"Guardian of Her Life": Intergenerational Transmission of Trauma in Nora Okja Keller's Comfort Woman

In the conclusion to the International Handbook of Multigenerational Legacies of Trauma, Yael Danieli points to the conspicuous absence of any psychological research on the intergenerational consequences of rape trauma[1] (671). Later in her conclusion, Danieli articulates the need to specifically explore a further absence in psychological literature, that is the intergenerational impact of a particularly unique form of rape trauma suffered by an estimated 50,000 to 200,000 "comfort women" during World War II (683). Despite Danieli's call for further investigation into the intergenerational consequences from the trauma of being a "comfort woman," the gap in knowledge remains ten years on[2]. Juxtaposed against this silence in the field of psychology is Nora Okja Keller's novel Comfort Woman that attempts to both imagine and render the relationship between Soon Hyo, a Korean survivor who continues to go by the name

[1] Danieli's sentiments about the paucity of work done on the intergenerational consequences of rape trauma echo Jeffery Scott Mio and Jacqueline Foster in their article "The Effects of Rape upon Victims and Families: Implications for a Comprehensive Family Therapy" (1991) in which they highlight that despite the entry of family therapists into the discussion of rape trauma in clinical literature, only the survivor's partner or parents are considered. Arlene Steinberg's chapter "Understanding the Traumatic Stress of Children" (1998) attributes this lack of research on the children of victims to "a common resistance to not wish to see children tainted and terrorized by trauma" (30).

[2] One of the many long-lasting results of this horrific experience has been survivors who are unable to have children because their reproductive systems were severely damaged by crude abortions while at the comfort station, or they were rendered infertile by the excessive use of salvarsan that was administered to reduce sexually-transmitted diseases among the soldiers and, finally, they may be infertile because of untreated sexually-transmitted diseases such as chlamydia or syphilis. This could potentially be one of the reasons for the absence of psychological research on the intergenerational consequences of this trauma.

Akiko that she inherits at the "comfort station" and her bi-racial, American-born daughter, Beccah[3].

The novel is told from both the perspectives of Akiko and Beccah. Yet, what threads these disparate narratives that move abruptly back and forth in time through different genealogies is the haunting trauma of Akiko's experience as an enslaved "comfort woman." In "The Intrusive Past: The Flexibility of Memory and the Engraving of Trauma," van der Kolk and van der Hart write, "Traumatic memories are the unassimilated scraps of overwhelming experiences, which need to be integrated with existing mental schemes, and be transformed into narrative language" (176). Yet, how can those traumatic memories ever be a part of both narrative memory and language when society, and terrifyingly the individuals closest to the survivor silence the very buds of such a narrative? In "Telling Tales: Women and the Trauma of Partition in Sidhwa's Cracking India," Deepika Bahri articulately highlights the "conflicted function" of the social order that must make room for the trauma survivor but can only do so by banning the trauma narrative, the survivor's single means of catharsis (221). Bahri writes, "A conspiracy of silence ensures that the hastily darned social fabric cannot be further rent while individual trauma is sealed within an inarticulate, asocial space" (221). In Comfort Woman, Akiko's short-lived marriage to her American missionary husband, Richard Bradley, seals her trauma in. Although Richard promises her that it is better to be married than to burn in hell as a fallen woman, Akiko's trauma rages on for she cannot speak it. It is particularly ironic then when he holds Akiko's face in his hands and preaches, "You

[3] While there have been two other novels centered upon the "comfort woman" experience namely Chang-Rae Lee's A Gesture Life (2000) and Therese Park's A Gift of the Emperor (1997), neither of them addresses the question of intergenerational trauma.

do not have to tell me of your past, for whatever you have done, you are now cleansed by the washing of the water with the word" (106). Here, Richard elevates the Judeo-Christian word above her narrative with the chilling hope that the rites of baptism and marriage that he has bestowed upon her will subsume the words of her trauma. In doing so, there is little difference between the Japanese patriarchal apparatus that enslaves Akiko during the war and then denies the truth of her trauma, and Richard's masculinist Judeo-Christian discourse that forbids her from articulating her trauma.

When Akiko does attempt to speak the unspeakable, she says, "'I know what I speak, for that is my given name. Soon Hyo, the true voice, the pure tongue. I speak of laying down for a hundred men… I speak of bodies being bought and sold" (195). At this juncture, the word of patriarchy, religion and social order unite to respond with Proverbs 4:24, "Put away perversity from your mouth; keep corrupt talk from your lips, or –"(195). Yet, Akiko continues to speak her trauma until Richard uses the most powerful ammunition that he has, Beccah. He says, "It is not for me to judge. But know that 'The sins of the parent shall fall upon their children and their grandchildren.' I ask you to protect our daughter, with your silence, from that shame" (196). Richard's words are resonant with irony since what research has been done on intergenerational trauma transmission challenges his final line, which mistakenly suggests that the collusive silence of the survivor parent and their partner is a protective gesture for the child involved. In fact, in their discussion of the effects rape has upon victims and their families, Mio and Foster insist that to avoid greater dysfunction from occurring, all family members must be involved in the speaking of the rape trauma and that family therapists should facilitate an open discussion that recognizes that a "crime was

committed against [a] mother" (152). What Richard fails to realize or perhaps refuses to realize is that the unspoken trauma of a parent can fall upon their child as readily as their sins can. Donna Nagata's landmark work on the transgenerational impact on children of former Japanese American internees highlights the psychic confusion and despair that these children experience especially in the face of their parent's seemingly inexplicable symptoms after the internment ended (1998). For Beccah, her mother's symptomatology[4] is truly and completely mystifying.

While her mother's behavior is incomprehensible to this very young child, Beccah has no other choice besides living and functioning within that incomprehensibility. Beccah's mind's eye has to normalize her mother's post-traumatic episodes. Perhaps more accurately, Beccah comes to conceptualize a new normal within their household. Beccah says of her childhood, "Most of the time my mother seemed normal. Not normal like the moms on TV – the kind that baked cookies, joined the PTA, or came to weekly soccer games – but normal in that she seemed to know where she was and who I was" (2). Even in reconfiguring this new normal for herself, Beccah is supremely conscious of the difference between Akiko and the other mothers. This hyper-consciousness of difference ends Beccah's childhood perfunctorily. Beccah learns at Ala Wai Elementary that if she ever found herself in trouble that she should tell her teacher or the police. (5) However, Beccah is aware that the lessons she learns at school cannot be directly applied to her life. She distinguishes between school and home as well as between the lives of her

[4] Akiko's symptomotology manifests itself in nightmares, flashbacks, trance-like dances, going for long periods of time without eating or drinking, hyper-vigilance and distrust. I remain unsure as to whether to read Akiko's shamanism as a means of exorcizing her own trauma and protecting Beccah or as another facet of Akiko's symptomotology.

friends and her own, "But in real life, I knew none of these people would understand, that they might even hurt my mother. I was on my own." (5) Beccah's "real life" is marked by her mother's post-traumatic symptomatology. In rethinking a new normal for their household, Beccah actually reverses roles with her mother and takes upon herself the task of caregiver[5] and protector. In his study of World War II veterans and their children, Robert Rosenheck (1986) suggests that one possible outcome of children being exposed to a parent's symptoms is a desire to rescue them from their emotional torment. Beccah describes herself as "the guardian of [Akiko's] life" and sees herself as especially responsible when Akiko experiences flashbacks of her trauma at night. Beccah recalls those moments in painful detail:

> I trained myself to wake up at abrupt snorts, unusual breathing patterns. Part of me was aware of each time she turned over in bed, dreaming dreams like mini-trances where she traveled into worlds and times I could not follow to protect her. The most I could do was wait, holding the thin blue thread of her life while her spirit tunneled into the darkness of earth to swim the dark red river toward hell. Each night I went to bed praying that I would not let go in my own sleep. And in

[5] There are poignant moments of Beccah caring for her mother in the novel such as the following description, "During these times, the body of my mother would float through our one-bedroom apartment, slamming into walls and bookshelves and bumping into the corners of the coffee table and the television. If I could catch her, I would try to clean her cuts with Cambison ointment, dab the bruises with vinegar to stop the swelling" (4). Yet, Beccah is simultaneously terrified of the care that she must give her mother. Immediately following the tender moment above is the line, "But most of the times I just left her food and water and hid in the bedroom, where I listened to long stretches of thumping accentuated by occasional shouts…" (4).

> the morning, before I even opened my eyes, I'd jerk my still clenched, aching hand to my chest, yanking my mother back to me. (125)

It was Akiko who once used to quietly watch Beccah the infant as she slept, afraid that she might stop breathing.

However, this does not mean that Akiko cedes complete responsibility to her daughter or gives her the freedom to do as Beccah wishes. Unconsciously, Akiko and Akiko's trauma exercise great influence over Beccah's performance of her gender as an adolescent. Here, we return to the epicenter of Akiko's trauma. How does she become a "comfort woman"? Undoubtedly, her position as a Korean subject is partly responsible because the Japanese Imperial Army saw the then colonized Korea as simply another set of resources to be channeled into the Japanese war effort. Yet upon revisiting Akiko's recruitment, it is her gender's location within a patriarchal system that leads her down the road of sexual enslavement. Orphaned, Akiko is sold by her older sister to the Japanese in order to obtain a dowry so that she may be married to their neighbor while Akiko serves at a "comfort station." Akiko recalls, "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" (21). Her body is brutally sexualized even before she is biologically viable for reproduction.

It is no wonder then that for Akiko, so much anxiety surrounds Beccah's attainment of puberty. Akiko becomes hyper-vigilant about the changes in Beccah's body. Beccah thinks to herself, "When earlier I had cherished the moments my mother paid attention to me, recognizing me as her flesh-and-blood daughter, I now began to

cringe whenever she studied me, targeting a single part of my anatomy for any length of time" (82). Akiko's fear that Beccah will become as vulnerable as she once was torments her and motivates her to look within her own shamanistic trade in order to protect Beccah from ever experiencing the same trauma. In order to do so, Akiko attempts to stall the onset of puberty in Beccah by starving this potential for trauma out of her. Akiko places strict restrictions on Beccah's diet insisting that she eat only vegetarian Korean dishes. Instead of providing Beccah with the nutritional nourishment that a growing adolescent needs, Akiko forces her to "drink endless bowls of blessed water" sometimes all night until Beccah in an almost hallucinatory state says, … "even one grain of rice, one section of orange, one strand of bean sprout, filled me to fullness" (85). Not only does Akiko's trauma impel her to halt the biological changes in Beccah's body, it is actually successful to the extent that Beccah imagines herself regressing to the point that she is in-utero once again:

> My body reabsorbed my hips, my breasts, the small belly that sloped between my pelvic bones. My hair fell out, leaving tufts of dry lifeless strands tangled in hairbrushes or in the shower drain … I would soon become as hairless as a newborn. 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 unable to see that her "tufts of dry lifeless strands" are a distinct combination of her mother's dietary restrictions and her own response to those dietary restrictions in

the form of anorexia[6]. Not only does Akiko's trauma both mutate and enervate Beccah's growing body, Akiko's trauma begins to infect her daughter in a deeply insidious fashion. Beccah starts to police her body by instituting a daily regiment of self-scrutiny. She creates a deeply disturbing ritual for herself:

> I learned to study my body carefully in order to find and eliminate the signs of sal[7] [italics in-text] before my mother saw them. I sucked on breath mints, rubbed deodorant under my arms and on my feet. When my hands started to sweat, I swiped a layer of Secret across them too. And each night in the bath, I'd lie back and wait for strands of downy hair to float away from my body in exploratory tendrils, then pluck them out with eyebrow tweezers. The removal of each hair brought a flash of tears to my eyes, the sting of a tiny arrow. (83)

The image of Beccah lying in the bath patiently waiting to snip off the tendrils of her newly emerging pubic hair is a striking echo of Akiko's trauma because both Akiko and her counterparts at the "comfort station" would have themselves scrutinized their own pubic hair and each other's with tweezers in hand in order to remove the crab lice that spread easily at the stations. Unlike Akiko who is scientifically poked and prodded at the beginning of the novel as if she were a specimen on the doctor's table, Beccah imbibes the trauma of her mother's mistreatment and morbidly enacts it upon herself as she lies

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[6] In her discussion of this novel in Consumption and Identity in Asian American Coming-of-Age Novels, Jennifer Ann argues that Beccah's perception of her body as constantly betraying her coincides with the perspective of anorexics described by sociologist Leslie Heywood, "For anorexics the body is experienced as entirely distinct, as 'other'; the body is not the self" (95).

[7] In the novel, "sal" refers to the evil energy arrows that Akiko is determined to expunge from Beccah's body. Akiko believes that the "sal" has been embedded in Beccah's body since the time of her birth.

there examining her body and purging it of any signs of femininity. Even in her dress, Beccah neutralizes her developing body by "[wearing] large oversized T-shirts, which [she] pulled in toward [her] knees to flatten [her] breasts" (83). In attempting to avoid the unwanted attention of her mother, she shies away from any and all attention desperately hoping to blend into the background. In this image of Beccah pulling her T-shirt in towards her knees, she becomes a pictorial representation of her mother's trauma. Beccah is a walnut-like knot of her former self, drawing her body inward. She has become her mother's han[8]. Once again, there is this inescapable return to her mother's site of trauma. In one of Akiko's reminiscences to herself, she recollects, "In front of the men, we all tried to walk the same, tie our hair the same, keep the same blank looks on our faces. To be special there, meant only that we would be used more, that we would die faster" (143). Unconscious of her mother's past as a "comfort woman," Beccah replicates the actions of her mother who had to neutralize every aspect of her body from her hair to her gait in order to avoid calling attention to her available body. Actually, Beccah goes a step further than her mother by not simply muting her female body but by masculinizing it. She is called a "mini-moke'" by her classmates, a term comparable to the Southern "redneck" or Mexican-American "cholo" (83). Even Beccah describes herself as "slouch[ing] over her desk like one of the big, tough boys who smoke[s] dope at the bus stop." (83) This is a

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[8] In "In/fertility Among Korea's 'Comfort Women' Survivors: A Comparative Perspective," Sarah Soh writes, "In the Korean ethno-psychological imagination, *han* takes the form of an invisible painful knot in the heart an individual carries over a long period of time containing a complex of undesirable emotions and sentiments such as sadness, regret, anger, remorse and resignation." (70) The term *han* is a single concept that encompasses such a range of emotions in the way no word in English can ever aspire to do and is intricately woven into the testimonies that Soh collects from these once enslaved women. Strikingly, when Beccah first begins to menstruate in Mrs. Abernacke's ninth-grade homeroom, she describes her menstrual cramps as "the knot of pain pulling in my abdomen, pinning [her] to her seat." (186) It is as if Beccah has inherited her mother's psychological trauma biologically.

particularly striking moment because Beccah's act echoes trauma narratives from actual survivors. In Jan Ruff-O'Herne's autobiography, 50 Years of Silence, she describes cutting her hair short and unevenly in order to look like a boy and thereby rendering herself less attractive to the soldiers who visited the "comfort station" (91). Beccah's somatization of Akiko's trauma is a striking testament to the ironic contagiousness of unspoken trauma.

Despite attempts to control Beccah's body both by herself and her mother, she is not untouched by sexual relationships with men. Her first relationship with her high school lover, Maximillian Lee, is typically adolescent in its violent and passionate avowals of love. Returning home one night after making love to Max at Aku Ponds, Beccah describes her body as "smell[ing] clean, electric like a rainstorm on the Ko'olaus" (134). Yet, Akiko greets her with the cry, "Stink poji-cunt!" and rushes towards her with a knife, scratching it along the zipper of Beccah's jeans before throwing the knife to the ground. Here, Akiko stigmatizes the sexual intercourse that Beccah has guiltlessly experienced by drawing attention to the "stink" that Beccah initially perceives as "clean." Akiko's use of the term "poji" or "pussy" in Korean is significant because that is precisely the language with which Akiko was taught to see herself. When she begins her time as a "comfort woman," the soldiers refer to her as "fresh poji" (21). By calling her daughter "poji," Akiko drags Beccah into the trauma of her own experience of sex as a "comfort woman." Akiko pollutes both Beccah's relationship and understanding of sexual intercourse as well as her relationship with Max. After this encounter with her mother, Beccah begins to see the grotesqueness of sex that she did not see before. As she once so carefully policed her own developing body, Beccah now surveillances her

formerly carefree lovemaking. Beccah says, "And I began watching the two of us making love, the way we groped and lunged, as if from another's eyes. As if from my mother's eyes" (136). As she surveys herself and her lover from her mother's eyes, she absorbs Akiko's vocabulary for sex. Words such as "groped" and "lunged" are reminiscent of Akiko's memories of new "comfort women" being groped and grabbed at as the Japanese soldiers passed them by. Akiko's trauma continues to mutate Beccah's relationship with Max to the point that Beccah can barely stand the sight of him and decides to end the relationship with a Max who is taken entirely by surprise. Beccah describes his utter disappointment and befuddlement with chilling contempt. She recalls, "Sickened, I hugged him so I would not have to see his blotchy, swollen face. 'Nothing,' I mumbled. 'It's just time to move on.' I held him, letting him cry, and it was like holding a stranger" (136). The image of Max as this stranger seeking comfort in her arms is disturbingly similar to Akiko's description of her interactions with certain soldiers that "would merely want to spend their half-hour allotments burrowed into our breasts, being cradled like a child" (148). Akiko's trauma emerges in Beccah's psyche the very night that she rushes at Beccah with a knife through a dream, "… I drowned in blood, unable to fight the arms that pulled me under, while the fins of the sharks sliced the water like knives" (135). This is not the last time Akiko's traumatic sexual experiences infect Beccah's dreams. Akiko's instinctively violent response to Beccah's sexual behavior permeates Beccah's adult relationship with the married Sanford. With much distaste, Beccah confesses, "I cannot stand the way he combs his hair forward to disguise his receding hairline, then asks – uncertain and vulnerable – if he looks too old for me" (137). After having sex with

Sanford, she falls asleep only to be plagued by a similarly terrifying nightmare. However, this nightmare plays itself out to a greater extent that that initial nightmare:

> I twist and turn, trying to land blows on its snout with my fists as well as feet, when I see not the jaws of a shark but the nebulous folds of a giant jellyfish wrapping itself about my lower body, trying to suck me into itself… I realize that it is my mother wrapped around my legs, holding on to me as though I can save her. Instead, I feel myself sinking. I cannot hold my breath any longer and just when I open my mouth to drown, I wake and find my body sinking toward Sanford's once again. (141)

The image of the jellyfish rather than the shark is significant because it speaks to the toxicity of Akiko's trauma that can potentially incapacitate or perhaps more accurately, consume Beccah's psyche.

The silence surrounding Akiko's traumatic past is only broken after her death. Akiko does not speak the unspeakable but sings the unspeakable in a tape recording that she leaves behind and has Beccah's name written on it. When Beccah plays the tape, she begins to occupy two psychical positions. She is the listener bearing witness to a testimony of trauma as well as the secondary victim of her mother's trauma who is being therapized by the taped narrative. In her role as listener and witness, Beccah possesses qualities that Dori Laub in "Bearing Witness or the Vicissitudes of Listening" would see as integral to this process. Beccah realizes quickly that "only when [she] stopped concentrating did [she] realize [her] mother was singing words, calling out names, telling a story" (191). When Beccah recognizes that concentrating on decoding the facts within

her mother's song is futile, it is precisely there that her behavior inadvertently coincides with Laub's argument regarding the ideal listener. Laub writes, "In the process of testimony to a trauma, as in psychoanalytic practice, in effect, you often do not want to know anything except what the patient tells you, because what is important is the situation of *discovery* of knowledge [italics in-text] – its evolution, and its very happening" (62). This "discovery of knowledge" does not simply happen to the testifier or the listener. Laub suggests that both testifier and listener partake in the creation of this knowledge together. Laub powerfully articulates this concomitant birthing of the testimony in the following lines, "The testimony to the trauma thus includes its hearer, who is, so to speak, the blank screen on which the event comes to be inscribed for the first time" (57). Indeed, Beccah actively participates in the creation of her mother's testimony. She rummages through the house looking for implements with which to inscribe this narrative. Finding several notebooks worth of writing to be "inadequate, small and disjointed," she strips the sheet from her bed and lays it across the floor to be the blank "canvas" for her mother's story (192). Beccah embodies the "blank screen" that Laub writes about when she adds her own voice to her mother's narrative by "fit [ting] [Akiko's] words into [her] mouth, syllable by syllable" attempting to sound out a word that she does not recognize, "Chongsindae" (193). Here, that single word becomes a concrete version of Laub's "password" in which "[e]verything falls into place and comes together" (63). The term "Chongsindae" means "comfort women" in Korean but the translation that Beccah obtains from her Korean-English dictionary is "Battalion slave" (193). In participating in the meaning-making of her mother's testimony, it is Beccah

who captures the lexical truth of her mother's testimony for Akiko is no "comfort woman." She is an enslaved human being in the Japanese military machinery.

Yet in bearing witness to her mother's testimonial song and partaking in her mother's posthumous therapy that is captured on tape, Beccah, the secondary victim of her mother's trauma, is therapized by this experience as well. In their article "The Testimony of Political Repression as a Therapeutic Instrument," Ana Cienfuegos and Cristina Monelli discuss the use of tape-recorded testimony as a mode of therapy. They write, "Patients are encouraged to tape-record a detailed description of the events leading to their present state of suffering… the procedure will allow the patients to understand more fully the emotions associated with their trauma" (48). In their particular case study, the tape-recording is meant to allow the patient to "reexperience their suffering in their own words and their particular tone of voice" (49). However, Keller's novel points to an alternative use for that tape-recorded testimony wherein Akiko is able to dispel the silence within which her behavior is shrouded and Beccah slowly comes to understand that she had little if anything to do with her mother's inexplicable outbursts. In Mary Beth William's article, "Treating STSD in Children," she writes, "As parents reveal details of the events, children inevitably try to envision themselves in that parent's place during the trauma…These reimaginings and fantasies challenge the belief systems of the children and could potentially overwhelm them" (118). Actually, Beccah finds herself unable to imagine her mother surviving this experience because she cannot imagine herself surviving (194). Yet, it is precisely in that inability to imagine herself in Akiko's place or to fully comprehend Akiko's trauma does Beccah come to understand Akiko and Akiko's own incomprehension of how she survived this experience.

The novel ends with Beccah's dream:

> I struggled, flailing weak kicks, but when I turned and saw that it was my mother hanging on to me, I yielded. I opened my mouth to drown, expecting to in such heavy water, but instead I breathed in air, clear and blue. Instead of the ocean, I swam through the sky, higher and higher, until, dizzy with the freedom of light and air, I looked down to see a thin blue river of light spiraling down to earth, where I lay sleeping in bed, coiled tight around a small seed planted by my mother, waiting to be born. (213)

In hearing the unspeakable spoken, Beccah's terrifying dreams take on a liberatory note. Her mother's trauma no longer ominously awaits Beccah in the abyss. Yet, there is a deeply unsatisfying element to this hopeful ending in which the weight of both Akiko's and Beccah's respective traumas is neatly packaged into a single freeing dream. Despite this somewhat pat ending to the novel, what is ultimately brought into relief by Akiko's articulation of her trauma and Beccah's listening and witnessing of the trauma is the potential for forgiveness. In leaving the tape behind, it is Akiko who sets them both upon the road to forgiveness. It is a belated apology for being unable to speak the truth to her daughter. Beccah communicates her forgiveness to her mother through the funeral rites that she performs for her. Beccah says, "When the blossoms, saturated, sank to the bottom of the bowl, I dipped a strip of linen into the water. Ink-black spider legs…wiggled out from the words I had scribbled on the material" (208). What is striking in this moment is that Beccah actually washes the words off the linen upon which she transcribes her mother's narrative before wrapping her mother in the strips. Doing so is Beccah's most touching and powerful gesture of forgiveness for she halts the cycle of

endless inscriptions upon her mother's body. Instead, she gives her mother the washed strips as a reminder of the strength she had when she spoke the words of her trauma, but simultaneously ensuring that eternally her mother would speak from within and for herself.