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Nora Okja Keller's *Comfort Woman* and the Ethics of Literary Trauma

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Nora Okja Keller's 1997 novel *Comfort Woman* has come to prominence recently as one of the key texts of Asian American literature, representing in literary form a silenced historical trauma: the enforced sexual servitude of Korean women and girls under the Japanese military occupation. In contrast to the numerous volumes of testimony and autobiography that have been published since the mid-1990s, Keller's text is a novel, a work of fiction written by someone with no personal experience of this historical trauma. The text therefore raises questions related to the ethics of using trauma as a literary subject, questions concerning the purpose of the fiction, the role of the author, and the status of the traumatized fictional protagonist.

The difficulty and pain involved in the speaking of traumatic memory is described by many former comfort women who in the course of their testimony confess that the recollection of their ordeal makes them physically ill: for example, Kim Sook-Duk tells how "I still have nightmares. I then scream to wake myself up. Nowadays, people often come here to interview me about my life as a 'comfort woman'. I cannot see them as often as I used to. My nightmares become worse after remembering the past at these interviews" (40); Pak Du-ri admits, "Occasionally I meet visitors who want to hear about my ordeal. After these meetings I frequently suffer from severe headaches. Sometimes they become so bad I have to be hospitalized" (71); Yi Young-sook explains, "Occasionally people come to hear my story of a former 'comfort woman'. I am reluctant to talk about it because it is my shameful, terrible past. Recollecting such a past is so emotionally draining" (101). As each of these women testify, to be known as a trauma victim places a woman in a specific subject position that ensures her further trauma through its representation.

Why then relive such trauma? Why is the testimony of survivors important? Trauma narratives seek both validation and catharsis for the survivor; they are motivated by the desire to make the traumatic experience real both to the survivor and to the witness by uniting fragments of traumatic memory and by taking control of the meaning of the experience through the retelling. Wendy S. Hesford in her essay "Reading Rape Stories: Material Rhetoric and the Trauma of Representation" acknowledges the risks of equating autobiographical testimony with authentic truth but she nuances this view by observing that

Survivor narratives do expose oppressive material conditions, violence, and trauma; give voice to heretofore silent histories; help shape public consciousness about violence against women; and thus alter history's narrative. Moreover, there is strong evidence that the process of telling one's story and writing about personal trauma can be essential elements of recovery ..."(195).

The difficulty of such testimony lies, however, not so much in the telling but in the appropriation of survivor discourses by dominant gender paradigms and ideologies that re-script such discourse. So the story becomes evidence of female hysteria or of

feminine weakness or of the irresistible sexuality of Asian women, for example. In *Comfort Woman*, Akiko's experience of rape and torture is rescripted by the American missionary who becomes her husband. His interest in her past is motivated by a sexual desire that is described in terms of paedophilia by Akiko and the only terms in which he can conceptualize and articulate her experience is as prostitution. But the question remains whether the novel offers the opportunity for validation and catharsis (and, if so, on whose behalf Keller offers such strategies of "working through" the historical trauma) or whether the fiction offers primarily entertainment with a measure of education.

In a 2002 interview with *Asianweek* Nora Okja Keller explained how she came to write *Comfort Woman* after hearing the testimony of Keum Ja Hwang, a survivor of the wartime Japanese comfort stations, at a University of Hawaii symposium on Human Rights in 1993. The friend who accompanied Keller told her, in Keller's words, "You should write about this, you're Korean". Keller continued, "But the topic was too big, I couldn't even find the words to express how horrified I was, much less find the vocabulary to talk about the pain in this woman's life. But her story took hold of me. I felt so haunted, I began dreaming about images of blood and war, and waking with a start. Finally, I realized that the only way to exorcise these dreams and the story from my mind was to write them down. So I got up one night and began to write bits and pieces of my dreams and the comfort woman's words." (Keller, 2002, n.p.).

What Keller describes is reminiscent of Toni Morrison's notion of "emotional memory" (described in her 1987 essay "The Site of Memory"). Morrison argues that in autobiographical texts, such as slave narratives of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, a "veil" (her metaphor) is drawn over the physically traumatic aspects of American slavery in narratives that strive to be as factual as possible. She describes her writerly mission to "rip" this veil so as to reveal interior lives: "I'm looking to find and expose a truth about the interior life of people who didn't write it (which doesn't mean they didn't have it)" (113). Later in the same essay she describes her route into these interior lives as emotional memory, "what the nerves and the skin remember as well as how it appeared" (119). The testimony of former comfort women shares a common set of characteristics. These texts strive to be as objective as possible, recounting the literal facts of coercion by the Japanese military, the nature of their ordeal as sexual slavery, and the extreme brutality with which they were treated.

These autobiographical texts seek to provide evidence in support of the survivors' claim for the acknowledgement of the violation of their human rights and for compensation from the Japanese government. What the survivor narratives do not describe is the nature of the emotional and psychological damage these women have suffered, damage that could possibly undermine their credibility as witnesses. They describe the destruction of their lives: lives destroyed because of the physical trauma they suffered as a result of beatings, punishments, drug therapies to induce abortions and to treat sexually transmitted diseases and because they could not return to intensely patriarchal communities in a condition where they were unfit for marriage. Like the slave narratives discussed by Morrison, these testimonies draw a veil over the inner lives of those who have been the subjects of historical trauma. And this invites Keller to rip the veil, to expose the interior operations of trauma upon these victims, witnessing "what the nerves and the skin remember."

In its assumption that the writer of fiction can articulate circumstances of extreme historical trauma, *Comfort Woman* raises questions about traumatic memory and its relation to cultural memory through the role of the witness within the context of a fiction. Questions such as: how is the role of the witness incorporated into the fiction? Who is the witness -- the reader, the author, or the fictional protagonist? And how does testimony, upon which the psychoanalytical analysis of trauma is based,

enter a fictional text? Can the text itself occupy the status of testimony even if it is fictional? What is the significance for the representation of trauma of the transformation of history from event into language?

In his book *The Ethics of Memory* (2002), philosopher Avishai Margalit argues that memory is knowledge *about* the past, not knowledge *from* the past; that memory is about belief rather than truth and so the agent who takes responsibility for shaping our belief in what has been the case must be a special agent of historical belief. He describes how: “[c]onveying the sensibility of events from the past that should be landmarks in our collective moral consciousness calls for a special agent of collective memory. Such an agent needs to be invested with special moral authority akin to that of the religious witness or martyr” – this agent he calls “the moral witness” (14). The moral witness is a particularly significant figure in the memorialization of trauma which is described by Jeffrey Olick and others as the disruption of “the legitimating narrative[s] that we as individuals produce for us as a collectivity” (345): in other words, the ongoing nature of trauma lies in historical events that cannot be integrated into the constitutive narratives of communities of memory. The moral status of the witness precludes mere survivors of such traumatic events as, say, natural disasters, where no morally evil force is involved. Margalit argues that “[b]eing a moral witness involves witnessing actual suffering, not just intended suffering. A moral witness has knowledge-by-acquaintance of suffering” (149). And he goes on to ask the question especially pertinent here: “[D]oes acquaintance mean experiencing the suffering first-hand – as a victim – or can one know it as a sympathetic bystander, observing the suffering without being a victim oneself?” (149). While Margalit concedes that it is possible to be a moral witness without being a victim, a moral witness must at the very least be at personal risk, and at risk as a consequence of acting as a moral witness. For a moral witness must testify to the existence of evil in the hope that in the future there will exist a moral community that will listen to and credit their testimony.

The witnessing of testimony is enacted in *Comfort Woman* through the daughter’s reception of her mother’s testimony. Akiko functions as a moral witness, testifying to the evil of the Japanese imperial regime. And she risks all by witnessing the nature of her traumatic experience and escaping to tell her story. This telling, in the nature of trauma itself, is belated. Akiko’s first-person narratives (which are juxtaposed with her daughter’s) place in question the idea of lived time and her traumatic experience in relation to her life before and after the recreation camp. There are two moments in the chronology of trauma: the original event and its belated emergence as a symptom. Ruth Leys explains:

The idea is that, owing to the emotions of terror and surprise caused by certain events, the mind is split or dissociated: it is unable to register the wound to the psyche because the ordinary mechanisms of awareness and cognition are destroyed. As a result, the victim is unable to recollect and integrate the hurtful experience in normal consciousness; instead, she is haunted or possessed by intrusive traumatic memories.

The experience of the trauma, fixed or frozen in time, refuses to be represented *as* past, but is perpetually reexperienced in a painful, dissociated, traumatic present” (2).

Trauma is defined by this belated temporality; trauma resides in the repetition of an earlier event that is forgotten or repressed and so is neither recalled nor known as traumatic. But these repetitions are not identical and because each repetition is not self-identical there opens the potential for analysis. After her escape from the military

camp where she has been imprisoned, Akiko suffers a period of hysterical muteness and, although she is able to articulate her memories in the narratives to which we as readers have access, for her daughter she prepares a cassette recording to be heard after her death (the text does not make clear whether Akiko's narratives are identical with this recording). It is the novel itself that returns obsessively in Akiko's sections to the repetition of trauma. Akiko functions as a moral witness but in a way that Nora Keller cannot. What then is the ethical status of the author who cannot *be* but can *create* a moral witness?

Historical trauma that is constitutive of a specific community of memory can be represented by what Dominick LaCapra calls the "secondary witness". This secondary witness empathizes with a trauma that has not been experienced personally, as LaCapra explains: "Historical trauma is specific and not everyone is subject to it or entitled to the subject-position associated with it. It is dubious to identify with the victim to the point of making oneself a surrogate victim who has a right to the victim's voice or subject-position" (722). This empathy, which LaCapra likens to a "virtual experience," acknowledges the difference separating the victim from the witness and is seen by him as a desirable affective complement to empirical research and analysis. Specifically, this empathy or "empathetic unsettlement" can disrupt the temptation to false harmonizing or recuperation of the past through "uplifting messages and self-serving scenarios" (723). The working of "emotional memory" or empathy with the victim of historical trauma empowers Keller both as a secondary witness and as the creator of a moral witness within her fiction.

The distancing of the text from the circumstances of the historical trauma that it purports to represent is troubling. Keller is a Korean American, born in South Korea and brought by her parents to the US at the age of three. She is separated generationally, culturally, and experientially from the victims of Japanese military sexual slavery about whom she had never heard until the University of Hawaii symposium on Human Rights in 1993. In these terms, *Comfort Woman* risks the commodification of trauma against which Patricia Yeager warns in her essay, "Consuming Trauma: or, The Pleasures of Merely Circling." Yeager describes the dangers of coopting and commodifying stories of trauma (turning pain to aesthetic pleasure), by sensationalising stories of suffering and violence and re-traumatizing victims. She warns specifically that academics are "busy consuming trauma ... obsessed with stories that must be passed on, that must not be passed over ... but are drawn to these stories from within an elite culture driven by its own economies" (228). Keller has anticipated such a charge through the creation of the character of Reno who commodifies the repetition of the traumatic event by Akiko. It is Reno who transforms Akiko into a famous psychic and spiritual medium. Where Beccah fears her mother's periods of insanity, Reno uses these opportunities to call up a crowd of seekers who pay handsomely to hear about what Beccah calls "the death and unfulfilled desire in their lives" (10). The conflict between Beccah, who experiences these trances only as the loss of her mother, and Reno, who grows rich as the facilitator of these meetings reaches a pitch after Akiko's death and over arrangements for her funeral. They argue literally over Akiko's dead body as Beccah accuses Reno of pure self-interest in her concern for Akiko, of using her to make money. Reno defends herself by describing Akiko as a shrewd woman who also made money out of her role as a psychic: "Your maddah was one survivah. Das how come she can read other people. Das how come she can see their wishes and fears. Das how come she can travel out of dis world into hell, cause she already been there and back and know the way" (203). In her description of Akiko's traumatic repetitions Reno articulates a hybrid discourse constituted of survivor narratives, popular mysticism and narratives of the American Dream, which repeat in miniature the rhetorical mix of the novel as a whole. Reno's defence of her use of Akiko's trauma can be seen to

parallel Keller's use of the trauma experienced by surviving comfort women, a parallel that incorporates into the fiction potential criticisms like those outlined by Yaeger. Beccah's eventual reconciliation with Reno and the compromise that they should conduct two separate funerals for Akiko, one a commodified event for the clients from which Reno will take a profit, the other a private ritual cremation, rehearses the expectation of the reader's acceptance of Keller's commodification of historical trauma that can be integrated into a variety of distinct cultural narratives.

The conflict between Reno and Beccah underlines the difficulty of recuperating traumatic stories and the dangers of such recuperation as "normalization." By normalization I mean the scripting of trauma and its assimilation to cultural narratives of normality. Kalí Tal refers to the "mythologization" of trauma that "works by reducing a traumatic event to a set of standardized narratives ... turning it from a frightening and uncontrollable event into a contained and predictable narrative. ... Once codified, the traumatic experience becomes a weapon in another battle, the struggle for political power" (6) – such that survivor discourses become revised or censored narratives of traumatic experiences. The untranslatability of trauma makes survivor discourse especially reliant upon cultural scripting for the conditions of its own meaning, even when it may resist these cultural ideologies. The ineffable nature of trauma creates a relationship of dependency with discourse to bring it into a "condition of significance" (Shoshana Felman's term). Consequently, literature is a privileged site for the representation of trauma. The figurative nature of literary language together with the representational nature of literature functions for the articulation of a trauma that does not need to be apprehended in order to be present in the text (Ramadanovic, n.p., para 2). In other words, literature can preserve the authenticity of trauma as an experience that takes place in a liminal space outside the normal contexts of experience and meaning. The significance of trauma as unspeakable horror is, in the view of theorists like Cathy Caruth and Walter Benn Michaels, articulated as pure horror when the referential function of language is pressed beyond its limits. Then, in the words of Benn Michaels, we have access to "not the normalizing knowledge of the horror but the horror itself" (8). In a literary context, trauma can be witnessed without being fully comprehended because "language is capable of bearing witness only by a failure of witnessing or representation" (Leys, 268). The peculiar epistemology of trauma resides in the special authority attributed to the survivor who, alone, is qualified to articulate the trauma they have experienced. But, as a consequence, the significance of the traumatic experience is contested.

Keller's recreation of the survivor's story is enmeshed in a number of contemporary North American cultural scripts which seek to control the significance of this historical trauma: the recovery movement which is dominant in US popular psychology and contemporary feminist analyses of patriarchal power structures. Keller's novel can be seen to derive validation from these discourses and, in turn, to confirm these discourses as powerful cultural narratives. This should not be so surprising: historical trauma can be destructive of some cultural narratives but can also function to affirm others (for example, the genocide of Native Americans can confirm narratives of the Vanishing American and of Manifest Destiny). Keller's adaptation of the comfort woman narrative confirms the feminist analysis of patriarchy in general and, in particular, the sexualization of Asian femininity through such practices as government-supported sex tourism and military prostitution around the US bases in South Korea.

Comfort Woman identifies a profound connection between Japanese military sexual slavery and the Japanese colonial occupation of Korea. Akiko describes how, when girls are forcibly taken to the comfort stations, they are required to adopt Japanese names and to speak only Japanese when they speak at all. They must

surrender their Korean identities and submit to their complete domination by Japanese colonial masters. Japanese imperialism works together with the forces of patriarchy to disempower all Koreans but Korean women are doubly disempowered, by reason of their race and their gender. Akiko tells how she was not taken by force by the military but was sold by her eldest sister in order to provide a dowry without which marriage – a woman’s only conceivable destiny – would be impossible. And upon her escape Akiko knows that because she is no longer a virgin, because she is unmarriageable, she is not able to return to her village and her family. The oppressive patriarchy that makes of Akiko a victim even before she enters her life of rape and torture as a comfort woman is generalized from Asia to encompass the US when Akiko migrates with her missionary husband. She finds little difference between the husband who rapes her and the Japanese soldiers who raped her. She finds in America that she occupies a subject-position that differs very little from Korea.

This emphasis upon a universalized patriarchal oppression is congruent with the very origins of the comfort woman movement, which was organized by the efforts of feminists in Korea and Japan to draw attention not to the isolated incidence of military sexual slavery during the war in the Pacific but to focus the attention of the world upon the sexual exploitation of Asian women generally and Korean women specifically in the global sex trade and in particular in the trans-national sex trade between Korea and Japan. The economic exploitation of Korean women’s sexuality is seen as an expression of powerful patriarchal narratives that dominate both cultures. So where the survivor narratives of former comfort women may shatter cultural narratives of human rights, for example, these narratives also affirm the continued power of narratives of Asian feminine sexuality and patriarchal dominance. That the intersection of discourses of patriarchy and orientalism is also powerful in American culture is evidenced by Keller’s equation of Akiko’s suffering as a comfort woman with her suffering as the oriental wife of an American man, and this interest is of course explored further in Keller’s second novel, *Fox Girl*, which addresses directly the experience of contemporary Korean women who provide sexual services to the US military personnel still stationed in South Korea.

The Americanness of Keller’s novel, then, lies in part in this connection between imperialism, patriarchy and the sexualization of Asian femininity but I would like to suggest that it also resides in the nature of Keller’s rhetoric of trauma. Keller uses the potentially cathartic role of literary language in the process of healing, where the special characteristics of poetic language can act as a mechanism by which the full horror of the traumatic event can be recreated or recovered. I use the term “recovered” advisedly to evoke the “recovery movement” in contemporary popular American psychology, which is founded on the principle that through therapy (involving a combination of self-help, support groups, addiction therapy, and the like) memories of childhood trauma can be pieced together as part of the process of healing. The shift in terminology to describe the nature of traumatic memory is significant, as Marita Sturken observes: “the slippage from *repressed* to *recovered* implies that remembrance is an activity that will *help one recover*” (104). In Freudian terms repression is an active process of keeping dangerous knowledge from consciousness but in recovery psychology the active process is the recovery of memory. In the concluding sections of *Comfort Woman* Keller uses this principle of self-help through the recovery of collective traumatic memory. It is not, however, the former comfort woman Akiko who is the subject of this healing but her American-born daughter.

In fact, trauma as depicted in the novel is not restricted to Akiko’s traumatic experience of the comfort camps and her subsequent bouts of insanity and attempts to commit suicide: her daughter Beccah also suffers the symptoms of trauma, though these are muted in the narrative. She embraces her mother’s rituals and the spirit world they conjure, and as a consequence she becomes anorexic, eating only that

which the spirits eat: the steam that arises from the offerings presented to them. She admits, “I continued to devour the steam of rice, waiting until I would be tiny enough to slip completely into the world my mother lived in” (86). Beccah is the victim of the trauma visited upon her mother, the trauma that has characterized her childhood as one of neglect and deprivation. That Beccah’s dysfunctionality is a consequence of her mother’s, and is in some way identical with it, is articulated in the text by the shared imagery of their unconscious and their dreams.

The motif of frogs or toads, linked to the figure of a “heavenly messenger,” unites the experience of both Akiko and Beccah. When Akiko recalls the killing of Induk, her predecessor in the camp, she imagines she can hear a chorus of frogs lamenting this death; the murdered Induk is ambiguously related to the spirit Induk, the Birth Grandmother, throughout the narrative and at times they are identified as one, as when Akiko imagines that she sees Induk in the form of her mother standing by the edge of the river where Akiko is lying unconscious having just escaped the camp. When Induk addresses her, Akiko describes her voice “creaking like a hundred thousand frogs” (36). Later, Beccah reports a dream in which she sees a woman standing by a river who appears to be her mother and who identifies herself as Induk but Beccah knows is actually herself. In addition to dreams, the stories passed from Akiko to Beccah – like the story of the heavenly frog who rewards those who believe him by taking them to heaven or that of the little frog who obeys his mother for the only time by following her literal directions for her burial when she had expected that he would act as he always had and do the opposite of what she asked – provide a symbolic commentary upon the characters’ unexpressed emotional lives. The frog jewellery and ornaments given to Akiko by her clientele represent her status as a spirit messenger like the Heavenly Frog, though her clients cannot know the significance of the figure of the messenger for Akiko who carried secret coded messages among the comfort women who were bound by a rule of silence in the camp.

These symbolic images then trace back to Akiko’s ordinary trauma, the trauma she cannot articulate in the terms of ordinary language to her daughter. Indeed, the healing of Beccah’s traumatized psyche is represented through dream imagery, imagery that arises from the story of Princess Pari who tricked her way into hell so that she could find her parents and drag them free by the strips of cloth she ties around her waist (49). Later, Beccah dreams that she is held underwater by a shark that transforms into the figure of her mother, holding her legs Beccah says, “as though I could save her. Instead I feel myself sinking” (141). Beccah feels herself punished by her inability to conform to the ideal established by Princess Pari until she discovers her mother’s true identity and learns of her mother’s traumatic history. Then she is able to shake off the suspicion that she is modelled upon the little frog who was incapable of correctly burying his mother. Then Beccah is able to conduct the ritual preparation of her mother’s body, though with the difference that she binds the body with cloth strips torn from the bedsheet upon which she has transcribed Akiko’s testimony. Beccah does this in the belief that when her mother’s body is cremated, the flames will carry her words away and free Akiko’s spirit from her body and her history also. The cloth with which Princess Pari saved her parents becomes the cloth shroud Beccah uses to liberate her mother. In the process, Beccah liberates herself. In the final dream that she reports, Beccah dreams that she gives birth to herself, a new and “whole” self. She dreams again of being immersed but rather than drowning now she swims through the sky, as she describes, “higher and higher, until, dizzy with the freedom of light and air, I looked down to see a thin blue river of light spiralling down to earth, where I lay sleeping in bed, coiled tight around a small seed planted by my mother, waiting to be born” (213). This image draws together several rhetorical strands of the narrative. It recalls the advice given to Akiko that in order to find something lost she must free her mind and allow her unconscious to spiral in towards

the lost object; this is in itself recalls Akiko explaining to Beccah that her trances are her mind's attempt to find something that she has lost – her past, her history, lost to the devastating power of trauma. The river represents throughout the narrative a gateway to the spiritual realm, be that hell or home. Beccah scatters her mother's ashes in the river by their home, the river that Akiko has ritually united with her daughter through a bond of blood that is extended to herself as Beccah touches her mother's wet ashes to her lips, “ ‘Your body in mine,’ I told my mother, ‘so you will always be with me, even when your spirit finds its way home’ ” (212). The conclusion of the narrative, then, enacts the recovery of traumatic memory and its reintegration into the narratives recalled by Beccah. As a consequence, daughter is united with mother, the unity of the generations is preserved, and ritual is united with history as body is united with spirit.

I mentioned earlier that survivor narratives seek two things: validation and catharsis and I posed the question: on whose behalf does Keller offer strategies of “working through” historical trauma? Nora Keller achieves in her novel validation of the suffering of surviving comfort women but catharsis is reserved for the generations who are damaged as a result of the originary historical trauma. As these generations witness the historical testimony of survivors, Keller suggests, the possibility for self-healing opens through the cathartic power of language. This is not the language of everyday life: Akiko is unable to articulate her traumatic experience except through the ritual mourning of the women who did not survive the comfort camps. She does not speak her trauma but sings it and the secondary witness to this testimony, Nora Keller, represents it in highly poetic terms, through dreams, visions, and inherited stories. These discourses, which exceed in their representational power the limits of normal mimesis, demonstrate the ability of poetic language to transform history from event into a discourse that approaches the horror of the traumatic event. Once remembered and recreated, the trauma can then be purged. The status of *Comfort Woman* as an Asian American text raises more questions about the status of the text's language than the text can resolve (for instance, why only Reno's Hawaiian accent is transliterated when other characters, most notably Akiko, must speak not only an inflected English but indeed Korean in sections of the text that are not marked by any such linguistic switching). Keller uses a style of rhetoric that appears to owe its motivation to the recovery movement in contemporary popular psychology and a style of discourse normalization that owes much to feminist analyses of patriarchal cultural formations. She creates a fiction based on history and written in the style of personal confession. But she appears to be ignorant of the dangers of cultural narratives that rescript the story of historical trauma and mythologize its significance. In these ways, this text continues to raise disturbing questions about ethics and the literary co-optation of traumatic memory.

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