ZINBUN No. 54 2023

Special Issue: The Ontology of Memory and the Horizon of History, Part III

Dual Edge of Fantasy in Traumatic Recollection: Response to Dr. Haaken's Keynote Lecture

Naono Akiko*

Memory pertains to the past but is conditioned by the present; that is, what is recalled is not a record of the past but a reconstruction of it, mediated by conceptual structures, cognitive categories, and cultural images available at the present moment of recollection. Individuals necessarily rely on social frameworks of memory in their acts of remembrance. Moreover, as social beings, we remember and recollect the past through interactions and communication with others (Halbwachs 1980; 1992). Sociocultural settings condition not only how we reconstruct the past but also how we interpret it. Given the sociality of both the production and reception of memory, it is difficult (if not impossible) to distinguish personally held images of the past from collective representations of the past. Traumatic memory is no exception; memories of those who were present at a traumatic event are imbued with historical knowledge and cultural imagery of the event that subsequently continues to develop, to which the survivors themselves had no access at the site of the event.

For example, 30 years after the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, *hibakusha*, the survivors of the bombing, depicted the mushroom cloud as part of their memory in the so-called "Atomic Bombing Drawings by Survivors."[1] The shape of the mushroom cloud in these drawings resembles those photographed by the US Air Force planes that accompanied the bombing missions. These photos were subsequently published in *Life* magazine and disseminated worldwide. They were taken from a high altitude and, thus, were not visible from the ground unless one was located quite far from the hypocenter. Nevertheless, *hibakusha* depicted the mushroom cloud as part of their memory in the drawings. Moreover, several pictures of the mushroom clouds produced by *hibakusha*

* Naono Akiko is Professor, Institute for Research in Humanities, Kyoto University.

[1] For the collection, see the Hiroshima Memorial Peace Museum site. https://hpmm-db.jp/picture_en/

from Hiroshima resemble the shape of the Nagasaki cloud, which is certainly not what that *hibakusha* would have witnessed firsthand. Given that the Nagasaki photo has been circulated more widely and has become an iconic image of the atomic bombing, it would appear that it has also been incorporated into the memories of Hiroshima *hibakusha*.

The survivors of historical trauma are clearly entangled with cultural imagery and collective representations of the past. Such sociocultural embeddedness and malleability of memory raise challenging questions regarding the veracity of memory and the credibility of a survivor-witness when dealing with a troubling past. If the memory of a past event changes according to new developments in terms of categories of perceptions or frameworks of interpretation, how can we determine what actually happened? Furthermore, if personal memory is so entangled with cultural and collective memories, how can we distinguish a real survivor from a vicarious or phony survivor?

The historical veracity of the use of two atomic bombs has not been questioned, unlike revisionists' claims in relation to events such as the Holocaust and the Nanjing Massacre. This is (at least partly) because President Truman, who was ultimately responsible for targeting and killing hundreds of thousands of civilians, announced these acts to the world to display the awesome power of the new weapon and establish American military hegemony. Therefore, it is unlikely that the accuracy of *hibakusha's* memories in this regard would be subject to critical scrutiny. However, suspicion is prevalent in cases of sexual violence in general and child sexual abuse in particular, both in the US and Japan, forcing survivors to be defensive. Given this long history of suspicion and denial, feminist clinicians and activists have insisted on the literal truth of female survivors' memories and their identity as victim-survivors of sexual violence. However, this has come at a considerable cost. In the heated debate that emerged over "recovered memories" of sexual abuse, Professor Janice Haaken has made a necessary and critical intervention.

Taking the narrative approach to memory, Professor Haaken provides a way to read and appreciate the complexities involved in the recollection of a long-forgotten disturbing past, specifically, the childhood experience of being sexually abused by a family member, without reducing the issue to the memory's fidelity to the past—memory being true or false—or the credibility of the women. She places women's narratives in a broader sociohistorical context and reads them as a collective grievance against the historical oppression of women in a patriarchal society and their "refusal to be silenced." Through a careful reading of the margins of women's narratives with a psychoanalytic lens, she attempts to reveal the complex truth that women's abuse narratives convey and highlight women's agentic acts of memory. She calls such acts "transformative remembering," which involve creative undertakings by women to reconfigure a disturbing past to ensure that they can remake their selves and recreate their lives (Haaken 1995; 1998; 2010).

One notable contribution Professor Haaken has made to the debate is her careful

consideration of the role of fantasy in women's recovered memories, on which she did not elaborate in her keynote lecture. In the fierce battle around the historical veracity of traumatic events, not only in cases of sexual abuse of children but also in other events of trauma, the term "fantasy" has been posited to deny the event's empirical status as "real." Fantasy means "making it all up," which is why feminist defenders of women with recovered memories as well as many scholars and clinicians disregard elements of fantasy in women's psyche. However, this is not the case among psychoanalysts.

Refusing to acknowledge the role of fantasy, or making the "assault on fantasy," as stated by Paul Antze and Michael Lambek (1996), is pervasive in trauma discourse in literalist/dissociationist theory and also in cultural trauma theory, most notably in work by Cathy Caruth (1996). Although relying heavily on Freud's texts, Caruth remains silent regarding his theory of fantasy and trauma and instead assigns a literal and non-symbolic quality to traumatic memory. As Kary Ball (2007) points out, Caruth's theory of literality is an attempt to secure the materiality of the event by locating traumatic memory outside the symbolic realm, thereby separating it from fantasy. However, in her deconstructionist reading of traumatic memory, Caruth (not unlike the defenders of trauma victims who trust victims' narratives literally) runs a risk of striping survivors of complex subjectivities and diminishing the actual impacts of trauma.

If survivors are trapped in literalism or literality regarding traumatic memory, they are then impaired in terms of their ability to formulate their experience and remain captive to a repetitive return to the scene of the trauma, according to Robert Jay Lifton (1983). While it may be extremely difficult to empirically understand the experience of massive trauma, as Caruth (1996) suggests, it is imperative for survivors to recover their imaginative capacity to transform the scene of trauma in their memories and come to an understanding of what happened. This can help them begin the journey to recover and come to terms with the past (not necessarily overcoming it) to the extent that it is no longer overwhelmingly immediate (Lifton, 1983).

While the imaginative work of memory seems imperative for the survivors of trauma to recreate their once-shattered selves and their world, it is especially difficult to address imagination and fantasy in discussing memories of sexual abuse and violence because of the fear that considering these factors will undermine feminists' longtime efforts to verify the pervasiveness of sexual violence in the family and invite backlash.

In the clinical trauma literature, some authors have pointed out that the boundary between reality and fantasy becomes blurred in cases of actual trauma—what can only happen in imaginary scenes becomes a reality (Herman, 1992; Shengold, 1999). In cases of child sexual abuse, Professor Haaken observes that the "incestuous longings" of a child and the actual act of incest may "converge" in the child's experience of incest. This type of convergence is destructive for the child because it "closes off the possibilities for using

fantasy creatively, as a realm of more open meanings and as an impetus for new avenues of development and self-assertion" (Haaken, 1995: 195). Thus, when we deny the aspect of fantasy over which the subject shows elements of agency (because the subject has a part to play in fantasy), as Judith Butler (2000: 42) forcefully argues, we may lose sight of "the depth and psychic consequence of" the trauma since, "it is often precisely the child's love that is exploited in the scene of incest."

It seems imperative to consider elements of fantasy seriously in the experience and memories of trauma to understand how fantasy is involved with the devastating consequence of trauma and how it is necessary for survivors to regain the ability to exercise fantasy in their journey to reconstruct their selves. Psychoanalysis provides an interpretive means to engage effectively with fantasy. However, what if we are unsure of the actuality of a traumatic event? Given the difficulty of distinguishing memories of actual trauma from fantasy, how do we interpret and respond to memories of trauma when there are opposing claims for truth? How were conflicting testimonies interpreted and resolved by Sierra Leone's Truth and Reconciliation Commission? How did that commission deal with the difficult question of memory veracity confirmation in relation to rape and other forms of sexual violence? Rape is used as a weapon of war, and the widespread use of rape and other forms of sexual violence against women are reported in the Sierra Leone civil war ("Operation Fine Girl"). Then, how do we hear "unbelievable" accounts of women, not just as a metaphor conveying their outrage and moral condemnation of the young rebels, but as the "unbelievable" actuality of rape? How do we hear the silence around women's accounts that could be a testimony of the extent of actual violence and trauma?

Before closing, I would like to raise some points regarding issues of forgiveness. It might be possible to forgive if the perpetrators ask for forgiveness, but that does not have to mean forgetting the deed. Ultimately, forgetting might be necessary to reconcile with the past and rebuild the community after the civil war for the people of Sierra Leone; however, that may leave the historical and structural causes of the violence perpetrated there intact. Perhaps the work of remembering is required of us, as citizens of overdeveloped capitalist societies, who are implicated in the historical and structural causes of that violence.

References

Antze, P. (1996). Telling stories, making selves: Memory and identity in multiple personality disorder. In P. Antze & M. Lambek (Eds.), Tense past: Cultural essays in trauma and memory (pp. 3–23). Routledge.

Ball, K. (2007). Introduction: Traumatizing psychoanalysis. In K. Ball (Ed.), *Traumatizing theory: The cultural politics of affect in and beyond psychoanalysis* (pp. xvii–li). Other

Press.
Butler, J. (2000). Quandaries of the incest taboo. In P. Brooks & A. Woloch (Eds.), *Whose Freud? The place of psychoanalysis in contemporary culture* (pp. 39–46). Yale University Press.
Caruth, C. (1996). *Unclaimed experience: Trauma, narrative, and history*. Johns Hopkins University Press.
Haaken, J. (1995). The debate over recovered memory of sexual abuse: A feminist-psychoanalytic perspective. *Psychiatry*, 58(2), 189–198.
Haaken, J. (1998). *Pillar of salt: Gender, memory, and the perils of looking back*. Rutgers University Press.
Haaken, J. (2010). The seventh veil: Feminism, recovered memory, and the politics of the unconscious. In S. Radstone & B. Schwarz (Eds.), *Memory: Histories, theories, debates* (pp. 428–441). Fordham University Press.
Haaken, J., & Reavey, P. (2010). Why memory still matters: Disturbing recollections. In J. Haaken & P. Reavey (Eds.), *Memory matters* (pp. 1–13). Routledge.
Halbwachs, M. (1980). *The collective memory*. Translated by F. J. Ditter & V. Y. Ditter. Harper & Row.
Halbwachs, M. (1992). *On collective memory*. Translated by L. A. Coser. University of Chicago Press.
Herman, J. L. (1997). *Trauma and recovery: The aftermath of violence—from domestic abuse to political terror*. Basic Books.
Lifton, R. J. (1983). *The broken connection: On death and the continuity of life*. Basic Books.
Ricoeur, P. (2004). *Memory, history, forgetting*. Translated by K. Blamey & D. Pellauer. University of Chicago Press.
Shengold, L. (1999). *Soul murder revisited: Thoughts about therapy, hate, love, and memory*. Yale University Press.