rather than a specific and fixed set of facts." It therefore somewhat clashes against the collective (sometimes government-led and other times public-led) effort to format a single, official record, "a definitive national memory."⁴¹ While the formation of a single memory is virtually impossible, there is no single way of "curing" and "improving" the impact of social trauma. The efforts cannot simply be a single bandage, but community efforts that requires adjustments between the individual input for the group and the communal input for the individual.

The unfortunate consequence was constructing all survivors' identity as a singular, monolithic victimized entity, instead of individuals who have suffered different consequences due to their sex slavery experiences. The documentation of the "Comfort Women" history during this period appears somewhat less human, while the scholars and activists were trying hard to get "all the facts together."

⁴¹ Rosalind Shaw, "Rethinking Truth and Reconciliation Commissions: Lessons from Sierra Leone," Special Report of the U.S. Institute of Peace

Many scholars towards the end of the 1990s and early 2000s accused the earlier scholarly works and activism efforts of essentializing the survivors' identities. They criticized the earlier ones of being as patriarchal as the Korean government's attitude toward the issue while they seemed to only focus on the part of history when the survivors were the sex slaves. The testimony itself came to be viewed within the context of Foucault's theory of "confession" as a mode of discipline. Foucault argues that in this western ritual, there still is "a power that constrains" the one who confesses, and while "the violence of a power weighs it down, and it can be finally be articulated only at the price of a kind of liberation."⁴² The narrator could feel the utter pressure to "confess" the part that has affected her entire life, because people who are working on TRC projects or the interviewers have the social power to construct "the truth" in the world, and therefore they can ideally "liberate" and heal the narrators from their traumatic memories.

Amy Kim also criticizes "the pursuit of (a particular) truth" which focuses on hard facts instead of human elements. She claims that:

[T]he activist representation of the comfort women issue (which relies greatly on UN framings of violence against women in the Third World) uses Enlightenment models of reason and progress, and activism that relies on these models can reproduce the asymmetries of power that currently exist between what is seen as the First and Third Worlds, as well as the hierarchical division between the world of the activist and the world of the "victim."⁴³

⁴² Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality vol. 1: An Introduction* (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), 60.

⁴³ Amy C. Kim, "A Politics of the Rights of Woman: Representation and Justice in the Movement for the Korean Comfort Women," (Undergraduate Honors Thesis, Duke University, 2002), 15.

She problematizes the issue of essentialization and materialization of the survivors' identity. Their narratives are, she argues, treated as mere tools of activism. However, this argument is also ironically based on a western notion, the "Enlightenment model" of the individual. Kim's argument says that the individuality of each survivor is ignored according to the dichotomy of First World and Third World that activists put into their interpretation, while the survivors are only seen as small parts of the group representation. However, her own assumption is also based on western discourse on identity and memory that stresses that "[one's] memory is uniquely [hers] as specific narrative conventions and systematic omissions."⁴⁴ The survivors were re/constructing their identities communally while trauma memory was the centerpiece of this process. The nature of activism was more group identity-based initially, because there was an urgent necessity to create an intangible space –a new culture—for the survivors to do inconceivable acts, talking about personal "shames" in front of strangers and facing their own memories and fears. And the community work was only possible through the individual commitment to talk about such thoughts and feelings. Everybody, survivors and activists, was in the process of learning to juggle different realities that s/he was facing in creating a movement.

Kim bases her opinion largely on the study and documentary work of Dai Sil Kim-Gibson. Kim-Gibson claims that the women have "become issues, numbers, and objects of studies, not full blooded human beings" while "well-meaning supporters

⁴⁴ Michael Lambek and Paul Antze, "Introduction: Forecasting Memory," in *Tense Past: Cultural Essays in Trauma and Memory*, ed. Paul Antze and Michael Lambek. (New York: Routledge, 1996), xx.

and researchers had reobjectified the women.”⁴⁵ Kim-Gibson’s criticism sounds fair, although the essentialization of the survivors’ identities was an inevitable political weapon for the activists to bring attention to the issue, while they were trying to establish a national and international ground that could politically oppose the patriarchal claims against them. I respect the fact that she expresses much sympathy towards the survivors, yet I did not find much empathy towards the activists’ efforts, which have been an essential part in re/presenting military sexual slavery history and the survivors’ narratives to the world. I also find her position to be self-contradicting while she reobjectifies the survivors and their history as well. Her documentary work, “Silence Broken: Korean Comfort Women” is full of disturbing visual representations that contain all the elements that she criticized throughout her writing. In the documentary film, she recreated a graphic scene of women at “comfort stations” getting raped,⁴⁶ which I consider as a very dangerous, disrespectful reobjectification and revictimization. She conveys a sense of self-righteousness to the audience.

The “Comfort Women” issue became public enough, thanks to scholarly and activist efforts throughout the late twentieth century. Once the issue came to be situated within the public consciousness as a social justice issue, not as a memory of the shameful past, the discourses gradually became liberated from the pressure to prove what “really” happened. After all, people gradually became to realize that “[t]o speak of memory as narrative is not to imply a set of fixed and bounded

⁴⁵ Dai Sil Kim-Gibson, “They Are Our Grandmas.” *positions*, 5:1 (1997): 257-58, 259.

⁴⁶ Dai Sil Kim-Gibson, “Silence Broken: Korean Comfort Women,” (documentary film) 2000.

texts.”⁴⁷ Such a memory re/production process is a connector that has opened more grounds for diverse legal, historical, and political discourses for problematization and discussions. And the academics took the initiative to interpret the survivors narratives in a more thorough way, not specifically focusing on recording historical crime that had been committed, but rather the life stories of the survivors. The academic movement started to question what “Comfort Women” really was and how there is a room for redefinition. The popular discourse along with the legal and, political discourse broadly defined the phenomenon as a rape camp system for the military which enforced young girls to be part of the military brothel. This broad definition encompasses many of the incidents yet according to the definition, some of the survivors’ cases do not quite fit in to the formula.

We should be constantly aware that it is a framework that was not created by the survivors, but by the outside observers and therefore can be often inadequate, especially when they try to pin it down to a certain context. The 90s discourses emphasized the coercive nature of the “Comfort Women” draft process which nicely parallels with Japan’s victimization of Korea during the colonial period, making effective cases against the Japanese government which denied its responsibility completely. However, the newer discourses started to focus more on the issue’s complexity as some of the narratives, such as Ms. Gil’s and to a certain extent, Ms. Lee’s, proved that the boundary between coercion and consent is often blurry, considering different circumstances. In Ms. Gil’s case, since she “volunteered” to be

⁴⁷ Michael Lambek and Paul Antze, “Introduction: Forecasting Memory,” in *Tense Past: Cultural Essays in Trauma and Memory*, ed. Paul Antze and Michael Lambek. (New York: Routledge, 1996), xix.

a “Comfort Woman” twice and was not effectively under the military’s supervision, some people could argue that she was not a “Comfort Woman,” by definition. Yet according to her definition of herself and her experience, she is one because her individual pain was due to social forces that she had no control over, and she was a victim of such constructions as a subaltern. This lack of agency is what caused her to “volunteer” for such an awful labor while Ms. Gil, then a thirteen-year-old girl, did not have any idea of what she would go through.

It is worth noting, over the past two decades of activism, how the survivors have developed their political selves. They started to establish the framework for academic interpretations by taking on political roles, for example, making social commentaries openly. Scholars, both domestically and internationally took more thorough approaches in obtaining the testimonies of the survivors. Although the survivors’ identity as victims was predominant throughout the 1990s, the public discourse regarding the issue has become diversified, focusing on different aspects of the individual lives of the survivors. The narratives came to be accepted as a meticulous process of connecting different dots in the survivors’ memories, sometimes in ways few people could comprehend, as a way of reconciling her present self with her past selves, her “shameful body” with the larger public. The survivors have become active participants in the movement (instead of a silent, powerless victim) to bring justice to the war crime that they have suffered. It was possible through the gradual mobilization of activism utilizing the testimonial tours domestically and internationally. Such political self-representation also prompted efforts to pay attention to the identity formation that is not solely based on the

victimization aspect, but on the broader experience of suffering as the consequences of traumatic sexual violence.⁴⁸

Their narratives have been significantly influenced by their two-decade-long activism experiences, while they have given countless testimonies and learned more about the historical context of her and other military sexual survivors' suffering. One could argue that such an "education" to become activists could reduce (or even de-authenticate) the individuality of each narrative while the survivors have been exposed to similar kinds of political discourses through the NGO/advocacy networks' agenda and popular opinions generated through various media.

However, I argue that each survivor produces such a political discourse in her own unique way that fits into her life-long experience. Her life consists not only of the traumatic experience as a military sexual slave, but also her suffering as a poor, uneducated woman in a society where she was not given any option but to remain silent and powerless. She experienced tough survivals throughout difficult historical turmoil of the nation and personal challenges, going through a civil war, painful democratization process over several decades, and extreme poverty. Her ways of surviving as a lonely fighter influenced the way of political self-representation.

Despite their common oppression, each survivor has led a different life which is significantly influenced by the trauma. She was a server at a bar. She was a woman who was selling whatever was possible on the street. She was a nanny for a

⁴⁸ I strongly recommend Laura Hyun Yi Kang's article "Conjuring 'Comfort Women': Mediated Affiliations and Disciplined Subjects in Korean/American Transnationality" (2003) which observes artistic representation of "Comfort Women" identity by Korean/American feminist artists.

rich family. She was a wife of an abusive husband. She was a life-long single woman who had hated the village people's gossip about her status. After overcoming such harsh realities and defeats, the self-politicization of their very political position gives the survivors more power to speak up for their rights as the ultimate survivors. Through the politicization, they are not simply victims who need salvation through the audience's sympathy and the others' framing of the military sexual slavery issue.

It is important to see the survivor's identity as more than a victim or a victor, yet it does challenge numerous social constructions within the modern Korean society and beyond. The fact (truth)-finding model of testimony presumes that the only legitimate testimony is that of a "pure victim," thereby essentializing the survivor's identity. In doing so, it dismisses the efforts of some survivors to complicate the story of their victimization. For example, a survivor may share her life story where the "Comfort Woman" story is not the majority of it yet is critical in understanding her selfhood and her lifelong suffering. This certainly does not fit neatly within the "ideal" category of victimhood that the audience imagine and want to hold on to. It poses a challenge to people's illusion and ideals about the military sexual slavery survivors. The model of absolute victimization and absolute empowerment fulfills the desire of the audience to present the former oppressor as the pure evil body, especially because the historical struggle from the colonial period is still going on to these days. This very challenge that we face today is precisely why understanding the uncanny border between consent and coercion is important. And it is also why the emphasis on political self-fashioning is important

since it shows how women actively seek to speak up, utilizing political activism rather than or in addition to their victimhood to claim the right to their developed (and still developing) agency.

The military sexual slavery survivors are powerful not because they were sex slaves yet still somehow have managed to live so long. It is because they have emerged as the survivors through their open narratives despite the fact that they still feel hurt –perhaps even more vividly than ever as they force themselves to remember— as they remember the part of their lives that they have tried so hard to forget about for many decades. At the same time, through actively facing and revealing the pain, the military sexual slavery survivors are boldly challenging even threatening state power. Their political engagement re/creates their agency while they connect with the audience and mobilize the movement interdependently with them. I witnessed several political statements throughout the interviews.

Q: Is there anything you wish, at this point of your life?

G: These things happened to be because our country was so powerless. They looked down upon Korea. [...] Why do they (the current Japanese government and the politicians) say “sorry” to America and other powerful countries while they really need to apologize to us, those who suffered? They are not apologizing to the people that they should. Were they “Comfort Women?” No! And that angers me... [silence since she was upset and crying. I tried to comfort her.] So before I die, I want the day that they reveal the truth to come. How long can the lie possibly last? Someday, it (the truth) will come out. [...] Before I die, I want the day to come...

Here, Ms. Gil is making a powerful statement about the unequal power dynamics that are still continuing even now in political/diplomatic relations between Korea and Japan. She is criticizing the political situation, skillfully utilizing her political knowledge that she obtained through the media and conversations with other

activists. It was also interesting to see her emotional investment in the political issue. While she was narrating her personal stories, she seemed to be very much under control without much emotional upset. Not only what she had to suffer throughout her life, but also the present political inequality which delays the revealing of “the truth” (simply the fact that military sexual slavery was a state-subsidized system) and justice to the survivors seemed to upset her more. This shows how much she has evolved to become a public, political entity as opposed to a subaltern victim who once was not willing to engage herself with the world regarding the “shameful” experience that she had. She also had a scathing comment on the Asian Women’s Fund, which was established in 1995 to pay “atonement money” to the survivors. The money was raised as a charity by Japanese citizens, as opposed to the Japanese government providing official reparation that accompanied formal apologies.⁴⁹ Ms. Gil emphasizes the fact that she is fighting for justice and dignity for the collective.

G: See, if they just tell the truth... the money [reparation] doesn’t matter. There are a lot of people like us in other countries. We’re not fighting for money here, but for our dignity and... we didn’t do anything to deserve this... I just want them to say it. What can I do with the money at this point of my life? Can I fix it (referring to what had happened to her physically and what she had to go throughout her life)? No. But they took us wrongly. Through the Asian Women’s Fund, they gave out some money. But people like me would not accept it. Why? I went through sexual slavery not due to one or two people, but during the wartime, by reckless soldiers. My life can’t be fixed at all. This is not done to just one person, so I’m not accepting the money. I want a formal, sincere apology and then reparation. If not, why would I accept it? I can’t accept it... *never*. You can give the entire nation of Japan to me, but the wound can’t be healed. You can give me the entire world, but it can’t be healed. [crying] My life is almost over, so what more

⁴⁹ Federation of Korean Trade Union. “The ILO Committee of Experts on the Application of Conventions and Recommendations.” September 2002.

could I want? I only want the truly sincere apology from them. Life is up to God, and I am still alive. [pointing at and showing a scar on her head] I still have this scar in my head. This soldier hit me on my head with his sword case... I was bleeding so badly, and I had to tear my clothes off of my body (because it was soaked with blood). And even after that, I'm still alive... In my body there is nothing. I have no gallbladder, I only have half of my liver, and my womb was completely removed when I was in twenties. I went through four big surgeries in my life. And I'm still alive, because my life is so tough. I live one day, then I think to myself, wow, one day has passed, again. I didn't even know if I was getting old, and I've been living until today, until I turned 80.

This assertive, powerful statement shows how much she is empowered by the “Comfort Women” movement since she is freely verbalizing her political stance, going back and forth between different stages of her personal life and political perspective. Yet it is not to say that she is a completely healed human being who is independent of public support and free of exploitation from the outside political forces. Rather, she is physically weak and is an *interdependent* entity who seeks to continuously engage people to her social cause. And no other survivor can weave and tell the personal story the same way as Ms. Gil did, because each individual has a different way of intertwining her personal experiences with the political elements.

In sum, a survivor's political position –such as social and political commentaries about what is going on currently in Korea-Japan foreign relations, her opinions towards the Japanese government's attitudes towards the “Comfort Women” survivors— during her narratives is a way of establishing her political body in the society, and she is entitled to do so. Through politicizing her experiences, the survivor is delicately weaving her personal history with the national, ethnic history. By “letting it out,” the survivor actively engages audience with various backgrounds. “The complicity a [testimonial narrative] establishes

with its readers involves their identification –by engaging their sense of ethics and justice— with a popular cause normally distant, not to say alien, from their immediate experience,” John Beverley states.⁵⁰ Through the personal narrative which has become public and political, the audience and the narrator establish a common ground, facing the ugly history through the sense of shared responsibility to “solve the problem.”

Dori Laub emphasizes the audience and their responses to testimonies as important parts of reconstructing the memories of trauma in the present context. She claims that in the process of emerging him/herself into the stories of the survivors, “the listener has to feel the victim’s victories, defeats and silences, know them from within, so that they can assume the form of testimony.”⁵¹ Her argument is not simply to impose ethical responsibilities for the audience while they are listening to the testimonies. It is also to acknowledge the thirst and needs that the audience may feel as they get to learn about a certain part of history from a different perspective. Such engagements from the audience are ways of coping with the indirect trauma as the audience get to identify with the narrators. The individual can be a survivor of a war, a survivor of sexual trauma, or a Korean person. However, one can simply feel empathy and affinity towards the survivors and their courage to speak out about their trauma, and many are shocked and become intensely engaged, as I have observed in testimony tour events. By virtue of their

⁵⁰ John Beverley, “The Margin at the Center- On Testimonio,” in *The Real Thing: Testimonial Discourse and Latin America*, ed. Georg Gugelberger (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997), 31.

⁵¹ Dori Laub. “Bearing Witness, or the Vicissitudes of Listening,” in *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*, ed. Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub (New York: Routledge, 1992), 58.

willingness to listen and share emotions, they form strong networks with the survivors whether they become active advocates or simply aware of such violence.

The development of relationships between the survivors and the audiences has become a key element in understanding the complexity of the “Comfort Women” narratives. The audience of the “Comfort Women” survivor narratives does not simply include those who attend the testimony events in various places in different countries. In fact, all of us who are not the survivors of war crime are audiences. “We” are activists, the Wednesday Demonstration participants, scholars, politicians, artists, journalists, and students of the history that was so violent, distorted, unknown and silenced. The relationships are largely based upon human affect. Nobody can foretell how the audience will react to the narratives, yet the survivors are playing the role of active agents to craft a type of relationship through reaching out to the others. At the same time, previous to the popularization of the “Comfort Women” narratives, there were incessant efforts from feminist activists who wanted to become the audience of the women and expand the scope of the audience to the general public. In sum, people of both parties, the survivors and the audience, have worked hard on creating this relationship that is so mutual, although we will never fully be able to understand the degree of suffering.

Another interesting layer that I would like to focus on regarding the “Comfort Women” narratives is the silence of survivors and how and what it communicates with the audience. Silence could refer to many different aspects, and I would like to pay attention to the several decades of silence before they came out and to the parts of their narratives that they do not mention intentionally and unintentionally. Laub

writes in another article on the silence of historical trauma (holocaust) survivors in psychiatric cares that the patient's attempts at rationalization make one feel a sense of self-betrayal as she realizes that she has to accept "the limits of rational thoughts in attempting to comprehend or explain events" that seem so irrational.⁵² It seems that many social trauma survivors struggle to make sense of the gruesome crimes that do not ever seem to be possible for any humans to commit, and the fact that they suffered such a violent crime and that they were betrayed against human faith will not ever make sense. Perhaps the silence that the military sexual slavery survivors have decided to keep, either for the past several decades before coming out or during their narratives, is because the horrifying experiences have never made sense to themselves, the very individuals who suffered the violence. They have constantly juggled how they can logically communicate to other human beings of inhumane, illogical experiences of violence.

Ms. Lee talked about how she got to "come out" without my particular direction. Interestingly, she directly connected the period towards the end of her sexual slavery and her relatively recent history of "coming out." As a "Comfort Woman," she barely mentioned how she has lived over a significant chunk of her life (about half a century)— 1946 jumped right into 1992. While she wanted to emphasize how she came to speak out about her trauma, she also kept silence on a certain part of her life that she perhaps felt was not essential for the researcher to know about. However, I still wanted to learn more about her life between the time she came back to Korea and came out, so I asked.

⁵² Dori Laub, "From Speechlessness to Narrative: The Cases of Holocaust Historians and of Psychiatrically Hospitalized Survivors," *Literature and Medicine*, 24:2 (2005): 255.

Q: So what did you do support yourself once you came back to Korea in 1946?

L: What did I do? I just lived with my family. My brothers got their money monthly together and gave them for me to spend. I'm still paying back to them. I paid them back all.

She cut this part of the conversation fairly short. She did not mention anything about her going through different, often dead-end jobs. It was clear that she did not want to talk much about this part of her life. Perhaps the period of silence is something that she does not want to remember and verbalize as the experience of silence was too painful. She also may have felt that it is not worth mentioning the in-between period, thinking that I do not “want to” hear this in-between period as a researcher. One could argue that her attitude is the result of the constant outside pressure to talk about sensationalistic parts of her memories. However, I want to point out that the establishment of her political agency was the most essential moment of her life that is the culmination of her life-long suffering due to the military sex slavery. It was a way that she wanted to represent herself. By presenting the contrasting images of her life, one that of utter powerlessness and another with much power to impact people's views, she does not necessarily give choppy, incomprehensible pieces of her lives, but rather crafts room for thoughts for the audience about the untold/under-told part of her life story when she lived through violent silencing.

Wendy Brown states that “human rights activism is valuable not because it is founded on some transcendent truth, advances some ultimate principle, is a comprehensive politics, or is clean of the danger of political manipulation or

compromise, but rather, simply because it is effective in limiting political violence and reducing misery.”⁵³ And this is the kind of human rights language that the activists and scholars, including myself, have pursued and tried to create since the beginning of the “Comfort Women” activism. We, as the observers and audience, cannot possibly define what is “true” and what is not, yet we have developed different ways of interpretation, adding more layers and constantly mediating the identities of the survivors and their narratives’ roles in human relationship re/construction. Establishing and upholding human rights are not about developing absolute boundaries but allowing constant dialogues and political criticism to flow so that we may understand the suffering of those who had suffered and establish meaningful relationships.

I would like to end this chapter with a thought-provoking statement from Kelly McKinney, who has worked extensively with psychotherapy patients who are survivors of political violence.

A particular kind of truth (distinct from the truths found in other forms of historical data) is thought to reside in the subjective experience of each person. Yet the individualized personal narrative of memory, or autobiographical memory, is thought to have only latent political and redemptive value until it is somehow performed and communicated in a social context. These stories of traumatic memories simultaneously make possible and are made possible by collective practices of memory work and identity construction.⁵⁴

⁵³ Wendy Brown, “‘The Most We Can Hope For...’: Human Rights and the Politics of Fatalism,” *The South Atlantic Quarterly*, 103:2/3 (2004): 451-2.

⁵⁴ Kelly McKinney, “‘Breaking the Conspiracy of Silence’: Testimony, Traumatic Memory, and Psychotherapy with Survivors of Political Violence,” *Ethos*, 35:3 (2007): 270.

Memory is continuously in the making. No agent of memory can narrate “the pure truth,” but she can only recreate what she believes to be true. And collectively with the empathetic, supportive audience, the survivors’ memories have been re/created over different time periods creating multiple layers. Through constant re/creation and re/construction, the discourses on “Comfort Women” history and the survivors have gone well beyond the arguments on victimization and empowerment. The uncanny continues, and the survivors’ identities continue to evolve and be recreated.

Conclusion

It's Personal, It's Korean, It's Feminist, It's Political

Never again will a single story be told as though it's the only one.

John Berger

In discussing military sexual slavery survivors' lives, I constantly raised the question of choice. Did the survivors choose to become "Comfort Women?" Did they choose to remain silent for several decades? How did they choose to come out to the world after many years of silence? What part of their memories do they choose to talk about and choose not to? These are matters regarding the influences of structure and agency on one's identity construction. Many women were kidnapped and coerced to be sex slaves, and my two interviewees volunteered to become "Comfort Women" whether they wanted to or not. As young girls who did not know much about their political and social situations, they made choices that could help their families and themselves get out of miserable poverty and eat white rice—a symbol of wealth—everyday. Japan successfully planted colonial illusions and misrepresented the "volunteer" job as one for working, "new" women who would be able to provide for themselves and be independent. It was a successful means of exploitation by the colonial government. Several thousands of women gave their consent, yet it was not really their choice because they were living in extreme systemic violence that did not allow women to develop any sort of agency.

The question of choice applies to post-colonial Korea. In 1965, the Korean president signed an unfair treaty with Japan, as I mentioned earlier in Chapter 4.

Why did the government choose to ignore its history/historiocity, risking the loss of the country's agency? It is obvious the government felt the urgency of economic development. To do so, politicians and government officials exploited the traditional top-down system. They were most familiar with running a hierarchy because many of the national leaders, including the president himself, were military personnel who were used in strictly hierarchical systems. They did not bother to take time to establish a new (Western) political system of democracy and believed it would cause chaos, making the country lose the most important element of its national culture: togetherness.⁵⁵ However, it was not just about getting the country out of poverty or about the government's political greed. The nation had no voice in the global political scene after going through a half a century of destruction through colonialism and civil war caused by international power players. Economic development was set to be the priority, because it was connected to establishing its agency and power internationally, which seemed, to the leaders at that time, worth giving up the country's historical identity. It had to survive and adapt to rapid global capitalistic changes, so the government believed that it could recover from a temporary loss of pride once the country became rich and powerful.

The larger question is not why one made a certain choice but *how* one reached this point while being influenced by both the social/political structure and individual agency. It is a stretch to say that a woman or a nation who made choices largely based upon structural pressure had no agency or was disempowered all

⁵⁵ On the surface, South Korea was a democratic nation since it was occupied by the U.S. under the Cold War politics. However, it was "democratic" as opposed to North Korea's Communist government, which was backed by the Soviet Union, the enemy of the U.S. during the period.

together. I believe that the glorified concept of individual agency is an ideological structure that is highly enforced on people's consciences by Western cultural values. Janice Boddy argues that "[i]t is always misleading to confuse agency with 'freedom.' Even when choice seems possible, one's economic security and personal well-being may depend utterly and irrevocably on compliance."⁵⁶ Her statement precisely points out how the concept of freedom (which is the ability to make choices) is misleadingly connected to one's agency. Westerners are obsessed with the issue of choice because they believe that it comes from the sacred value of individual agency. But the truth of the matter is that agency is not isolated from structural influences, meaning these are not mutually exclusive values, yet rather close-knit entities that are the essential fabric of one's identity. Therefore, agency is not absolute and sacred, especially when we are discussing non-Western issues and histories, such as the "Comfort Women" issue.

The survivors, while participating in activism, have developed their agency, and this was possible through the mobilization of different structures, such as Koreanness. "Comfort Women" activism has been a remarkable counter/cultural revolution in generating the survivors' narratives as the main means of communication with the general public. It was started as a women's issue and yet people started to consider it an "our" issue, a Korean, patriotic issue. Although initially, the narratives were means for fact-proving reasons, the narrators gradually took active initiative to construct their political selves within the activism through

⁵⁶ Janice Boddy, "Violence Embodied?: Circumcision, Gender Politics and Cultural Aesthetics." *Rethinking Violence Against Women*, eds. R. Emerson Dobash and Russell P. Dobash. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1998)

telling their life stories. As mentioned repetitively, their life stories are not just about their victimized lives as “Comfort Women”— but rather are about complicated, multiple layers which were influenced greatly by their experiences as sex slaves. Their narratives enrich the contents of human history while they challenge people to approach the military sexual slavery issue from diverse angles.

As the audience of the “Comfort Women” narratives, “we” have strongly felt a sense of affinity and compassion toward the survivors; we connect or identify with the stories and eventually with the narrators themselves. Lambeck and Antze state, “Memories do not merely describe the speaker’s relation to the past but place her quite specifically in reference to it. As assertions and performances, they carry moral entailments of various sorts.”⁵⁷ We want to better understand and re/present the significances of the narratives as the children of the history whose remnants constantly resonate in our everyday lives and conscience. These remnants challenge us to revisit and rethink what we have been learning passively as “the” history of a certain nation and/or period. We engage ourselves in a process of active learning and realization, and I claim that this is possible through our willingness to form particular relationships with the very human selves of the survivors while we interact with various human and nonhuman elements to reset “our” memory.

⁵⁷ Michael Lambek and Paul Antze, “Introduction: Forecasting Memory,” in *Tense Past: Cultural Essays in Trauma and Memory*, eds. Paul Antze and Michael Lambek. (New York: Routledge, 1996), xvi.

Epilogue

Dear *Halmoni*,

I don't know how I should start this last note of my writing. As some of you may know, I got to learn about your story, "*wianbu*⁵⁸ *halmoni's*" story as a high school girl. At that point, when I was so young and naïve, I just wanted to help, because I thought you all were these poor women who suffered so much and needed help. But now, what I see is not the powerless victim that I imagined, but women who are empowered and who communicate through their narratives. Our past history is still being made with your incredible stories.

I came this far in studying your words and your lives. It would not have been possible without your strength and courage to continue your activism which has inspired me continuously for the past 5 years. I will continue to be on your side. I will be a strong advocate for military sexual slavery survivors and for all the women who have suffered sexual exploitation during wartimes for the rest of my life. But I know that I will never be as passionate and courageous as you have been for the past two decades, or rather, for your entire lives, which are proof that you have thrived despite your tumultuous history.

As much as this research taught me about you, this taught me about myself as well. As an individual who is a combination of so many cultural identities, I got to look at "my" people's stories with both insider and outsider's perspectives, and this process opened my eyes in so many ways. You gave me the opportunities to talk to you, be in the protests with you, and share a unique sense of sisterhood with you, despite the age and experience differences. I feel such powerful connections and emotions in this relationship.

My work has been really by you and for you. Thank you for being who you are and for what you have done.

With much love and respect,

Young-In Song

⁵⁸ Korean term for "Comfort Woman" or "Comfort Women." I would also like to note that the Korean language is not very strict about plurality of noun, therefore when I say, "halmoni," it is not just one particular woman, but is generally referring to all the survivors.

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