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‘Comfort Women’: From Personal Trauma to Collective Integrity

The Statue of Peace and contested memory of ‘comfort women’

The Statue of Peace in Berlin was installed in September 2020 as a universal monument against sexual violence by the Berlin-based transnational feminist alliance.[1] This bronze statue is a replica of the so-called Korean “comfort women” memorial, which was erected in front of the Japanese Embassy in Seoul to mark the 1000th Wednesday Demonstration calling for the resolution of Japan’s ‘comfort women’ issue. ‘Comfort women’ is the euphemistic term which refers to the victims of the sexual slavery system established by the Imperial Japanese Military during the Asia-Pacific War (1931–1945).[2] What makes the Statue of Peace in Berlin different from other Statues of Peace across Germany, is the “first” and the “only” installation on “public space” that intends to be “permanent”.[3] Why being *permanent* is so important? The Japanese ‘comfort woman’ survivor, Shirota Suzuko[4] (pseudonym: 1921–1993) would be the first person who answered the question in the history of the ‘comfort women’ justice movement because her successful activism brought the first *permanent* monument for ‘comfort women’ to the world in 1986.[5] The stone memorial signified the *permanent* pledge of Shirota and many other Japanese advocates proclaiming no more sexual slavery in the present and future.

The public memory of ‘comfort women’ has been manifested as memory contestation over ‘sex slaves’ or ‘prostitutes’ since 1991, when the Korean

'comfort woman' victim-survivor, Kim Hak-sun came forward in public. With concerted efforts of transnational feminist redress movements, her courageous breaking of silence achieved a paradigm change in the public memory of 'comfort women' from 'voluntary prostitutes' to 'rape victims', which was clearly stipulated in two UN reports.[6] Ever since, this humanitarian turn of the 'comfort women' issue has ignited a fierce backlash from the 'comfort women' denialists and the Japanese government who have rejected Japan's war responsibility for the state's violence against women by disseminating the counter-memory of 'comfort women' as 'prostitutes'. This 'memory war'[7] silenced in particular, the voices of Japanese 'comfort women' victims, some of whom testified their experiences at 'comfort stations' under various pseudonyms until 1990s.[8]

The issue of 'comfort women' is far beyond the diplomatic concerns between Japan and South Korea. As the extant research shows, the nationalities of 'comfort women' victims include not only many other Asian countries, but also from Western nations such as the Dutch 'comfort women'.[9] Notwithstanding the following, the first victims of the Japanese military system of sexual slavery were Japanese women.[10] This fact indicates the 'comfort women' issue as a violation of universal women's human rights premised upon a patriarchal gender hierarchy where the male dominates female sexuality. Japanese 'comfort women' victims attest to a gendered, classed and racialised power relationship between the state and women. Narratives of some Japanese victims including Okinawan women resonate with non-Japanese victims who were taken to 'comfort stations' by deception or by coercion. In consideration of Okinawa's colonial history, postcolonial accounts of Okinawan 'comfort women' victims as racialised 'others' within Japan seem parallel to their Korean, Taiwanese and other non-Japanese counterparts from Japan's wartime colonised territories.

Nevertheless, the majority of Japanese victims were state-licensed prostitutes for civilians prior to their mobilisation into military 'comfort stations'. They were initially sold to brothels at an early age by their poor families as indentured prostitutes who were trapped in sexual enslavement without any hope of payback. The state preyed upon their destitution and devastation for their mobilisation into the war. Hence, Japanese victims were the victims of two sexual slavery systems established by the state. However, since the end of WWII, Japanese victims have been continuously stigmatised as 'professional prostitutes', which has excluded the initial victims from the victimhood status in constructing the memory of 'comfort women'. In borrowing the words by Nishino Rumiko, unless their voices of life-long trauma can be heard and recognised as victims of sexual violence, the public memory of 'comfort women' will never be remembered as that of a violation of universal human rights.[11]

This study is based upon my oral history research[12] on two marginalised stories of trauma confessed by Japanese 'comfort women' victim-survivors, Shirota Suzuko and Kikumaru (*geisha* name: 1924–1972). Both were sold by their fathers at the age of 17 and ten respectively, into *geisha* houses which were incorporated in the prewar state-sanctioned prostitution system.[13] Their life stories reveal the destructive effects of prostitution sex on female personhood followed by their life-or-death survival through their entire lives. Their voice and/or silence illuminate how significant *the* listener with human empathy is in the process of recovery from individual trauma and the reconstruction of collective integrity.

Self-dehumanisation as the survival strategy

Prostitution sex manifests multiple self-dehumanisation processes which prostituted women undergo to protect her true self from total destruction.[14] Kathleen Barry conceptualises the survival strategy as the four-stage process composed of 'distancing', 'disengagement', 'dissociation' and 'disembodiment and dissembling'.[15] By pretending to be someone else, the prostituted woman keeps a distance from her real identity. Then, she numbs her senses to disengage in the ongoing act of prostitution. This separation between her self and her body is promoted through dissociating the former from the latter by convincing herself that she is 'not there.'[16] She further fragments her body into a sex/commercial object whereby the final step, 'disembodiment and dissembling' is complete. Thus, the simultaneous and multiple self-segmentation and objectification in prostitution sex destroys her personhood. Therefore, prostitution is a form of sexual violence against women which strips away her human dignity and integrity.

The Japanese 'comfort woman' victim, Kikumaru was approximately 14 years of age when she sexually serviced her first client in her *geisha* house with little knowledge about sex and its meaning. It is beyond our imagination how many times she had gone through the multiple self-dehumanisation process in both civilian and military brothels until she committed suicide at the age of 47 in 1972. Her physical and psychological wounds caused by sexual violence were so excruciating that they haunted Kikumaru as traumatic memory.[17] This belated traumatised experience is 'beyond the limits of human ability to grasp, to transmit, or to imagine'.[18] This impossibility to speak of trauma further agonises victims of sexual violence.

Not only internal conflict within the self, but also external confrontation such as stigmatisation and social exclusion, topples the traumatised to a hell with no closure of excruciating pains. The real hell for Kikumaru was her post-war life.[19] Her endless battle against dire poverty and social stigma in postwar Japan is similar to other 'comfort women' victims' experiences as Caroline Norma emphasises:

> Regardless of the pathway that led women into the wartime comfort stations – whether it was manipulation, abduction, or trafficking out of civilian brothels – their health, welfare and life-course outcomes, irrespective of nationality, were depressing the same.[20]

Nevertheless, their voices of trauma were silenced by the patriarchal social structure in which the gendered binary of 'virgins' versus 'prostitutes' runs deep enough to force 'comfort woman' victims to internalise the perpetrator's shame and guilt into her deeper inner self. This victim-blame attitude towards victims of sexual violence has been perpetuated across space and time with multiplying on-going trauma on the victims.

As a self defence strategy, Kikumaru chose the flight mode which includes numbness, dissociation and "self-as-other."[21] As mentioned before, this strategy promotes self-segmentation, resulting in *The Divided Self*.[22] Kikumaru ultimately suffered from her identity split between her outer self as a "nuisance" excluded by her community and her inner self as "good-natured."[23] She always believed that she continuously sacrificed herself for the family as a dutiful daughter who became an indentured civilian prostitute, and then for the nation as a patriotic imperial subject who sexually served Japanese

soldiers at ‘comfort stations.’ Her consistent self-identity was completely torn apart by a post-war society which never recognised her coherent integrity.

Re-constructing one’s own life history through the present sense of self is identical to re-creating her identity in her relationships to the past and the external world. Kikumaru’s tragic suicide uncovers that speaking life-story narratives needs “the creation of coherence” in both the past-present relations and the public-personal relation.[24] In this vein, temporal consistency of the self illuminates “who we are and how we got that way” through our past events.[25] The continuity of the self in life history is also built upon through the constant revision of a “comfortable” sense of self as a member of the social world,[26] because “the social order” provides us with the meaning and dignity of life.[27] However, the patriarchal gender hierarchy traps victims of sexual violence into ethical dilemmas between “the moral standing of the self” and the social judgement[28] as exemplified by Kikumaru’s inner conflict between being ‘good natured’ and being a ‘nuisance’.

Being desperate “to remove this endless feeling of agony”,[29] Kikumaru abruptly switched from the flight mode to the fight mode[30] and testified her ‘comfort woman’ experience in a male magazine. Her article came out in 1971. Judith Herman’s three-layer model of recovery from trauma[31] reveals the danger in Kikumaru’s sudden shift on her survival strategy. Kikumaru bypassed the first stage of establishing her physical and psychological sense of safety. This first step constructs the foundation which allows her to move to the second stage: telling her own story of trauma. Tragically, societal ignorance permanently silenced Kikumaru’s last voice clamouring for the public

recognition of her role as a 'comfort woman': "a patriotic national subject on the same footing as soldiers."[32]

Recovery from trauma as creation of the coherent self

In a stark contrast to Kikumaru's struggle to restore human integrity, Shirota's transformation to the victim-survivor-activist fulfils the conditions necessary to Herman's three stages of recovery from trauma. In 1955, Shirota exercised her agency to reclaim ownership of her personhood through finding a safe place for life and finally acquired her intimate community. It was *Kanita Fujin no Mura*, Bethesda Rehabilitation Village for Women,[33] which assisted Shirota to keep reflecting on and revising her narrative of trauma through dialogue with the inner self and the external world. The establishment of physical and psychological safety thus allowed the victim of sexual violence to regain "a sense of power and control" stolen by trauma which enables her to tell her narrative of trauma "completely, in depth and in detail."[34]

In this second stage of recovery from trauma, the victim of sexual violence still faces the horror and the despair of her life, which raises the risk of her suicide as a way of rejection.[35] The difficulty in communicating trauma consists of two aspects: the impossibility of speaking unspeakable stories of trauma[36] and the incapacity to listen to unspeakable trauma stories.[37] Thus, in this dialogical aspect in communication of trauma, both a narrator and a listener are equally important. It was her listener, a Christian vicar, Fukatsu Fumio (1909–2000), who rescued Shirota from her temptation of suicide at the second stage of speaking of her own story.

Fukatsu became *the* listener of Shirota's voice of trauma since 1955, when she had met him at *Jiairyo,* her first rehabilitation centre. Different from a listener, *the* listener actively participates in listening to unspeakable stories of trauma. In this active listening, *the* listener further bears witness to her traumatic events, "partially experience" her trauma and "feels" her inner conflicts or emotions as if s/he is a "co-owner" of her trauma.[38] What makes the impossible communication of trauma possible is empathetic feelings toward the victim of trauma. In reality, the world has been divided into 'us' and 'the other' by multiple boundaries such as race, class and gender. Victims of sexual violence both in peace time and war time have been equally categorised as the '(stigmatised) other' by the society embedded with the patriarchal binary of 'good' women and 'bad' women. However, the patriarchal female bifurcation is an illusion because the dividing line is "redrawn and/or removed by the patriarchal state for its own benefit."[39] The hidden *Sexual Contract*[40] between Japan and the United States during the occupation period reveals that all Japanese women were potential 'whores' for US soldiers.[41] Fukatsu nurtured empathetic feelings toward Shirota as an equal human being, which transcended the patriarchal dichotomy. His constant role as *the* listener assisted her to reconstruct her coherent identity as a 'comfort women' victim-survivor.

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Shirota's reconciliation between the past self and the present self through the second stage motivated her to go beyond her intimate community, *Kanita,* in an aim for her "reconnection to the external world" – Herman's third stage of recovery from trauma.[42] At this final stage, public acknowledgement of her voice as representing 'comfort woman' victims, is critical. Interviewing the

children of Holocaust survivors, Nadine Fresco concludes that the site of "concentration of death" enclaves the site of silence. [43] Here, silence symbolises innumerable deaths behind a single survivor. During the war, Shirota witnessed countless deaths of other 'comfort women' from illnesses, murders, bombings and suicides. As Miyaji Naoko, a Japanese psychologist, claims, it is not impossible to imagine their permanently silenced voices through listening to survivors who broke their silence.[44] When Shirota recognised herself as the survivor who could speak for *all* 'comfort women,' her new identity emerged – the survivor who represents the silenced voices of dead as well as surviving 'comfort women' victims. Her solidarity with Kim Hak-sun and other all 'comfort women' victims opened the door for her reconnection to the society as well as her restoration of human integrity which is manifested by embracing "the full complexity of who we are."[45]

The politics of integrity is also integral to the society which has stigmatised, ignored and silenced the voices of 'comfort women' victims. Their experiences of violence and trauma shape "a living legacy" that instructs us how to identify and resolve social injustice in the present and future.[46] Let's listen to their individual voices of suffering by oppression as *the* listener, as an equal human being. This is a pathway for us to recognise fractures and fragmentations in our history/memory and identity construction. Restoring the coherent wholeness of our society cannot be possible without acknowledging both positive and negative legacies from our collective past. This is a personal act of resistance against oppression and can grow to "a collective political act that can transform the ways in which we talk about sexual abuse."[47] Kikumaru, Shirota and other courageous 'comfort women' survivors exercised unimaginable agencies to speak their unspeakable stories of trauma. Now is our turn to be *the* listener of

their marginalised voices for restoring human integrity to *all* victims of sexual violence, every one of us and our society.

Endnote

[1] For an excellent analysis of the background and the contestation behind the installation of the statue, see Dorothea Mladenova: The Statue of Peace in Berlin: How the Nationalist Reading of Japan's Wartime "Comfort Women" Backfired, in: Journal of Japan Focus, 20, 4, 1, 2022, pp. 1-28.
[2] This euphemism has been so controversial because the term, 'comfort' denotes 'sexual comfort' for the perpetrator. Many survivors have refused this term to identify themselves whereas scholars and activists have widely used it in quotation marks for its historical legacies.
[3] Mladenova: The Statue of Peace in Berlin.
[4] The name order of all Japanese persons except Japanese scholars who have published in English follows the Japanese traditional pattern; that is, the surname precedes the given name.
[5] Shirota's resistance against sexual violence against women was her driving force to install a 'comfort women' memorial within the compound of *Kanita*, a women's rehabilitation centre. On 15 August 1985, a wooden monument with the inscription of *Chinkon no Hi* [the Monument to alleviate the dead spirits] was erected on the top of the hill in *Kanita* by the Christian vicar, Fukatsu. He was convinced by Shirota that the installation of the monument was the best way to apologise to the 'comfort women' victims. Further, in pursuing to replace the wooden installation with a stone monument, she passionately initiated the stone monument movement through media interviews and fundraising, which culminated in her 1986 radio interview with TBS (Tokyo Broadcasting System). TBS launched the Kangaroo Campaign for her fundraising, and her interview program won an award.
[6] The United Nations' Reports were submitted by Special Rapporteur, Ms. Radhika Coomaraswamy in 1994 (https://docs.un.org/en/E/CN.4/1996/53/Add.1) and by Ms. Gay McDougall in 1998 (https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/257682?ln=en&v=pdf). McDougall provides legal definition of sexual slavery based on the 1926 Slavery Convention, which stipulates that "slavery" refers to "the status or condition of a person over whom any or all of the powers attaching to the rights of ownership are exercised, including sexual access through rape or other forms of sexual violence."
[7] See Sachiyo Tsukamoto: The Counter-boomerang Effect of Transnational Revisionist Activism on the Memory of 'Comfort Women', in: Journal of *Memory Studies*, 15, 6, 2022, pp.1346-1359 https://doi.org/10.1177/17506980221134907 .
[8] For more stories about Japanese 'comfort women' victims, see Appendix: Brief life Stories of some Japanese 'comfort Women' in Tsukamoto: The Politics of Trauma and Integrity. Tanaka Tami (pseudonym) confessed in 1992 to Kawata Fumiko, a female journalist on the 'Comfort women' Hotline, which was set up after Kim Hak-sun's 1991 testimony. See Fumiko Kawata: Nihonjin 'Ianfu' Tanaka Tami san no Shogen [Testimony of a Japanese 'Comfort Woman,' Tanaka Tami], Shukan Kinyobi, 1019, 5 December 2014, pp. 28-31.
[9] See the map of 'comfort stations' produced by the Women's Active Museum on War and Peace (WAM) "based on intensive research of documents, including survivors' testimonies, soldiers' testimonies/memoirs, eyewitness reports, and official documents" (https://wam-peace.org/ianjo/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/MAPofCS_EN_forUse_ver20241222.pdf). The Dutch victim-survivor-activist, Jan Ruff-O'Herne was among the first western survivors who broke their silence about their plights in 'comfort stations' in Indonesia, a Dutch colony during WWII. See Jan Ruff-O'Herne: Fifty Years of Silence, William Heinemann 2008.
[10] VAWWRAC (Ed.): Nihonjin 'Ianfu': Aikokushin to Jinshin Baibai to [Japanese 'Comfort Women': Nationalism and Trafficking], Gendai Shokan 2015; Caroline Norma: The Japanese Comfort Women and Sexual Slavery during the China and Pacific Wars, Bloomsbury Academic 2016; Sachiyo Tsukamoto: The Politics of Trauma and Integrity: Stories of Japanese "Comfort Women", Routledge 2022.
[11] Tsukamoto: The Politics of Trauma and Integrity, p. 5. Nishino is the co-head of the Violence Against Women in War Research Action Center (VAWW RAC). Its predecessor was the Violence Against Women in War Network, Japan (VAWW-NET Japan), which organised the 2000 Women's International War Crimes Tribunal on Japan's

Military Sexual Slavery in Tokyo. The women's tribunal indicted sixteen perpetrators including Emperor Hirohito and concluded that all of them were guilty. By including Japanese women as victims, Japan participated in the tribunal as the country of both the perpetrator and the victim of the military sexual slavery system. "It was the passion of VAWW-NET Japan. They were unable to work on behalf of Japanese victims because they had been extremely preoccupied with supporting non-Japanese survivors' court cases against the Japanese government since 1991" (Nishino: Interview with Tsukamoto 23 June 2016). The feminist historian, Fujime Yuki testified that the victimisation of Japanese 'comfort women' was still valid, notwithstanding the absence of Japanese survivors. Accordingly, the judges concluded that "Japanese women were forced to become 'comfort women' and, thus served as sex slaves" (VAWW-NET Japan: The Women's International War Crimes Tribunal: Judgement, 2001, p. 70). In spite of those Japanese conscientious activists' efforts, Japanese victims have been still excluded from the victimhood status. In 2021, the VAWW RAC halted their activities without further notice.

[12] Lynn Abrams: Oral History Theory. USA & Canada: Routledge 2010.

[13] Even under the state's licensed prostitution system, recruitment of girls under 18 years of age was prohibited. The *geisha* apprentice system served as a loophole (Onozawa Akane: The Two Sexual Slavery Systems: 'Comfort Women' under the Japanese Military and Licensed Prostitution in: Júlia Tomás and Nicol Epple (Eds), Sexuality, Oppression and Human Rights, Brill 2015, pp. 153-162, here: p.155-6.
2017: 155-6).

[14] Katherine Barry: The Prostitution of Sexuality, New York University Press 1995.

[15] Barry: The Prostitution of Sexuality, here: pp. 30-35. Barry's twenty-year research based on her interview with prostituted women provides strong empirical support for her theorisation.

[16] Barry: The Prostitution of Sexuality, here: pp. 31-32.

[17] For more details about Kikumaru's life story, see Tsukamoto: The Politics of Trauma and Integrity, and Sachiyo Tsuakamoto: A More Miserable Life than Living in the Jungle: A Japanese 'Comfort Woman' Story in: Journal of Gender & History, 35, 2023, pp. 305-322 https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-0424.12583 .

[18] Dori Laub as cited in Cathy Caruth (Ed.): Trauma: Explorations in Memory, The John Hopkins University Press 1995, here: p. 68.

[19] Kazuko Hirota: Shōgen Kiroku Jūgun Ianfu/Kangofu: Senjo ni ikita Onna no Dokoku [Testimonial Records of Military Comfort Women/Nurses: Lamentations of the Women who Lived at the Front], Shinjinbutsuōraisha 2009, here: pp.104-105. The late female journalist, Hirota (1939–2018) interviewed Kikumaru in 1970.

[20] Caroline Norma: The Japanese Comfort Women and Sexual Slavery during the China and Pacific Wars, Bloomsbury Academic 2016, here: p. 3.

[21] Susan Rose: Naming and Claiming: The Integration of Traumatic Experience and the Reconstruction of Self in Survivors' Stories of Sexual Abuse. In: Kim Lacy Rogers, Selma Leydesdorff, Graham Dawson (Eds.): Trauma and Life Stories: International Perspectives, Routledge 1999, pp. 160-179, here: p. 170.

[22] Ronald David Laing: The Divided Self: A Study of Sanity and Madness, Tavistock Publications 1960.

[23] Hirota: Shōgen Kiroku, here: pp. 16-18.

[24] Charlotte Linde: Life Stories: The Creation of Coherence, Oxford University Press 1993.

[25] Linde: Life Stories, here: p. 3.

[26] Linde: Life Stories, here: p. 3.

[27] Jenny Edkins: Trauma and the Memory of Politics, Cambridge University Press 2003, here: p. 4.

[28] Linde: Life Stories, here: p. 3.

[29] Tsukamoto, The Politics of Trauma and Integrity, here: p. 38.

[30] According to Judith Herman: Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence–From Domestic Abuse to Political Terror, Basic Books 1992, here: p. 199, the fight mode in dealing with trauma encourages a victim of trauma to establish "a degree of control over her own bodily and emotional responses that reaffirms a sense of power" and "to learn how to live with it, and even how to use it as a source of energy and enlightenment." In contrast, the flight mode as represented in the form of numbness, dissociation and self-as-other allows her to give in to despair and abandoning her self.

[31] Herman: Trauma and Recovery.

[32] Tsukamoto: The Politics of Trauma and Integrity, here: P. 42.

[33] Shirota's long-cherished dream of establishing a permanent care home for former prostituted women finally came true as her home, *Kanita*. The women's rehabilitation centre was established with state subsidies in 1965. It illustrates Shirota's successful political activism fully supported by the Christian vicar, Fukatsu and Christian sisters. For more details, see Tsukamoto: The Politics of Trauma and Integrity.

[34] Herman: Trauma and Recovery, here: pp. 159-175.

[35] Herman: Trauma and Recovery, here: P. 194.
[36] Caruth: Trauma; Cathy Caruth: Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narratives, and History, John Hopkins University Press 1996; Edkins: Trauma and the Memory of Politics; Herman: Trauma and Recovery; Dominick LaCapra: Writing History, Writing Trauma, The John Hopkins University Press 2001; Shoshana Felman & Dori Laub: Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History, Taylor and Francis 2013 http://www.ebrary.com.ezproxy.newcastle.edu.au access: 27.12.2021.
[37] Amy Novak: Who Speaks? Who Listens? : The Problem of Address in Two Nigerian Trauma Novels, in: Journal of Studies in the Novel, 40, 1, 2008, pp.31-51; Zoë Norridge: Perceiving Pain in African Literature, Palgrave Macmillan 2013; Catherine Gilbert, Catherine: From Surviving to Living: Voice, Trauma and Witness in Rwandan Women's Writing, Presses Universitaires de la Méditerranée 2018.
[38] Felman & Laub: Testimony, here: pp. 57-58.
[39] Tsukamoto: The Politics of Trauma and Integrity, here: p. 32.
[40] Carol Pateman: The Sexual Contract, Polity Press 1988.
[41] For more details, see Tsukamoto: The Politics of Trauma and Integrity, Chapter 2.
[42] Herman: Trauma and Recovery, here: pp. 196-213.
[43] Nadine Fresco: Remembering the Unknown, in: Journal of International Review of Psycho-analysis, 11, pp. 417-427 as cited in Felman & Laub: Testimony, here: pp. 64-65.
[44] Naoko Miyaji: Kanjoto: Torauma no Chiseigaku [The Ring Island: Geopolotics of Trauma], Misuzu Shobo 2007, here: p. 214.
[45] Aurora Levins Morales: Medicine Stories: History, Culture and the Politics of Integrity, South End Press 1998, here: p. 7.
[46] Maki Kimura: The Legacy of Injustice and Resistance: Japan's Military Sexual Slavery in: Chris Beasley and Pam Papadelos (Eds.): Living Legacies of Social Injustice: Power and Social Change, Routledge 2024, pp. 173-190, here: p.175 and p.182. According to Kimuara, "[l]egacy here indicates complex power relations that materialise the connection between past, present and future. In the context of the debates over 'comfort women', legacy concerns political processes of the memorialisation of the past, that is, determining what is to be remembered and how."
[47] Morales: Medicine Stories, here: p. 24.