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DIASPORA OF CAMPTOWN: THE FORGOTTEN WAR'S MONSTROUS FAMILY

GRACE M. CHO

My life seemed a lot like the lives of other kids around me, but there always seemed to be this tension and anxiety, which was sort of going through my family like an unhappy wind; there were silences which became part of the fabric of our daily lives. —Kevin Ryu, in R. Liem, “History, Trauma, and Identity: The Legacy of the Korean War for Korean Americans”

In Ramsay Liem’s oral history project about the ways in which unacknowledged memories of the Korean War have left deep psychic imprints on the Korean diaspora in the United States, the children of war survivors consistently spoke of having been traumatized by the silences in their families. One of Liem’s findings was that the first generation still had very salient memories of wartime traumas although these memories had apparently been left unspoken for many years. Those who were often the last to hear about these experiences were the children of survivors themselves, yet despite not having any conscious knowledge of their parents’ stories, the second generation often described a felt sense of their parents’ traumas precisely around that which was unsaid. The words above were spoken by a thirty-something Korean American in an interview about how the traumas from the past—the events of the war and the history of U.S. militarism on the Korean peninsula—continue to haunt the present, particularly in the space of his family’s mundane private life.¹

Many examples of cultural and knowledge production by diasporic Koreans treat questions of the lasting effects of the Korean War, its unresolved status, and the continued daily practices of U.S. militarism in South Korea. But as much as this body of work is about nameable events such as the Korean War, the division of the peninsula, or any number of incidents involving violence perpetrated by the U.S. military, it is also an enactment of “a trace of something that cannot be named” (Cheng

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2000, 147). There is no coherent narrative about these traumas, because there is so much that remains erased from public discourse or foreclosed from personal memory. The dubbing of the war as “the Forgotten War” calls into question the extent to which we can remember an event that is articulated in terms of its already having been forgotten. But the traumatic aspects of U.S.-Korea relations are amplified by the silences surrounding it, and it is in this space that a new force emerges.

As noted in research on transgenerational trauma, it is often the act of not speaking that generates trauma’s capacity to move across boundaries of time and space. Yael Danieli describes the unspeakable traumas of a family or collective history as an “audible void” (1998). It is precisely in this void, according to Abraham and Torok, that “transgenerational haunting” begins. The taboo words and secrets of one generation become “phantomogenic” and “are often the very words that rule an entire family’s history” (1994, 176). This phantom, then, “inhabits the depths of the unconscious . . . as the living-dead of knowledge of *someone else’s secret*” (188). The sense of having inherited another’s secret haunts “not just down through the generations, but across them; and not inside one family, but, creating a monstrous family of reluctant belonging” (Rose 1996, 31).

While there are many ways in which the violences of the U.S.-Korea relationship are silenced, the voids that are perhaps most audible surround issues of sexual exchange between American servicemen and the Korean women who work in the system of militarized prostitution, a system that dates back to the U.S. occupation of Korea in 1945 and continues to this day. The name that these women acquired in Korean popular discourse was *yanggongju*, literally meaning “Western princess,” but often translated as “Yankee whore” or “GI bride.”

In this essay I analyze the way in which the *yanggongju* is a figure that is both central and spectral in a Korean diaspora constituted by the double trauma of war and the failure to remember it. Korean women who have married U.S. servicemen, many of whom met their husbands through military prostitution, led the way for Korean migration to the United States and were literally the most important agents of Korean diaspora (Yuh 2002). The women who are sex workers, companions, and wives for U.S. military personnel occupy an ambivalent position, however, in that while they enact the fantasy of the American dream through the most intimate encounters of sex and marriage, the trauma that the *yanggongju* embodies and transmits also disrupts this fantasy. As a

psychic and social figure that has itself been constituted by war and militarism, the *yanggongju*'s vexed history troubles two aspects of the American dream. On one side is the geopolitical narrative that the U.S. military has always been a benevolent protector in Korea. On the flip side is the story of how Korean Americans (most of whom arrived through a trajectory of U.S. military intervention) are well assimilated into the United States. The *yanggongju* complicates these narratives in that she is heavily invested in the Dream, carrying the weight of a familial longing for America, yet at the same time, her assimilation in the United States is contingent upon a violent severing from the past, a past that is always present. The force of the *yanggongju*'s haunting lies in the way her unacknowledged traumas are machined together with the far-reaching effects of violence in the camptown to haunt diasporic Koreans who have an unconscious recognition that someone else's traumas have permeated what might seem to be their normal everyday lives.

"THE UNCONSCIOUS ASPECTS OF LOOKING": A NOTE ON METHODS

I want to tell a story about how the yanggongju has come to haunt Korean diaspora, but I also want to acknowledge that this figure is a ghost from my own unconscious and the unconscious to which I am bound. I arrived at this place of doing research on the yanggongju and Korean diaspora because there were so many voids in my family history.

In this essay I do not attempt to present original findings about the experiences of sex workers or military brides, but rather deal with the *yanggongju* as a psychic figure that haunts Korean diaspora. What I offer is a reading of how different discourses in which the *yanggongju* is a spectral character create friction against one another and thus reveal the effects of violence in the U.S.-Korea relationship. I pay particular attention to the gap between the two sides of the literature about the *yanggongju*—one that deals with sex workers as geopolitical actors and symbols in Korea (H. S. Kim 1998; Moon 1997, 1999; Sturdevant and Stoltzfuz 1992) and one that documents the life experiences of military brides in the United States (Yoo 1993; Yuh 2002). While each side recognizes the other, neither focuses on the intersection between the two.² It is precisely the break between the "GI bride" and "Yankee whore" that creates the conditions for the *yanggongju*'s trauma to be sent out into diaspora.

The *yanggongju*'s trauma surfaces not just through interviews with sex workers and military brides, who wish to keep quiet about their histories, but also through the transgenerational haunting of diasporic Koreans for whom kinship to the *yanggongju* is secreted and uncertain. To draw out this haunting, I employ what David Eng calls "dreamwork [and] the unconscious aspects of looking" (2001, 37). I link analyses of existing literature on the *yanggongju* with examples of popular literature in which the *yanggongju* is a central but shadowy figure, memory work by diasporic Koreans, and my own autoethnographic writing. These autoethnographic vignettes help to fill in gaps in research about an aspect of Korean diaspora that is rarely talked about explicitly, to engage other works by diasporic Koreans, and to make large-scale phenomena intimate with "a personalized accounting of the location of the observer, which is typically disavowed in traditional social science writing" (Clough 2000, 16).

A FIGURE OF TRAUMA

When I first began studying military prostitution, I was constantly asked to elaborate the roots of my intellectual curiosity. If I obliged, I was usually met with some combination of shame, shock, anger, and titillation. My personal reasons for studying the figure of the yanggongju became highly stigmatic in a field that still privileges the position of the researcher as an outsider who has an "almost inevitable absence of intimate acquaintance" with the topic of her study, and in a department in which students were encouraged to be self-reflexive about their research, as long as it was within the sanctioned space of the methods section, and then usually in one or two "confessional" paragraphs near the beginning (Blumer as qtd. in Becker 1998, 11). But with time, the ghosts moved beyond the confessional space into the rest of the text . . .

Today there are twenty-seven thousand women who are sex workers for the thirty-seven thousand U.S. troops stationed in South Korea, and since the Korean War, more than a million women have provided sexual labor in the camptowns (Takagi and Park 1996).³ Although the beginnings of camptown prostitution are debatable, the birth of the *yanggongju* in Korean cultural memory can be traced back to the early days of the Korean War when U.S. soldiers were reported to have broken into homes, raping young women and girls (Hanley et al. 2001; Halliday and

Cummings 1988). As the war progressed, as the landscape and people became increasingly obliterated, Americans also came to represent survival and U.S. bases became places where Koreans bought and begged for leftovers or sought employment and where women and girls would exchange companionship for American goods (Takagi and Park 1996; Yuh 2002):

I saw through the window. American soldiers with Korean lady . . . they look just like a toy . . . they don't know how to speak, only "honey, kiss, honey, kiss" pretty cheap language. Then they kiss . . . And after that, she has chewing gum and packs of Marlboros. Then they sell that on the street . . . they can buy about 10 meals and some clothes you know . . . (Chang Soam, qtd. in Cho et al. 2005, 4)

The local population's fears and fantasies about U.S. soldiers as both benevolent protectors and monstrous criminals coupled with the material realities of war set up the conditions for *yanggongjus* to become "living symbols of the destruction, poverty, bloodshed, and separation from family of Korea's civil war" (Moon 1997, 8) at the same time that they were associated with "never-before-seen material goods that American soldiers brought to an impoverished and literally starving Korea" (Yuh 2002, 34).

Born of the traumas of an unresolved war that has been "forgotten" in the U.S. yet that is central to the everyday lives of Koreans on the peninsula, the *yanggongju* emerged from the U.S.-Korea relationship as an ambivalent geopolitical symbol that wavered between overexposure and a reclusive existence in camptown ghettos. In Katharine Moon's study of the camptown during the 1960s and 1970s, for example, the Korean government tried to discipline camptown sex workers into the role of the patriot who was fulfilling her duty to the nation by keeping American GIs happy, and thereby keeping U.S. interests engaged in Korea (1997). As Moon argues, while the labor of camptown prostitutes increased the foreign exchange earnings of the country, the women workers incurred large debts that kept them bound to sex work under abusive conditions. Meanwhile, the larger society viewed them as pariahs who were tolerated in order to protect virtuous women from rape. The way in which *yanggongjus* were physically and psychically separated from the rest of society through the strict policing of camptown boundaries and stigmati-

zation by “normal” Koreans reveals camptown prostitution as a biopolitical practice—an investment in life that protects Koreans against both the threat of communism and of sexual violation from U.S. soldiers, one that is contingent upon marking sex workers as a disposable population.

The first time I imagined her as a *yanggongju*, I had not yet heard this word nor did I know all that it would come to mean. My mother had raised me to “just work and study hard [and] stay away from politics and social things” (Cho et al. 2005, 4). So in the early 1990s I went to school and knew little about Korean politics. I had not yet learned that a camptown sex worker had been murdered by a U.S. serviceman and that this murder would spark the largest anti-American protest in more than a decade. I don’t know if my mother paid attention to what happened back home, but it was at this time that she began saying things I had never heard before, about how she had felt her life was worthless. She also began repeating the dates of significant moments of her childhood, one of which marked the arrival of the U.S. military. The *yanggongju* began to make her presence felt in my unconscious at the same time that she became visible in the landscape of Korean politics.

While in the 1960s and 1970s the Korean government tried to construct the *yanggongju* as a body sequestered in camptown ghettos but in service of national security, by the 1990s anti-U.S. nationalist groups and women’s organizations had constructed her as a body in need of saving. In October 1992, a camptown sex worker named Yoon Geum-yi was murdered by one of her clients. Although “the condition in which her body was found was too heinous to look at with open eyes,” this image was widely circulated by activists who took on this case (Chung et al. 2005, 59). The language used to describe the body that was too brutalized to look at detailed every injury inflicted upon it. “In her uterus, two beer bottles. A coca cola bottle penetrating her vagina. An umbrella driven twenty-seven centimeters into her rectum. Her body was found bruised and bloody” (Chung et al. 2005, 59).⁴ “In an attempt to fake the evidence, [the perpetrator] filled her mouth with broken matchsticks, and spread white detergent powder over her body” (Go 2002).

Yoon was not the first camptown sex worker to be killed, but her

body was put on display, whereas previous murders of camptown women were kept in the shadows. The dead Yoon became “material evidence of imperialist violence against the bodies of Korean women” (H.S. Kim 1998, 189). Her case was supported by a diverse range of organizations that formed the Committee on the Murder of Yoon Geum-yi by American Military in Korea, a committee that later spawned the National Campaign for Eradication of Crime by U.S. Troops in Korea. In popular anti-American literature, Yoon’s murder is identified as both a moment of incipient action against U.S. military violence and a symbol of the history of this violence (Chung et al. 2005; Go 2002; K.N. Kim 1994; *National Campaign*, 2005). “The unmerciful and cruel crime, committed by a soldier whose commander insists that they came here to defend the freedom of Korea, shocked and angered the Korean people once again, as the worst of a long string of crimes perpetrated by U.S. military personnel in Korea during the last 40 years” (K.N. Kim 1994). Yoon’s murder was replayed as the primal scene that would recall all past violations against Koreans by the United States. This was an instance in which the *yanggongju* was made hypervisible as the image of Yoon became “filled out, symbolized beyond recognition with the weight of desire, and then manipulated in fantasy to its purpose” (Rose 1996, 24).

While some groups had an interest in making a spectacle out of Yoon’s mutilated body, the deployment of this image was somewhat unpredictable because her status as a prostitute served to undermine efforts to use the *yanggongju* as an organizing trope for anti-imperialist politics. The former “comfort women” dissociated themselves from “willing” Yankee whores because they did not believe that *yanggongjus* should rightfully be called victims (Moon 1999). Anti-American groups deleted Yoon’s background from their narratives even as they divulged the details of her murder (Chung et al. 2005; K.N. Kim 1994). The committee reconstructed her as a virtuous woman, while living sex workers were “shoved to the margins of Korean society” (H.S. Kim 1998, 189). As Kim Yeon-ja, an activist and former military sex worker argued, “There were dozens of girls who died before Yoon Geum-yi died. But no one ever tried to help us when we called for help” (Lee 2005). After having witnessed eight of her friends and coworkers die of suicide, intoxication, assaults by GIs, and “unknown reasons,” Kim escaped the camptown (Lee 2005).

The spectrality of this population of women who are left to die gains its force from the traumas inflicted upon their own bodies coupled

with a denial of this very trauma when *yanggongjus* move beyond the camptown. The image of the injured body of the *yanggongju* that was salient among anti-U.S. activists in Korea, for example, disappears when the *yanggongju* as “GI Bride” comes to America. The story of her arrival and rapid assimilation into the United States only makes sense through a willful forgetting of the everyday life of the camptown and of the violent and intimate history between Korea and the United States.

THE DIASPORA OF CAMPTOWN

[T]he area around an American army base is like an island between Korea and the U.S., not part of the sea, not part of the mainland.—S. Kang, “Days and Dreams”

The camptowns in Korea are often described as “islands, “quicksand” (H. S. Kim 1998), or “*bbaet-bul* . . . a swamplike area that, once entered is impossible to escape” (Yuh 2002, 238). For some Korean women they are exotic locales in which dreams of America are played out through a repeated and performed romance between Korean women and American soldiers. For others, the camptowns are spaces of trauma and exile from which escape is nearly impossible, and in which marriage to American GIs is not a lived fantasy as much as it is a desperate attempt at finding “a way out” (Suh 1999). Does marriage to an American, both a marker of prestige among camptown women and a marker of upward mobility within the discourse of assimilation, allow the *yanggongju* and her kin to participate in the fantasy of the American dream? Is this trajectory of marriage and migration indeed a way out of the camptown, and if so, to what does the escape give way?

Since these islands have no roots, the girls living on them have no roots either. They know full well they can’t rely on the islands, and that’s why they have a pimp—or long for a one-way ticket to the U.S. Mi-ra and Sun-ja were just extreme cases of this. (Kang 1989, 23)

In the imaginary camptown of Kang Sok-Kyong’s story “Days and Dreams,” there are three *yanggongjus* whose tales of escape are woven together—Mi-ra, who was murdered by her pimp at the start of the

story; Sun-ja, who desperately wants to be taken to America and hopes for romance with one of her clients; and the narrator, who exhibits shamelessness at being a prostitute and makes no move toward leaving. For Sun-ja, the fairy tale of going to America nearly comes true, but Kang adds an important twist. Sun-ja invests all her hopes in one of her American clients, as the story often goes, but this client is not the white man that is the symbol of America for Koreans, but a black woman named Barbara.⁵ Sun-ja transgresses the prescriptive fantasy of marrying a white male GI, and enters into a relationship that defies norms even among the deviant women of the camptown. She pursues the relationship initially out of desire to leave Korea, but also because she encounters love for the first time. As the end of the story approaches, readers are led to believe that Sun-ja's dream will come true, but moments before meeting Barbara for their flight out of Korea, Sun-ja falls down a flight of stairs to her death, and "in this meaningless way, she left the world of the living for the eternal America of her dreams" (Kang 1989, 23).

Unlike Sun-ja, the narrator indulges no escape fantasy. Her first sex-for-money exchange brings the realization that her movement is only circular, returning to the same subordination to the United States from which she started in postwar Korea, and she quickly becomes disillusioned about being saved. Although she takes pleasure in American men, she does not dream of romance or a married life in the United States. She even ridicules this dream in the last scene when her married American boyfriend is about to return to his wife in the United States and promises to write. "I started giggling and told him I didn't need his letters. If he could just give me ten dollars, I'd call his name even in my dreams . . . He stuffed two hundred dollars in my hand saying, 'pay off what you owe your madam.' I gave him a violent kiss. I'd paid off my debt to the madam a long time ago, but I still had plenty of places to spend the money" (27). The final lines of "Days and Dreams" troubles the American dream because we are confronted with a narrator who remains in militarized prostitution not because she is searching for a ticket out of Korea, not because she is debt bonded, but because she already knows that she is going nowhere.⁶ In Kang's narrative, marriage is not a viable option, and for those who dream of escape, the only way out is death.

Although Kang's work has been critiqued for portraying *yanggongjus* as passive victims and receptacles of national sorrow, I offer a different

reading (H. S. Kim 1998). Kang's characters, in both their cynicism and their tragic outcomes, unsettle commonsense ideas of migration and marriage as paths toward "honorary whiteness."⁷ The narrator, for example, harbors no notions of either romance or progress when it comes to marrying an American, thereby troubling the fantasy in which the white American soldier rescues the abject Korean woman from prostitution and the third world and takes her to revel in the abundance of America. And perhaps the deaths of Mi-ra and Sun-ja demonstrate how marriage as a migration route is haunted by a history in which the violences of the camptown and the desire for America are intimately tied together. As there is movement in and out of the camptown, whether through marriage or death, the traumatic effects of the system also take flight and are carried forward through a diaspora descended from camptown women.

"THE PERFECT AMERICAN WIFE, KOREAN-STYLE"

My father's hometown was not exactly the America of my mother's dreams. No one there had ever met a Korean and her strangeness made her more determined to blend in, so she carefully studied the habits of American women. She cooked spaghetti and meatballs and green Jell-O mixed with cottage cheese and fruit cocktail, hosted parties for the neighbors, smiled hello at people's stares, kept quiet about the goings-on behind closed doors, hung lights at Christmas, carved jack-o'-lanterns on Halloween, spoke only English at home so that we would grow up American, went to PTA meetings, donated to bake sales, volunteered for the United Way, attended church although she did not believe, did everything in hopes of becoming the perfect American wife and mother.

After I have baby in the hospital, my husband, he abuse me by curtain leg. He abuse me by tennis racket. He abuse me by mop stick. . . All over my body got abused. (Yang Hyang Kim, in Takagi and Park 1996)

Like Kang's fictional story, Takagi and Park's documentary film *The Women Outside: Korean Women and the U.S. Military* (1996) narrates the lives of three camptown women. Two have grown jaded to the possibility of ever leaving the camptown, but the third finds possibility in marriage. Her first husband takes her to the America, but he also beats her, thus showing her a nightmarish side of the American dream. She

returns to Korea and to prostitution and eventually finds a second man who pays off her debts and marries her. Prior to this departure, we follow her through classes in the camptown's "U.S.O. Bride School."⁸ An article in the *Christian Science Monitor* titled "The Perfect American Wife, Korean-Style" describes the kind of training this woman might have received at the "Bride School": "Yvonne Park bangs a head of lettuce against a table and extracts its core . . . Twenty Korean women take note of the neat trick. They've never made an American-style salad. Next they learn how to baste turkey, slice canned cranberry gelatin, and bake pumpkin pie" (Baker 1998). The women in this scenario, like the GI bride in Takagi and Park's film, are exemplary spectacles of hope who eagerly participate in the fantasy of America. The Bride School describes itself as a service to ease Korean women's assimilation into American culture, suggesting that escape from the camptown and assimilation into the United States are two sides of the same coin.

In *Beyond the Shadow of Camptown*, Ji-Yeon Yuh argues that military brides are the invisible backbone of the Korean American community, in that the most common migration route for Korean immigrants for four decades following the Korean War was through sponsorship by one of the one hundred thousand Korean women who married American GIs (2002). While she contextualizes the women's oral histories in the broader history of U.S.-Korea relations and military prostitution, she also acknowledges that the prevalence of the *yanggongju* as Yankee whore in the United States cannot be empirically proved because of the desire to keep this part of one's personal history secret. "One Korean wife of an American GI told a researcher that nine out of ten Korean women met their GI husbands at clubs catering exclusively to American soldiers, thus implying that they were prostitutes, and then added that nine out of ten will deny it" (12). As the title of Yuh's book suggests, *yanggongju* have moved beyond the camptown through migration, while they also seek to distance themselves from the stigmas associated with camptown life. When the *yanggongju* comes to America, she retreats into the private spaces of white middle-class domesticity, an achievement that sociologists of immigration have long considered a benchmark of assimilation.

Although sociological assimilation theories date back to the beginning of the twentieth century, notions of the assimilated Asian are still being produced in academic and public discourses. Popular culture's most recent articulation of model minority success is the Kim sisters'

controversial book, *Top of the Class: How Asian Parents Raise High Achievers*, that was recently featured in the *New York Times* Style section (Williams 2005). Similarly, sociologists have called for a revision of assimilation theory, offering up Asian Americans as the test case (Alba and Nee 1997; Foner 2001; Min and Kim 1999; Tuan 1998). An assumption made by hegemonic sociological accounts of immigration is that Asians' "relatively high intermarriage rates . . . suggest their acceptability to many whites . . . and the absence of a deep racial divide" (Alba and Nee 1997, 839).⁹ Asian American Studies scholars, however, have critiqued the notion of assimilation for erasing the traumatic aspects of diasporic histories and idealizing whiteness, claiming that it is a homogenizing *project* rather than a normal social *process* (Cheng 2000; Eng 2001; Eng and Han 2000; Puar and Rai 2004). The history of the *yanggongju* troubles the idea that assimilation can be quantified by intermarriage and English-only, standards by which Koreans are the most assimilated of all Asian groups (Alba and Nee 1997; Min and Kim 1999). Some Korean American social scientists, for example, have challenged these indicators of "success," pointing out that "many interracial married U.S. servicemen neglect and even abuse their Korean wives, deciding that the women who provided them companionship in Korea are no longer valuable to them in this country" (Min 1995, 220).¹⁰ Jong Yeon Brewer, who is herself a Korean woman married to an American serviceman, also contests the claim that speaking only English at home is a desirable outcome of assimilation because the loss of Korean language is traumatic for the children of such unions (2003).

What is obvious in these critiques is the whitewashing of power dynamics in these families, but less obvious is the way in which the discourse of assimilation is also implicated in the camptown's disciplinary logic. Not only does the narrative of Koreans' easy assimilation into the United States cover over instances of domestic violence, the performance of the successful intermarriage that begins in the camptown through practices such as Bride School domesticates the traumatic history of U.S.-Korea relations by glamorizing America to those living under the most oppressive conditions of U.S. military control. When these women are given the chance to go to America, they often go to great lengths to hide their pasts both from their children and from the gaze of social scientists who have coded the intermarried Asian woman and her children as "assimilated."

[E]ven though she didn't talk about it, I could feel the fear she had so many years ago . . . she told us to do all the right things, just work and study hard, stay away from politics and social things . . . so I learned, you're supposed to get an education so you get an education; then you're supposed to get a job so you get a job; then a house . . . then you ask yourself, "now what, now what are you supposed to do with yourself?" (Lee Chong-Soon, qtd. in Cho et al. 2005)

But what happens when the *yanggongju* as GI bride represses within her own body the *yanggongju* as Yankee whore, and is haunted by the ghost of her own past? This type of psychic violence is not only what's most troubling *about* the project of assimilation, it is also what's most troubling *to* it as the *yanggongju* comes to haunt the fantasy of honorary whiteness. She is ghosted by her own past covered up, as well as by all those *yanggongjus* left behind and those who have escaped the camptown through death. The secret she harbors about herself and about the historical traumas she embodies is transmitted unconsciously, haunting children with gaps in knowledge about their histories. Even those deemed to have "made it" in America are still haunted by some lingering fear from another's past, "forms of remembrance—most often hidden and shameful family secrets—which hover in the space between social and psychic history" (Rose 1996, 5).

THE GHOST AND THE DREAM

I dream of her still . . . my oldest friend and truest enemy . . . she drifts through my sleep almost nightly . . . When I wake, I try to envision her face, but her features melt into one another . . . as if through several layers of photographic negatives . . . at fourteen, peeking out from under the paper bag she had put on her head when we went to Dr. Pak's VD clinic; at seventeen when, with her mother's makeup smeared over her face, she taught me about "honeymooning" in the backbooths of the GI clubs . . . in every memory I have of her, I can hear her words, see her gestures, but her face remains a fragmented blur. —N.O. Keller, Fox Girl

This quote from Nora Okja Keller's novel depicts the way in which the narrator has been haunted by a shared past with her companion, but it also offers a broader vision of how the *yanggongju* is remembered in the Korean diaspora.

In Keller's imagination, this figure is not fully fleshed out, but rather an outline filled in by a suturing of memory flashes. She lives in the dreamer's unconscious as an assemblage of traumatic moments and a shameful family secret that, upon waking, becomes phantasmatic. The tension of transgenerational haunting—that those who are haunted have been silenced by the “horror at violating a parent's or family's guarded secret, even though the secret's text and content are inscribed within”—is revealed in the works of diasporic Koreans, whose relationship to the *yanggongju* is likely but cannot be proved given the conditions of Korean migration to the United States (Abraham and Torok 1994, 176). When the *yanggongju* appears, their relationship to her is often framed in terms of what remains secret or uncertain. Ishle Park, for example, makes reference in one of her poems to how her aunt's marriage to an American GI was a “family secret” even though it was that marriage that allowed the rest of her family to migrate (2003). Questions of kinship to the *yanggongju* are particularly salient in the work of biracial Korean Americans who are the direct descendents of GI brides, although this is perhaps the place where she is also most ambiguous.

When I first published my work, others like me started crawling out of the woodwork of the academy, contacting me from all parts of the country. They too were haunted by silence and secrecy. A PhD student told me that she believed that the history of military prostitution had been deleted from the literature on Korean mixed-race families to “save face.” She did not want to expose her own history publicly, but believed that my efforts to do so were “shocking and daring.” A women's studies professor shared with me that haunting was a perfect metaphor for how she had lived her life never knowing how her parents met, but with time she understood that her mother had been a prostitute. Indeed in my own family, the story among my generation is that we do not really know how my parents met. Although I spoke with my parents once about this, I suppose it's true that no one ever said the words “prostitute” or “prostitution” or “yanggongju.” Without those words, I suppose they could have been talking about anything.¹¹

In *Memories of my Ghost Brother*, Heinz Insu Fenkl reveals family histories in which the lives of *yanggongjus* and their biracial children are sacrificed

as a consequence of the women's desire to leave prostitution for America, such as the black biracial child who mysteriously disappears shortly before his mother marries a white GI (because "who would marry a whore with a Black kid?") and Fenkl's cousin who commits suicide because her GI boyfriend will not marry her (1996, 229). Ultimately, *Ghost Brother* is a story of how family lineage is deliberately obscured as part of an investment in the fantasy of America. At the end of the story, Fenkl's mother confesses that she had given up his older brother to adoption as a condition of her marriage to Fenkl's father, a U.S. serviceman. But with this act, America comes to haunt her dreams even more because "[t]hat's where all the wonderful things come from, and that's where he is . . . Someday I'll find him . . . That's why I'll go to America" (267).

Keller's novel *Fox Girl* also shows a world that is thoroughly inter-implicated with ideals of America. *Fox Girl* is set in an American town in Korea during the 1960s, a community made up of American GIs and the Koreans who serve them. It is a world that reflects the gaze of those who prefer to think of themselves on the outside—where biracial children are hated for being racially contaminated but envied if they are taken to the United States, where American goods are looked down on as "whore's rubbish," yet seductive enough to lure new generations of girls into the camptowns (2002, 11). In the landscape of *Fox Girl*, it is the desire for American pleasures and the transgenerational psychic bind to America that draws the girls into prostitution.

In one scene, for example, the girls and their seventeen-year-old biracial pimp are singing a song in English, even though they are uncertain of what the words mean. It is an army song they have heard American soldiers sing while marching. The boy-pimp may have learned this song from his Yankee father, although he can't be sure because memories of his father have grown dim. They decipher the words, one by one. "Toad" is easy. *Toggobi*. But some of the words prove more challenging because there is no direct translation into Korean. "Fucked," one of the girls explains, "means . . . 'Your mama will die.' So don't ever say it." "Whore" is the second word that comes into question. This question is met with silence among the children, perhaps because the knowledge of this word was corporal. "We knew what whore meant. We knew whose mothers they were" (81).

I found a whore by the side of the road.
Knew right away she was dead as a toad.

Her skin was all gone from her tummy to her head.
 But I fucked her, I fucked her even though she was dead. (81)

The children of *yanggongjus*, Keller suggests, carry knowledge of their family histories in their bodies. One of the refrains of *Fox Girl* is “Blood will tell,” referring to the future of the *yanggongju*’s children. The suggestion is, of course, that there are generational continuities in military prostitution. *Blood* here can be regarded as genetic disposition, but it can also be read as a transgenerational haunting in which those who are more intimately tied to the violences of war and militarization are bound together.

As the story of *Fox Girl* unfolds, family lineages become more and more ambiguous, as characters speculate about which of them “share the same whorish blood,” and memories of their American fathers fade away (111).¹² In their uncertainty, the young people in *Fox Girl* become increasingly entangled in the nightmare of the American dream. One cannot help but wonder if this unraveling of an ambiguous family history born of U.S. military domination is also about the author’s own sense of trauma. In an interview with AsianWeek.com, Keller speaks to the ways in which she was haunted by her characters. “I feel like I live a dual life. My waking life, which is my real life, is centered around my family. . . . Then there’s my other life, my writing life, which usually takes place in the dark of night. . . . I had trouble shaking that darkness when I got up in the morning. . . . Towards the end of writing the book, I felt that parts of the characters were seeping into my own character” (Hong 2002).¹³ Although we cannot be sure of how much *Fox Girl* reflects Keller’s own background as a biracial Korean American, the ghosts of U.S. militarism in Korea and American-Korean intermarriage assert themselves in Keller’s text, as well as in her own unconscious. The psychic dynamics that are elaborated in Keller’s ostensibly fictional work, and in Fenkl’s autobiography, often disappear in narratives of Korean assimilation, a narrative that depends on an exclusion of a violent relationship, an exclusion that is in itself violent.¹⁴

A “MONSTROUS FAMILY”

The story of Koreans as honorary whites and the story of U.S.-Korea relations are thoroughly interimplicated—they are progress tales that depend on the *yanggongju*, who was a condition of possibility for both the geopolitical alliance between the United States and Korea and for the

Korean diaspora. The intermarriages that are taken for granted as measures of assimilation also serve an allegorical function in U.S.-Korea relations. The marriage attests to interracial harmony and international cooperation, and it is within this frame that the *yanggongju* as GI bride is an exemplar of assimilation whose progeny become “honorary whites.”

Those of us who are literally born out of the U.S.-Korea relationship are not the living proof of harmony across lines of difference as much as we are bodies bearing the marks of militarization. I was born in a hospital for U.S. military personnel stationed in Korea and on the statistical record accompanying my birth certificate, there is a category for “father’s rank in military” and another for “mother’s occupation.” I was born into an identity that was already militarized and a family fiction in which my mother’s occupation was “housewife.” Assimilation for those who are children of the U.S.-Korea relationship is a homogenizing project that is impossible because we inherit the traumas that are sent into diaspora by the *yanggongju*, and trauma is precisely that which cannot be assimilated.

The *yanggongju* embodies the contradictions within these storylines, but the tension between the Yankee whore and GI bride no longer holds when the history of militarized violence is brought to bear on the Korean diaspora, thus revealing a transgenerational haunting in which the entanglement of unconscious creates “a monstrous family of reluctant belonging” (Rose 1996, 31). The *yanggongju*’s trauma is absorbed by both those who know about her but would rather forget and those who don’t know but are afflicted by someone else’s secret. But what new possibilities might come of such monstrosity?

The kinship of uncertainty that has developed around the *yanggongju* serves as a binding force that changes one’s ethical relationship to militarized violence, so that proof of one’s familial ties to the *yanggongju* becomes less relevant than recognizing one’s implication in another’s trauma. This recognition becomes especially important when considering the paradox of trauma—that the closer one is to trauma, the more difficult it is to remember it, thereby making memory work a shared responsibility (Caruth 1996; Felman and Laub 1992). The cultural pro-

ductions of diasporic Koreans, including my own autoethnographic vignettes, are offered in this essay as examples of memory work that bear witness to the *yanggongju*'s trauma, without claiming to tell a definitive story about her past because that story cannot be known with certainty. The traces of transgenerational haunting found in these works offer "evidence that registers loss, even as it recognizes the unrecognizability of the content of loss" (Cheng 2000, 147). Perhaps these pieces evoke what Judith Butler describes as "the loss of loss itself . . . no story can be told about it; no memory can retrieve it. A fractured horizon looms in which to make one's way as a spectral agency . . . one for whom the irrecoverable becomes, paradoxically, the condition of a new political agency" (2003, 467). Even in the absence of a coherent narrative about the *yanggongju* in the personal and collective memories of Korean diaspora, transgenerational haunting creates a sense of urgency to address a trauma that circulates beyond the boundaries of the self and the limitations of the empirical.

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NOTES

1. A portion of this quote makes up the tagline of a collaborative multimedia art project by a group of Korean American artists titled *Still Present Pasts: Korean Americans and "The Forgotten War."* This project is based on the oral histories conducted by Liem, and some of the excerpts of these histories that are presented in the exhibit will be included in this essay.

2. There is only one comprehensive study for each side of the literature about the *yanggongju* (Moon 1997; Yuh 2002). Yuh opens her book with a discussion of the legacy of the Korean War and the system of camptown prostitution and Moon includes a chapter on marriages between U.S. servicemen and Korean sex workers.

Both studies acknowledge the overlap between the “Yankee whore” and the “GI bride” as well as the difficulty in studying this overlap because of the women’s reluctance to speak honestly about their life experiences, but neither studies the gap between the two. Furthermore, neither Moon nor Yuh look at the psychic consequences for Korean diaspora of not knowing one’s family history.

3. Because of the U.S. military’s plans for global redeployment of troops, the U.S. forces in Korea are to be reduced by one-third by 2008.

4. The translation of this text was provided by Hosu Kim, Department of Sociology, The Graduate Center, City University of New York.

5. Although there are many GIs who are nonwhite or female, the American GI is always presumed to be white and male in both the Korean fantasy of marrying an American GI and in the sociological fantasy of honorary whiteness that measures assimilation in terms of intermarriage.

6. Unlike much of the social science and social work research on Korean military sex workers, we see in Kang’s work a portrayal of a *yanggongju* who takes a certain kind of pleasure in her work, even if she is jaded. I have been asked about the extent to which desire plays a role in women’s decisions to enter camptown prostitution. Although I am reluctant to answer this question without first interrogating the notion of “choice,” the available sources of data about camptown prostitution say that most women are drawn into the work by economic necessity rather than either physical coercion on one hand, or sexual desire on the other. However, the stigma against prostitution and particularly military prostitution is so great that few women would actually admit that sexual desire was one of their motivations. As I suggest here, a collective desire for America is a motivating force that trumps individualized sexual desire.

7. For a broad overview of the history of sociological debates about assimilation and its applicability to Asian Americans, see Tuan 1998. I use the term *honorary white* as does Tuan, interchangeably with *assimilated* and *model minority*, to connote the way in which the discourse of assimilation has positioned whiteness as the ideal to which racialized groups should assimilate.

8. Although the school recently changed its name to Cross-Cultural School, I have chosen to use the name that was used when Yang Hyang Kim was featured in the film in 1996. For most of the school’s history, from 1971 until 2000, this service was called Bride School and catered to Korean women who were married or engaged to U.S. servicemen. Besides the name change, there has been an effort to recruit couples, rather than just brides-to-be, but as Yvonne Park, the school’s director, points out, most American servicemen are not interested in learning about the cultures of their spouses and fiancées. “Their idea is: ‘We are not going to live in Korea. . . . Just teach my wife’” (Adelman 1999).

9. While sociologists such as Min (1995) and Tuan (1998) caution against assuming that intermarried couples and biracial children are automatically “accepted,” the leading sociologists of immigration continue to take for granted the standard indicators of assimilation. In the Sawyer Seminar on Immigrants and the Transformation of American Society held at the City University of New York, for example,

Richard Alba defended the notion of assimilation against recent waves of criticism about the model's ethnocentric biases. He asked the audience to take Asian Americans as an example of a non-European group that is successfully assimilated. His evidence was offered in statements such as "Asian kids don't speak Asian languages." On another occasion, Nancy Foner (2001) delivered a lecture in this seminar, stating that Asian Americans were "honorary whites." Foner gave her talk about one week after September 11. In the talk, she did not make distinctions between Asian groups, treating South Asians and East Asians alike as "honorary whites." During the Q&A, I asked how she understood the wave of violence against South Asians and people "who appeared to be Arab" during the aftermath of September 11 if all Asians were indeed "honorary whites." I suggested that the events following 9/11 showed evidence that Asian Americans were not as close to being white as sociologists of immigration once thought, and that the moment we were living through provided an opportunity for sociologists to revise the story line about Asian assimilation in the United States. At this point, the seminar coordinator went to the next question rather than give Foner time to respond to my concerns. A few questions later, another Asian American scholar said, "I would like to repeat the question Grace asked, since it was not answered"; however, the question was glossed over again. Alba and Foner, as two of the top social scientists in the field of immigration studies, continue to produce constructions of the honorary white Asian, while scholars in other fields argue against these notions to bring questions of political and psychic violence to bear on the assimilation paradigm. For an excellent juxtaposition to Foner, see Puar and Rai 2004.

10. The work done the Rainbow Center in Flushing, New York—a shelter for abused or homeless Korean women married to U.S. servicemen, further demonstrates the ways in which the unequal power relations in these marriages often make assimilation impossible for these women. Takagi and Park (1996) also document how Korean women married to U.S. servicemen have unusually high rates of divorce, domestic violence, and mental illness.

11. For another example of the transgenerational haunting of biracial Koreans, see www.halfkorean.com, where you can find interviews with "prominent half Koreans" born of Korean mothers and American fathers who served in the U.S. military. One of the standard interview questions is "How did your parents meet?" The answers typically reflect not knowing any details about one's family history. One interviewee says, "I'm not exactly sure how they met. All I really know is my father was stationed in Korea when he served in the Air Force." Another responds, "My dad works for the US government and was on assignment in Korea and that is how they met."

12. Keller addresses many of the same issues as the biracial Vietnamese choreographer Maura Nguyen Donahue whose work looks at the impact of U.S. militarism on Vietnamese children fathered by U.S. soldiers during the Vietnam War. One of the statistics presented in Donahue's dance piece "SKINning the SurFACE" is that only one in a hundred Amerasian children ever meets their father.

13. In other interviews, Keller speaks of being the biracial child of a Korean mother and an American father, but to my knowledge, she does not reveal any details

about how her parents met. Perhaps like other biracial Korean Americans, she may never have been told about her family history, or like the haunted subjects of Abraham and Torok's work, she experienced a "twofold and contrary effect: the prohibition of knowledge coupled with an unconscious investigation. As a result 'haunted' individuals are caught between two inclinations. They must at all costs maintain the ignorance of a loved one's secret; hence the semblance of unawareness (nescience) concerning it. At the same time they must eliminate the state of secrecy; hence the reconstruction of the secret in the form of unconscious knowledge" (1994, 188).

14. As I have been suggesting, there is not a clear delineation between fact and fiction, particularly when one takes into account both the force of the unconscious and the stigma of prostitution. Even in empirically driven social research, there is an element of fictionalization both in the stories that interviewees tell about themselves and in the way that interview data gets put into a coherent sociological narrative.

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