

**“Comfort Women”  
on the International Public Stage:  
Feminist Resistance and the Politics of Visibility**

*Margaret Stetz*

It is an article of faith in the post-Freudian Western world that to externalize memories of traumatic experience, especially by turning them into verbal and/or visual narratives, is both cathartic and healing—a step toward managing them and toward repairing the damage. The benefits are supposed to arise from giving coherent shape to otherwise overwhelming mental images and feelings, as well as from the act of sharing the events with an auditor or viewer, which breaks the sense of isolation produced by remaining silent. Through such exposure of damage, the suffering supposedly lessens or at least becomes bearable, the psychic fissures close, and the victim finds resolution.

Recently, Kimberly Dozier, the correspondent for CBS News who was gravely injured in Iraq by a roadside bomb, has endorsed just such a view. She has aggressively countered the “assumption some people have about trauma patients . . . that we’re scarred for life in our heads and hearts . . . [and that] I’m plagued by nightmares and flashbacks, all the symptoms of the dreaded post-traumatic stress disorder.” On the contrary, as she insisted in a May 11, 2008 report for the weekly television newsmagazine *CBS Sunday Morning*, “You can go through hell and end up with some of those symptoms, yes, but you can get rid of them. It’s not a life sentence. Dispelling the flashbacks for good can be as simple as talking about them” (Dozier, “On Recovering Without PTSD”). Her message has been unambiguously optimistic: “Even if you went through hell, trust me, you can leave it behind.” Talk therapy has been one part of her own process of leaving “it behind,” along with the writing and the publication of a memoir titled *Breathing the Fire: Fighting to Report—and Survive—the War in Iraq* (2008). Dozier would appear to align herself with what Kenneth Kidd, in “A is for Auschwitz,” has characterized as recent developments in trauma theory that align treatment not only with psychoanalysis, but with “alternative discourses,” especially ““narrative therapy”” through testimonial (Kidd 163).

But another facet of her media publicity campaign has been the act of making her war wounds visible. Inviting camera crews to film her for an hour-long documentary called *Flashpoint*, as well as for

**WORKS AND DAYS 57/58: Vol. 29, 2011**

periodic news segments on her recovery, she has displayed her injured body before, during, and after surgery and recorded her painful steps toward physical rehabilitation, turning these into a televised spectacle. Doing so has been vital, as she asserts in *Breathing the Fire*, to becoming “a textbook example” of “fortitude”—someone whom “the finest” mental health professionals “in the world” allegedly have certified as having “done all the right things to process the event and get beyond it.” As Dozier has remarked, regarding the broadcast of footage from the surgical procedures that “chiseled out the excess bone” in her bomb-shattered leg, “Images like that are powerful” (280–81).

If self-representation, particularly through visual media, of the traumatic consequences of war has been credited with the ability to heal individual minds and lives, so has it also increasingly been associated with successful feminist resistance to war, militarism, and state-sponsored violence. Feminist historians of the “Dirty Wars” of Central and South America in the 1970s and 1980s, in which rightwing military juntas overthrew constitutional governments, then tortured and murdered thousands of dissidents, have been adamant about the personal and political efficacy of women’s protest through oral *testimonio* and also through visual means. In *Revolutionizing Motherhood: The Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo* (1994), Marguerite Guzman Bouvard has emphasized the spectacular nature of the Argentinian *Madres’* protests, in which they displayed themselves publicly as suffering mothers of “disappeared” children. Although they also “traveled throughout the country on speaking tours” (15), key to their “long act of defiance against the terrorist state” (71) was their wearing, during their marches in the Plaza de Mayo of Buenos Aires, white “baby shawls as their insignia,” in order to create “powerful symbols . . . [of] the claim of family bonds and ethical values in the public arena” (75). Through such visible appropriation of public space and exposure of individual trauma, the *Madres*, according to Bouvard, “began a rebellion against their own political system and against patriarchal values the world over” (250) and thus achieved “new-found freedom and selfhood” (251).

This affirmation of women’s visual strategies of protest and resistance against military violence has been echoed, more recently, by Marjorie Agosin. In the revised second edition of *Tapestries of Hope, Threads of Love: The Arpillera Movement in Chile* (2008; originally published in 1994), Agosin draws an explicit connection between the efforts of the *Madres* and that of the Chilean makers of the needlework collages known as *arpilleras*—women who demand to know the fates of “disappeared” relatives and who, in some cases, are survivors themselves of political imprisonment, rape, and torture:

The *arpilleras*, like the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo in Argentina, generated new symbolic strategies in an attempt to change the structures of oppression. For both of these groups of women, photographs are the links that connect the dead with the living. The Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo wear photographs of their missing children, while the *arpilleras* sew them onto cloth. These women share a private image that becomes a commem-

orative and collective spectacle for the nation. (Agosin 56)

The individual testimonies of *arpilleristas* that Agosin includes in her volume reinforce this positive message. Valentina Bonne, for example, whom Agosin identifies as “an artist who was instrumental as a teacher of many *arpillera* workshops” (95), writes of her original wish to develop a project that she could “undertake” with those who were suffering, in order “to serve as a catharsis” for them: “It was dramatic to see how the women wept as they sewed their stories, but it was also very enriching to see how in some way the work also afforded happiness and provided relief” (Agosin 96–97).

Yet such confidence in public spectacle as a tool, whether to express resistance and effect political change or to alleviate the psychic distress of individual trauma survivors, is not universal. In her 2006 study, *The British Slave Trade and Public Memory*, Elizabeth Kowaleski Wallace has raised discomfiting questions about the value of “visibility” in a human rights context. As she puts it, “[What] does it mean to invest ourselves in what we might call a politics of the visible? Simply put, if social justice is an acknowledged goal, is visibility necessarily more efficacious than invisibility? Can rendering seen that which has been unseen thereby right a historical wrong?” (Wallace 126). Although her queries focus on the usefulness of making the “historical wrong” of a farther-away past available to view, they are also worth raising when it comes to situations closer in time.

Kelly Oliver, for instance, in her 2007 polemic titled *Women as Weapons of War: Iraq, Sex, and the Media*, has asked equally troubling questions about visibility in a more contemporary context, attempting to “identify some of the ways in which both visual and narrative images reproduce and justify violence” (67). Citing and agreeing with John Berger, Oliver suggests that “war photographs do not stop violence unless those viewing the photographs have the political power to do something, a power that the ordinary viewer does not have.” More often, spectacles of “agony and war” risk producing the paradoxical effect of “depoliticizing” the circumstances that engendered them; the audience may then interpret the sufferings they make visible as merely the “evidence of the general human condition” (78), and thus as something dreadful, but neither remediable nor preventable. According to Oliver, a focus on the display of individual trauma means “Viewers and readers are left with sentiment and empty empathy that do not translate into political reflection, let alone action” (79).

Does the visibility of women’s “war wounds” necessarily further the ends of political resistance, moral action, or legal redress? Both Elizabeth Kowaleski Wallace’s and Kelly Oliver’s questions around this subject resonate troublingly when it comes to the situation of the so-called “comfort women” of World War II. As survivors of the organized system of military sexual slavery for which the Imperial Japanese Army recruited some 200,000 young Asian women, as well as a few women of European descent, several hundred of them have been on view themselves in the past two decades, widely and often. But they have yet to see the righting of the “historical wrong” (to use

Wallace's phrase) that was done to them, and it is increasingly unlikely that they ever will see this happen.

In recent years, these women have found themselves in a uniquely terrible position. Since Kim Hak Soon, a Korean woman, first came forward in 1991 to bear witness to the existence of the "comfort stations" and to declare this military sexual slavery a war crime for which its victims have received no official acknowledgment, apology, or reparations from the Japanese government, women in their seventies and eighties have been repeating again and again, often in large public forums, the details of their individual stories. Many have recounted the physical and emotional agony of the daily, multiple rapes inflicted systematically over months and sometimes years; of the beatings, slashings by the swords of military officers, and other forms of abuse; and of the effects of having to endure forced abortions, sterilization, and medical experiments, as some did.

Unlike survivors of the Nazi death camps, whose testimony has been accepted as reliable by all but a handful of so-called "deniers," and whose accounts have been corroborated by mountains of physical evidence, including archives filled with documents and German government directives, by photographs, and even by newsreel footage of the liberated camps, the "comfort women" often have met with skepticism and with attempts to discredit them. In spring 2007, the Japanese prime minister, Shinzo Abe, publicly raised doubts about the survivors' claims regarding the use of force or "coercion" by the Imperial Army, doing so in order to shore up his own political support in Japanese nationalist circles (Onishi A:11). For those "comfort women" who reiterate their stories of sexual violence before journalists, human rights workers, and audiences at peace conferences or at public events dedicated to the study of war crimes, the act of reviving and articulating their memories, as well as of putting themselves forward on an international stage, is rendered doubly harrowing by the knowledge of the hostility with which their testimony continues to be received by successive Japanese governments.

The visual and documentary record that would confirm the horror of the "comfort women's" experiences is scant, especially in comparison with the amount of material related to the Holocaust. Unsurprisingly, no one appears to have photographed fourteen-year-old Asian girls at the moment they were being shipped by the Japanese fleet to "comfort stations" at the battlefield or being raped. There are no dramatic visual images to capture the public imagination and elicit sympathy—merely a handful of Japanese government documents in dry, bureaucratic language, such as the ones unearthed in 1992 by Professor Yoshimi Yoshiaki of Chuo University, or by Professor Grant Goodman of the University of Kansas (Goodman 142-47). The survivors themselves, therefore, have felt compelled not merely to put a human face on these reports of hidden war crimes, but to display as spectacles their own individual female bodies as evidence and to do so repeatedly, over the course of more than sixteen years. They have done so in hopes of settling at last the legal and moral case that their situations represent and of resolving this unfinished consequence of war. From the start, they have been clear that

only a governmental response will suffice, not merely individual acknowledgments from a particular Japanese official. So far, however, their efforts have been unsuccessful in achieving the desired results at the state level; thus, there has been no peace for them on a personal level either.

In describing the effects of telling and retelling their personal histories, few women have spoken of feeling either relief or release through these public declarations. Most have instead echoed the sentiments expressed by the nineteen victims whose narratives appear in *Comfort Women Speak: Testimony by Sex Slaves of the Japanese Military*, a volume issued in 2000 by the Washington Coalition for Comfort Women Issues, a Washington, D.C.-based activist organization. As Pak Du-ri, an inhabitant of the "House of Sharing," a residence established in Seoul for the aging survivors, told her interviewer in November 1994, "Occasionally I meet visitors who want to hear about my ordeal. After these meetings I frequently suffer from severe headaches. Sometimes they became so bad I had to be hospitalized" (Schellstede 71). Similarly, Yi Young-sook, another survivor living in Seoul, reported that "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). Yi Bok-nyo, who was interviewed in Pyongyang, North Korea, emphasized that giving voice to the experience produced no abatement of her fury and distress: "Even today, thinking of such tortures and such inhumane treatment, my rage has not subsided. . . . When I recall the painful past, I still feel uncontrollable bursts of anger, resentment, and hatred" (92–93). Meanwhile, in 1997, Kim Hak Soon, who was among the first to come forward and address the international media, told the Asian American writer and filmmaker, Dai Sil Kim-Gibson, that, after six years of public speech, she remained in physical, as well as emotional, torment. As Kim-Gibson has said of this interview,

When we visited Grandma Kim Hak Soon . . . she coughed constantly and was short of breath. I offered to come back, but she said, "Stay. I am rarely free of this kind of attack anyway. This pain is *han*. From the time when I was little, what the Japanese inflicted on me—that's what makes knots in my chest and that *han*—how can it be untied? You can't untie it. Then, all the time when I have been fighting in the open since 1991, this knot of *han* has become even tighter. It is completely blocked now, so that I can hardly breathe." (Kim-Gibson, "A Film Within the Film" 188–89)

*Han*, as C. Sarah Soh has explained, is a form of spiritual agony that assumes a physiological dimension: "In the Korean ethnopsychological imagination, *han* takes the form of a painful, invisible knot that an individual carries in her heart over a long period of time, made of a complex of undesirable emotions and sentiments such as sadness, regret, anger, remorse, and resignation" (Soh 80).

At the International Public Hearing held in Tokyo on December 9, 1992, one of the first public forums devoted to the subject of the

"comfort system," a witness recorded that "The third testimony came from a Chinese woman. As she told her story of the barbarous crimes inflicted upon her by the Japanese military she was so overcome by the memories that she fell backwards and passed out on the podium" (Ruff O'Herne 145). Similarly, at the "Women's International War Crimes Tribunal for the Trial of Japan's Military Sexual Slavery," held in Tokyo in December 2000, which symbolically prosecuted the Japanese governmental officials who could not be called to account in a court of law, another Chinese survivor "couldn't bear her sixty-year-old pain any longer while relaying her experience about how she was enslaved by the Japanese soldiers when she was only eleven, and how she witnessed her parents being killed." Finally, "she collapsed on the stage and was taken away for emergency hospitalization" (Kim-Gibson, *Shout Out* 209).

Even the relatively few women who have spoken of positive effects, after breaking their silence about their systematic sexual exploitation, have emphasized, too, how ephemeral that relief can be. In her 1999 memoir, *Comfort Woman: A Filipina's Story of Prostitution and Slavery Under the Japanese Military*, the late Maria Rosa Henson balanced her assertion that "Telling my story has made it easier for me to be reconciled with the past" (Henson 91) with accounts of the convulsions of feeling occasioned by her narrative acts: "On September 18, 1992, I gave my very first press conference. . . . The reporters asked me many questions, and I could not stop my tears as I answered them. As I told my story, images of Japanese soldiers falling in line to rape me kept returning to my mind" (Henson 86). Repetition of the experience of bearing witness increased, rather than lessened, this effect, both for herself and for the other Filipina "comfort women" around her: "Images of Japanese soldiers would flash before my mind whenever I recalled my wartime ordeal. After the forums, we would return to our rooms exhausted. There were times I wept alone in my room" (90). If the goal was to achieve catharsis or a degree of personal peace, that result proved shortlived at best and largely elusive.

Articulating and sharing their formerly hidden experiences of military rape has, moreover, created psychological repercussions that have touched more than the victims alone. Jan Ruff O'Herne, one of the few white "comfort women" of European descent to have come forward, has revealed that, after reading the written account of her history, "My daughters cried for weeks on end, devastated that something so horrible could have happened to their mother and feeling that it would take them a long time to come to terms with it" (Ruff O'Herne 141). Similar, if less prolonged, reactions have been common even among those who are not related to the survivors, after seeing them testify in person. Dai Sil Kim-Gibson has written of her own sympathetic agony, describing how "my intestines coil with sharp pain and sorrow" (Kim-Gibson, "Comfort Women" 206). In September 1996, at the first major scholarly conference in the U. S. on "comfort women" issues, of which I was the co-organizer, Kim Yoon-shim's testimony produced a deeply emotional response in the audience. Yet it was a response of grief and outrage that brought no catharsis, for there was no way to assign to this narrative any sort of

closure in the absence of a legal or political resolution—an outcome that the largely academic audience was powerless to effect. Moreover, as Pamela Thoma has concluded in retrospect, “Kim Yoonshim’s testimonial was in clear danger of becoming a spectacle and even risked fetishization, since local and university media attempted to record the testimonial as an ‘event’” (Thoma 109).

Journalists in the U.S. often have used the metaphor of wounds when talking about the “comfort women.” In referring, for instance, to then-prime minister Shinzo Abe’s questions about the survivors’ claims of Japanese governmental responsibility, a front-page headline in the *New York Times* of March 8, 2007 reported that “Denial Reopens Wounds of Japan’s Ex-Sex Slaves.” Similarly, on March 3, 2007, the CBS network’s weekly news magazine, *CBS Sunday Morning*, created its own narrative about this issue and, drawing upon excerpts from filmed interviews with survivors, titled the segment “Open Wounds.” But the phrase “open wounds” is more than a mere metaphor; it is also a precise and literal description of a situation in which the victims have been prevented by political circumstances from healing and instead have felt themselves being forced by political exigencies to keep returning to the memory of their psychological and physical injuries and exhibiting these in narrative form.

Most recently, in July 2007, the U.S. House of Representatives approved a non-binding resolution, H.R. 121, which reads, in part, “the Government of Japan should formally acknowledge, apologize, and accept historical responsibility in a clear and unequivocal manner for its Imperial Armed Forces’ coercion of young women into sexual slavery.” Passage of this measure happened only after three years of similar resolutions being introduced, tabled, and unsuccessfully reintroduced. The turning-point, however, came in late spring 2007, when three survivors arrived in Washington, D.C., to testify at a Congressional hearing and, once more, to tell their stories in person and thus to put “a face” on this politically charged subject. Even a purely symbolic victory, such as this unenforceable resolution, demanded not only the airing of historical matters through the circulation of previously published testimonies, but the display of the women themselves. Once more, they were presented and also represented themselves as living and visible emblems of their war wounds. As Dai Sil Kim-Gibson has said, “The justice that comfort women are seeking is a human issue—not theirs, women’s, or those belonging only to specific countries” (Kim-Gibson, “Comfort Women” 214). Yet it is the individual female survivors who are still being called upon continually to embody in the flesh, so to speak, this broader “human issue” by re-narrating the specifics of their own victimization.

If the dreadful and seemingly hopeless situation of the “comfort system” survivors raises ethical questions related to the use of visibility as a successful strategy for resistance and redress, so it also poses a feminist pedagogical conundrum. How should we frame the story of the “comfort women” movement in a high school or college classroom? Matters would be simple indeed, if those of us who offer courses on world history, international relations, feminist activism, war and militarism, sexual violence, or peace theory and practice

could teach the subject of “comfort women” as our students prefer all subjects to be taught—that is, as clear-cut instances of heroic survivors coming forward, breaking silence, revealing their victimization, and receiving justice. Students love to read stories of victims who became victors through peaceful means, merely through the application of moral pressure, and who then were able to move on—vindicated, renewed, and recovered. They have been encouraged in this interpretive practice by what Susan Heald identifies as “the industrialized world’s dominant form of autobiography”: a triumphalist personal narrative that “stand[s] as proof that racism, sexism, heterosexism, classism, ablism, and so on can be overcome by strength of will, that nothing stands in your way if you want it badly enough, that inequalities are not structural and systemic” (Heald 74–75).

The “comfort women” issue, however, continues to defy that reassuring shape, and the shape that it might eventually assume remains unknown. Those of us who teach the subject must decide, in the meantime, how to present both the history of the Second World War embodied by the survivors and the more recent history of global activism around the topic. In “What’s Left? After ‘Imperialist Feminist’ Hijackings,” Huibin Amelia Chew has denounced Western feminist involvement in Afghanistan and Iraq as exploitative and destructive. Will we see the conduct of those in the “comfort women” movement as similarly tainted by self-serving interests, or will we describe it to our students as a counter-example of the sort of work that Chew endorses—“Organizing that centers on gendered experience, which is consciously anti-sexist while remaining connected to other progressive” efforts? (Chew 88–89). Whatever we may choose to do, we will still be left with a discomfiting reality: the sight of the narrators of the individual parts of this unfinished story—the aging survivors themselves—who remain on display on the public stage, speaking out and making the invisible past visible again and again, showing their unhealed “wounds,” and suffering afresh every time that they do.

### Works Cited

- Agosin, Marjorie. *Tapestries of Hope, Threads of Love: The Arpillera Movement in Chile*. Second Edition. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2008.
- Bouvard, Marguerite Guzman. *Revolutionizing Motherhood: The Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo*. Wilmington, DE: SR Books, 1994.
- Chew, Huibin Amelia. “What’s Left? After ‘Imperial Feminist’ Hijackings.” *Feminism and War: Confronting U.S. Imperialism*. Eds. Robin L. Riley, Chandra Talpade-Mohanty and Minnie Bruce Pratt. London: Zed Books, 2008. 75–90.
- Dozier, Kimberly. *Breathing the Fire: Fighting to Report—and Survive—the War in Iraq*. Des Moines, IA: Meredith Books, 2008.
- . “On Recovering Without PTSD.” *CBS Sunday Morning*. 11 May 2008.
- Goodman, Grant. “My Own Gaiatsu: A Document from 1945 Provides Proof.” *Legacies of the Comfort Women of World War II*.

- Eds. Margaret Stetz and Bonnie B. C. Oh. Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 2001. 142–51.
- Heald, Susan. "‘Just My Opinion?’ Women’s Studies, Autobiography and the University." *Troubling Women’s Studies: Pasts, Presents and Possibilities*. Eds. Ann Braithwaite, Susan Heald, Susanne Luhmann and Sharon Rosenberg. Toronto: Sumach Press, 2004. 43–90.
- Henson, Maria Rosa. *Comfort Woman: A Filipina’s Story of Prostitution and Slavery Under the Japanese Military*. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1999.
- Kidd, Kenneth. "A is for Auschwitz: Psychoanalysis, Trauma Theory, and the Children’s Literature of Atrocity." *Under Fire: Childhood in the Shadow of War*. Eds. Elizabeth Goodenough and Andrea Immel. Detroit: Wayne State UP, 2008. 161–84.
- Kim-Gibson, Dai Sil. "'Comfort Women' Want Justice, Not Comfort." *Shout Out: Women of Color Respond to Violence*. Eds. Maria Ochoa and Barbara K. Ige. Boston: Seal Press, 2007. 205–14.
- . "A Film Within the Film: Making a Documentary about Korean ‘Comfort Women.’" *Legacies of the Comfort Women of World War II*. 171–92.
- Oliver, Kelly. *Women as Weapons of War: Iraq, Sex, and the Media*. New York: Columbia UP, 2007.
- Onishi, Norimitsu. "Denial Reopens Wounds of Japan’s Ex-Sex Slaves." *New York Times*, 8 March 2007. A11.
- Ruff O’Herne, Jan. *50 Years of Silence*. Sydney: Editions Tom Thompson, 1994.
- Schellstede, Sangmie Choi. *Comfort Women Speak: Testimony by Sex Slaves of the Japanese Military*. New York: Holmes and Meier, 2000.
- Soh, C. Sarah. *The Comfort Women: Sexual Violence and Postcolonial Memory in Korea and Japan*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2008.
- Thoma, Pamela. "'Such an Unthinkable Thing': Asian American Transnational Feminism and the ‘Comfort Women of World War II’ Conference." *Legacies of the Comfort Women of World War II*. 101–127.
- Wallace, Elizabeth Kowaleski. *The British Slave Trade and Public Memory*. New York: Columbia UP, 2006.



Courtesy of Dr. Ok Cha Soh and Washington Coalition  
for Comfort Women