

JUDIT NAGY

Private Memory and Public History in Chang-rae Lee's *A Gesture Life* and in Christina Park's *The Homes We Build on Ashes*

Introduction

Doc Hata of *Bedley Run* and Nara Lee of *Vancouver* are troubled by past traumatic events intertwined with the history of their ancestral homeland. Their experience of loss dominates the memories they have of the place they once called their home, where their saga of multiple displacement began. Moreover, they also share the remorse over failing to protect someone close. Former comfort station medical staff Doc Hata's reminiscences of Kkutaeh and Minjoo's narrative of her accidental kidnapping and subsequent afflictions punctuated with Nara's factual input offer a near-historical portrayal of Japanese military sexual slavery. In an attempt to uncover how private memories and public history are linked in Lee and Park's respective novels, this paper will discuss the following points: story lines and narration, the perpetrator's tale, Doc Hata and Minjoo's respective stories of sexual slavery, and finally, the authors' comments on their motivation, sources and insights.

Story lines and narration

First, an explanation will be provided as to how the story lines and the narrative patterns help forge the link between personal memory and public history in the two novels. Lee's novel has two parallel story lines. One focuses on wartime events in the past, the other on Doc Hata's current life in the United States. The narrator, Doc Hata oscillates between "an intense, violent setting where bizarre and sadistic things would happen" and the "vernal, tidy, and controlled suburban setting" of *Bedley Run*.¹ Chapter 6 takes the first plunge into Doc Hata's past. In an interview with Sarah Ann Johnson, Lee explains, "I tried to institute and develop that suburban setting to an extent where it feels like that's what the book is, and only then switch gears".² The two storylines converge when Kkutaeh appears in Doc Hata's *Bedley Run* home in the form of a hallucination, symbolic of the past nagging at Doc Hata's present life. The beginning of the novel's closing paragraph contains Doc Hata's prayer for reconciliation with his past:

¹ Sarah Ann JOHNSON: „An Interview with Chang-rae Lee”. https://www.awpwriter.org/magazine_media/writers_chronicle_view/2464/an_interview_with_chang-rae_lee Accessed 15 April 2023.

² *Ibid.*

Let me simply bear my flesh, and blood, and bones. I will fly a flag. Tomorrow, when this house is alive and full, I will be outside, looking in. I will be already on a walk some place, in this town or the next or one five thousand miles away. I will circle round and arrive again. Come almost home.³

Almost in the last sentence suggests that full reconciliation in this sense is impossible. In Lee's novel, other characters are also seen and described through Doc Hata's eyes, their words are put in quotation marks, including those of Kkutaeh. Lee has amply commented on his choice of first person narration for *A Gesture Life*. His interest centers on the exploration of the inner world of his sole narrator all throughout, "the drama of consciousness."⁴ He also warns, though, that there is a certain limitation due to the ever-present filter of the character's consciousness "on his self view and world view."⁵ Accordingly, by employing a disclaimer at the very beginning of the story, Doc Hata deems himself an unreliable narrator:

[i]t seems difficult enough to consider one's own triumphs or failures with perfect verity, for it's no secret that the past proves a most unstable mirror, typically too severe and too flattering at once, and never as truth-reflecting as people would like to believe.⁶

His unreliability, as Lee suggests in an interview with Ron Hogan, "has to do with his own feelings and emotions and psyche"⁷ deeply affected by his past experience. Memories are of a subjective nature. At the same time, they also form important building blocks of public history through the variety of perspectives they offer.

Park chooses a different narrative strategy to unfold her story. Her novel opens with the Busan fire of 1953. The description of the fire and how it devoured Nara's neighborhood including her newly built home is followed by an account of Nara's school days in the 1930s. From that point on, the story progresses towards the present with occasional flashbacks signifying earlier events, such as the 1919 Independence Movement, Nara's escape from Daegu, Minjoo's story or the tale of the phoenix. The initial image of the Busan fire places the loss of home as a theme in focus right from the beginning of the novel. Many of the shared retrospective episodes to follow, among them, Minjoo's first-hand experience of Japanese sexual slavery, echo this theme, in close connection with ways of rebuilding, mitigation and the „spiritual resilience of women in the face of colonial and domestic violence."⁸

³ Chang-rae LEE: *A Gesture Life*. New York, Riverhead Books, 1999, 356.

⁴ JOHNSON *op. cit.*

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ LEE *op. cit.* 5.

⁷ Ron HOGAN: "Chang-Rae Lee". <http://www.beatrice.com/interviews/lee/> Accessed 12 April 2023.

⁸ Alissa McARTHUR: "The Homes We Build on Ashes". <https://roommagazine.com/the-homes-we-build-on-ashes/> Accessed 1 April 2022.

Another important feature of Park's narration is her creation of a menacing atmosphere, which functions as a foreshadowing tool to contextualize the fate which befalls Minjoo. Such sinister episodes include the public school beatings, the Japanese military breaking into and subsequently closing the missionary school, or ominous whispers about the orphanage such as "[t]hose places [...] are no good at all right now. [...] It is not safe in those places."⁹ In addition, both Park and Lee make use of the object-triggers-memory scheme be it the geisha doll Nara smashes in her Vancouver apartment or the shreds of the black flag stashed away in Doc Hata's Bedley Run house. Through the symbolism these objects carry, they evoke personal memory and make remnants of public history at the same time.

The Homes We Build on Ashes is narrated in third person singular, with the narrator filling in on some important historical details. Nara allows Minjoo to share her experience with the reader directly, while also providing the broader historical context of these happenings through her own insights, thus enabling the reader to place Minjoo's experience in a wider perspective. What is more, the affective overtones of Minjoo's account are accentuated by Nara mediating what she actually sees looking at Minjoo and how that makes her feel. While Lee is presenting the issue of military sexual slavery through Doc Hata's internal drama, Park uses what Lee terms an "outwardly dramatic" narrator¹⁰ to achieve affective complexity and to provide the narrative perspective bridging personal memory and history.

The perpetrator's tale

"Survivors tell stories or create testimonies that bridge the gaps in historical and personal memory," states Miller in his analysis of *A Gesture Life*.¹¹ Having witnessed the plight of Japanese military sexual slaves in some way or other, both Doc Hata and Nara can be considered survivors, who "provide history to a silent story."¹² However, their position as survivors is very special. Doc Hata is employed as medical staff in the Japanese Imperial Army at a *comfort station* during WWII, so, through his profession, he becomes an instrument in the systematic victimization of military sexual slaves. "Though not all-powerful, he's also someone with a measure of control, which puts him in an unenviable position with respect to the women," Lee elaborates.¹³ From the weekly check-ups Doc Hata conducts, he is fully aware of the harsh treatment and fiendish violence 'comfort women' are exposed to, he is also familiar with their appalling living conditions. He himself does not frequent

⁹ Christina PARK: *The Homes We build on Ashes*, Toronto, Inanna Publications and Education Inc., 2015, 73.

¹⁰ JOHNSON: *op. cit.*

¹¹ Matthew MILLER: "Chang-rae Lee's *A Gesture Life*: The Recuperation of Identity". *Ethnic Studies Review*, Volume 32, Issue 2, 2009. 1–23.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ JOHNSON: *op. cit.*

the *comfort station*, yet, he provides just enough medical care to keep the women in service, which is “not against [his] field training,” he confesses.¹⁴ Furthermore, on an occasion, he forces one of the girls back to an officer. This all lends support to the argument that Doc Hata is not just a survivor witnessing the hardships of military sexual slaves but can also be seen as a perpetrator. To make his position more complex, he possesses a ‘tragic flaw’, which brings about Kkutaeh’s and, in a way, his own downfall: in his doomed relationship with Kkutaeh, he fails to understand and respect her needs as a woman in her situation. Lee explains, “[t]he context does not allow for what any of us would think of as a real love. His love for her is perverse, even if he doesn’t think of it as perverse. [...] She can’t reciprocate in the way that he would want, and of course, something terrible is going to happen to her.”¹⁵

When Nara first observes Minjoo on the boat, she describes the apparent traces of violence on her body: “she had bruises on her face and neck like she had been strangled. Welts and cuts covered her arms in circular patterns that looked like cigarette burns. There were scars on her upper back and shoulders that ran deep, as though someone tried to skin her alive.”¹⁶ As a witness, she faithfully chronicles the visible effects of Minjoo’s brutal treatment, adding factual details to complement Minjoo’s own painful confession thereby acting as an agent connecting memory and history. Moreover, Nara herself experiences the cruelty of Japanese men as a slave labourer. When she makes a mistake handling the machine at the textile factory in Osaka:

One of [the men] punched her across the jaw while another kned her in the stomach and yet another struck her on the side of her head. [...] [T]he three kicked and stomped on her [...]; two of [the perpetrators] seemed to enjoy this with a perverse sexual pleasure, while the other descended into an animalistic frenzy.¹⁷

In addition to her Japanese superiors’ heinous attack on her, Nara is also to assist one of her fellow labourers at birth who “had been raped by one of the factory managers.”¹⁸ These experiences enable her to better comprehend what Minjoo had had to endure and add a certain complexity to Nara’s own position in the story.

When Minjoo dies shortly after their arrival in Pusan port, she bestows her testimony on Nara – a heavy burden for her to carry, given the circumstances of Minjoo’s kidnapping from the orphanage, which Nara witnesses but also allows to happen. In addition, she would have had the chance to inform Minjoo’s parents

¹⁴ “I was to employ the least wasteful treatment. [...] Which is what I did [...] each [...] time one of them was brought in, despite their terrible condition.” LEE: *op. cit.* 227.

¹⁵ JOHNSON: *op. cit.*

¹⁶ PARK: *op. cit.* 114.

¹⁷ PARK: *op. cit.* 92.

¹⁸ PARK: *op. cit.* 103.

about the incident, but, completely overtaken by fear and her survival instincts, she chooses to run away. Later, when Mr. Lim visits Pusan in search of her missing daughter, she lets another chance pass by to share with him what she now knows about his late daughter's fate. She only discloses the fact that Minjoo has passed away. This latter incident may be perceived as an act of grace, yet, similarly to Doc Hata, it may equally place Nara in the role of a perpetrator.

Lee recounts that initially, his novel centered around the character of a military sexual slave: "I'd written quite a bit of that first story, and it wasn't doing a lot of things for me that I wanted it to do. It didn't feel particularly fresh and different compared to the research I'd done."¹⁹ In fact, Doc Hata began as a side character in the original novel.

[What I wanted was] [n]ot to reflect solely on [Doc Hata's] experience in the camp, but to let that experience sear him psychically, forever. Once I started writing him, I then began to feel that this was a new story, definitely one I hadn't encountered in my research, and one that is the other side of the story, the perpetrator's tale.²⁰

Accordingly, both novels dwell upon the portrayal of the perpetrator's post-traumatic life and show how Doc Hata and Nara bear lifelong consequences of their actions. *A Gesture Life* concludes with Doc Hata flying the black flag calling for Kkutaeh in his perpetual spiritual voyage of coming "almost" home whereas Nara invokes Minjoo even on her deathbed: "[t]oday, for the first time, Minjoo turned around and saw Nara. She reached out her arm to Nara and Nara eagerly reached back. 'Oh, have you forgiven me, dear Minjoo?'"²¹

Perpetrators, like their victims, are traumatized, and their guilt keeps echoing relentlessly in the aftermath of their acts. Lee himself stresses that he intended to "bring home for the reader not just an act, [...], but the aftereffects, what happens in the act's wake. And, most interestingly, how people live in that wake."²² Indeed, the perpetrator's guilt surfaces in both novels in various ways. First, they see the dead in their current lives: Doc Hata talks to Kkutaeh as a ghost in his Bedley Run while Nara imagines her grandchild Lauren to be Minjoo's reincarnation. Second, guilt also manifests in the protagonist's unwillingness to share their memories in both novels. Thinking of Minjoo, Nara "refuse[s] to dwell on that part of the past" and "she push[es] the memories out of her mind as hard as she could unable to bear the guilt."²³ It is like "pulling yourself blindly through a mysterious resistance whose properties are slowly revealing themselves beneath you, in flame-like roils and

¹⁹ JOHNSON: *op. cit.*

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ PARK: *op. cit.* 254.

²² HOGAN: *op. cit.*

²³ PARK: *op. cit.* 5.

tendrils, the black fires of the past,”²⁴ Doc Hata describes, drawing a subtle parallel with the movement of the water in the swimmer’s wake. “Blindly”, “resistance”, and “revealing themselves” are symptomatic of his reluctance to speak. Meaning “muddy or thick with suspended matter,” the term “roil” implies the cloudy and soiled past looming while “tendril,” associated with climbing plants, captures its nagging and clinging quality. The color black brings a richness of associations into the image, the most important of which is perhaps the reference to the shreds of the black flag binding Doc Hata to what is left of Kkutaeh.

Details emerge little by little, triggered by “music and voices playing off the hidden trees,”²⁵ the tattered pieces of black silk, the pool, the dark fabric of the shop used for decoration, the cardboard school in Busan shanty town, Nara’s granddaughter, the cooking pot saved from the fire or the geisha doll Nara smashes “with an almost violent force.”²⁶ Lee himself confirms to have employed this strategy to build Doc Hata’s narrative of guilt. In addition, more in Lee than in Park, the reader is often left to infer the affective repercussions from the facts in terms of how they would reflect on the protagonist in the gapped texture of the narrative: “[Doc Hata] would never give a huge confession, so the narrative would have to provide an acknowledgement of what happened without any real show of emotion when he tells you these things. That was very important to me, that he was going to just let you know what happened and let it sit there.”²⁷ In Park, Minjoo focuses on the affective aspects of her experience of military sexual slavery while Nara is used as an instrument to fill in on some important historical details. At the same time, echoes of Nara’s guilt keep reverberating throughout the story and reach their climax in Minjoo’s haunting sentence “Do you remember, Nara? I was only visiting. I wanted to comfort you and keep you safe. I was only visiting.”²⁸ Thirdly, also signifying Doc Hata and Nara’s guilt, self-justification occurs on several occasions in the two novels. For example, Doc Hata mentions that in wartime everything works differently, thus commodities – which category includes the girls in his care – should not be handled wastefully, hence he keeps sending them back to resume their duty after the most basic ‘mending’ he can provide as a medical assistant, “for in wartime it was never a question of salubrity, really not for anyone.”²⁹ Or, upon witnessing the kidnapping scene, Nara “was traumatized and an uncontrollable self-preservation drove her away as fast as possible. She only had one thought, which was to survive, and she pushed away any other thought that would pose an obstacle,” which she points out as the reason why she did not stop to inform Minjoo’s parents of what she has witnessed, “[s]omething she would come to regret deeply and painfully.”³⁰

²⁴ LEE: *op. cit.* 152.

²⁵ LEE: *op. cit.* 105.

²⁶ PARK: *op. cit.* 228.

²⁷ HOGAN *op. cit.*

²⁸ PARK: *op. cit.* 120.

²⁹ LEE: *op. cit.* 226.

³⁰ PARK: *op. cit.* 80.

As has been shown, inherent to the perpetrator's tale, guilt is present in many different forms in both novels from episodes of hallucination, self-delusion and self-justification to structural enhancement, with the effect of making both Doc Hata and Nara's character more complex, while also providing an important additional narrative perspective for presenting and understanding the past.

Characters' respective stories of military sexual slavery

The next part of the paper will focus on the sexual slavery-related content of the two novels. Firstly, the reader is given the chance to learn how Kkutaeh and Minjoo became military sex slaves. Kkutaeh and her sister were "traded" by their parents for their brother about to be drafted. They were told they were going to work in a boot factory outside of *Shimonoseki*,³¹ while Minjoo accidentally fell victim to a kidnapping scheme arranged by the corrupt matron of Nara's orphanage, which also implies the responsibility of Korean collaborators regarding Japanese military sex slavery: "Nara watched motionless as the woman mumbled some rubbish to the men while they handed her a small envelope."³²

Next, Lee's novel provides a description of the military sexual slaves quarters, the five small wooden cabins of the 'comfort house' arranged in a line, the "tiny, windowless rooms, no more than the space of one and a half tatami mats", with a "wide plank wood" in the middle shaped like a coffin lid³³ emblematic of the girls' likely fate. Minjoo's testimonial does not contain any details in this respect.

In both novels, there are also textual references to the military sexual slaves' life. Doc Hata estimates that the three women "ranging from sixteen to twenty-one"³⁴ at the Rangoon camp have to serve 200 men, 20–30 a day, "the resulting insult [...] horribly painful and ignominious."³⁵ Minjoo confesses that "like it was some retail shop," they received 'visitors' from 8:00 am to 5:00 pm "all day, every day" and worse, secretly also at night.³⁶ In Lee, Mrs. Matsui, a Japanese woman in her fifties who "had obviously once been in the trade"³⁷ functions as the girls' "keeper", cooking meagre meals and providing them with minimal supplies and care to remain in service. She is also in charge of handing the soldiers their tickets to visit the *comfort house*. Minjoo makes only a brief reference to the "manager of the facility", who would get angry with the assaulted girls for "soiling the sheets with [their] blood" and who forced them to bathe for their *customers*.³⁸

³¹ LEE: *op. cit.* 250.

³² PARK: *op. cit.* 76.

³³ LEE: *op. cit.* 179.

³⁴ LEE: *op. cit.* 181.

³⁵ LEE: *op. cit.* 226.

³⁶ PARK: *op. cit.* 116.

³⁷ LEE: *op. cit.* 181.

³⁸ PARK: *op. cit.* 119.

Lee's novel makes mention of the medical surveillance conducted among sexual slaves, the purpose of which is "well-being aside, to make certain they could perform their duties for the men in the camp."³⁹ Mrs. Matsui readies them for the examination, spreads their legs apart and "holds them steady,"⁴⁰ if they are unwilling to comply. Doc Hata focuses on the paperwork and does not touch the girl's "swollen and bruised" privates, he inspects them only "visually"⁴¹, yet, he feels uncomfortable with them due to the catalytic role he plays in their victimization, whereas Captain Ono, the chief medical personnel, is suggested to have molested Kkutaeh. Minjoo simply utters that they had "access to medicine" and she speaks of the horrid conditions under which abortions were performed.⁴²

When Doc Hata's comrades, Lieutenants Enchi and Fujimore are discussing the arrival of "the fresh girls" in Singapore, their causal banter is interrupted by the commotion the suicide of one of the new arrivals jumping from the barracks has caused. "She must have landed just to snap her neck like that,"⁴³ Doc Hata observes. It is also added that two girls were "lost" on the way from *Shimonoseki* to the military camp. In Park's novel, Minjoo recounts that she herself was often praying for "the Angel of Death"⁴⁴ to come to her rescue, and that the *comfort station* was furnished minimally to prevent women from taking their own life. Still, some tried to hang themselves even with their bedsheets or, initially, using the weapons of the visiting soldiers. "[M]any women did kill themselves,"⁴⁵ Minjoo adds. Moreover, in Lee's novel, Kkutaeh keeps begging Doc Hata to kill her to escape Captain Ono's grip, and Corporal Endo performs what can be termed the consented form of honour killing on Kkutaeh's sister to save her from shame, for which he pays with his life "as any saboteur who had stolen or despoiled the camp's armament or rations."⁴⁶

Some of the women try to run away or hide upon arrival at the camp. Doc Hata's first flashback ends with the scene where he captures a girl and delivers her back to General Yamashita, who thinks of the girl's move as a potential suicide attempt: "We wouldn't want another leaper, would we?"⁴⁷ Kkutaeh's sister finds shelter under the porch but the promise of rice balls lures her out of her hiding place and, in turn, Colonel Ishii drags her back inside. Park's Minjoo does not share any episode of anyone attempting to flee, but she does comment on the ban of soldier's weapons at the 'comfort station' as "no solace for those who wanted to escape."⁴⁸

³⁹ LEE: *op. cit.* 180.

⁴⁰ LEE: *op. cit.* 184.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² PARK: *op. cit.* 119.

⁴³ LEE: *op. cit.* 108.

⁴⁴ PARK: *op. cit.* 116.

⁴⁵ PARK: *op. cit.* 117.

⁴⁶ LEE: *op. cit.* 189.

⁴⁷ LEE: *op. cit.* 112.

⁴⁸ LEE: *op. cit.* 118.

Both novels provide numerous references to women depicted as disposable objects to be discarded once they reach the condition 'beyond mending'. Their death means the rest are "one fewer", their dead bodies are swung like "a sack of radishes."⁴⁹ Minjoo's description testifies to the same attitude on the part of the military: "[o]nce dead, [the manager of the facility] tossed the body out with the rotting garbage behind the barracks."⁵⁰ Even when they are alive, they are "merchandise"⁵¹ of "monger[s]"⁵², a commodity "quite valuable [...] to the well-being and morale of the camp"⁵³ while they last. Like machines, they need to be maintained, which "present[s] [Doc Hata] with difficult challenges,"⁵⁴ given the regular mass visitations. "Almost all the women in my barracks died within a few years,"⁵⁵ recounts Minjoo. Like useless objects, they are replaced by new girls. And, as "supplies became more scarce" towards the end of the war, the girls "ha[ve] to last longer."⁵⁶

Violence is a prevalent feature of the picture the two novels paint of military sexual slavery. Doc Hata's second flashback of the war takes the reader to *Rangoon* (Yangon, Burma), where new *volunteers* are delivered to the military camp in a truck. Ms. Matsui, their keeper "barks" at the girls. Her verbal violence is followed by Captain Ono hitting one of the girls for not obeying his orders quickly enough. From "faint bruising"⁵⁷, "broken nose", "dislocated hips", "cigarette burns", welts, cuts, scars, strangling, the "barbaric and forced" abortions, mutilation, vaginal bayoneting, soldiers' "unauthorized night visits" causing "nocturnal terror"⁵⁸ to the sadistic gang rape initiated by Shiboru⁵⁹, violence is portrayed as a quotidian corollary of military sexual slaves' life, leaving minimal chance for the girls to survive. In the end, Kkutaeh is killed in the vile assault by Shiboru's men. Moreover, even though Minjoo is set free "for she survived for so long," she dies within a relatively short time due to the substantial damage done to her body.

While *A Gesture Life* zooms in on the violence pertaining to the final years of WWII (1943-45) in two Japanese military camps in South-east Asia, Park's novel additionally catalogues violence and abuse during the Japanese Occupation: the public school beatings, the forceful closing down of missionary schools, the hunt for alleged *traitors*, the confiscation of noblemen's property, the murder of Nara's father, the brutality of foremen at the forced labor camps. Except for the incident

⁴⁹ LEE: *op. cit.* 109.

⁵⁰ PARK: *op. cit.* 119.

⁵¹ LEE: *op. cit.* 183.

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ LEE: *op. cit.* 166.

⁵⁴ LEE: *op. cit.* 167.

⁵⁵ LEE: *op. cit.* 118.

⁵⁶ PARK: *op. cit.* 118-119.

⁵⁷ LEE: *op. cit.* 182.

⁵⁸ PARK: *op. cit.* 114-119.

⁵⁹ LEE: *op. cit.* 304-305.

which befalls Nara's father, Park's victims are female. However, in Lee's story, men are pictured as violent among themselves, too, which instances such as Colonel Ishii shooting the sentry dead or the beheading of Corporal Endo reveal.

Both novels paint a historically accurate picture of Japanese military sexual slavery. The highlighted issues include how these women are forced to serve as sexual slaves, their quarters and quotidian life, suicide and attempts to flee as ways out of their misery, the treatment of sexual slaves as objects and the omnipresent violence in their life. While Lee uses the presented factual information to capacitate the reader to piece together Kkutaeh's story, in Park, the focus is on the physical and mental scars Minjoo and other women have suffered at the *comfort stations* as a consequence of sexual slavery. All that is shared is congruent with the available historical sources and the testimonies given by former Japanese military sexual slaves.

The authors' motivation, sources and insights

In the TV program *To Read a Book*, Lee reminisces how the idea of the novel came to him:

“[t]here was a very small article about Korean women who were protesting at the Japanese Embassy in Seoul. [...] I wondered why they were protesting so I read more of the article [...] It was the first time I ever heard about what had happened to them. [...] I was kind of ashamed of myself.”⁶⁰

This incident inspired Lee to start doing research on Japanese military sexual slavery. He additionally conducted interviews with a few survivors in Seoul, first intending to write a novel from their point of view, but it “didn't quite come up to the measure of what I had experienced, sitting in a room with these people,” Lee admitted,⁶¹ thus he foregrounded an initial side character in Doc Hata's person, who also grew out of the interviews he was conducting.⁶²

Lee was aiming to create a story that “would be as accurate and authentic as possible.”⁶³ Yet, he did not wish to simply replicate the collection of historical facts at his disposal. In fact, “[t]he only thing that I tried to remember was to try not to make it seem so historical,”⁶⁴ he explains. And indeed, the reader is continuously

⁶⁰ “A Gesture Life’ (Author: Lee Chang Rae)”. *TV To Read a Book*, ep. 31, KBS, 05 July 2014. Accessed 4 August 2022.

⁶¹ Dwight GARNER: “Adopted Voice”. *The New York Times*. Books. September 5, 1999. <https://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/books/99/09/05/reviews/990905.05garnet.html> Accessed 12 April 2023.

⁶² *Ibid.*

⁶³ JOHNSON: *op. cit.*

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

invited to fill in the gaps in Doc Hata's story of Kkutaeh, the narrative lacunae provided by the "reveal[ed] bit[s] of information without the surrounding details [...] You get the fact before you get the real story. The deeper revelation comes later."⁶⁵

Christina Park's novel was inspired by her grandmother's story of losing her home in the Busan fire.⁶⁶ Home is a central metaphor of the work. „I anchor those really big events in the homes in which [Nara] lives”, Park reveals, be it even such unhomey places as the “insidious orphanage”⁶⁷ or the climactic passage home on Pusan-bound boat where Nara finds out what has become of Minjoo. Like Lee, Park also consulted various historical sources for her novel, which Nara's intermittent explanatory passages confirm unequivocally. Moreover, the book was written at the time when the issue of apology became the topic of heated debate, so its “Acknowledgements” section, which contains a passage dedicated to the “200,000 women and girls who suffered in the camps under military rule,” addresses this issue explicitly: “[i]n order to forgive, one must first asked to be forgiven. May you get the apology you deserve.”⁶⁸ Equally importantly, Park calls the attention to the inappropriateness of the term *comfort women*:

[i]t continues to baffle me why we still label these poor women from the perspective of the soldier. These were women and girls who were kidnapped or tricked and then coerced and forced into a militarized form of sexual slavery. The comfort part was to bring comfort to the soldiers. [...] In fact what they went through was heinous and horrible. If I affect any kind of change, I'd love to change the language around that and shift the perspective back to the women and give them the justice that they deserve.⁶⁹

Conclusion

The gap between personal memory and public history is bridged in several different ways in Chang-rae Lee's *A Gesture Life* and in Christina Park's *The Homes We Build on Ashes*. First, the convergence of Lee's two story-lines and Doc Hata's prayer for reconciliation illustrate how the past – embedded in a historical context – haunts the present at a personal level in a “drama of consciousness”. The historical context for Minjoo's story is created through “outwardly dramatic” Nara's occasional flashbacks, the sense of menace pervading her account leading up to the kidnapping

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶⁶ Jeanette KELLY: “Christina Park explores Korean ancestry in first novel”. *CBC*, October 14, 2015. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/montreal/nara-lee-houses-we-build-on-ashes-1.3271177> Accessed 2 Aug. 2022.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

⁶⁸ PARK: *op. cit.* 257.

⁶⁹ KELLY: *op. cit.*

scene and the factual information she provides to supplement Minjoo's confession. Moreover, both novels employ objects through the symbolism of which personal memory and public history are connected. Next, as Doc Hata and Nara feature in the role of *witness*, *survivor*, and *perpetrator* at the same time, their character helps the reader understand the complexity of the issue of military sexual slavery. Guilt, a corollary of the perpetrator's post-traumatic life is amply documented in both protagonists' narratives. An important tool to link personal memory and public history are the *historical realia* the authors worked into their stories based on research they had done on the subject. These include references to how military sexual slaves were *recruited*, their quarters, living conditions, routines, the inhuman and violent treatment they received and how they reacted to it. Finally, as interviews with both authors are available on their respective works, it can be confirmed that attempting to achieve historical authenticity was a conscious choice on Lee and Park's part.

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Abstract

Former comfort station medical staff Doc Hata's reminiscences of Kkutaeb in Chang-rae Lee's *A Gesture Life* (1999) and Minjoo's narrative of her accidental kidnapping and subsequent afflictions punctuated with Nara's factual input in Christina Park's *The Homes We Build on Ashes* (2015) offer a near-historical portrayal of Japanese military sexual slavery. In an attempt to uncover how private memory and public history are linked in the two novels, this paper will discuss the following points: story lines and narration, the perpetrator's tale, Doc Hata and Minjoo's respective stories of sexual military slavery, and finally, the authors' comments on their motivation, sources and insights.

Keywords: sexual slavery, works by Korean diasporic authors, narrative theory, the "perpetrator"'s tale, Korean history.

Reszümé

Magánemlékezet és történelem Chang-rae Lee „*A Gesture Life*” és Christina Park „*The Homes We Build on Ashes*” című művében.

Doc Hata, a „vigaszállomás” egykori „egészségügyi dolgozójának” Kkutaeb-re való visszaemlékezése Chang-rae Lee *A Gesture Life* (1999) című regényében, és Minjoo a legjobb barátjáné, Nara közvetítésével történő elbeszélése az egy szerencsétlen véletlennek köszönhető elrablásáról és az azt követő szenvedéseiről Christina Park *The Homes We Build on Ashes* (2015) című regényében a japán katonai szexuális rabszolgaság történetileg hiteles ábrázolásának tekinthetők. A tanulmány a következő pontokon keresztül mutatja be, hogy hogyan kapcsolódik össze a magánemlékezet és a történelem a két regényben: történetvezetés és narráció, az „elkövető” története, Doc Hata és Minjoo visszaemlékezései és a szexuális katonai rabszolgaság, bepillantás a szerzők motivációjába, az általuk használt forrásokba és a szexuális rabszolgasággal kapcsolatos meglátásaikba.

Kulcsszavak: szexuális rabszolgaság, koreai diaszpórában élő szerzők művei, narratíva elmélet, az „elkövető” története, koreai történelem.