7 Representation and Its Limits

7.1 The ‘comfort women’ issue and the question of representation

The previous chapter presented feminist discussions on the difficulties and challenges in engaging with the testimonies of ‘comfort women’ victim-survivors. The main arguments revolved around the problem of seeking truth in victim-survivors’ narratives and the importance of the very process of listening to them. Listening to women’s narratives is a critical and reflective practice, and this also poses a question of how to ensure such reflectivity in representing the women and their voices. Due to their connection with historical facts/truth, the testimonies of ‘comfort women’ victims and the women themselves are expected to be represented as undistorted and realistic. The question, however, can be raised as to whether realistic representation is possible or even desirable. To put it differently, the main concern of this chapter is whether there is any desirable way that a certain topic and voices should be represented (interpreted) and whether the particular nature of the topic might limit or determine how it should be represented.

The question of representation has been very much at the centre of the discussion surrounding the ‘comfort women’ system. This is because, as discussed so far, the testimonies of victim-survivors have posed a fundamental question about the representation (or the lack of representation) of the ‘comfort women’ system and victim-survivors in history. Debates on representation concerning the ‘comfort women’ system have mainly taken place in three areas, two of which have been already addressed in this book: first, the authenticity of women’s testimonies as historical documentation; second, the discussion on the inclusion/exclusion of the commentary on the ‘comfort women’ system in history textbooks; and third, cultural and media representation of the system and of victim-survivors. However, they are not completely separate areas and overlap with each other. In addition to the discussion on representation of the ‘comfort women’ system and voices of victim-survivors in history and history textbooks, various cultural and
media representations of the ‘comfort women’ system and victim-survivors emerged or have been rediscovered since the 1990s. These include paintings by victim-survivors themselves, produced as part of their therapeutic activities to engage with their experience, as not many of them know how to read and write, to express and record their experiences. As will be discussed in the final chapter, (feminist) artists such as Arima Rie, Ito Tari, Chang-Jin Lee, Song Hyun-sook, Shimada Yoshiko, Tomiyama Taeko and Yun Suk-nam created performing and visual work inspired by these women and their testimonies. Various documentary films about victim-survivors were produced, including the documentary trilogy about the women living in a communal house in South Korea, *Nanumu no Ie* (The House of Sharing) directed by Byun Young-joo, and the film *Silence Broken: Korean Comfort Women* by Kim-Gibson mentioned in Chapter 6.

Graphic novelists of various political views have published work that refers to the ‘comfort women’ system and victim-survivors. Heated debates broke out when Kobayashi Yoshinori, one of the leading graphic novelists, and a right-wing supporter in Japan, published *Shin Gomanism Sengen* (The New Statement of Arrogance) in 1997, which became a best-seller. Feminists and left critics felt that Kobayashi’s work was deeply problematic, due to his denial of the existence of the ‘comfort women’ system that sexually exploited these women. They were also concerned about the impact of his work on the general public, as he was a well-known and popular graphic novelist in Japan.

Another major incident regarding cultural and media representation of the ‘comfort women’ system is that the NHK (*Nihon Hoso Kyokai*, Japanese Broadcasting Corporation) broadcast a heavily edited programme in January 2001 on the WIWCT on Japan’s Military Sexual Slavery that took place in December 2000. The WIWCT, which was a people’s tribunal, was organized by transnational feminists and human rights activists in Asia and supported by various international NGOs. The WIWCT was established as states had failed to fulfil their role of ensuring justice and redressing the crimes committed by the Japanese government, which sexually enslaved women, and to end wartime sexual violence (IOC, 2001). Initially, the NHK expressed its interest in making a documentary programme that covered the process of the WIWCT, and interviewed a feminist activist, Matsui Yayori, one of the convenors of the International Organizing Committee (of the Tribunal), as well as academics and critics who held views supportive of the WIWCT. However, when the programme was broadcast, the interview with the convener was completely removed, any positive comments on the WIWCT were erased and the rationale and judgment of the Tribunal were not reported at all. Instead commentaries by right-wing academics that were critical of the WIWCT were included.

A women’s organization (VAWW-NET) which helped set up this Tribunal filed a lawsuit in July 2001 against the NHK and other companies involved