

Echoes of War. Postmemory and the Haunting of the Past in Nora Okja Keller's *Comfort Woman* (1997)

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Abstract Linda Hutcheon's critical response offers contemporary authors an opportunity to reimagine history through the postmodern concept of historiographic metafiction, which explores the past as not one original truth but as "plural truths" (Hutcheon 1998: 109) that can be reinterpreted. Consequently, this approach enables marginalised voices, those often omitted from official record, to reclaim their narrative authority in order to represent their lived experiences. Building on this foundation, scholars use Marianne Hirsch's theory of postmemory so as to counteract official and exclusionary versions of the past by examining how one generation transmits history and memory to the next, as it reflects on how memory functions as a mechanism for the survival of cultural material. These ideas converge in Nora Okja Keller's novel *Comfort Woman* (1997), which centres on the story of a former Korean woman, Akiko, forced into sexual slavery through the Japanese Occupation in Korea, her country's intervention in the Pacific War. Through an intergenerational dialogue, Keller does not only offer the fragmented history of Akiko, but also the perspective of her daughter, Beccah, who inherits her mother's cryptic and disorienting memories that shape her personality, her life, and her own trauma. The main objective of this article, hence, will focus on the historical representation of a war-time period from a memory that is damaged and abused, while also emphasizing the role of the mother-daughter relationship. Moreover, this research will also accentuate the importance of absenteeism, silence, and cryptic phantoms as a metaphoric representation for repression and resistance.

Keywords Trauma; Postmemory; Comfort Women; Historical Fiction; Haunting.

The past has always been a powerful tool through which authors have aimed to explore the unexplored. By doing so, contemporary authors have challenged the limitations of history, as well as the legal silences and gaps produced by representation as ideologically shaped by historiography. The manipulation of history is something that Pierre Nora defends in his work, "Between Memory and History", stating that history is "the reconstruction, always problematic and incomplete, of what is no longer" (1989: 8). In contrast to this depiction of history, Nora underlines how memory is "multiple and yet specific; collective,

plural and yet individual” (1989: 9), providing with a plurality that history lacks. Nevertheless, the friction between history and memory opens a field for authors such as Dominick LaCapra, Paul Ricoeur or Linda Hutcheon, who advocate for the reinterpretation of history in an attempt to reach historical justice, by engaging with silenced voices from minorities regarding gender, origin, religion, or class. Within this broader field, Nora Okja Keller’s novel *Comfort Woman* (1997) occupies a distinctive position as a work of historical fiction that reimagines the lived experience and aftermath of sexual enslavement through an intergenerational narrative.

The novel under study is inspired by real events that happened during the Pacific War, following Japan’s occupation of Korea, as the military established comfort stations in which women were subjected to psychological, physical and sexual abuse, as they became trapped “in a system that was likely to kill them, destroy their ability to have children, and stigmatize them to an extent they could no longer participate in Korean society as wives and mothers” (Norma 2017: 132). As it will be explored through Keller’s narrative, many of the women under these circumstances often perished, either by suicide, illness, or they succumbed to the Japanese military’s violent abuse, while those who survived were abandoned to their own luck, stained with the stigma of the trauma, and “forever altered by the experience” (Robinson 2011: 98). The author’s position as a Korean-American writer also shapes the novel’s engagement towards the involvement of the United States in the Korean War and the comfort women issue. As a diaspora writer, she approaches the history of Japanese colonial violence from a mediated distance that invites comparisons with other Asian-American writers who have addressed wartime atrocities from a diasporic framework, such as Iris Chang’s work on the Nanjing Massacre, titled *The Rape of Nanking: The Forgotten Holocaust of World War II* (1997). In Keller’s case specifically, fiction becomes a space to wonder how historical violence has been portrayed in historical fiction, and simultaneously allows the reader to question themselves about issues of migration, generational rupture, and the ethics of representation. This novel, then, displays an exploration of gendered trauma and national displacement through the protagonist’s experience in the Japanese system of sexual abuse. Consequently, the diasporic framework in which the novel is written can be studied from the perspective of Abraham and Torok (Rand 1994: 169, Gordon 1997: 8), and how the haunting of the past is not only exemplified through generations but also follows the victims in space, as Rose observes: “haunting works not just down through the generations, but across them” (Rose 1996: 31). By situating *Comfort Woman* (1997) within the scholarly discourse and foregrounding the interplay between fiction, memory, and diasporic authorship, this article argues how Keller’s narrative does not simply recount historical suffering through a fictional narrative, but also demonstrates

how the past can be transmitted to the next generation in the shape of a trauma that does not belong to them, but that still shapes their lives, and that can be seen and experienced in every aspect of their existence.

1. Memory, Postmemory, and the Haunting of the Past

Defining memory has been a challenge for critics and philosophers who work in the field of Memory Studies, as the first pursuit to define it regarded Henry Bergson's phenomenological disciplines through which he created a dichotomy between pure perception and pure memory, terms that refer to the visual figure that triggers an individual to remember, while the second explains the process through which memory is retained (Ansell-Pearson 2010: 64). Nevertheless, it was not until the First and the Second World War that studies on memory started to expand as a consequence of post-structuralism, and philosophers such as Theodor Adorno and Giles Deleuze reinterpreted the danger of forgetting the past and the human desire for truth, both of which defended the conservation of memory as the only way of preserving human identity, as the "loss of individuality and the danger of forgetting human suffering" (O'Connor 2010: 136) would evolve into the repetition of patterns of destruction and cruelty. However, memory has not only served to preserve history in a truthful manner. It has also helped to shape the ways in which history has been rewritten, particularly through contemporary fiction narrative such as Keller's *Comfort Woman* (1997).

Theorizing the importance of non-forgetting, Marianne Hirsch articulates a model through which the transmission of the past unfolds towards the present through generational structures that forge a dynamic between past and present. Said structure produces a "generational remove" (Hirsch 2008: 106) and creates a temporal yet affective distance that prevents historical and familial memories from receding into oblivion, since it will be inherited through the generations¹. In "The Generation of Postmemory" (2008), Hirsch delineates for

¹ While this article mainly focuses on Marianne Hirsch's Postmemory, other critics contributed to the idea of inheriting the past, such as James E. Young, who proposed the term "received history" in order to explain the problematic character of postmodern history and to question how truthful history is. Celia Lury, on the other hand, used the term "inherited memory" to emphasize the importance of actively passing on memories, not only through the familial circle but also to the social sphere. Eva Hoffman, closer to Hirsch's concept of generational remove, used the term "hinge generation" in order to defend the existence of a generation who did not experience trauma or violence, but that nevertheless

the first time the base for the postmemorial structure, which has two generational positions: the first one comprising the individuals who directly undergo a traumatic or violent experience, as it can be the experience of war, while the second generations, by contrast, are those whose lives are shaped by “experiences that preceded their births [...] [that] were nevertheless transmitted to them so deeply as to seem to constitute memories in their own right” (2008: 103). It is through this framework that Hirsch demonstrates how memory can be inherited, mediated, and reimagined across time, challenging the conventional boundaries between personal recollection and subsequently, contributing towards a real collective historical consciousness.

The mother-daughter dynamic that Hirsch’s model attempts to decipher can be observed in Keller’s novel. The daughter’s character will inherit the mother’s trauma and this will shape her life. This narrative structure also intertwines with the daughter’s retrospective account of events. The mother’s voice illustrates how trauma, even when it is unspeakable and has been silenced, can become equally significant. For this reason, trauma can influence how the past is understood and reimagined. Another common feature of postmemory is its fragmented nature, which Hirsch describes as composed by “flashes of imagery” and “broken refrains” that are transmitted through “the language of the body” (2008: 109). In other words, the consequences of inheriting Akiko’s traumatic memories exceed the realm of symbolic or aesthetic representation. An additional element shared both by Hirsch and Keller is the somatic expression of trauma. Rather than materializing in a coherent story, postmemorial work usually emerges through psychological registers that trigger depression, anxiety, silences, unarticulated gaps and crypts. Categorised as traumatic residues, they signal that the second generation bear with the weight of what remains unspoken, and by not being properly articulated, it becomes unassimilated.

Because of the perspective on gender that both the present article and the novel under study contain, it is necessary to emphasize that gender is crucial in the construction of history and memory, as it determines how the experience of trauma is narrated. Both Marianne Hirsch and Eva Hoffman coincide and provide examples of how female voices —or the lack of them— shape the literature written on the Holocaust and reflect on how these gaps in history have affected their inheritance of the past as well as their comprehension of their own history. One of the examples that Hirsch provides in *The Generation of*

acquired these experiences, and in order to make sense of them, had to use fiction to imagine a past that they never lived, though comprehended.

Postmemory (2012) is her experience after watching the documentary film *Shoah* (1985). Hirsch wonders why were women's voices not represented:

“Why were women relegated to the role of translators and mediators? Why were they allowed to sing in the film and not to talk about their experiences as the men were invited to do? And how did the absence of women shape the story told in this remarkable document?” (2012: 8–9).

Hoffman's approach further elaborates on the fact that the way in which history was told affects how memory is being received by the following generation, and she reflects on this by sharing her own experience. Hoffman shares her position with Beccah, as both of them are second generation daughters. Hence, they belong to the generation “in which received, transferred knowledge of events is transmuted into history, or into myth”, This creates a sense of living connection between generations that can be seen through the perspective of a past filtered through gendered hierarchies, as the trauma of the mother haunting the next generation can be interpreted both as belonging to the cultural context and as part of familial stories. Haunting also occurs in gendered spaces –such as the house, the kitchen, or as it will be seen in the analysis, in the river or the comfort camps–, usually in a non-linear form, fragmented, or in the necessity of being understood by the daughter. The need for connection between the mother's memory and the daughter provokes a sensation similar to re-living a situation originated from a wound. This, LaCapra asserts, is a way of “acting out the past” that would evolve in a way of “self-rendering identification with the victim” (1998: 113), creating a pattern of re-enactment by which the second generation does not only acquire the first generation's memory –as postmemory defends– but creating a repetitive pattern of action.

Those types of sequence can be clearly observed in the narrative of Toni Morrison and in her usage of rememory, a term that she created to meditate upon international haunting and the spectral return. In her novel *Beloved* (1987), Morrison used this pattern to reflect on how a daughter's life must be conditioned by the unresolved trauma of the mother, which reappears not only psychologically but materially as a ghostly presence that collapses the distinction between past and present, as well as the real and unreal. In this dynamic, the trauma persists beyond individual consciousness and inhabits both body and space. On the other hand, Marianne Hirsch observes how rememory involves the use of the unconscious, as it embodies the transmission of maternal wounds to the daughter, who needs to feel mutual identification towards her parent (2012: 87). This observation resonates with Akiko and

Beccah's dynamic in Keller's novel. Following Hirsch's approach, Marilyn Sanders Mobley describes Morrison's rememory as the creation of "fictional texts that tap into history, lived life, and the imagination to create new representations" (2024: 10). Yet Morrison's narrative does more than re-stage the past, as it establishes a dialogic space where readers, regardless of their origin, can "interrogate the meaning of a moment in history about which many have been miseducated, uneducated, or undereducated" (Mobley 2024: 11). Finally, even if *Comfort Woman* (1997) has not typically been categorised as a rememory novel, it shares comparable similarities to the dynamic of revisiting silenced or forgotten stories. As a Korean American writer, Nora Okja Keller does not pursue the discovery of the original history of comfort women. She provides a fictional narrative that she herself constructed upon an alternative voice from a different perspective. By doing so, her novel functions as a literary intervention that opens a space through which readers can reconsider the problematics of history and the lingering presence of traumatic pasts.

Gabriele Schwab conceptualizes traumatic inheritance as a "haunting legacy", defining it as the "result of a violence that holds an unrelenting grip on memory" while being "deemed unspeakable" (2010: 1). Traumatic experience, in this sense, becomes a form of knowledge that resists assimilation, remaining unincorporated within the traumatised individual. These histories are not only confined to direct witnesses and do "not only haunt the actual victims. They have also been passed on through the generations" (2010: 1). Schwab further emphasizes that "children become the recipients not only of their parents' lived memories but also of their somatic memories" (2010: 14), inheriting not simply the narratives but the embodied affective residues that continue to influence their heirs long after the original event has passed. The socio-historical dimensions of trauma also inflict a deep and lasting damage on cultural practices, policies, and forms of collective understanding that crystallize into structures of silence, which are never neutral, but part of an ethical representation of trauma. Schwab distinguishes three different types of silence depending on the origin of muteness. The first one designates an attack on memory, a mode of forgetting through which the individual deliberately buries certain experiences within their psyche in order to protect themselves (2010: 51). The second one, silencing history, refers to the intentional suppression of historical knowledge enacted either by the perpetrators of violence who seek erasure of the past or by victims who were muted against their will (Schwab 2010: 53). Finally, the third one is the crypt – a concept that describes rupture, as the "dysfunctions in expressiveness may then be read as symptoms and

symptomatic silences or traces pointing to a secret that is paradoxically both kept and revealed in language” (Schwab 2010: 53). In other words, the type of silence that is acknowledged through the crypt withholds an information that is made obvious, even when it is not directly revealed. At the beginning of the novel, Akiko’s silence might be interpreted as an attack on memory. Yet, as the narrative unfolds, it becomes evident that her silences are part of a crypt. Rather than simply silencing her traumatic memory, Akiko’s muteness becomes apparent through fissures, interruptions or indirect speech. Therefore, the trauma cannot be spoken but it is seen through the traces that expose what remains unassimilated.

These silences and the way in which they shape the transmission of memory resonate profoundly with Jacques Derrida’s notion of hauntology, which reframes the past not as something concluded but as a spectral presence that continues to infiltrate the present. Hence, these gaps do not only haunt next generation’s minds, nor do they simply disappear or remain unspeakable. In fact, they return as a spectral residue. According to Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok, the spectral element in narratives plays a significant role in the generational transmission of the past, as well as in the transmission of silence. Abraham considers the phantom as “a metapsychological fact” since “what haunts are not the dead, but the gaps left within us by the secrets of others” (1994: 1), which turn into the inability of an individual to process a loss, to mourn, and to work through their trauma in order to survive. Spectral features, then, become a critical lens for understanding how trauma operates across generations as a suppressed or disfigured form of memory. This consideration is especially valid when referring to Derrida’s conception of the spectre as a phantasmagorical figure that surfaces when articulation in language fails, “a deconstructive figure hovering between life and death, presence and absence, and making established certainties vacillate. It does not belong to the order of knowledge” (Davis 2005: 376).

2. Historical Re-interpretation through Contemporary Trauma Narratives

Because the historical record regarding the comfort women system had remained fragmented and hidden from global knowledge until survivors began speaking publicly in the early 1990s, literary works such as Nora Okja Keller’s *Comfort Woman* (1997) uphold a tremendous interpretative weight, both in the transmission of knowledge towards the contemporary public and in the

representation of an experience through which survivors may see themselves, as she offered a different voice through which a silenced history can be reconstructed, contextualized and reimagined. In fact, the existence of documents from the 1930s regarding comfort stations in China as well as in other parts of Europe was well known before the 1990s (Yoshiaki 2018: 44–46). Artistic items such as books and films were produced about the matter in Japan. Among these: *Gate of Flesh* (1964) or *Story of a Prostitute* (1965), directed by Seijun Suzuki and based on previous novels by Taijiro Tamura; the trilogy *The Human Condition* (1959), directed by Masaki Kobayashi based on the written work of Junpei Gomikawa; *Sandakan No. 8* (1974), based on the novel written by Yamazaki Tomoko. Nevertheless, what these films have in common is that they focus on Japanese sexual slaves rather than on Korean victims, a notable exception being Yoshida Seiji's written testimony. Published in 1983 under the title *My War Crimes: The Forced Draft of Koreans*, in this work "Yoshida describes how he himself led 'slave-raid' expeditions which recruited thousands of male labourers and about 1000 women for comfort duties" (Hicks 1995: 55). These artistic expressions of life in the comfort stations may as well be regarded as not completely accurate if we take into consideration other sources, such as the research carried out by Korean academic Yoon Jeong-ok in the 1980s. During this time, Yoon had embarked in the process of acknowledging the truth of many Korean women who, unlike women in other parts of the world, were still silenced by the political situation of their country. It was not until 1988 that she published the results of her work, which became a precursor for many studies as well as for research committees that came afterwards (Kyeol 2019).

In her narrative endeavour, Keller attempts to provide a new perspective on the comfort women issue. Emphasizing that the novel is a work of fiction, her work is based on previous research started by Professor Yoon, as well as on the political activism that rose in the 1990s in South Korea after the testimony of Grandmother Kim Hak-sun. Kim's statements inspired many other women to come forward and share their experience in different parts of the world, such as China, the Philippines or the Netherlands. It is for this reason that Akiko, Keller's protagonist, exposes not only the experience of living as a comfort woman, but also portrays a socio-political and historical situation. This can be seen, for example, when Beccah states how her mother's generation "was the first in Korea to learn a new alphabet, and new words for everyday things. She had to learn to answer to a new name, to think of herself and her world in a new way" (Keller 1997: 153). This description emphasizes the change of everyday

life in Korea during the Japanese occupation by specifically referring to the enactment of assimilation politics, which forced Korean citizens to absorb Japanese language and culture and even change their birth names into Japanese.

The background of the novel covers the outcome of World War II and the role of the United States in the political, military, and religious domains during the Korean War and its aftermath. Such contextualization could be inspired by the author's own experience as a Korean-American. It is through Akiko's memories that the readers, as well as the daughter, are inserted into the exposition of colonial violence through silences, crypts, and erasure. The novel opens with Akiko's testimonial confession towards her daughter, Beccah, with whom Keller creates a multigenerational and polytemporal narrative space, and who will be portraying the haunting forces of Akiko's memory. Through the historical narrative of both characters, the text reveals references to structures of oppression, especially when Akiko hints at her childhood and at how women's bodies and voices were situated at the centre of colonial oppression, underscoring how Confucian social structures functioned as well as how the absence of male family members who were sent to war exposed young girls to abduction and sexual enslavement.

When further presenting historical information and enhancing the diasporic sentiment, Keller emphasizes the identity dislocation that happened in the comfort stations, as the girls' identities were systematically erased through both physical and psychological violence. Akiko recounts how the Japanese soldiers forced them to learn basic commands in their language, limiting them to simple words such as "sit, eat [or] sleep", as well as "'close mouth' and 'open legs'" (1997: 16). Such imposed vocabulary became a symbol of the enforced muteness which the girls were obliged to, and conveys the objectification of their minds and bodies, since the system attempted to also erase their linguistic abilities. Despite the repeated attempts at silencing them, the community of imprisoned women created a clandestine linguistic structure, developing non-verbal cues, glances, gestures and sounds, which allowed them to keep the communication flowing. In Akiko's words: "We taught ourselves to communicate through eye movements, body posture, tilts of the head, or—when we could not see each other—through rhythmic rustlings between our stalls; in this way we could speak, in this way we kept our sanity" (Keller 1997: 16), but also, as an act of resistance against the dominant force, and as a preservation of selfhood against the machinery of oppression. Keller also reflects on how the brutality of the system and the exploitation of Korean girls throughout the colonization process functioned as a racist attempt to erase Korean identity.

She illustrates the structure of dehumanization imposed on women through the imposition of Japanese names accompanied by numbers which marked the girls who had owned that name before, and who had died, thus emphasizing the disposability of the bodies as, once again, objectified matter. The protagonist, Akiko 41, receives that number after Induk –former Akiko 40– is brutally murdered by the soldiers after reclaiming her own identity.

The character of Induk does not only serve as the example for historical cruelty, but becomes a constant in Akiko's life, as her spirit comes to be a pivotal figure illustrated in the gendered and political critique of the novel. As her final act she perishes in the hands of the Japanese army after reclaiming her own voice and identity, stating that:

I am Korea, I am a woman, I am alive. I am seventeen, I had a family just like you do, I am a daughter, I am a sister. [...] All through the night she talked, reclaiming her Korean name, reciting her family genealogy, even chanting the recipes her mother had passed on to her (Keller 1997: 21).

Her violation and her death has a double meaning in Keller's metaphorical framework, and rather than being simply a narrative of a violent event, the violated female body mirrors how war was violating their nation, how it was being invaded, mutilated and deprived of their own autonomy, while also becoming a martyr and a symbol of national and feminist resistance, something emphasized by the use of the body and the effect of the Emperor's orders, as Akiko claims that under his rule, "we were beaten and starved", "the holes of our bodies were used to bury their excrement" or "we were bled again and again" (Keller 1997: 193). On the same matter, and continuing the metaphor of the body as the country comes the idea of war and colonization as a never-ending process in which waiting is not an option: once Induk has died, the soldiers will need a new Akiko, and that becomes the novel's protagonist:

I was given her clothes, which were too big and made the soldiers laugh. [...] Even though I had not yet had my first bleeding, I was auctioned off to the highest bidder. After that it was a free-for-all, and I thought I would never stop bleeding. [...] That is how I know Induk didn't go crazy. She was going sane. She was planning her escape. The corpse the soldiers brought back from the woods wasn't Induk, It was Akiko 41, it was me. (1997: 21)

While this is the most powerful moment in which the dichotomy between the female body and the country is explored, in the course of the novel Keller

distributes details referring to the country as a body cut into two, so as to make readers retain this metaphor firmly on their mind (Keller 1997: 105). In another part of the novel, when the missionaries baptize Akiko, she consciously takes the land into herself by licking a pinch of mud from the river, as she claims that she wanted to make sure that the country would always stay within herself, inside her body (1997: 104). These actions could also be read as a metaphor for the inability of the new colonisers –the American missionaries– to change her identity, that had remained intact despite the Japanese had attempted to erase it. On this matter, Stella Oh contemplates that female bodies could be silenced by society as “discursive and disciplinary practices manipulated the bodies and stifle the voices of women in an effort to dissolve the national shame associated with colonisation” (2024: 182). Likewise, Oh reinforces the conceptual connection between the female body and the land by suggesting how sexual violence is represented in art and literature, as she argues that such portrayals should avoid graphic and sensationalist depictions. Instead, they should adopt a more symbolic mode of expression, through which artistic performativity enables a more mediated engagement with trauma (2024: 186–187).

3. The Haunting Burden of Memory

Despite her relocation to the United States after she marries an American missionary, Akiko is unable, throughout the novel, to save herself from the violence imprinted on the body and mind through the years of constant cruelty at the comfort stations. As discussed in relation to the somatic persistence in LaCapra’s re-enactment or Morrison’s rememory, Akiko’s everyday life is burdened by the presence of involuntary flashbacks and dissociative trance states in which the past becomes vividly present again. These episodes will be described by Beccah as possessions by spirits that come to talk to her mother, as Akiko is believed to be a shaman during her adult life. In earlier stages of her life, when she had not yet left Korea, the manifestation of previous experiences became a perpetual re-living of a past that has never existed: an embodied force that refuses to be assimilated and continually disrupts her relationship to her present reality and to other people. The missionary house, the place where Akiko met her husband is acknowledged and described by Keller as a space of salvation, to explore the phenomenon of traumatic re-enactment as well as the ways in which trauma persists in the nervous system, resurfacing without previous warning or boundaries. As stated by the protagonist during her work

sessions, she experiments a series of re-enactments and memories of the stations originating in the safety of the missionary house:

Whenever I stopped cleaning or gluing to stretch cramping fingers or crack my stiff neck, I heard the sounds of a woman being kicked because she had used an old shirt as a sanitary pad. Or I heard a man sigh loudly as he urinated on the body where he had just pumped his seed. And always, a low rumbling underlying every step I took at the mission house, I heard the grinding of trucks delivering more men and more military supplies (Keller 1997: 65)

Although the space is framed within the ideas of Christian benevolence, Akiko is haunted by the echo of war, and consequently by the comfort stations, firstly because the missionaries, similarly to the Japanese soldiers, expect her and other rescued Korean girls to know, or at least learn, their language, which in this case would be English. Likewise, Akiko is expected to perform roles assigned to her without resistance, whether it is sweeping floors, washing dishes, or gluing labels to boxes (Keller 1997: 64). By completing these tasks, she will continuously repeat patterns of labour and obedience that mirror the compulsory submission enforced in the stations. This prevents her from healing her original wound. Quite on the contrary, it keeps it open due to the constant re-enactment of the unresolved trauma. Sounds, including footsteps, breathing, or the sound of men laughing become part of the haunting scheme through Keller's narrative, since it triggers fear responses from Akiko by reminding her of the acoustic landscape of the stations, where she believes she will be sent back if she does not perform her allocated duties in the house:

I remember thinking that I could not stop cleaning, washing, cooking, gluing, because if I did, the camp noises would envelop me and I would be back there, trying to silence the noises I made eating, crying, relieving myself, breathing, living. As long as I was quiet, there was the hope that I would be overlooked and allowed to die in the darkness. (Keller 1997: 65)

These sensory flashbacks can be interpreted with the Derridean theory of hauntology, given that they blend the boundaries between present and past. Moreover, the narrative becomes somehow polytemporal, as the ghost of the past inhabits the present and materialises, refusing to leave her. Toward the missionaries, Akiko performs a double act of silence, partly imposed by the language barrier, but also stemming from the impossibility of bearing witness to those unwilling to listen to her. Consequently, her muteness resembles

LaCapra's concept of acting out. Trauma, rather than being worked upon and overcome, is constantly embedded into the narrative, because her environment replicates the structures of domination that she had endured throughout her childhood and teenage years.

Grace M. Cho discusses how these readings act as "unacknowledged traumas carried into the diaspora" and how they become assembled into the victims daily life (2008: 166). Referencing John Johnston's idea of "machinic vision", the original trauma becomes diasporic as "what is perceived is not located at any single place and moment in time, and the act by which this perception occurs is not the result of a single or isolated agency but of several working in concert or parallel" (1999: 44). To this, Cho adds that trauma and diaspora are intertwined and they identify metaphorically with the figure of the ghost, which resonates with Keller's proposal of a ghost that haunts Akiko's life even when she moves from her home country, by delineating how "the ghost is distributed across the time-space of the diaspora in order to create another type of body, an assemblaged body whose purpose is to see and speak the traumas that could not be seen and spoken by those who directly lived them" (2008: 166). In this specific case, the ghost of Induk talking to Akiko would be seen as a diasporic assemblage that seeks self expression through a new body, while the traumatic inheritance towards Beccah would add a second layer of trauma narratives in diasporic contexts. Nevertheless, this structure also serves Keller to expose the second biggest dichotomy of the novel, which is the comparison and juxtaposition of Japanese and American occupations. In so doing, Keller discloses the continuity of both as imperial systems that claimed to liberate and help Korea but instead, imposed cultural, religious and economic authority, an idea that is supported by Chow Sheat Fun, who argues that the Western imposition of "gospel, culture, [and] philosophy" mirrors, on a geopolitical scale, the intimate violations of the comfort stations (2020: 2999).

Continuing with the use of religion as a dominant force towards the victim, Christianity and the pastor are used by the author so as to suggest a metaphorical reflection of an imposed second culture. The pastor advocates for the idea that Akiko should marry him since he perceives her as a challenge. He needs to "guide her into the flock by yoking her to its shepherd" (Keller 1997: 101). While adoption might have been seen as a more appropriate option due to the age gap between these two characters, the pastor reiterates the idea of getting married as a better choice. This leads Akiko to live the moments that later on she would categorize as the "two greatest events in a Christian woman's life" (Keller 1997: 102), which are her baptism and her wedding. It is in this

relationship that violent dominance is once again enacted and underlined in the novel. As the pastor finally becomes Akiko's husband against her will, once again under the excuse of helping the poor girl from her appalling future, he would likewise objectify her by violating her and forcing her to bear children. To contextualise the extent of Akiko's haunted mind and her rejection of men, the narrative demonstrates how the pastor's performative sermons provoke her a traumatic re-enactment, as she claims that "each time I saw him slap the pulpit for emphasis, I heard the sounds of women's naked buttocks being slapped as they were paraded in front of a new arrival of troops" (Keller 1997: 71). The pastor becomes yet another iteration of patriarchal power, and the trauma of sexual and colonial domination persist even when she is taken outside Korea, and displaced to the United States.

4. Spectrality and Postmemory

The novel's postmemorial attitude can be seen through its dual narrative, divided between Akiko's fragmented testimony and Beccah's belated attempt to decipher it. This provides Keller with a structural foundation through which Hirsch's theory can be understood, as the role of the daughter becomes one of interpreting her mother's unresolved trauma through the unresolved gaps of history and absenteeism. Akiko's unavailability in her role as a mother is blamed on the trances that take her to the spiritual world, where she meets two main spirits to which she devotes her spiritual life, who are Saja the Death Messenger and Induk, the Birth Grandmother. For Beccah, these figures initially take the shape of delusions or hallucinations of a mother who drifts between silence and madness, yet the spirits operate according to a Derridean logic of the spectre, functioning as a mechanism useful to understand a truth that Akiko cannot articulate by herself. Thanks to moments of disappearance, the crypt becomes obvious and Keller makes it readable. Meanwhile, for Beccah, the ghosts take on a transgenerational dimension, marking an inherited gap that has been silently transmitted and that somehow shapes her life and her identity, to an extent that she starts connecting the mother's explanation to her own imaginative process by interpreting Akiko's descriptions of the past and transforming them into what she considers best for each situation.

For instance, she considers that Saja the Death Messenger must either be the devil that her father preached about or her father himself. This happens especially during Akiko's trances, when she asks the spirits to take her with them. Beccah witnesses the situation and describes it as a desperate request for help: "when she cried out for my father, for Saja the Death Soldier, for the

spirits that teased her with their cacklings, for anyone who cared, to kill her” (Keller 1997: 127). When Beccah enters her teenage years, she starts conceiving her mother as a mad woman who cannot be trusted, for example, when Akiko swamps her with the idea that she has got “evil-energy arrows” (Keller 1997: 73) that attack her by changing her body, and the only solution to escape an horrific fate is to burn everything red, as stated by Beccah:

My mother held her hands in front of her, and like divining rods, they swung toward the color of blood. She ripped red-bordered good luck talismans from our walls and furniture, where they fluttered like price tags. She knocked over our altars, sending the towers of fruit and sticky rice crashing to the floor, and rummaged for the apples and plums. Clawing through the bedroom closets and drawers, she collected everything red, from T-shirts and running shorts to a library copy of *The Catcher in the Rye* to the bag of Red Hots I bought with my own money and stashed in my sock drawer. When she was through piling the red things into a mountain in our living room, my mother said, “We need to burn the red from your life. Everything.” (Keller, 1997: 74)

While burning was considered a purifying tool, what Akiko calls the red disaster has a deeper meaning that, against her will, cannot be burnt. Based upon her daughter’s age and the symptoms that she is starting to see in her body. This phenomenon, described by Beccah as “Knees and elbows erupted into sharp and dangerous angles. Zits bubbled onto my forehead and chin. Hair sprouted in damp, unexplored crevices.” (Keller 1997: 82). What Akiko fears so much, then, is the fact that her daughter is about to have her first menstruation. Her discomfort toward Beccah’s sudden physical and psychological maturation can be read through two interrelated yet different frameworks. First, by reading it through Marianne Hirsch’s postmemory, Akiko feels how the emergent womanhood threatens to provide her daughter with her same wound, that she is so eager to protect Beccah from. This reading would mean that Akiko’s rejection of her daughter is not a repudiation but instead, an instinctive and protective manoeuvre that is grounded in transgenerational trauma. Being aware of the burden that her daughter is about to inherit, Akiko is attempting to stop her history of trauma to continue on her daughter’s life by preventing her from entering womanhood. A second reading can complicate this protective behaviour. By referring to LaCapra’s theory of acting out, Akiko, at the age of twelve, had already been forced into the comfort stations. Hence, her transition to womanhood coincided not with normalised cultural rites of passage but with institutionalized sexual violence. Consequently, Beccah’s bodily transformation does not simply make Akiko recall the past, but make her re-live those experiences. To that end, her refusal to acknowledge that her daughter is

growing up emerges from the haunting of the past and traumatic compulsion of repetitive patterns in which this maturation of the body is equal to rape. Yet, at that point, Akiko is not only passing on her spiritual knowledge and fear. She is also visualizing how her own perception of biological transitions has been understood and shaped by her own history of possession, exploitation, and forced labour in the stations, thus reframing Beccah's entrance to puberty not as a natural progression of life, but as an initiation into a realm of threat and vulnerability.

Building on the spectral transmission and the haunting structures of inherited trauma, it emerges that Beccah is not conscious of her mother's fragmented and bruised memory until she gets old enough to listen to her story and complete the existing gaps. It is for that reason that the distortion seen in the mother is projected onto the daughter's personality and her actions, as Beccah grows cautious of her mother's testimonies that appear to be inconsistent, fantastical, or deliberately fabricated. Eventually, Beccah's realization would cause her to reject them. Patterns re-emerge as Akiko attempts to not replicate the past but to conceal the truth in order to deceive her daughter and distract her from what really happened. Akiko also resorts to block her own memory as part of a forced displacement of that what cannot be consciously remembered or spoken, yet in that displacement, truth surfaces within metaphors. It is precisely in the dynamic between mother and daughter that Hirsch's theory becomes indispensable, as Beccah, who was raised in the nature of her mother's trances, spectral visitations, fragmented stories and half-truths, inherited not only the memory of the event but the affective charge that surrounds its suppressions. This is apparent also in how she unconsciously inherited the mannerism of her mother's imaginative reconstructions as well as her narrative strategies:

I grew cautious of my mother's stories, never knowing what to count on or what to discount. They sounded good—most of the stories she told me included the phrase: "It was a hard time but a happy time." In fact, I repeated several of her stories, telling teachers and other students versions of them that I supplemented with my own favorite movies: *West Side Story*, where Maria, my mother, was left pregnant with her love child, who was, of course, myself; *The Little Princess* and *The Poor Little Rich Girl*, where I, the brave and suffering orphan, am reclaimed in the end by a rich and loving father, who was alive. (1997: 32)

The embellishment of an unfinished narrative constitutes a trauma response that Beccah learns by participating in her mother's system of deception, as she attempts to fill the gaps of Akiko's stories with her culturally acquired scripts.

Yet, Beccah's postmemorial experience is bound to be only understood after her mother's death, when Akiko overcomes the unspeakability of her trauma and decides to leave her real testimony behind for her daughter to listen to. Meanwhile, Beccah's inheritance consists of the complete haunting of the mind, as she will devote her life towards the understanding of her mother, and the acceptance that no matter what, she cannot escape her origin.

5. Conclusion

In the final scenes of *Comfort Woman* (1997), the intricate architecture of trauma, memory, and spectral inheritance converges into a moment of profound recognition as Beccah comes to understand that her mother lives within herself physically, psychologically, and spiritually. This is a crucial moment for this article's central argument as it illustrates how the novel constructs trauma, not as a contained and rehearsed past event, but as the embodiment of a transgenerational force that persists across time and space. Psychologically, Beccah opens a window towards her mother's past, and she begins to comprehend the fragmented, encrypted and unintelligible stories that her mother told her, only once she is able to access Akiko's life through a cassette recording that she records for her daughter to have. The belated comprehension resonates with Marianne Hirsch's concept of the "generation after", as she becomes the vessel that bears the personal, collective and cultural trauma of those who came before her. Finally, Beccah's spiritual inheritance becomes real when she accepts the shamanic gifts that Akiko has blessed her with, but that she dismissed for years. Such gifts now emerge in Beccah as an undeniable force and can be understood thanks to Cho's explanation of the ghostly figure that needs of a new body to be seen (2008: 166). By accepting her memory, Beccah embraces her shamanic destiny, and the appearance of Induk's spirit as a guide binds her to her ancestors in a crucial narrative transformation, proving how diaspora moves across time and space. Akiko's existence is proven to have shaped her daughter, preparing them from her moment of departure, as Beccah's own memories resurface with the rituals that she had so intentionally tried to forget in order to ensure that her mother's spirit would go back to her homeland in peace. By performing these rituals, she does not merely imitate her mother, but starts to participate in the same spiritual lineage that the women before her had sustained. As a final act of love and respect, Beccah scatters her mother's ashes in the river, she drinks from it, evocating Akiko's scene in the river where she licked a bit of mud to maintain her homeland within her body. By doing so, Beccah chooses to honour her mother's history, her pain, her resilience, and embraces her haunting presence. It is also by performing this

ritual that Beccah allows the spirit of her mother to find “its way home. To Korea. To Sulsulham. And across the river of heaven to the Seven Sisters” (Keller 1997: 212). An imagery that evokes not only the literal return to the homeland that was denied to Akiko throughout her life, but also, a metaphysical reunion with the matrilineal ancestors represented by the seven sisters, those who were lost, silenced, or unremembered. Rather than a simple ritual of mourning, Beccah’s actions constitute an act of narrative and historical reclamation, through which suppressed histories are re-written and find representation into both personal and collective memory.

Within this framework, traumatic retelling emerges as an ongoing and cyclical process, as trauma critics have argued, because it recurs, reconfigures, and reinterprets itself through repetition. Nora Okja Keller demonstrates throughout the novel that the dynamic of an ongoing conversation between present and past mirrors the intrusive return of traumatic memory. The very act of retelling, then, does not only become a mode of survival of history and memory, but also a way through which new generations reconnect and engage with an inherited past that was previously inaccessible. In this sense, the novel responds directly to the central concern of the article, which is how historical trauma can be rearticulated through historical fiction in ways that challenge official historiography and mediate through the fragmentation of memory and postmemory. Additionally, the historical perspective of the novel becomes inseparable from the gendered approach that it aims to embrace, as Keller situates her characters within a complex historical terrain shaped by colonial domination, militarized sexual slavery, and patriarchal structures embedded in their cultural contexts. The novel portrays women as victims of the position they occupied. Yet, it also presents them as survivors, collaborators, spiritual mediators and most importantly, as vessels of history and as responsible for cultural transmission. Women, in Keller’s novel, are those who possess a voice, who testify, witness, and who reveal the multiplicity of female experience through war, exposing perspectives that are erased from official historiography. A gendered framework is essential for understanding Akiko and Beccah, whose identities develop under oppressive structures, colonial subjugation and violence in the mother’s case, and by displacement and unspeakable suffering in the daughter’s. For instance, Marianne Hirsch reflects on the importance of gendered narratives in historical fiction by stating that “it can offer a position through which memory can be transmitted within the family and behind it, distinguishing mother-daughter transmission from that of fathers and daughters or fathers and sons”, and simultaneously, gender also “seems to be erased or invisible”, reason why “feminist and queer readings can [...] illuminate not just what stories are told or forgotten, or what images are seen or suppressed, but how those stories are told” (2012: 18).

Finally, the present article traces back to the idea of the relationship between history and literary fiction as an interactive and relevant conversation that needs to happen in contemporary narratives contexts, something that Keller achieves perfectly throughout the novel, as it interweaves historical documentation with the fictional testimonies of Akiko and Beccah. Further enhancing the idea that the present and the past are in constant conversation with each other, Paul Ricoeur emphasizes the existence of an “insurmountable gap between history (the real past) and fiction” (Arias & Petterson 2022: 4). In a similar manner, Dominick LaCapra underscores the methodological affinities between writing history and writing fiction. From a postmodern perspective, this dialogue has been defined by Linda Hutcheon’s idea of Historiographical Metafiction as fiction that is not only used to write about the past, but that creates an interplay that provokes the rethinking of the past under a paradoxical and self-reflexive world, where the reader is invited to reinterpret the past (Hutcheon 1998: 18). This narrative process, rather than diminishing historical truthfulness, reveals the necessity of literary testimony in order to capture forms of suffering and oppression that still may remain unrecorded in historical documents. This effect is especially relevant because Korean diaspora and other existing diasporas – differently from other diasporas – has not been globally acknowledged so far. In the words of Grace M. Cho, “the ongoing conflict of the Korean War is not apparent to most Americans, nor are its state-sanctioned practices of mass killing”. There is a “failure to recognize the brutality of the Korean War” that has been “elaborated to such extent that what we remember about it first and foremost is that it is ‘forgotten’” (2008: 30–31). Hence, diaspora becomes a crucial tool for transmission, proving how trauma is not only displaced geographically but also rendered as an invisible string within historical narratives. Literature, then, becomes a safe space in which the erased, the spectral, and the unspeakable can be reimagined, and the silenced may be given a voice. Through Akiko’s voice, *Comfort Woman* performs an act of historiographic recovery by engaging history, not as a static record of pure data but as a fluid narrative, while its postmemorial relevance demonstrates how second generations can become witnesses of a history they never lived but nonetheless inherited. Trauma does not end. In fact, it is carried on throughout the generations. Memory, likewise, is not resolved or forgotten but transmitted. The dead appear to not be silenced but accompany the living in their spiritual corpus. Eventually, Beccah’s acceptance of her mother’s trauma marks Keller’s indication of a future in which voices that were once oppressed by colonial violence will resonate through new embodiments. The river that receives Akiko’s ashes becomes a new metaphor, again, of the ongoing flow of memory and inheritance, of a movement across generations. By connecting geographies, the river challenges the boundaries between the realm of the living and the

dead. Finally, Beccah chooses to honour her mother's history, her pain, her resilience, and she accepts the haunting, ensuring that the history that was once silenced will neither be forgotten nor lost. It will remain present and alive.

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