DENOUNCING HUMAN TRAFFICKING IN CHINA: NORTH KOREAN WOMEN'S MEMOIRS AS EVIDENCE

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Abstract: China's policy of returning North Koreans without a previous screening of their particular cases goes against international agreements, such as the Refugee Convention and Protocol. Multiple organizations have discussed this issue, quoting from legal documents as well as anonymized interviews. What this essay aims to do is present autobiographical texts that deal with the same topic but from a personal point of view. The conditions of North Koreans in China, relived in testimonial accounts, deserve special attention because of their first-person account of victimization. This essay situates North Korean women's memoirs within the tradition of life writing for testimonial purposes, aimed at raising awareness of the critical absence of human rights in the context of North Korean refugees, and the ongoing atrocities committed against girls and women.

Keywords: North Korea; refugees; China; human rights; trafficking; memoirs

Introduction: North Korean Refugees in China

As a consequence of economic stagnation and widespread famine hundreds of thousands of North Koreans have been forced to cross into China in an influx that started in the 1990s, causing major concerns on a social level, but most particularly for women (Davis 2006: 131). This movement justified the emergence of human trafficking networks operating on both sides of the border (Seth 2010: 227). Far from having stopped, this crossing of North Koreans into China continues to date, even if, as experts note, there is a range of push and pull factors driving their escape, notably economic reasons (Haggard and Nolan 2011: 27–32) and growing disillusionment with the regime (Fifield 2017). As noted by Markus Bell (2014), "Brokers and people smugglers are now a well-entrenched part of the migration process out of North Korea and through China. Dependency on these informal migration strategies leaves North Koreans, especially women, vulnerable to exploitation and abuse" (106). Afraid of the repercussions at home, which include arrest, prison camps, torture, rape, enforced abortion and even death sentences, some women decide to risk staying in China "living precariously below the

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poverty line with no legal status" (Han 2013: 536), always afraid of being caught and sent back. Many of those women are "victims of human traffickers, working in brothels, or becoming unwilling brides of Chinese suffering from a shortage of women" (Seth 2010: 227). Thus, as Bell and Fattig (2014) pointedly argue, "The crisis of North Korean refugees is a gendered crisis, with the majority of North Korean women who arrive in South Korea reporting some form of sexual abuse during their journey" (60). Drawing a parallel to the history of the Korean peninsula, Bell (2013) contemplates sexual slavery repeating itself:

> The trafficking of North Korean women throughout Northeast Asia is a process whereby women are commoditized. They are sold to Chinese men as brides, or forced into prostitution to pay off debts accumulated while escaping North Korea. In many ways, North Korean women are inheritors of the suffering of the comfort women.

In 2009, the Committee for Human Rights in North Korea published a report on North Korean women's trafficking in China. The report, entitled *Lives for Sale*, highlighted the "precarious legal status of North Korean women in China" (H. Lee 2009: 23). Hae-young Lee, who conducted those personal interviews from 2004 to 2006, admitted that they offered a partial glimpse into the North Korean experience in China, as participants were pooled from two Northeast provinces, and were those willing to be interviewed (24). As recently as in the 2017 *Trafficking in Persons Report* China has been downgraded to Tier 3 for it "does not fully meet the minimum standards for the elimination of trafficking and is not making significant efforts to do so" (U.S. Department of State 2017: 126). Though China is a State party since 2000 to the Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, especially Women and Children, adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in November 2000 (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights [OHCHR] 2000), it fails to recognize victims as such. This essay follows the definition set out in the Trafficking Protocol of what counts as "trafficking" in international law (H. Lee 2009: 51), as stated in Article 3(a):

> "Trafficking in persons" shall mean the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of persons, by means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation. Exploitation shall include, at a minimum, the exploitation of the prostitution of others or other forms of sexual exploitation, forced labour or services, slavery or practices similar to slavery . . . (OHCHR 2000)

Importantly, North Korean girls and women who are coerced into marriage by brokers, fall under the category of "trafficked person" even if they agree to the transaction since, according to Article 3(b), "The consent of a victim of trafficking in persons to the intended exploitation set forth in subparagraph (a) of this article shall be irrelevant where any of the means set forth in subparagraph (a) have been used" (OHCHR 2000).

Were China to recognize North Koreans as refugees, these trafficked women would be able to claim some protection. China is a State party to the 1951 Refugee Convention and the 1967 Refugee Protocol. However, "China disregards its agreement with UNHCR to allow UNHCR personnel unimpeded access to asylum seekers including those from the DPRK" (UN Commission of Inquiry [COI] on Human Rights in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea 2014b: 130). Considering North Koreans who enter China as "mere economic illegal migrants" (130), "not refugees" (2014a: 33), the Chinese government refuses access to those mechanisms that would allow North Koreans recognition as refugees. Indeed, not all North Koreans meet the definition set out in Article 1 of the Refugee Convention when they leave their country, according to which a "refugee" is a person who,

> owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it. (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees [UNHCR] 2010: 14)

Those same North Koreans in China could be considered refugees "*sur place*" (UNHCR 1979) given the fact that they face grave danger if forced to return "regardless of their original motivation for leaving the country" (Charny 2005: 14) "because of the certain prospect of severe punishment" (Human Rights Watch 2017b).[1] Seeing North Koreans in China as refugees "*sur place*" (UNHCR 1979), Joshua Kurlantzick and Jana Mason (2006), contributors to the report *The North Korean Refugee Crisis* (2006: 34–52), stress China's violation of Article 33(1) of the Refugee Convention which states "No Contracting State shall expel or return ('refouler') a refugee in any manner whatsoever to the frontiers of territories where his life or freedom would be threatened on account of his race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion" (UNHCR 2010: 30). Yet, far from allowing access to international organizations and humanitarian screening processes, China disregards its commitment to the practice of "non-refoulement" whenever it returns North Koreans to their country without the opportunity to assess their claims to refugee status (Kurlantzick and Mason

2006: 41). More recently, Article 435 in the *Report of the detailed findings of the commission of inquiry on human rights in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea* has stressed this ongoing practice: "Despite the torture, arbitrary imprisonment and other gross human rights violations awaiting forcibly repatriated persons in the DPRK, China pursues a rigorous policy of forced repatriation of DPRK citizens who are in China without proper documentation" (UN COI on Human Rights in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea 2014b: 127). The COI's Report further explains how China is violating this and further agreements to which it is a State party:

> 443.The obligation not to expel, return (*refouler*) or extradite a person to another state where there are substantial grounds for believing that he or she would be in danger of being subjected to torture emerges from article 3 of the Convention against Torture, ratified by China on 4 October 1988. Contrary to article 33 of the Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, to which China is also a State party, repatriation typically also places DPRK citizens in a position where their life or freedom would be threatened on account of their religion and/or membership of a particular social group or holding of a political opinion. The obligation not to expel persons to other states where there are substantial grounds for believing that the person would be in danger of being subject to gross human rights violations also emerges from the requirements of customary international law. (129–130)

This risk of forced repatriation "remains high" (OHCHR 2017: 10). On 6 July 2017, Amnesty International launched an appeal to the Chinese authorities for eight North Koreans currently detained in China not to be forcibly returned: "Forcibly repatriated North Koreans are often subjected to arbitrary imprisonment, forced labour, torture or other ill-treatment, and possibly execution." According to Human Rights Watch (2017a), more than 38 North Koreans are detained in China and may be eventually returned to North Korea, which is why they have appealed to South Korea to intervene in their favour by mediating with U.S. President Donald Trump. This issue of forced repatriation is by no means a new situation, as previous reports by multiple organizations, such as Amnesty International (2000), Human Rights Watch (2002), Anti-Slavery International (Muico 2005) and Brookings Institution (Cohen 2010, 2014), attest to. However, it is proof that the condition of North Koreans continues to be dire and that no solutions have been provided.

North Korean Women's Memoirs: Experiencing Trafficking in the First Person

Though there have been previous studies on the issue of human trafficking in China, this essay focuses on autobiographical texts written by the victims themselves. That

is, instead of relying on second-hand information, court documents, reports, anonymized interviews and so on, it deals with the experiences of women in the first person singular, dramatically recounting the human rights transgressions they suffered.[2] In the case of victims of sexual violence, women's testimonies prove crucial, as they show a glimpse into a situation that would otherwise go untold, most of the times due to the shame inherent in such traumatic situations. Thus, the first person singular pronoun is deployed to speak of human rights trespasses that the "I" has endured, but also of the ones the "I" has witnessed, using that denouncing voice to raise awareness and give voice to a group of people – in this particular case, to North Korean women trafficked in China.

In order to assess the impact that these North Korean memoirs dealing with human trafficking have on the reading public, I draw from autobiography and literary studies, particularly Kay Schaffer and Sidonie Smith's (2004b) influential study *Human Rights and Narrated Lives: The Ethics of Recognition*, where they explore the "frames" the authors embed their stories in to render their narrative more dramatic and far-reaching, intent on capturing our interest and generating a response (27). This has been more recently taken up by Karen-Margrethe Simonsen and Jonas Ross Kjaergård (2017) in their edited volume *Discursive Framings of Human Rights: Negotiating Agency and Victimhood*. As Schaffer and Smith (2004a) define them, "Survivor narratives tell stories of abuse through which narrators turn themselves from victims to survivors by acts of speaking out that shift attention to systemic causes of violation" (15). Framing their narratives on the long-standing traditions of testimonial literature, they turn to what Gillian Whitlock (2007: 12, 2015: 187) calls narrative or aesthetic "devices", which are meant to engender empathy. The ethical and affective dimension of life stories have the potential to amplify the effect the narratives may have on readers (Schaffer and Smith 2004a: 6–7), seeking their support and mobilizing constituencies (Boltanski 1999: 73). In this process, putting "a human face to suffering" (Schaffer and Smith 2004b: 3) is key, as authors like Richard Ashby Wilson and Richard D. Brown (2009) have also noted (2), but there are other narrative techniques that elicit an empathic response, like narrative perspective, as Tilman Habermas and Verena Diel (2010) point out (321).

Suzanne Keen's (2016) theory of narrative empathy, recently applied to human rights life narratives, might help in this regard. In the article "Life Writing and the Empathetic Circle", Keen asserts that authors make use of strategic empathizing techniques:

> Sometimes motivated by the desire to effect social change or raise awareness, narrative artists employ representational techniques aimed at moving their readers. I think we can see those aims quite vividly reflected in works of life

> writing, and especially in *testimonio*. This is especially the case in nonfiction narratives that link up with the advancement of human rights. (20)

Far from making readers distrust the truth-value of the narrative, "authorial strategic empathy" (20) works towards achieving potential goals, for instance implementing policy change. In the case of human rights life narratives, authors/activists seek to garner support for their cause, whatever that may be. Considering Keen's definition of "ambassadorial strategic empathy" (20) as one that insists on the plight of victimized others so that readers react to the injustice, one may start to consider the strategies at work in the following North Korean life narratives to be discussed, where the group of victims is those who fall prey to human trafficking in China.

Within the emergent field of human rights life narratives (Goldberg 2012: 2), I address the release in 2015 of several North Korean women's memoirs (Jang and McClelland 2015; E. Kim and Falletti 2015; H. Lee and John 2015; Park 2015). Matching a historical moment when attention is being paid to the Korean peninsula, these memoirs emerge as "poignant testimonies of the human rights violations" North Korean women have to endure (Martínez García 2017: 599). In this essay, I aim to explore the ways in which these memoirists emerge as representatives of the suffering of many such disadvantaged individuals. Despite concerns about their potential unreliability, North Korean memoirs, particularly those published since 2000, have played a key role in shedding light on the political situation in the region: "their ultimate significance in this context is how they have sought to influence international perceptions of North Korea and its ruling regime. Their intentions, then, are as important as the disturbing stories they tell" (Gauthier 2015: 111). These memoirs are first and foremost texts of political import, written by victims turned activist survivors and with a clear political agenda: "micro-level stories in the form of North Korean refugee testimonials and autobiographies . . . are instrumental in efforts to justify policy objectives and rationalize political resolutions" (Han 2013: 538). Taken as a whole, North Korean memoirs represent "the soft power of North Koreans to shape international perceptions of the DPRK" (Gauthier 2015: 111).

Yeonmi Park's (2015) *In Order to Live: A North Korean Girl's Journey to Freedom* appeals to an international readership through the use of an emotionally charged first-person account of victimization. Park not just witnessed her mother being raped and sold, but was herself held against her will, later participating in the criminal activities of a trafficking network in China. Dramatically, Park was only 13 years old when her experience of trafficking began, which means that she was a minor and therefore more susceptible to harm as well as legal protection. In this testimonial account, not only are the Universal Declaration of Human Rights articles unfulfilled,[3] but also those of the United Nations Convention on the Rights

of the Child.[4] Lucia Jang and Susan McClelland's (2015) *Stars between the Sun and Moon* describes in harrowing detail the experience of being raped, trafficked and abused by police on both sides of the border and on several occasions. However, Jang was already an older woman and mother to a child by the time she left North Korea, meaning that, though she endured traumatic events, her age and maturity allowed her to survive without as many post-traumatic stress disorder symptoms as Park. Eunsun Kim and Sébastien Falletti's (2015) *A Thousand Miles to Freedom: My Escape from North Korea* is told from the perspective of a child who, together with their mother and sister, was sold, made to work as a slave, imprisoned and subjected to inhumane treatment. Finally, Hyeonseo Lee and David John's (2015) *The Girl with Seven Names* discusses trafficking much more indirectly, either in flashbacks of Lee's near-brushes with traffickers or in self-made decisions that take her close to those involved in such trade. The appeal these memoirists launch calls attention to processes of objectification, animalization, numbing and identity loss, a psychic fragmentation that testimonial self-writing might help alleviate (Henke 1998: xii–xiii). Ultimately, what these memoirists seek to bring to light is the untenable situation they face both in their country as well as when they try to escape, particularly in countries such as China which take advantage of their earlier mentioned "precarious legal status" (H. Lee 2009: 23).

Violence Against Refugee Women's Bodies

A compelling image of human trafficking emerges in Yeonmi Park's (2015) memoir, *In Order to Live*. Park's narrative is a detailed, crude, hard-to-read testimonial. Born in 1993, the events described in her memoir happened when she was between 13 and 15 years old. Crucially, the most terrible things that human trafficking implies, such as rape, sexual slavery and losing your rights over your body, are not merely witnessed but suffered by the author/narrator. Park's descriptions of the atrocities she endured illustrate what Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson mention as common uses of life writing in the context of human rights campaigns, confronting readers with "emotional, often overwhelming, accounts of dehumanization, brutal and violent physical harm, and exploitation" (Smith and Watson 2010: 133). Not taken to be a child anymore once she crosses into China at 13, in direct contradiction to Article 3(d) of the Trafficking Protocol which states that "'Child' shall mean any person under eighteen years of age" (OHCHR 2000), this first-person victimization is made even more urgent given her age, and serves the purpose of advocating for justice and redress. In terms of life narrative, the testimonial power of a narrator's voice in the form of a child, particularly a girl, to express violence exerted upon them, is a common trope indebted to Anne Frank, which has become a model for other activists to frame their story (Douglas and Poletti 2016: 20–22; Smith 2006: 152).

After Park (2015) and her mother crossed the river into China, a Chinese man of Korean descent handed them different clothes and told them to change into them. Then, one of the most traumatic events in Park's childhood took place:

> Our North Korean guide stayed with me while the bald broker pulled my mother around to the other side of the building.
>
> "Don't worry," the guide told me. "Everything is okay."
>
> But it did not sound okay. I heard my mother pleading with this man, and then there were terrible noises I had never heard before. (125)

Guilt and shame forced mother and daughter not to discuss the matter until years later. The reason why her mother was raped was to protect her, as Park was the intended target of the broker's lust. That was the struggle she had heard at first. This scene is an example of "ambassadorial strategic empathy" (Keen 2016: 20), as readers are not expected to identify with Park or her mother, but rather to bear witness to their suffering from a distance. Yet, this might also trigger an empathic reaction on the grounds of shared experience, namely having been in a position of vulnerability due to age and gender and the feelings associated with it. Thus understood, this is what Keen would call "broadcast strategic empathy" (22). The combination of both techniques would make for a longer-lived narrative that survives the passing of time (22).

Park's mother was later raped leaving no doubt about it: "he threw my mother on the ground and raped her right in front of me, like an animal. I saw such fear in her eyes, but there was nothing I could do except stand there and shiver, begging silently for it to end. That was my introduction to sex" (2015: 130). Park's eyewitness account is blood curling, as the reader is faced with such degrading treatment. The testimonial power of "eye-witnessing" or "I-witnessing" creates deep affective ties between reader and narrator: "The eyewitness holds a special status in narrative accounts. The attestation 'I was there' makes a unique bid for readers' attention and empathy" (Watson 2016: 683). Park's narrative of these traumatic events, relived along these lines, serves an advocacy agenda, denouncing the trauma of rape and human trafficking suffered precisely at the hands of those who, given their common ancestry, should have helped them. One is reminded of studies that show the involvement of precisely the Korean-Chinese ethnic population in the border regions in these trafficking networks (H. Lee 2009: 17–19). That brokers and victims share Korean ancestry is particularly traumatic for the latter, mostly given the Confucianism embedded in North Korean culture with its emphasis on family and elders as figures deserving of respect as well as loving, wise and protective (Seth 2010: 137). This ideal is shattered when these men traffic North Korean women

and girls. Park's narrative is an attempt to come to terms with what she felt, a form of self-healing through writing which Suzette Henke calls "scriptotherapy" (1998: xii), aimed at healing oneself through reliving the traumatic experience in written form and making it public. Only then, according to Dori Laub, may one repossess one's life story (1995: 74). In fact, the aim of using life writing is stated by Park in her prologue, where she acknowledges her past silence regarding this issue but accepts the need to finally come forward: "the only way we can survive our own memories is to shape them into a story that makes sense out of events that seem inexplicable" (2015: 5). This matches Henke's theory that "What cannot be uttered might at least be written" (1998: xix). Exposing the crimes committed against them, activist narrators become agents in and of their life story, while healing the wounds that trauma may have caused.

Psychological and Physical Trauma

Previous studies have suggested how North Korean refugees experience symptoms akin to post-traumatic stress disorder or PTSD (Haggard and Nolan 2011: 36–41), both when interviewed in South Korea (Baubet et al. 2003; Jeon 2000; Jeon et al. 2005) and in China (Y. Lee et al. 2001). Notably, Yoonok Chang's survey (Chang et al. 2006: 14–33), conducted in northeast China in 2004 to 2005 shows how psychological distress is prevalent among North Korean refugees, featuring in various manifestations in most interviewees' responses. Thus, it should be taken into account when considering their fear of potential retaliation if sent back to North Korea, a central idea for their aforementioned redefinition as "refugees *sur place*" (UNHCR 1979).

The way in which North Korean women and girls are tricked into agreeing to being sold is explained by Park (2015) as part of a process by which the brokers make them feel as if they were not human beings, which calls to mind the UDHR and how these networks dehumanize people to make a profit:

> "If you want to stay in China, you have to be sold and get married," she told us.
>
> We were stunned. What did she mean, "sold"? I could not imagine how one human could sell another. I thought people could sell only dogs, chicken, or other animals – not people. . . .
>
> "Get sold or go back. That's the only way it works."
>
> . . .
>
> "I want to stay in China," I said.
>
> "Good," the bald broker said. (127–128)

This transaction should not be considered legal, as Park was still a minor and had not been informed of the full consequences of her actions. Moreover, as advanced in the introduction, Article 3(b) of the Trafficking Protocol asserts that, no matter the trafficked person's consent, in the case of vulnerable subjects as stated in (a) they should be fully protected (OHCHR 2000). Indeed, such position of vulnerability leading girls and women into forced marriage further contravenes Article 16(b) of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) (OHCHR 1979) to which China is also a State party since 1980. A vital issue in Park's story is her family's struggle with political repression. If they were to return to North Korea, they might be imprisoned or worse, which is why their fear features as a prominent drive in their wish to stay in China, allowing readers to see them as rightful "refugees" as defined in Article 1 of the Refugee Convention (UNHCR 2010: 14). In the case of Eunsun Kim's family, their reasons for not wanting to be sent back were due to the hunger they had endured and the harsh retaliation against defectors they had witnessed, which is why they also agreed to being sold: "In retrospect, I can say today that this willingness to marry a Chinese stranger might seem difficult to understand, but we were desperate. We wanted to ensure our safety at any cost" (E. Kim and Falletti 2015: 79). Yet again, this kind of marriage is not the one stated in Article 16(b) of the CEDAW whereby both spouses give "free and full consent" (OHCHR 1979). These memoirists' first-person testimonies of forced marriage in China contradict Article 23(3), by which China is meant to ensure that "No marriage shall be entered into without the free and full consent of the intending spouses" (OHCHR 1966).

Witnessing the brokers negotiating prices "right in front of us" (Park 2015: 128) imbued Park with a deeper sense of shame:

> I will never forget the burning humiliation of listening to these negotiations, of being *turned into a piece of merchandise* in the space of a few hours. It was a feeling beyond anger. It's still hard to fathom why we went along with all of this, except we were caught between fear and hope. We were numb . . . (129, my emphasis)

Once their bodies are treated as commodities and objects to trade with, their humanity fades; feelings would just be a hindrance to their survival: "our purpose was reduced to our immediate needs" (129). In fact, one of the typical symptoms associated with PTSD is "Diminished responsiveness to the external world, referred to as 'psychic numbing' or 'emotional anesthesia'" (American Psychiatric Association [APA] 1994: 424–425).

Park's (2015) mother was then sold to an unmarried farmer for $2,100 (137), and allowed to place a single call to her daughter to assure her that she is safe. Silence ensued for the next few weeks:

> The family locked up their cell phone, their money, even their food. She discovered that she was expected to be not just a wife to this Chinese farmer but a *slave* for the whole family. She had to cook and clean and work in the fields. Time after time she begged them to let her call her little daughter again, but no matter how much she cried, they didn't care. To them, she was like one of their farm animals, *not a human being at all*. (138, my emphasis)

Traffickers and those compliant with them or profiting from the process, further dehumanize victims by treating them as slaves or animals. This experience roughly coincides with that of Eunsun Kim's family. Kim escaped North Korea at eleven together with her mother and sister. They crossed the river into China without the help of any smuggler, their only goal to find food to survive. A "guardian angel" offered them food and lodging (E. Kim and Falletti 2015: 77), and gave them what seemed like sound advice – that Kim's mother married a Chinese man to obtain legal documentation, "*hukou*", and avoid deportation (78). However, what transpires is that they are actually sold, the three of them for just "two thousand yuan" (81). Their "generous savior" (80) is actually a human trafficker who sells them not only as enforced labourers but also as potential child-bearing wombs (81). Treated as cheap merchandise and subjected to a process of animalization, these women exemplify what Schaffer and Smith (2004b) called "commodification of suffering" (27). Even though hard for the memoir's reader as a secondary witness, it is precisely in the harsh depiction of their slavery that their activist denunciation of China's compliance in the trafficking market is most advanced. With phrases such as "we were merely three bodies to toil away in the fields every day" (E. Kim and Falletti 2015: 87), "we were just slaves" (88) or "selling us like we were commodities" (90), Kim shows how North Korean women's status in China is akin to that of animals. All the while fearing an arrest (91), her mother is forced to bear the farmer a son (92). After a year elapsed with no heir in sight, he started hitting Kim, her mother and her sister (94). Even after her mother delivers a boy (101), their situation did not improve. Instead, they were suddenly denounced to the authorities and sent back to North Korea without the baby (110).

In order to survive, Park collaborates with a trafficking network she denounces in her memoir. She is tricked into becoming a gangster's mistress on the promise that he will buy back her mother and help find her sister and father (Park 2015: 145). That way, Park is convinced, putting aside what she sees as selfish suicidal thoughts:

> For a long time I thought of it a business negotiation, not rape. Only now, with the passage of time, can I accept what transpired in all its terrible dimensions. I was only six months past my thirteenth birthday, and small for my age . . . I thought I would split in two . . . the act was so painful and disgusting and violent that I thought it

> couldn't really be happening to me . . . I actually felt like I had left my body and was sitting on the floor next to the bed. *I was watching myself, but it wasn't me.*
>
> . . . I felt so dirty. I felt such despair. I rubbed my skin until I bled . . . I discovered that *physical pain helped me feel less pain* . . . for a while pinching and scratching myself . . . became a habit. (146, my emphasis)

Self-mutilation is a frequent coping mechanism for victims of sexual abuse, as are Park's subsequent bulimia episodes every night (147). Her detachment from her body during the act hints at a possible dissociation syndrome, conducive to her progressive dehumanization. "Self-destructive behavior" and "dissociative symptoms", together with feelings of "despair", are some of the consequences that afflict trauma victims (APA 1994: 424–425). Perhaps even worse is that Park's "impaired affect" (APA 1994: 424–425) causes her to see no qualms in selling other girls in her very same situation. Thus, Park (2015) states how she collaborated in the process, helping her rapist instead of rebelling against of him or even warning the girls about the dangers that lie ahead:

> I had been in China for just two months when I began working for Hongwei. He brought two North Korean girls to stay in the apartment, and I talked to them and was able to translate a little. I cleaned them up, just as Young Sun had done for me, picked out clothes and makeup for them, and gave them lessons in hygiene. (147)

In essence, Park's narrative is also a justification of all the morally ambiguous choices in her life: "Unlike my mother and me, these girls had known they would be sold in China when they escaped. They didn't care, they said. It was better than dying in North Korea" (147). By laying the responsibility beyond her control ("these girls had known . . . They didn't care"), Park removes herself from a position of authority from which she could have helped them. However, adopting a confessional tone is quite a common strategy in one's memoir, following in the footsteps of Augustine's *Confessions*, one of the first autobiographical texts to be written and one that emphasized the narrator's sins not to be judged by readers but to be accepted as an intrinsic part of human fallible nature. This utter lack of compassion on her part suggests another symptom of possible PTSD, shown in her "markedly reduced ability to feel emotions" (APA 1994: 424–425). By losing – or, rather, numbing – her emotions, she becomes one of the things she most despises, a human trafficker. It is a confession that comes as a shock to the reader, as she avoids talking about it in her public appearances (Park 2014a, 2014b, 2014c, 2014d). Instead, Park (2015) blames both the Chinese and North Korean governments for the things girls are forced to do (154–155).

Park (2015) was about to become either a slave to another man or a luxury prostitute when she managed to escape (173). From there, she moved on to Shenyang's "adult chat-room underworld" (181), where she insists that she would not strip for the camera, but just talk to customers online (183). Shenyang is also the place where memoirist Hyeonseo Lee escaped prostitution when she was offered a job at a "hair salon" with "'therapy rooms' with smoked-glass doors" (H. Lee and John 2015: 124) and "the filthiest room I had seen in my life" (125). Luckily, Lee managed to escape before they abused her (126).

As for memoirists Jang and Kim, they both experienced the trauma of being imprisoned and abused under inhumane conditions. These North Korean women and girls in detention in China demonstrate how this country is in violation of some of the treaties it has signed, such as the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), signed in 1998. Regarding the issue of North Koreans subject to trafficking, China should be bound by Article 8 in defending their rights not to be held in slavery or forced labour against their will (OHCHR 1966). China further contravenes the Covenant by denying those persons their liberty while, according to Article 9(1), "Everyone has the right to liberty and security of person. No one shall be subjected to arbitrary arrest or detention." Furthermore, the Chinese labelling of North Koreans as "mere economic illegal migrants" (UN COI on Human Rights in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea 2014b: 130) does not preclude the necessity of a fair trial, as stated in Article 9(2) and (4) (OHCHR 1966), which again is found to be missing in the cases discussed above. Those who have been in detention deserve the right to compensation, according to Article 9(5), and this has not been the case so far, not even for those North Koreans who have been released instead of forcibly returned. Finally, their treatment in detention must be humane, as stated in Article 10(1), and there are reports that testify to the contrary, such as the testimony of Lucia Jang in her memoir – where she claims the Chinese police watched her undress and then dress without allowing her any privacy (Jang and McClelland 2015: 188–189) – and Eunsun Kim in hers – where she says they were picked up in the middle of the night (E. Kim and Falletti 2015: 107), then left inside a restroom for the night because there were no free cells in the station (108), then taken to prison where they shared a room with other North Koreans and stayed there without being allowed out during a four days' nightmare (109–110).

Conclusion

Having come from different geographical places inside North Korea (Jang and Kim from rural and industrial areas, Park and Lee from a border merchant city) and from different family backgrounds and class (all of them mentioning issues of "songbun" throughout their narratives (Collins 2012), to point out the incongruences of the

social classification system in North Korea), makes little difference when faced with the trauma of escaping North Korea and living in China. All four memoirists – Jang, Kim, Park and Lee – finally managed to escape China via diverse routes having experienced trafficking to some extent, which highlights their vulnerability as gendered victims of violence. Their raw, intimate disclosure illuminates the ongoing violation of human rights North Korean refugees experience during their time in China. Theirs is an attempt at invoking the victimized other of the trafficked girl/woman in both context-specific and universal terms. Their testimony emphasizes the tension between human rights advocacy, reminding others of the value of a human life, and the dehumanizing techniques used by traffickers, where the focus is instrumental, not ethical, on financial gain or work that may be achieved by treating individuals as commodities.

Even if admittedly partial, these first-person testimonial accounts serve a very clear political agenda, reminding countries of their responsibilities towards those disenfranchised in need of aid. The various organizations with which these four memoirists collaborate give an idea of their intended goals. Thus, Jang's translator, Soohyun Nam, has served on the Executive Board of HanVoice, a Canadian non-profit organization (NGO) for North Korean refugee and human rights issues which mission is "to give voice to the voiceless" (HanVoice 2017). Kim works for Seoul-based NGO Citizens Alliance for North Korean Human Rights (NKHR), which "seeks to mobilize world leaders to change the fate of the Korean peninsula north of the 38th parallel, and to help North Korean defectors who have taken refuge in Seoul" (E. Kim and Falletti 2015: 226). Similarly, Lee collaborates with PSCORE (H. Lee and John 2015: 286), a "Non-profit NGO based in Seoul, South Korea, working towards reunification and assisting North Korean defectors" (PSCORE 2017). Finally, Park (2015) works for Liberty in North Korea (270), which, importantly, aims to "change the narrative from the top down by engaging directly with international journalists and policymakers" (LiNK 2017). What these diverse approaches to activism and advocacy show is a common passion to raise awareness of ongoing rights violations and to help North Koreans in any way they can. In the case of North Koreans escaping their country, and most markedly women and girls, their status as refugees should guarantee international protection. Out of the four abovementioned organizations, NKHR (2017) specifically works to "help refugees in need reach South Korea safely, particularly women and children at risk of being sexually trafficked in China". Though China is a State party to international agreements such as the Convention on the Status of Refugees (CSR), the United Nations Convention against Torture (UNCAT), the United Nations Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons (UNTP), the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), the Universal Declaration of

Human Rights (UDHR), and the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), its rupture with several of the provisions mentioned throughout this essay demonstrates an unwillingness to reform its judicial system directly affecting North Koreans.

These North Korean women's guilt and shame, long repressed, come to the surface, mimicking the scene of psychoanalysis (Henke 1998: xii). In this sense, narrative may be therapeutic, as psychotherapy and trauma scholars have long recognized (Caruth 1995; Felman and Laub 1992; LaCapra 1994; Laub 1995; Nelson 2001): "It is through the very process of rehearsing and re-enacting a drama of mental survival that the trauma narrative effects psychological catharsis" (Henke 1998: xix). Thanks to a writing "ritual of healing" (Herman 1992: 181), one may be turned from a traumatized subject into a survivor anointed of heroic status (Haaken 1996: 1083). This is how narrative works in two distinct but compatible ways – healing the survivor's psyche (Nelson 2001: 22) as well as building awareness of ongoing horrors. Park's confessional testimony thus acknowledges her own wrongs – helping sell other people – while denouncing those committed against her and others like her. In the end, she is able to recover her emotions, and her humanity along with them. Her life story entails the promise to devote her life to a bigger cause – "stepping into the international arena to speak for global justice" (Park 2015: 256–257). These four memoirists' heightened emotional tone represents a collective, reminding the reader of the use of testimony by many other human rights activists (Schaffer and Smith 2004a: 15–20). An individual voice is raised to present a "collective self" that speaks or stands for a community (Martínez García 2017: 596).

These memoirs' play on emotions serves an activist purpose. Their "strategic wielding of emotions" (Martínez García 2018: 492) and strategic framing of the story – embedded in the tradition of trauma and slave life narratives – serves to reach an ever-widening audience with the intention of provoking an empathic response. By making their suffering legible within a human rights framework (Kurz 2015: 7), North Korean activists try to gain support for their awareness-raising campaign. Their narratives represent as much a critique of China as of North Korea:

> I want everyone to know the shocking truth about *human trafficking*. If the Chinese government would end its heartless policy of sending *refugees* back to North Korea, then the brokers would lose all their power to exploit and *enslave* these women. But of course if North Korea wasn't hell on earth, there wouldn't be a need for these women to flee in the first place. (Park 2015: 154–155, my emphasis)

Park's choice of words strategically calls to mind the various treaties at stake. Park's "truth", though partial and subjective, is heralded as a story that needs to be

heard. Common to other human rights life narratives, this focus on "truth" is one of the many conventions of the genre Wendy S. Hesford (2011) calls "the human rights spectacle" (23) and is deployed intentionally for political purposes. As Leigh Gilmore's (2017) *Tainted Witness* reminds readers, no matter the potential accusations of untruth usually attached to ethnic women due to stereotypes of gender and race, these witnesses deserve to be ethically reinstated. Instead of reading these stories, then, in terms of verifying facts, one should approach them from the potential ethical work they can achieve (Smith and Watson 2012). Park's words establish a link between China's policy of "refoulement" (UNHCR 2010: 30), which contravenes China's subscription to the CSR (UNHCR 2010), and human trafficking, which contravenes China's subscription to the CEDAW (OHCHR 1979) and to the Trafficking Protocol (OHCHR 2000). These four North Korean women's memoirs' goal, as seen in this essay, is to raise awareness of the dangerous situation North Korean refugees experience, focusing on girls and women for their most disadvantaged status regarding gender: "Though surrounded by controversy and clouded by what remains unknown of their lives . . . these life narratives make potent ethical claims" (Martínez García 2018: 499). They do so by offering their own testimony to speak for a collective at risk and in the hopes of fostering legislation and socio-political changes. Actual changes in policy may be difficult to achieve, but, in the meantime, activists hope to change people's opinions. Activists' life writing may thus become a useful tool that does not ask to be taken as legal proof, but further complements and illuminates humanitarian crises worthy of public attention. Activists place themselves in the position of empowered survivors, instead of passive victims, and wield their now overcome traumas as weapons in the fight for legal rights for North Korean girls and women who risk their lives by crossing into China or, rather, as multiple international human rights organizations have pointed out, as refugees in need of protection.

Notes

1. As stated in paragraph 94 of Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR's 1979) *Handbook on Procedures and Criteria for Determining Refugee Status Under the 1951 Refugee Convention and the 1967 Protocol relating to the Status of Refugees*,

   > The requirement that a person must be outside his country to be a refugee does not mean that he must necessarily have left that country illegally, or even that he must have left it on account of well-founded fear. He may have decided to ask for recognition of his refugee status after having already been abroad for some time. A person who was not a refugee when he left his country, but who becomes a refugee at a later date, is called a refugee ***"sur place"***. (emphasis in original)

2. For that reason, I have decided to leave out of the present study other works, such as Barbara Demick's (2009) influential *Nothing to Envy: Ordinary Lives in North Korea* as it consists of anonymized interviews. I have also left aside the multiple memoirs written by North Korean male refugees (Harden

2012; Jang 2014; Kang and Rigoulot 2001; J. Kim and Suk-Young 2009), as they would only provide second-hand testimony, if at all, on the issue of human trafficking and sexual slavery.

3. See full text in Ishay (1997: 408–410). Article 3: "Everyone has the right to life, liberty and security of person" (Ishay 1997: 408). Article 4: "No one shall be held in slavery or servitude; slavery and the slave trade shall be prohibited in all their forms" (Ishay 1997: 408). Article 5: "No one shall be subjected to torture or to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment" (Ishay 1997: 408–409). Article 9: "No one shall be subjected to arbitrary arrest, detention or exile" (Ishay 1997: 409). Article 13: (a): "Everyone has the right to freedom of movement and residence within the borders of each state" (Ishay 1997: 409); (b): "Everyone has the right to leave any country, including his own, and to return to his country" (Ishay 1997: 409). Article 16: (a): "Men and women of full age, without any limitation due to race, nationality or religion, have the right to marry and to found a family. They are entitled to equal rights as to marriage, during marriage and at its dissolution" (Ishay 1997: 410); (b): "Marriage shall be entered into only with the free and full consent of the intending spouses" (Ishay 1997: 410).
4. As stated in the Convention on the Rights of the Child (OHCHR 1989), three articles stand out:

> Article 29:
>
> (b) "The development of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, and for the principles enshrined in the Charter of the United Nations".
>
> Article 34: "States Parties undertake to protect the child from all forms of sexual exploitation and sexual abuse.
>
> For these purposes, States Parties shall in particular take all appropriate national, bilateral and multilateral measures to prevent:
>
> The inducement or coercion of a child to engage in any unlawful sexual activity;
>
> The exploitative use of children in prostitution or other unlawful sexual practices;
>
> The exploitative use of children in pornographic performances and materials".
>
> Article 35: "States Parties shall take all appropriate national, bilateral and multilateral measures to prevent the abduction of, the sale of or traffic in children for any purpose or in any form".

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