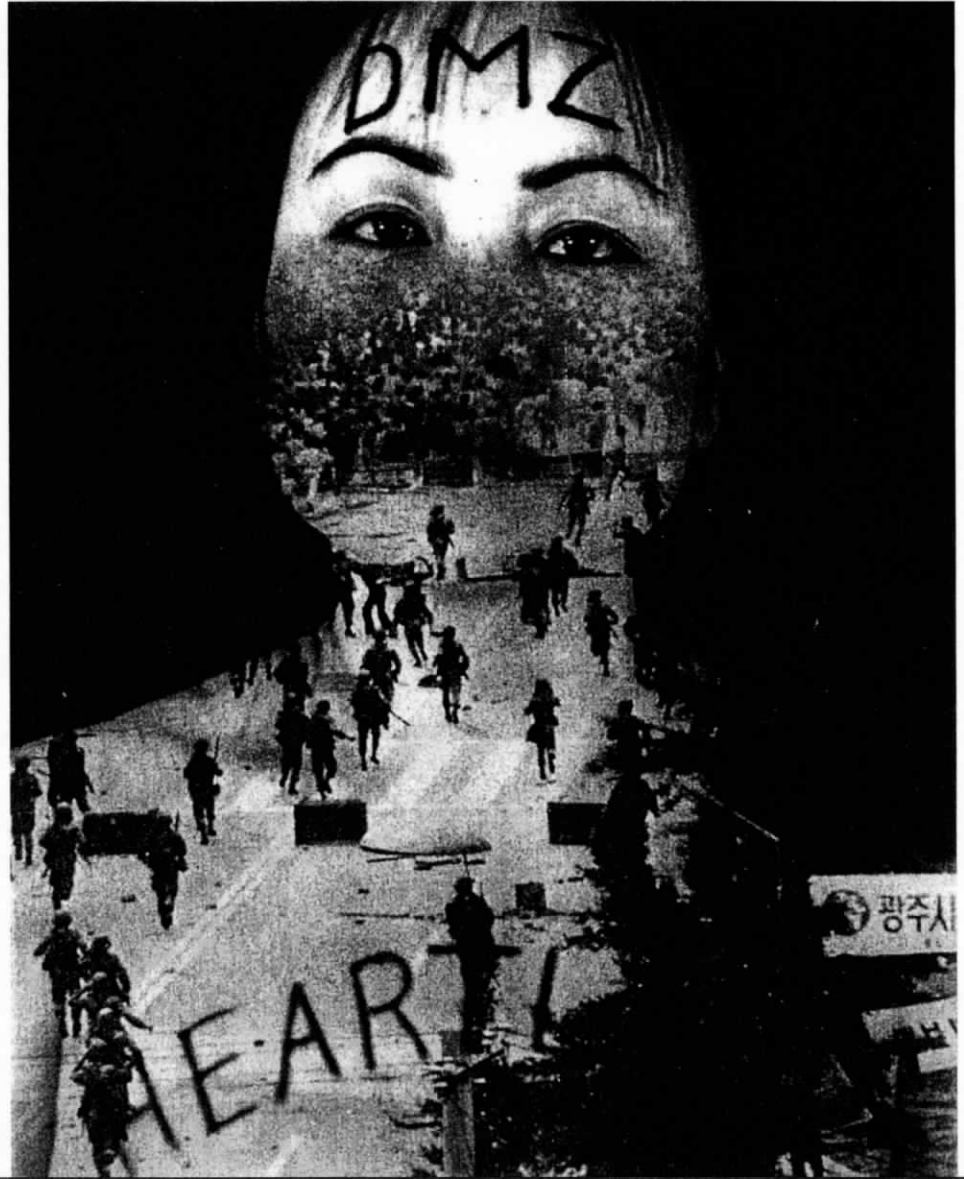


HAUNTING VIOLATIONS

Feminist Criticism and the Crisis of the "Real"



EDITED BY WENDY S. HESFORD & WENDY KOZOL



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Defining Moments

Wendy S. Hesford

The importance of history in formulating my own identity is undeniable. Once I felt I had a grasp of alternative history, a history of my Korean roots that was denied or suppressed, that there was a role model, it gave me incredible strength.

—Yong Soon Min

Defining Moments #4, which serves as the frontispiece and also appears on the cover of this book, is the fourth in a series of six gelatin silver prints (1992; 20 x 16 inches each) by Yong Soon Min, a Korean American artist who emigrated to the United States in 1960. Superimposed on the artist's upper body is a photographic image of the Kwangju Uprising and Massacre. Superimposing this historical referent onto the photographic flesh of the artist positions the material body as a site marked by the trauma of cultural and national conflicts. Yong Soon Min figures her body as an archive of memory, even as she interrogates the dilemma of realist representations by placing the "real" of history in dialogue with the "real" of the body. Like other contributors to this book, she forces viewers to confront the paradoxical need to interrogate truth-telling discourses, even as we rely on those discourses to rethink imperialist, ethnocentric, and Western epistemologies.

The uprising and massacre occurred in May 1980 in the southern provincial capital of Kwangju. The uprising began as a peaceful demonstration by students who were soon joined by large numbers of ordinary citizens as they protested the South Korean government's military rule and called for democratic elections. The military violently suppressed the demonstrations that spread across the city, ultimately killing an estimated two thousand civilians. Yong Soon Min's image depicts a moment when government troops rushed at a group of protesters in the streets of Kwangju. However, the sign "DMZ" (demilitarized zone) on her forehead reaches beyond the specificity of the moment to implicate imperial power and subvert static notions of the nation-

state. More particularly, writing this history on the artist's gendered body turns our attention to the traumatic impact of hegemonic forces on Korean and Korean American women.

Still, Yong Soon Min's gaze is not directed solely at the specter of Eurocentrism and neocolonialism. She also unsettles romanticized, nostalgic images of "the home country" (the United States or Korea or both). The nationalist U.S. slogan "Heartland" bleeds into the image of the Kwangju Uprising and Massacre, seeping into the artist's skin. The disappearance of "land" points to the immigrant experience of cultural dislocation and generational hybridization and to the trauma of historical memory. By marking both geopolitical territories on the body Yong Soon Min creates a context for a transnational feminism that recognizes the relationship of historical identities.

Are we to read this image as a memorial? An elegy? A testimony? Does it call for the viewer to bear witness? If so, are we witnessing the hybridization of identity? The fracturing of the nation-state? The violation of the body of the people? The dilemma of autobiography and historical narration? What is it that haunts the viewing process? What is it that wounds us, that "shoots out of [the photograph] like an arrow and pierces" (Barthes 26–27)?

The historical trauma that haunts the production and reception of *Defining Moments #4* lies in the repetition of the inscription of violence. If photography is, as Barthes suggests, "a figuration of the motionless and made-up face beneath which we see the dead" (32), then we might say that the death of those massacred at Kwangju lies motionless beneath the face of Yong Soon Min. Yet, *Defining Moments* suggests not that one becomes a ghost of oneself—a conception of trauma that limits forgetfulness to individual repression—or that what returns to haunt the subject is the lost referent. Rather it suggests that the archive of traumatic memory "leaves the trace of an incision right on the skin; more than one skin, at more than one age" (Derrida 20). The punctum of *Defining Moments #4* is not only the loss that pierces like an arrow or the absence that lingers like a ghost; it is also the inadequacy of representation—its doubleness. As Patrick Brantlinger puts it in his contribution to this volume, "to resist violence it must give violence expression."

Defining Moments #4 prompts viewers and critics to grapple with the ethical and political questions that arise when we turn to representations of violence, trauma, and oppression. Yoon Soon Min urges us to think about how material bodies take on the function and burden of cultural memory. The image offers a clarifying editorial moment, enabling us to see how political, cultural, and personal violations haunt the crisis of "the real."

Works Cited

- Barthes, Roland. *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*. Trans. Richard Howard. New York: Hill and Wang, 1981.
 Derrida, Jacques. *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*. Trans. Eric Prenowitz. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996.