Ink Painting and Woodblock Printing

Narrating Violence through the Brush Stroke

Victoria Lupascu

1 Introduction

This chapter focuses on graphic narratives of abuse and violence in Asia, notably those depicting the Sino-Japanese war and Japanese aggression in Korea from late 1930s to the end of the 1940s[1] and during particular periods during the twentieth century in the People's Republic of China. Keum Suk Gendry-Kim's graphic novel, *Grass*, and Li Kunwu and P. Otie's *A Chinese Life* draw their own and other's encounters with war, abuse and violence starting from an early age and challenge the existing political discourses around the events they recount in and from South Korea and China. In analyzing the aesthetic means that render violence into both the subject and the object of these works, I argue that their black and white, heavy ink styles create the narrative dimension that allows the unspeakable to take shape on paper. Words alone are not sufficient to encompass the immensity of prolonged war and violence, but the aesthetic change in storytelling brought about by graphic novels allows for a multifaceted depiction of abuse and violent exploitation of children, women and the poor.

1 I am using the term Korea here as a signifier for the geographical location, as the split into North and South Korea happened in 1948. The fact that the graphic novel I am focusing on comes out of what today is South Korea should not create too much confusion.

Drawing on a long tradition of ink painting in Asia, Gendry-Kim, Li Kunwu and P. Ôtie revisit the wood block printing and ink-wash modalities not only to situate their works inside the Korean or Chinese artistic canon, but to create an internal tension between the subject and its representation. In *Grass* and *A Chinese Life*, the artists' choice of very dark scenery emerging from thick brush strokes suggests the heavy violence suffusing the air, the unbearable despair of hunger and cold and the seemingly interminable states of emergency. The graphic novels superimpose traditional types of strokes and leave the visually heavier pages without any text in a political move to demonstrate the truthfulness of their testimonies. This became an imperative as the Chinese, Korean and Japanese states have actively denied past acts such as the use of comfort women for the Japanese army all over Asia or the atrocities happening during the twentieth century in China.

Inspired by Dominick LaCapra's and Cathy Caruth's studies in trauma theory, as well as Hillary Chute's and Diana Taylor's intellectual work in visual studies and representations of war and violence in graphic novels, I return to Kelly Oliver's proposal of witnessing beyond recognition. In other words, I argue that the visual enables the textual in offering a narrativity dimension words alone don't possess, especially when trauma is recounted by children. The graphic novel performs the act of witnessing, and while it cannot recognize itself as the subject of violence, it affirms the past and becomes an act of testimony against political denial.

Lastly, the two graphic novels here allow us to explore the relationship between the visual and the textual but refuse the aestheticization of violence: the implicit scope is legibility through canonic lenses to inscribe the children and women's voices into a historic period that still needs to be ethically, politically and philosophically interrogated.

2 The violent historical context

The Maoist period (1949–1976) in China is often portrayed as a time of intense transformation punctuated by violence (Wemheuer 2019). How-

ever, it is important to mention that before Mao Zedong founded the People's Republic of China and became its leader, national and international turmoil ravaged the territory of present-day China. The two World Wars notwithstanding, China went through the fall of the last dynasty (namely, the Qing dynasty,1636 to 1911), a period of domination by war lords, a republican period from 1912 to 1949 dominated by foreign invasion, division of Chinese territory between foreign countries, the Second Sino-Japanese War (1931 to 1945) and the Civil War between Nationalists and Communists (1927–1937 and 1945–1949). Other notable events before the end of the Qing dynasty worth mentioning are the Second Opium War, the First Sino-Japanese War and the Boxer Rebellion that shook the entire region and disrupted in various ways agricultural cycles, regeneration cycles and society all-together (Dikötter 2008). This enumeration suggests that violence and abuse in a conflict-ridden context were on a continuum for the better part of a century in what today we call the People's Republic of China. The founding of the PRC represented the nominal end of conflicts, the disappearance of immediate foreign threats and the chance of finding one's identity and position in a much calmer society for the most part. Contrary to these political promises of peace and prosperity, the historical context did not lose its violent nature.

While the wars ended in 1949, recovery in and through the Maoist period was not a serene process, nor violence free. Mao Zedong's doctrine and vision for the newly formed state was heavily influenced by the USSR and his own determination for the state to be able to provide food for everyone, education and basic health services. His intentions and successful implementation of some of these policies and programs have been widely recognized and praised—one example that comes to mind is the high esteem and influence Mao's 'health care for all' initiative had at the 1978 World Health Organization Conference at Alma Ata (in the then Kazakh Soviet Socialist Republic) (Kadetz and Stanley-Baker 2022). Despite considerable advances, many nation-wide movements inadvertently brought about destruction and suffering. The two widely known examples are the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution (Wemheuer 2019). The former (1958 -1962) was an all-encompassing campaign following the second five-year plan of the PRC to transform

the country from an agrarian economy to a communist society through the formation of people's communes, increased grain yields, rural industrialization and thought reformation towards a whole-hearted embrace of the Maoist doctrine. The political persecution campaigns resulted in officials under- or overreporting grain yields and industrial advances and the construction of parallel discourses around the economy in order to escape imprisonment or other types of retaliation. At the same time, agricultural collectivization, the communal kitchens with little at-home cooking, poorly designed infrastructure and political struggle sessions for those who opposed such measures created an atmosphere suffused with fear, poverty, hunger and confusion in heavy contrast to the original intention set by the CCP[2], namely to better people's daily life.

The end of the Great Leap Forward and the Great Chinese Famine it engendered with casualties ranging from 15 to 55 million people have been officially attributed to natural disasters and Mao's opposition (Songlin 2021). A similar rhetoric appears when talking about the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) whose goal was to remove any political opposition and consolidate power for those already in charge. One of the most important aspects in this period was the co-optation of children as political agents into the movement. In other words, children and adolescents, as Red Guards, were given the power to denounce their parents or neighbors, or anyone else for that matter, as people's enemies, or Party's enemies (Yang 2017). They were taken seriously, and parents were killed, oppressed, tortured or deported as a result of such denouncing. A famous example is the well-known director Chen Kaige, who directed *Farewell My Concubine* and *Yellow Earth* among many other masterful films, who at 14 years old denounced his father for creating subversive art. The father was heavily persecuted thereafter. This type of behavior and its repercussions in such a context become the subject and the object of the graphic narrative analyzed in this chapter, *A Chinese Life*.

The war between the people on the Korean Peninsula and Japan had been a longstanding geopolitical issue, starting as early as the 16th

2 CCP is the abbreviation for the Chinese Communist Party.

century. However, Japan officially announced the annexation of Korea in 1910 after prolonged conflicts (Jo 2023). The peninsula was considered part of the Empire of Japan until 1945 and during this time Korean language and culture were heavily fought against and violently suppressed. In this context, subjects such as settler colonialism and genocide are not out of place. For this reason and the Empire's actions in Asia, the Empire of Japan was tried in the International Military Tribunal for the Far East, also named the Tokyo Trial or the Tokyo War Crimes Tribunal after the end of the Second World War (Cohen and Totani 2018). Another subject receiving international attention as part of the Trial revolved around the comfort women. Young women, some from Korea, China, Taiwan and many other occupied territories were forced into sexual slavery in comfort stations all over Asia. While a form of domination through violence and part of the prolonged war in Asia, and despite multiple trials and public outrage over more than half a century, Japan refused to formally apologize and/or compensate survivors and their relatives (Nishino, Kim, Onozawa 2018). The South Korean Government also did not do its utmost for the survivors and their families (Carranza Ko 2023). The lack of such an apology implying the denial of history has fueled various cultural and political moves to construct and sustain testimony that would survive the survivors and provide historical documents to oppose official history. This is one of the goals for the graphic narrative *Grass* by Keum Suk Gendry-Kim.

The historical background positions the two graphic narratives, *A Chinese Life* and *Grass*, in the context they are representing. This chapter does not compare the two directly in political terms, it analyzes them together for their aesthetic attempt at writing and showing the unspeakable. Both follow long periods of time, covering multiple decades and underscoring traumatic events that not only impacted the authors and their families, but society and the world at large. For *A Chinese Life*, its three volumes start in 1949 and end in the 2000s, while *Grass* starts in 1934 and ends around 1996. They share artistic techniques through which they can rework previous experiences and produce counter-narratives as retrospective reconfigurations of existing knowledge. It is here that the graphic narratives show their epistemological enabling of narrativ-

ity, understood as a re-working of previous patterns and elements with a communicative function in mind. *A Chinese Life* and *Grass* articulate available signs of violence through traditional aesthetic means to better anchor them in history.

3 Wood block printing and ink painting

The authors of *A Chinese Life* and *Grass*, Li Kunwu, Philippe Ôtié and Keum Suk Gendry-Kim use wood block printing techniques, ink painting and ink wash, as well as caricature at times as their preferred illustration modes.

Ink brush painting is a type of Chinese brush painting using the same black ink common in calligraphy (Jullien 2009). It started in the Tang dynasty, that is around 7th century CE, and it is not interested in realistic depictions or techniques, but in catching the "spirit" of a subject. It heavily emphasizes the brushwork, the turns and twists that come out of the artists hand that will convey the subject's essence. This type of painting, in both China and Korea, was closely connected to calligraphy and poetry, and, moreover, in Hu Zhiying's theorization, was a "pluralistic continuation of multiple historical traditions" (Hu 2003). Notably, this type of painting, at its origins and throughout history, has privileged the affective aspect: the scenes were at best loose adaptations of scenery or people's figures, as the main goal was to evoke certain feelings, to spark philosophical conversations about humans' place in the world and their relationship with nature, the latter's beauty etc. At the same time, due to the type of paper and ink, strokes could not be changed, or covered over or erased. On one hand, this suggests the difficulty of mastering such an art form and, on the other hand, it implies affective singularity.

In A *Chinese Life*, Ôtie and Li interlace ink painting techniques with woodblock printing relying on an equally long Chinese tradition that started around the 3rd century CE (Allen 2010). This artistic method comprises a few steps each: an image is first carved into a block of wood and then covered with ink so that the image will show in print, in a relief

printing sequence. Intense and laborious, this technique has been used over the centuries for both textile and paper printing but has been abandoned in the modern and contemporary eras as it could not compete with mass printing. However, the act of carving into wood a specific image brings up the issue of temporality, permanence and materiality before the printing even takes place. The famous Chinese writer Lu Xun (1881–1936) emphasizes such characteristics when encouraging and supporting the New Woodcut Movement (Lin and Tsai 2014), springing it into action in the 1920s in China and persuading his peers to use this type of printing as the best way to represent society. The dark woodcuts have condensed compositions and, traditionally, focus on the suffering inflicted by social and political struggles, by war or famine.

At the end of the 19th century and beginning of the 20th in China, there was no shortage of artistic societies who favored this type of art and, who in their frenzy, instrumentalized it through their practices. Despite this tendency, however, the Wooden Bell Woodcut Research Society articulated, as shown by Tang Xiaobing, two salient features of the woodcut movement, namely "a commitment to represent the underrepresented, and a conviction in the exhortative power of a distinctly democratic artistic medium." (Tang 2015, 139). Furthermore, Hu Yichuan, in his work entitled *To the Front*, contends that his motivation was "not to offer an indexical reference, as photographic documents were intended to do, but instead to establish an interpretative frame for an overwhelming crisis. (....) for this, woodcut printing offers clarity and an unambivalent take on the situation" (cited in Tang 2015, 120). In doing so, the woodcut printing movement conceives of a visual language that recognizes the prevalent structures of visibility and visual representation and positions itself away from oil painting. The class-based implications notwithstanding, woodcut printing offers the form through which we can read the period from the 1920s to the 1940s (cited in Tang 2015, 120) — in other words, its formalism co-producing a historical discourse alongside literary journals where these images would be published.

The use of such a technique, or a style resembling woodcut/woodblock printing, in graphic novels refines, I contend, the aesthetic pat-

terns that allow traumatic narratives to be recognized as such in contemporary culture; it also revives a narrative dimension that contextualizes daily life as a traumatic continuum, not as a collection of exceptional events. Lastly, in assuming the freedom of artistic collage, overlaying and braiding different aesthetic and political positions, these graphic novels become "initiators of discursive practices" (Bacchi and Bonham 2014) that enrich the extant context.

4 A Chinese Life

Set to illustrate engagement with historical events throughout the 20th century, the graphic novel *A Chinese Life* positions itself in the minor register of the personal. Starting with the title, the indefinite article "a" cancels any claims to universalization[3] by following one character, their family and their individual and collective response to sweeping violence. The presence of the adjective "Chinese", on the contrary, classifies the noun it precedes and localizes violence in a particular geography. The tension between the indefinite article and the specific adjective, while suggesting one, isolated way of many of engaging with life, it also creates enough epistemological ambiguity to allow the graphic novel's content to dialectically define this "life" and the adjective "Chinese". The content visualizes displacement, famine and violence, all of which become perspectives through which life can be understood and interpreted.

3 The graphic narrative was first written in French and the same use of the article is present there.

Figure 1: A Chinese Life, p.52

Li, K. and Ôtié Philippe (2012) *A Chinese life*. London: SelfMadeHero, 52

In Figure 1 we see a family who suffers through the Great Chinese Famine during the Great Leap Forward. The protagonist's family went from the city to the countryside as they believed there could have been more food there and reconnected with the side of the family who remained in the village. They bring a small present, what appears to be a

small cake or piece of tofu and are distressed to have to split the small cake into countless pieces so that everyone can have a taste. While the graphic narrative follows what Scot McCloud theorized as sequential art (McCloud 1994), the panels are unequal and their difference in size and mise-en-page underscores the amount of focus and time needed to engage with each of them. The middle panel, larger in size, clarifies the context: everyone flocked around the table to get a piece of food; their faces are slightly contorted while looking at it. Grandma assures everyone their turn will come, but the panel's dark atmosphere and the visual mechanics contrasting people's bodies, especially their faces, and the pieces of food they are waiting for show the beginning of a long famine. The alteration of scale in the unbalanced ration between the crowding of bodies around the table taking up most of the space in the panel and the pieces of food barely visible, implies the gravity of the situation. The tension between the visual and the textual starts to form as Grandma tells everyone they will receive an equal part. One panel over, the alternation of focus between the giving and the receiving hands, the change in positions signal the almost complete disconnection between text and image. Grandma's advice is to chew really well and not to swallow too quickly after someone receives one piece of food. The advice falls short very fast when we notice that a piece needed to be distributed to five hands. There is no text in this last panel as the image stands out on itself. The reader has already been taught how to read the image and the narrativity becomes a clear function of the reader (Pier and Garcia Landa 2008).

Following Michael Chaney's theorization of graphic narratives in *Reading Lessons in Seeing*, "rather than illustrating things, the images and the composition **are** the thinking" (Chaney 2018). On this page, Grandma's echoing the egalitarian thinking proposed by the government and the logic behind the communes and her stating that "everyone will have their turn" and "everyone will receive an equal part" falls short and enhances famine's violence on those who have believed they will receive this or any other small, equal piece if they wait for their turn. This page sequentially strengthens narrativity as it visually reconfigures the official discourse and forms a type of visual pedagogy. The reader is

shown how slogans become violent, their impact on bodies and the despair they create, through simple elements organized in a type of black and white composition where the focus and the scale, not to mention the changes in point of view, define the growing intensity in the panels. Neither the countryside, nor the urban areas had access to more food, but they both engaged in a mutual suspicion of the other.

Figure 2: A Chinese Life, p. 75.

Li, K. and Ôtié Philippe (2012) *A Chinese life*. London: SelfMadeHero, 75

Figure 3: A Chinese Life, p. 76.

Li, K. and Ôtié Philippe (2012) *A Chinese life*. London: SelfMade-Hero, 76

In Figure 2, the panel's diegetic composition, drawing on the tension between image and text, further illustrates the progression of famine. In the first panel we see people gathered in a communal space, one of them reading the slogan on the wall, "We take care of each other, we love each other. . ." The images, in a cinematic move, will zoom in to show us how one of the main characters' brothers has come from the countryside to the city to look for food, doing the reverse trip we have seen in Figure 1. Liuba is very tense, unrecognizable and does not answer his sister's

questions. On the contrary, he starts threatening that he will bite and devour everyone around. The face, the long fingers with pointy nails, as well as the panel's atmosphere indicate madness, which is dietetically confirmed on the next page. Liuba is mad because of hunger. He and his family had to eat their sheep and the dog and started to threaten his neighbors. His hunger is so intense he claims, "I will eat the entire Earth and the Sky too!" and bursts into a loud laughter. The violence on this page comes not only from Liuba's madness, but also from the fact that his brother-in-law does not believe hunger was a reason for madness. In the corner panel on the left side, the brother-in-law claims he is disappointed in Liuba going mad because he had to eat his own dog. The dismissal at the bottom of the page grows even larger as the brother-in-law mentions that "the situation is so dramatic that one cannot take pity on a dog". The human-non-human relations notwithstanding, the irony brewing on this page is palpable and implies the dissolution of all connections, all sense and logic. Lastly, the panels on this page suggest that the Great Famine was indeed catastrophic, (a few degrees more severe than the adjective "dramatic" used by the brother-in-law) and transformed social and political relations, not just isolated, individual lives.

The visual-textual relationship proposes depictions of famine in a visually pedagogic way that builds the irony, the tension and the expectations in a progressive, constant manner. The woodblock printing style not only contributes to the panels' aesthetic formation, but functions as a means of legitimizing the existence of violence, of famine and the dissolution of human relations, while, through the idea of woodblocks' existence, materializes testimonies. Also, this graphic narrative takes what Hillary Chute argued for a step further. Chute claims that "the complex visualizing [this graphic novel] undertakes suggests that we need to rethink the dominant tropes of unspeakability, invisibility, and inaudibility that have tended to characterize trauma theory" (Chute 2016). *A Chinese Life* rethinks visuality as a form of rethinking history, as a way of expressing the affective charge of what words fail to describe. The woodblock printing and the ink painting styles facilitate this endeavor from their position as canonical aesthetic means of capturing fleeting encounters, emotions and invisible details. The innovation Li and Ôtie

bring to the table stems from their goal of making the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution aesthetically legible to Chinese art, Chinese culture, and, hence, to suggest that the dominant historical discourse is one part of a flow of interpretations and renditions of events.

Given the violence and extreme turn of events in short periods of time, personal memory can fail to recount entire sequences of events, especially when the perpetrators where children. Set during the Cultural Revolution, the panels refer to a specific policy that granted children, adolescents and young adults the right to denounce everyone as a Party enemy. Taking advantage of slogans' ambiguity, vocabulary obscureness, hunger, and interpersonal tensions, the local authorities asked children to turn in everyone they considered suspicious. In the first set, the right-hand side page takes rumors and gossip as its object and shows how children enabled each other in their denouncing, chasing and struggling against their elders, or, more precisely, what seem to be their teachers. What is even more dramatic appears at the bottom of the second page where the child who denounced the teachers tries to recount the series of events, but fails and admits "what followed. . . , what followed it's erased from my memory". As we will see with the graphic novel *Grass*, these three sequential panels play with time and space, past, present and everything in between, in order to "feel out the contours of cultural responses and social reactions to trauma, rather than define or delineate trauma itself", as Davies D. proposes (Davies 2019). The violence is all-encompassing to the degree that memory cannot hold it. Differently put, the blank spaces occupy a diffuse and unstable cultural ground, or in Sarah Ahmed's words "saturated with affect and personal tensions" (Ahmed 2014). Lastly, but just as importantly, the interplay between present and past, memory and forgetting we see in the last panels on the right openly acknowledges the relationship between trauma and memory, relativizes the testimonial nature of visual remembering and its accuracy while stating its importance on this diffuse ground. Once more, the contours of cultural responses take precedence over iron-clad, yet, elusive, definitions.

Figure 4: A Chinese Life, p. 143.

Li, K. and Ôtié Philippe (2012) *A Chinese life*. London: SelfMadeHero, 143

Figure 5: A Chinese Life, p. 159.

Li, K. and Ôtié Philippe (2012) *A Chinese life*. London: SelfMadeHero, 159

When contrasted with the left-hand side page, the last four panels in figure 5 subtly perform a change in narrative registers. On the left and to the bottom of the right side, there is a cinematic view of each scene from an omniscient type of narrator. However, in the last three panels, the point of view changes, and the reader sees the child's confusion and shock. The text "what followed. . . what followed it's erased from my memory" describes the confusion and the shock, while it underscores the change in perspective to a first-person narrator. Additionally, it is not just the memory of events whose mechanics become unclear, but the subject himself disappears with little traces to be seen. The small dots in the very last panel indicate a dissipation of the self, of an ontological loss due to extreme violence. The metalepsis offers a perspective on what is remembered and what remains untold, creating a metanarration that attempts to bring together the narrator and the author's past and the present. Because events got "erased from memory", the metaleptic jump indicating the narrator's disappearance becomes a reaction without object, a diffuse affective state situated in co-dependency with an actual, yet traumatic past.

5 Grass

At its beginnings, this narrative was designed as a semi-fictionalized thinking on social classes and gender disparity during the Second World War in Korea. Gendry-Kim's interviewing Li Ok-sun, an elderly Korean woman who lived through the war and its aftermath changed the plan (Lee and Hodapp 2022). The book became an intricate, non-fictional account of the Japanese occupation, comfort women, poverty, struggles and human relations.

In the graphic narrative, the very first thing we learn about Li Ok-sun is that her family was living in abject poverty and her parents sold her to a noodle shop in the nearest city. Ok-sun's most intense desire was to go to school, and she was ready to do hard labor for it. Her parents knew of this desire, and they used it to convince Ok-sun to leave without any fuss. The money they got for her helped alleviate poverty in order to

offer a better future to their son. Ok-sun did not know she was leaving the village forever and the two pages in figure 6 and 7 represent not only a metalepsis visible at the textual level but also a manipulation of time and space on the page.

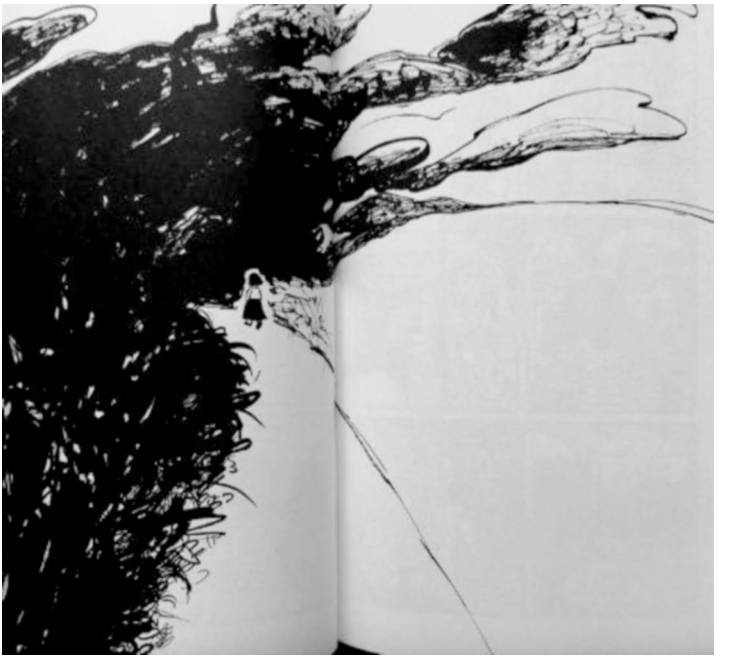
Figure 6: Grass, p. 80–1, 134

Gendry-Kim, K. S. (2019) *Grass*. First ed. Québec: Drawn & Quarterly, 80–1, 134

While the landscape might represent a memory, something from the past, the words come from the present time, "I shouldn't have said yes", a realization possible through temporal distance between the represented moment on the page and the author's present time. Ok-sun makes herself responsible and creates a retro-active possibility of refusing her departure from the village, assuming her parents would have gone back on

their decision (Juhila, Raitakari, Hall 2016). There is no sure way to know, and her imagined agency raises questions of guilt, shame and retroactive, fictional agency in the aftermath of traumatic events.

Figure 7: Grass, p. 80–1, 135



Gendry-Kim, K. S. (2019) *Grass*. First ed. Québec: Drawn & Quarterly, 80–1, 135

The landscape on the right side is devoid of any human presence and it is only the text that functions like a cinematic voice-over that indicates any relation between humans and the environment. Upon a closer look, the shapes in the background can stand in for the huts in Ok-sun's village, in which case the perspective is given by Ok-sun throwing a last look behind, her body facing forward, and her head turned back. The page

to the right shows Ok-sun heading into a dark cloud, her body diminished by the barely shaped darkness. This page does not host any text but maintains the silence as it depicts Ok-sun heading into the unknown. Also, it questions the potentiality of agency, but it does not negate it, maintaining the illusion, through the contrast between the negative and the positive space on the page. The aesthetic theory at the basis of ink brush painting described the negative space as the location from which the viewer (or the reader in this case) can imagine the necessary elements of and contextualize what is happening in the positive space (Da-Wei 2012). The emphasis falls on the viewer and their affective engagement with the negative space, the painting becoming a hermeneutic tool of larger philosophical and political questions. The negative space in the right side can be populated with the drawing on the left, but it can also suggest Ok-sun's state of mind. Moreover, given the violence and hardship she faced after she was sold out of the village, the negative space can be interpreted as a more peaceful, less traumatic memory. In both cases, the ink brush painting style in this spread allows for a reconfiguration of personal memory while restating past events and negotiates narrativity (as a function of the reader and as a retrospective reconfiguration of available signs) without words.

Additionally, the two spreads[4], with no panels, gutter or even speech bubbles depart from the conventions of graphic narratives and metaphorically show a winter landscape. This does not sequentially follow the previous pages and leaves the audience wondering about its signification. The spread to the right, where little Ok-sun is heading towards a dark cloud implying her future struggles, points to the temporal and spatial manipulation happening on the page that gives the two spreads a strong testimonial dimension. The ink brush painting underscores the affective encounter between Ok-sun and her new life and performs an important task: just like some cinema verité techniques, these four pages, with this specific aesthetic style, tell us from the very beginning how the narrative will unfold and warn us about

4 A spread, in graphic novels and comics, represents an image drawn on two pages.

any possibility of hope for the better. Thus, the emphasis falls on the "*how*", the mechanics and the memories of surviving, all essential in the reclamation of survivors' voices (Shearer-Cremean and Winkelmann 2005).

Figure 8: Grass, p. 162–3

Gendry-Kim, K. S. (2019) *Grass*, Montréal, Québec: Drawn & Quarterly, 162–3

Ok-sun's life in the next village was not easy and she is kidnapped. Her life was not ideal in the noodle-shop, and she was not sent to school either. Her next station is also unbearable and very violent and does not heed her pleads of going to school. She is abducted by two Japanese soldiers in plain clothes and taken far away into China to serve the Japanese army's needs. There is a moment of visual, diegetic recognition between the young and the old Ok-sun in Figure 8 and it continues in Figure 9.

Figure 9: Grass, p. 164–5

Gendry-Kim, K. S. (2019) *Grass*, Montréal, Québec: Drawn & Quarterly, 164–5

This juxtaposition represents an important moment of presence. In other words, Lynne Huffer's ethical question of "how can the other reappear at the site of her inscriptional effacement?" (Huffer 2001) is rerouted through the brush stroke and into a corroboration of past and present. Hence, this graphic narrative, as well as *A Chinese Life* demonstrate what Hillary Chute calls "an expanded idiom of witness/ing, a manner of testifying that sets a visual language in motion with and against the verbal in order to embody individual and collective experience, to put contingent selves and histories into form" (Chute 2016, 3). Ok-sun remembers her abduction and she testifies to it through the brush stroke against political and historical effacement. The comfort women issue is highly contested in Asia and the survivors' voices have been silenced with every occasion. The graphic narrative inserts an older-looking representation of Ok-sun back into the narrative at the moment of her abduction to make her the witness to her own story, challenging thus legal theories of wit-

nessing and violence against women. Her voice, textual or visual, performs dynamic metalepsis to create and re-create the self from her very complex, woman survivor position.

Conceptually, the visual language remains closely connected to the written, since ink brush painting and calligraphy share their practice, tools, skills and even ethos. The kidnapping followed by an empty landscape on the following page can be interpreted as effacement, but, from this aesthetic perspective, insinuates the recording of the event into nature firstly, and into the audience's perception while reading the graphic narrative. The "writing as painting" and "self-writing into the landscape" constituting, hence, a few ways of testifying and witnessing mediated through a traditional aesthetic.

Figure 10: Grass, p. 190–1

Gendry-Kim, K. S. (2019) *Grass*, Montréal, Québec: Drawn & Quarterly, 190–1

It is not only Ok-sun who was kidnapped, but many more girls. Before being brought into the comfort station each one of them, from different backgrounds, countries, and, importantly, using different languages and dialects, was flown into different other locations, blind

folded or kept in freight containers on trains, all in order to dislocate them and make it even harder for any of the girls to escape. Nonetheless, they try to run away and it is not the very cold weather, their disorientation, the hunger or the tiredness, but the fact that at the barbed fence around the station they find a dead body that prevents them from even trying to make it past it. The reality of death appears very clear in front of their eyes, and despite the horrors of the comfort station, the fear of death keeps them inside.

The left side tells us "We had no choice but to work until we dropped dead. There was no way out." Thus, the three girls go back to their barracks and their return, under a starry sky fulfills multiple functions. Firstly, the graphic narrative equates their captivity with being in the world, from where, other than death, there is no other way out. Life as they knew it was synonym with violence, abuse and rape whose destructive power encompassed everything the same way the sky covered everything on the right side in Figure 10. The visual composition in both pages plays with proportions and scale and depicts the girls diminutively in comparison to the surrounding environment. Secondly, the return challenges critiques regarding the girls own agency. At this point in the narrative, as opposed to the pages where Ok-sun was sold out of her village, agency can't even be retrospectively imagined. Here, the graphic narrative frames violence and sexual slavery as a naturalized historical fact that needs to be engaged with as such.

6 Conclusion

By way of conclusion, I want to reiterate the importance of visual pedagogy via woodblock printing and ink brush painting these graphic narratives propose for building a multifaceted depiction of abuse and violent exploitation of women and children. The geographical location, while culturally important, cannot become an exceptionalizing element that ends the conversation on such topics and continues to efface survivor's voices denying them the possibility of healing. Moreover, *A Chinese Life* and *Grass*, reject theories of unspeakability and invisibility

in an important political move, as these categories can and have been politicized and used for denying eyewitness accounts, testimonies and demands for reparations and apologies. Lastly, the two graphic narratives' use of traditional artistic techniques makes testimonies legible to the Chinese and Korean artistic canon and inscribe children and women's voices into historical periods that still need to be interrogated.

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