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**'Ghostly' Histories: Alternative Frameworks for Understanding the Memories,
Experiences, and Representations of South Korean 'Comfort Women'**

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HISTORY 101

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University of California, Berkeley

PURPOSE / AIM / ABSTRACT

The main purpose of this paper is to trouble the dominant idea in mainstream national and international narratives that the proper way to understand and reconcile the hitherto unresolved 'comfort women' issue is by establishing an objective 'truth' of what happened. Instead, I argue that what is needed is the inclusion of multiple perspectives and approaches into historical studies of 'comfort women,' in conjunction with the acknowledgement that there will always be stories and experiences that are being excluded in naming the experiences of 'comfort women' and women in war. Two alternative approaches, or frameworks for looking at history, that I propose to supplement the existing 'official' narratives and understandings of the 'comfort women' issue are: 1.) the use of bodies as rich, substantial sources of history, particularly histories of subaltern identities and groups that have been concealed from official narratives, and 2.) small, independent activist museums that combine social justice with subjective knowledge production. By incorporating bodies as sites/sources of history, as well as independent activist museums with subjective knowledge positionalities, into existing official narratives in historical records and public institutes, it becomes possible to disrupt ethnonationalist discourses of passive victimization and construct a deeper, gendered understanding of war not just when it is occurring but also the unique, lasting aftereffects it has on different groups and individuals, not just in accordance with national boundaries.

Note: I want to be clear in acknowledging that the 'comfort women' system included women from many different Asian countries, and this issue is not simply a Japan-Korea issue; however, for the purpose of establishing a feasible scope for the limitations of this paper, I will be focusing on the unique experiences of South Korean women.

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RESEARCH QUESTIONS

*“War has not ended yet. My life was totally ruined by Japanese Empire, but I won’t be dead until history remembers me.”*¹

Kang Soon-Ae was one of up to an estimated 200,000 girls and women who were forced into military sexual slavery by the Japanese Imperial Army from 1931-1945, the time period before and during the Pacific theatre of World War II.² Despite this systematic sexual abuse and violation of women’s bodies that occurred during wartime, the debate of what actually happened to these women is still unresolved within political debates, and reparations ergo have not been achieved.³ From history textbook revisionism to complete erasure in official historical and political records, history has not yet been able to “remember” the experiences of ‘comfort women,’ as survivor Kang Soon-Ae willed.

In considering this question of historical remembrance more deeply, as well as Kang Soon-Ae’s declaration that she “won’t be dead until history remembers” her, I began to ask, “What exactly would it take to fully remember ‘comfort women’ in history? Are there different ways of remembering? What are the political and moral implications of remembering certain parts, and forgetting (or leaving out, both intentionally and unintentionally) other parts?”

From this initial inquiry, I developed the following research questions to guide my paper: “How do we reconcile the tensions between established public narratives and individual recollections? Between remembering and forgetting? Additionally, what are the possibilities for representing an ‘accurate’ reality and explaining the complexities of psychosocial trauma these

¹ The Korean Council for the Women Drafted for Military Sexual Slavery by Japan, *공식 사죄* (Seoul: War & Women’s Human Rights Museum, 2021), 12.

² Pyong Gap Min, “Korean ‘Comfort Women’: The Intersection of Colonial Power, Gender, and Class,” *Gender & Society*, 17, no. 6 (December 1, 2003): 938–57, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0891243203257584>.

³ Gerald Krieger, “Korean Comfort Women: America’s Role in Southeast Asia’s Unresolved Historical Legacy,” *International Journal of Security Studies & Practice* 2, no. 1 (September 25, 2022).

women go through on a daily basis? What are the ethical, moral, and political issues that are involved in considering such possibilities?"

From my research and findings, I will propose a two-part alternative framework for understanding official history and personal memories as coexisting approaches to constructing historical knowledge. The first is the body as an additional lens for studying the histories of 'comfort women' that aren't included in official records and narratives. The second is a comparative study of four museums in Korea, each of which have their own strengths and limitations — the museums I examined are: National Museum of Korea, National Museum of Korean Contemporary History, War Memorial of Korea, and War & Women's Human Rights Museum. Through this comparative analysis of government records versus individual testimonies and bodily experiences, as well as national versus small nonprofit museums, I aim to critique ethnonationalist narratives of Korea's 'comfort women' history and show how the experiences of war and imperialism are engraved in the day-to-day lives of 'comfort women' survivors, not just in the years during which they were 'comfort women.' With that, I will also show how the experiences of constructing and reconstructing histories are an ongoing process of productive knowledge creation, which will lead into a discussion of the subsequent political and ethical implications of this argument.

INTRODUCTION / OVERVIEW

In South Korea, current dominant narratives of history, which are regarded as objective, truthful, and value-neutral, have interacted with nationalist memory to continuously re-victimize 'comfort women' survivors even nearly a century after the Pacific War, which started in 1931. In this sense, the victimization of 'comfort women' survivors in Korea did not end with the

conclusion of Japanese occupation in 1945; in order to effectively move forward in healing and reconciliation, this fundamental question of historical 'truth' must be addressed.

To prevent Japanese soldiers from sexually exploiting local women during the Pacific War, the Japanese government set up a system for Japanese soldiers in colonized countries to provide sexual 'comfort.'⁴ As the war continued, these stations evolved into an expansive, formal system of military sexual slavery, largely composed of young women, often from impoverished backgrounds. These girls and women were euphemistically referred to as 'comfort women,' and they were continuously forced to endure physical and sexual violence in the 'comfort stations.'⁵ An estimated 80% of the total 'comfort women' were from Korea, which was a colony of Japan at the time, but according to official documents, military comfort houses existed in China, Hong Kong, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and many more countries — essentially, they were established wherever the Japanese troops went, from the border of Siberia to equatorial New Guinea.⁶ Toward the end of the war, in anticipation of a decisive battle on the mainland, 'comfort stations' were set up in Japan as well as in Korea. Thus, it is distressing yet unsurprising that Japanese soldiers joked that on every battlefield women arrived with the ammunition.⁷ In this regard, the 'comfort women' were viewed as subhuman outlets for Japanese soldiers to not only relieve sexual stress, but also enact a specific form of gendered humiliation against Korean men/soldiers by weaponizing and mutilating the bodies of Korean women.

⁴ Pyong Gap Min, "Korean 'Comfort Women': The Intersection of Colonial Power, Gender, and Class," *Gender & Society*, 17, no. 6 (December 1, 2003): 938–57, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0891243203257584>.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Rumi Sakamoto, "The Women's International War Crimes Tribunal on Japan's Military Sexual Slavery: A Legal and Feminist Approach to the 'Comfort Women' Issue," *New Zealand Journal of Asian Studies* 3, no. 1 (June 2001): 49–58.

⁷ Yoon, Mee-Hyang, *25 Years of Wednesdays: The Story of the "Comfort Women" and the Wednesday Demonstrations* (Republic of Korea: The Korean Council for Justice and Remembrance for the Issues of Military Sexual Slavery by Japan, 2019), 86.

This direct connection between war and women's bodies is something Christina Lamb notes in her book *Our Bodies Their Battlefield*, in which she writes that rape is "the cheapest weapon known to man," and in fact "rape is as much of a weapon of war as the machete, club, or Kalashnikov."^{8, 9} In addition to weaponizing women's bodies as part of the war effort, the military leadership of the Japanese Empire believed the systematic expansion of sexual entertainment facilities was important based on the binary, patriarchal idea that male sexual desire is natural and ergo men in nerve-racking situations required prostitution to boost wartime morale.¹⁰ However, the sheer obliteration of human rights and extreme insult to dignity were unforgettable to the girls, as Kim Bong-Yi details:

*"How could I possibly deal with thirty or forty soldiers a day? I wasn't even able to eat well, and my down there was so small, how could soldiers do what they wanted to me? They dragged me out and cut it with a knife because it wasn't grown yet. I tried to resist but they beat me saying "You girls are nothing, our supplies and spare parts." "You're here as spare parts. What more are you but our supplies?" they said in Japanese while beating us."*¹¹

The Japanese government and army collaborated with local police, officials, and agents in organizing the large-scale trafficking system that was meticulously designed to recruit women and girls from poor families through deception or force.¹² While it is difficult to provide complete information about the actual recruitment process due to lack of official documentation, testimonies from victims, former soldiers, and recruiters reveal that there were no clear

⁸ Christina Lamb, *Our Bodies, Their Battlefields: War through the Lives of Women*, Scribner trade paperback edition. (New York: Scribner, an imprint of Simon & Schuster, 2020).

⁹ Ibid, p. 5.

¹⁰ Yuki Tanaka, *Japan's Comfort Women* (London: Routledge, 2001), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203302750>.

¹¹ Yoon, Mee-Hyang, *25 Years of Wednesdays: The Story of the "Comfort Women" and the Wednesday Demonstrations* (Republic of Korea: The Korean Council for Justice and Remembrance for the Issues of Military Sexual Slavery by Japan, 2019), 86.

¹² Tessa Morris-Suzuki, "You Don't Want to Know About the Girls? The 'Comfort Women', the Japanese Military and Allied Forces in the Asia-Pacific War," *The Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus* 13, no. 31 (August 3, 2015): 1-11.

procedures, and methods such as deception, coercion, and lying were common.¹³ Korean villages were raided frequently to seize women, and numerous Korean females, particularly in rural areas, were vulnerable to false promises of stable jobs and wages in urban areas and abroad. Government officials, often aided by the police, recruited girls, and Japanese military officials employed traders to recruit women directly through intermediaries.¹⁴

HISTORICAL DENIALISM

Although there are less than a handful of registered survivors still alive in Korea today, the debate on reparations for these women is still unresolved. Much of the academic and political discussion so far has centered on establishing the singular, most ‘truthful’ narrative of the history of ‘comfort women’: for example, the Japanese government denying its involvement in the system for decades until 1993, and some Japanese nationalists denying — to this day — the existence of the system entirely, equating comfort women to prostitutes.¹⁵

One prominent voice in academia who has asserted this harmful position concerning the truth of ‘comfort women’ is J. Mark Ramseyer. Although he is not a historian, Ramseyer, a Harvard Law School professor, published a highly controversial paper in 2021 arguing that the ‘comfort women’ were actually just sex workers.¹⁶ This damaging claim that the women were sex workers who had voluntarily entered into contracts is a politicized view that is supported by Japanese ultra-conservatives and historical revisionists. As such, Ramseyer’s paper has intensified a political dispute between Japan (whose recent leaders have denied that the women

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Archie Miyamoto, “Some Uncomfortable Truths About Comfort Women for the International Mob | JAPAN Forward,” *Japan Forward*, February 22, 2021, <https://japan-forward.com/some-uncomfortable-truths-about-comfort-women-for-the-international-mob/>.

¹⁶ J. Mark Ramseyer, “Contracting for Sex in the Pacific War,” *International Review of Law and Economics* 65 (March 1, 2021): 105971, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.irle.2020.105971>.

were coerced) and South Korea.¹⁷ His argument fails to move past the fundamental question of the validity of the survivors' experiences as a harmfully false, unjustifiable intellectualization of the horrifying reality that 'comfort women' lived through during and after the war. Nonetheless, it is worth noting that Ramseyer's paper has already drawn widespread critique from scholars and activists alike, who have denounced his attempt to legitimize the patriarchal system of 'comfort women.' Feminist anthropologist Chunghee Sarah Soh, for example, showed how the experiences of Korean 'comfort women' survivors was an explicit and "prominent instance of gendered structured violence."¹⁸

Another one of the most outspoken critics of Ramseyer and historical denialists is Alexis Dudden, a historian of Japan and Korea at the University of Connecticut.¹⁹ Dudden employs a gender-sensitive approach to studying the 'comfort women' issue as a matter of transnational women's rights, moving beyond the nationalist frameworks that constrict the extent of the issue to a matter of Japan versus Korea.²⁰ In doing so, she shows how the 'comfort women' movement presents a unique lens for reframing national history as an intersection between individual and collective memory of war, trauma, and identity. This thesis expands on Dudden's analysis of war and national identity to address the question of how individual narratives and alternative understandings can be integrated into larger 'official' narratives even if they are contradictory, before considering the consequences of that disregard. Ultimately, this thesis will argue that these tensions cannot be resolved and rather, contradictions necessarily inhere in and between national

¹⁷ Jeannie Suk Gersen, "Seeking the True Story of the Comfort Women," *The New Yorker*, February 25, 2021, <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/annals-of-inquiry/seeking-the-true-story-of-the-comfort-women-j-mark-ramseyer>.

¹⁸ C. Sarah Soh, *The Comfort Women: Sexual Violence and Postcolonial Memory in Korea and Japan* (University of Chicago Press, 2020).

¹⁹ Alexis Dudden, "The Abuse of History: A Brief Response to J. Mark Ramseyer's 'Contracting for Sex,'" *The Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus* 19, no. 5 (March 1, 2021): 1–4, <https://apjjf.org/2021/5/Dudden.html>.

²⁰ Ibid.

and personal narratives. In a broader sense, this argument carries a critique of history itself for aiming to wrap complicated histories up into a singular narrative.

PART I.) OFFICIAL PUBLIC NARRATIVES

In asking the question of how to reconcile the tensions between established public narratives of national trauma and individual recollections, it is first necessary to clarify what is meant by 'public narratives.' This term consists of the official stories told about war — this is found in government documents, national museums, public sources of information such as newspapers, etc., essentially materials that are presented as objective historical truth.

Post-War Historical Context

When the war ended in 1945, the Japanese army abandoned the 'comfort women' at the stations, in addition to burning, bombing, and burying 'comfort stations' with the women confined within in order to destroy the evidence.^{21, 22} Surviving 'comfort women' who were able to return home did so without knowing the decades of prolonged suffering and severe social stigmatization that awaited them. In 1965, Japan and South Korea signed an international treaty, titled "Treaty on Basic Relations," which established basic diplomatic relations between the two nations but did not include any mention or acknowledgement of 'comfort women.'²³ In 1991, Kim Hak-Sun was the first surviving 'comfort woman' to come forward publicly and break the silence, which led to a paradigmatic change in transforming 'comfort women' from prostitutes to

²¹ Helen Durham and Bebe Loff, "Japan's 'Comfort Women,'" *The Lancet* 357, no. 9252 (January 27, 2001): 302, [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736\(00\)03624-2](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(00)03624-2).

²² Max Fisher, "Life as a 'Comfort Woman': Survivors Remember a WWII Atrocity That Was Ignored for Decades," *Vox*, December 29, 2015, <https://www.vox.com/2015/12/29/10682830/comfort-women-japan-survivors>.

²³ Governments of Japan and Republic of Korea, "Agreement Between Japan and the Republic of Korea Concerning the Settlement of Problems in Regard to Property and Claims and Economic Cooperation" (n.d.), Wikisource.

sex slaves.²⁴ However, in the aftermath of Kim Hak-Sun’s courageous testimony, the emergence of Japanese historical revisionism placed binary concepts of prostitution or sexual slavery at the forefront of the debate.²⁵ Since 1991, Japanese historical revisionists have mobilized the sex-work feminist proposition — which argues that sex work is a legitimate, non-criminal form of labor that is a valid choice for individuals who choose to engage in it — as justification to evade the state’s responsibility in depicting ‘comfort women’ as voluntary prostitutes.^{26, 27}

In 1992, the Japanese government admitted involvement in their army’s ‘comfort women’ system for the first time.²⁸ However, Japan described itself through ambiguous language and denied that the system had been organized, sponsored, and maintained under the leadership of the Japanese state.²⁹ In 1993, then Chief Cabinet Secretary Yohei Kono admitted Japan’s “military involvement” but still did not admit that Japan was the main responsible agent of the crime of sexual enslavement in creating the ‘comfort stations.’³⁰ According to the Kono Statement, the ‘comfort stations’ were built at the military’s request, and the operations and management were carried out with military involvement, including the transportation of the ‘comfort women.’³¹ However, there is no mention of who carried out these crimes in which the Japanese military was involved, and the Japanese government sought to maintain that the ‘comfort stations’ were carried out by private businesses, not the state.

²⁴ Annemarie Luck, “No Comfort in the Truth: It’s the Episode of History Japan Would Rather Forget. Instead Comfort Women Are Back in the News,” *Index on Censorship* 47, no. 1 (April 1, 2018): 19–21, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0306422018770099>.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Kerry Porth, “Why Feminism Must Include the Fight for Sex Workers’ Rights,” Pivot Legal Society, January 26, 2018, https://www.pivotlegal.org/why_feminism_must_include_the_fight_for_sex_workers_rights.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Rin Ushiyama, “‘Comfort Women Must Fall’? Japanese Governmental Responses to ‘Comfort Women’ Statues around the World,” *Memory Studies* 14, no. 6 (December 1, 2021): 1255–71, <https://doi.org/10.1177/17506980211054308>.

²⁹ Ibid, p. 1260.

³⁰ Ibid, p. 1260.

³¹ “Statement by the Chief Cabinet Secretary,” Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, accessed November 27, 2022, https://www.mofa.go.jp/a_o/rp/page25e_000343.html.

The 2015 Japan-South Korea agreement on the issue of 'comfort women' was the latest 'official' development in addressing the 'comfort women' issue. In this agreement, the two nations agreed to settle the controversial issue "finally and irreversibly" by establishing a foundation to support the survivors.³² However, the unilateral deal faced immediate backlash from Korean survivors and activists, who said the negotiations had been conducted without any input from them, and it failed to acknowledge Japan's legal, not just political, responsibility.³³ When Korea pulled out of the 2015 agreement, Japan used the stipulations of the 1965 treaty to argue that its obligations to South Korea for addressing the grievances of 'comfort women' survivors had been met. Japan referred to Clause 1 of Article II, which notes that all issues concerning people's "property, rights and interests" are "settled completely and finally" (but again, did not actually mention 'comfort women' survivors).³⁴ Due to this provision, the Japanese government has claimed that the 'comfort women' issue has been fully addressed and resolved, while the Korean government maintains that the clause does not cover the 'comfort women' issue.

Political Documents + Records

The official narratives found in government records, from speeches to memos to international agreements, underscore the idea that the suffering of 'comfort women' is limited to wartime. Even in cases where the plights of 'comfort women' are acknowledged, they do so with

³² Yuji Hosaka, "Why Did the 2015 Japan-Korea 'Comfort Women' Agreement Fall Apart?," *The Diplomat*, November 18, 2021, <https://thediplomat.com/2021/11/why-did-the-2015-japan-korea-comfort-women-agreement-fall-apart/>.

³³ Hyun-Soo Lim, "Not 'Final and Irreversible': Explaining South Korea's January 2018 Reversal on the 'Comfort Women' Agreement," *Yale Journal of International Law*, February 1, 2018, <https://www.yjil.yale.edu/not-final-and-irreversible-explaining-south-koreas-january-2018-reversal-on-the-comfort-women-agreement/>.

³⁴ Ibid.

the presumption that the women's suffering ended with the official end of the war in 1945. One example is former Japanese Prime Minister Kiichi Miyazawa's 1992 policy speech in Korea.

*"There was a certain period ... when we were the victimizer and you were the victim. I would like to once again express a heartfelt remorse and apology for the unbearable suffering and sorrow that you experienced during this period because of our nation's act."*³⁵ (emphasis added)

In this excerpt, while Prime Minister Miyazawa apologizes for the suffering that 'comfort women' experienced during the war, the discussion and recognition starts and ends there. The language he uses implies that the women's suffering ended with the end of the war, and he makes no indication or effort to address the lasting effects that the 'comfort women' system had on survivors in the time after it ended.

National Museums + Public Memory

This is not to say that national sites of remembrance, memorialization, and public knowledge do not have an important role to play in remembering the past, present, and future. Rather, in telling the histories of different identities and legacies, there is a sociopolitical and moral obligation to recognize the limitations of knowledge and implications of political power in contexts where the nation sponsors the construction of cultural and public memory.

Scholars such as Pierre Nora have studied the close relationship between 'memory' and 'history' in the nation, in which memory is situated in communities and places, whereas history is a narrative that is imposed from the top by the state. Nora makes the argument that in the past,

³⁵ "Japanese Government Statements and Ministry of Foreign Affairs Statements | Korean Legal Studies," Columbia Law School, accessed November 27, 2022, <https://kls.law.columbia.edu/content/japanese-government-statements-and-ministry-foreign-affairs-statements>.

there was national history and individual memories, but at some point, the concept of national memories (in which the state decides to remember in certain ways) started to take shape, and national records and museums are some of the ways that this materializes.³⁶ That is, early in a nation's formation, history and memory were distinct, but then an official story imposed by the state began to emerge, and this evolved into what is now understood as 'history.' Additionally, he makes the case that sites of memory, whether material or non-material, have become symbolic in the memorial heritage of any community, and that these sites are created deliberately and intentionally; inevitably, this privileges certain narratives, identities, and representations over others.³⁷ In this sense, the establishment of government-sponsored museums and public memorials to the Pacific War in South Korea are places of national memory that continuously contribute to the construction of national identity and public knowledge. As Nora asserts, these places of memory are not static, but instead are living, cultural entities that are always in flux and always in a state of becoming.³⁸ The significance of national museums and memories, thus, are not only dependent on their physical materialization, but also on the events and public responses they initiate after they are officially constructed.

In Korea, sites of national remembrance such as monuments, memorials, and museums focus on a triumphant narrative of the nation overcoming the hardship and oppression of Japanese domination. Including the ongoing pain and trauma that 'comfort women' survivors suffer in their daily lives would pose a significant challenge to the validity of such a story, and thus they have been reduced to passive victims or erased completely. For example, in Korea's biggest museum, the National Museum of Korea, there are no exhibitions or even mentions of

³⁶ Pierre Nora, "Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire," *Representations*, no. 26 (1989): 7–24, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2928520>.

³⁷ *Ibid*, 12; 17.

³⁸ *Ibid*, 19.

‘comfort women’ anywhere.³⁹ Currently, national museums in Korea present their archives as the one ‘true’ history, and any event, object, or representation that challenges this is perceived as false or even malicious due to the implicit threat on Korea’s national identity and history.

This is seen in the mission statement for the National Museum of Korean Contemporary History (NMKCH), which states, “The museum seeks to provide objective facts with balanced interpretations and to help the Korean people heal their wounds from the past so that they can live in harmony based on mutual understanding and coexistence” (emphasis added).⁴⁰ This statement not only raises the question of what constitutes “objective fact” in history, but also who is included in the category of “the Korean people,” and why the stories of ‘comfort women’ have been excluded from this category (given the open, gendered wounds of war, conflict, and trauma that have not yet healed for these women).

While the NMKCH does actually house a permanent exhibition of ‘comfort women,’ albeit a small one that is tucked away in a low-lit corner on the third floor of the six-floor museum, this is the only location where ‘comfort women’ are mentioned, despite the museum’s central focus on contemporary history.⁴¹ Furthermore, there is no mention or acknowledgement of the transnational nature of the ‘comfort women’ issue, precisely how women from various countries were forced into the system, not just women from Korea. While it is true that the museum is dedicated specifically to the history of Korea, given that the museum is presenting information and archives as the one ‘true’ narrative of history, it is telling how these ‘facts’ are framed through a nationalist discourse/lens.

The NMKCH’s ‘comfort women’ exhibition includes the following description:

³⁹ “Collection Database,” National Museum of Korea, accessed November 27, 2022, <https://www.museum.go.kr/site/eng/relic/search/https%3A%2F%2Fwww.museum.go.kr%2Fsite%2Feng%2Frelic%2Fsearch%2Flist>.

⁴⁰ National Museum Of Korean Contemporary History,” accessed November 19, 2022, <https://www.much.go.kr/en/contents.do?fid=02&cid=01&sub=01>.

⁴¹ Ibid.

*“The stories of Korean “comfort women” are about the daughters of poor families during the Japanese colonial period. Even though they were powerless women who should have disappeared without a trace ... We hope that more and more people will listen ... and be willing to remember it.”*⁴²

The most noteworthy element in this exhibit description is the framing of ‘comfort women’ survivors as “powerless,” which implicitly denominates them to a position of passive victimization. Furthermore, the women are subsumed by their identities as solely ‘comfort women,’ which strips them of their full identities and “complex personhood.” “Complex personhood” is a term from sociologist Avery Gordon, who describes it as the idea that “all people remember and forget, are beset by contradiction, and recognize and misrecognize themselves and others.”⁴³ This term embodies the understanding that people are more than the labels that are used to contain them (e.g., gender, class, race, ethnicity) and live complicated lives that are shaped by many kinds of relationships and experiences. In the NMKCH exhibit, the ‘comfort women’ survivors are reduced from full-blooded human beings with multifaceted subjectivities to a politicized narrative that is more about the nation than it is about the women themselves, demonstrating a complex connection between knowledge creation and political power that has become tied into ethnonationalist discourses in Korea.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Avery Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 4.

War Memorial: Knowledge-Power + Biopower

To better understand the close relationship between knowledge and power, it is helpful to turn to Michel Foucault's work on power-knowledge theory and biopower of the state. In his "17 March 1976" lecture, Foucault investigates the ways in which people and institutions wield power upon other people and how that power has an effect on those populations in both direct and indirect ways.⁴⁴ For Foucault, the workings of knowledge and power cannot be separated, and both society and individual humans are managed through knowledge (which subsequently reinforces and further entrenches this knowledge as a form of power and authority). Through this lecture, Foucault demonstrates how power-knowledge takes hold of bodies, not enacted by a single person or group but circulating through society as a norm, thus making it 'continuous' in that regard.⁴⁵ That is, one entity does not have knowledge, but it is rather enmeshed in webs of power and sociopolitical processes that actively produce normal subjects, citizens, and selves. Foucault touches on the concept of subjectification as a technique of power and normalization, as subjects learn to discipline themselves to fit the norm by shaping their lives to appear in a recognizable way — this relates to his idea of 'biopower,' or power focused on managing life, and bodies are a powerful site where this management is focused.

Foucault's overall argument on the productive power of the state because it shows how for Foucault, modern power is non-authoritarian, non-orchestrated, and non-conspiratorial; further, it is focused on the 'population' of bodies, rather than 'individual' bodies.⁴⁶ The decentralized nature of biopower thus produces and normalizes particular kinds of bodies, working largely through knowledge and discourse, and any bodies or identities that fall outside

⁴⁴ Michel Foucault, "Society Must Be Defended," accessed November 3, 2022, <https://cpb-us-e1.wpmucdn.com/sites.psu.edu/dist/d/37602/files/2016/01/Foucault-Society-must-be-defended14032016.pdf>.

⁴⁵ Ibid, 247.

⁴⁶ Ibid, 247.

of this state-determined norm or narrative, such as subaltern 'comfort women,' becomes illegible and invisible in the eyes of the state. For example, in the War Memorial of Korea, toward the beginning of the visitor experience in the main exhibit halls, two huge banners hang overhead from the ceiling. The first, titled "War and Community Spirit for the National Security," reads:

*"The freedom and happiness of the people are dependent upon the existence of a nation-state. Preserving the wholeness of a nation intact is a never-ending challenge for us with countless foreign invasions and on the cost of our lives for the sake of tomorrow. Defending our country is the value with the utmost priority, transcending statuses, genders, ages, ideological and religious conflicts. The strong will to defend our homeland, in other words, the community spirit for the national security is the greatest virtue that people must have."*⁴⁷

The second banner, located right next to the first and titled "War and Peace," contains the following assertion:

*"The history of humankind is the history of war. Korea has also seen numerous wars and conflicts over the course of its history. Due to patriotism and community spirit, however, the people of Korea have successfully been able to protect peace and freedom. The War Memorial of Korea aims [to] impart the moral that "If you want peace, prepare for war," thereby making a significant contribution to the world peace and the prosperous future of Korea."*⁴⁸

⁴⁷ "The War Memorial Of Korea > Exhibition> Permanent Exhibition> The War History Room I ,," accessed November 1, 2022, <https://www.warmemo.or.kr/Eng/E20000/E20100/E20102/html>.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

Like the National Museum of Korea, there was no mention of 'comfort women,' although there was plenty of material about Korea's wartime experiences during Japanese imperialism (namely, the entire second floor — this was the main floor that visitors entered through when stepping into the three-floor memorial). However, this history was framed through a very nation-centric, masculine lens that emphasized citizenship and patriotism. As gender studies scholar Mino Moallem writes in relation to the complicated plurality of culture, this framing of hypocritically 'objective,' nationalist, and masculine history shows how "the history of embodied gendered positions cannot be separated from the history of nation-state formation."⁴⁹ This is true in South Korea, where the history of 'comfort women' and Japanese imperialism have created a stage for "masculinity and femininity [as] sites of cultural performance of citizenship" and "nationalist and ethnic absolutist discourses to reclaim cultural authenticity" have taken shape in institutions of politics and knowledge.⁵⁰

Political Implications of Passive Victimization

The harmful political implications of stripping 'comfort women' survivors of their complex personhood can be examined further by looking at the work of scholars of war and politics, such as Jonathan Grossman. Citing Grossman, historians Maria Paula Nascimento Araújo and Myrian Sepúlveda dos Santos write about the consequences of knowledge creation methods that reduce the multifaceted subjectivities of actors in political history to a homogenous, politicized narrative, particularly one that places an emphasis on the nation as the central focus.⁵¹

They draw attention to the detrimental effects of a historical narrative that "places suffering over

⁴⁹ Mino Moallem, "Gender and Culture," in *The Blackwell Encyclopedia of Sociology* (John Wiley & Sons, Ltd, 2019), 1–6, <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781405165518.wbeosc185.pub2>.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 3–4.

⁵¹ Maria Paula Nascimento Araújo and Myrian Sepúlveda dos Santos, "History, Memory and Forgetting: Political Implications," trans. Sheena Caldwell, *RCCS Annual Review. A Selection from the Portuguese Journal Revista Crítica de Ciências Sociais*, no. 1 (December 1, 2009), <https://doi.org/10.4000/rccsar.157>.

and above engagement and political resistance,” adding, “As the focus is only on pain, people who have lived through the entire experience of survival and resistance end up being reduced simply to victims, and the fact that they also survived and resisted is not taken into account.”⁵² In describing the ‘comfort women’ survivors as “powerless women” who would have disappeared through the crevices of history had it not been for the benevolent saviorship of others who were willing to listen to their stories, the agency of the survivors before, during, and after the wartime period is written out of the broader history of Korea, and their complex emotions, actions, and stories are rendered invisible.

Ethnonationalism

In addition, the assumption of ‘comfort women’ survivors as passive victims is closely related to the discourses of Korean ethnonationalism, which is a form of nationalism that defines the nation through ethnicity and primarily approaches politics through the explicit affirmation of a particular ethnic group, often done through a masculinized lens.⁵³ In “Violence of Protection,” Moallem writes that such forms of gendered, racialized discourse “contextualize[s] violence by framing specific forms of representation that institute and demand the subject’s compliance with identifiable subject-positions.”⁵⁴ This is similar to Foucault’s argument on knowledge-power, but Moallem brings in a more detailed focus on the influence and implications of gender and the nation; she makes the case that gender and national discourses have contributed to the construction of specific, uniform subject positions that define who is made legible in the eyes of the state. Subject positions, for Moallem, are socially and culturally constructed through

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Walker Connor, “The Politics of Ethnonationalism,” *Journal of International Affairs* 27, no. 1 (1973): 1–21, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24356606>.

⁵⁴ Mino Moallem, “Violence of Protection,” in *Interventions: Activists and Academics Respond to Violence*, ed. Elizabeth A. Castelli and Janet R. Jakobsen (New York: Palgrave Macmillan US, 2004), 47–51, https://doi.org/10.1057/9781403981561_7.

hierarchies of knowledge-power that create categories that legitimize certain identities while excluding others. This applies to what it means to be a 'comfort woman' victim in Korea, and any survivor whose experiences and opinions do not fit into these definitions (for example, a survivor who places the blame for their capture on Korea's weakness rather than on Japan, which would challenge the anti-Japan ethnonationalist discourse) is not valid or included in the state's fight to achieve acknowledgement for the 'comfort women' survivors. Even the survivors who exercise individual agency and self-mobilize for recognition go against the identifiable subject-position of 'passive victim,' which invalidates their complex personhood and thus is a form of "contextualized violence," as Moallem puts it, against these women that is perpetuated by ethnonationalist narratives.

Particularly, in the case of 'comfort women,' Korean ethnonationalist groups and individuals have employed a gendered discourse of protection to show solidarity with 'comfort women' — this discourse is very reductive and exploits the survivors as nothing more than passive victims who are unable to act on their own behalf and ergo require masculine saviorship. For example, in Appendix A, two Korean men are pictured at a 'comfort woman' rally, standing on either side of the Statue of Peace in Seoul, a statue that has come to be known both nationally and internationally as the standard symbolic representation of 'comfort women.'^{55, 56} The narrative of ethnonationalist protection is starkly demonstrated by two elements. First, one of the men is wearing a shirt with Korea's flag, the 태극기, which is also painted on his face. Secondly,

⁵⁵ Hong-Ji Kim, "People Hold Placards next to a Statue Symbolizing 'Comfort Women' during a Weekly Anti-Japan Rally in Front of Japanese Embassy in Seoul, South Korea, December 30, 2015," Alamy, December 30, 2015, <https://www.alamy.com/people-hold-placards-next-to-a-statue-symbolizing-comfort-women-during-a-weekly-anti-japan-rally-in-front-of-japanese-embassy-in-seoul-south-korea-december-30-2015-the-placard-bottom-l-reads-oppose-the-relocation-of-the-statue-reuterskim-hong-ji-tpx-images-of-the-day-image376069235.html>.

⁵⁶ Sol Han and James Griffiths, "Why This Statue of a Young Girl Caused a Diplomatic Incident," CNN, February 6, 2017, <https://www.cnn.com/2017/02/05/asia/south-korea-comfort-women-statue/index.html>.

the man on the right is holding a sign that reads, “소녀야 울지마. 너를 끝까지 지켜줄께!” This translates to, “Young girl, don’t cry. I will protect you to the end!”

According to Moallem’s framework of gendered, racialized citizenship in the context of nationalism, “Discourses of violence and protection ... circulate in a semantic system that is beyond law and order ... [and] distinguish an inside and an outside, which assign specific subject positions to the protected and protectors.”⁵⁷ This ‘protected’/‘protector’ dichotomy is rooted in nationalism and is a form of othering that, in the context of the Korean ‘comfort women’ movement, has morphed activism for human rights into an anti-Japan discourse. This is demonstrated in Appendix B, which pictures multiple protestors standing around the Statue of Peace (the same statue in Appendix A).⁵⁸ The signs they are holding translate to, “Condemn the Abe administration. Apologize for forced labor.” An important element in this picture is the “NO” located directly below the text on the signs, with the “O” colored red for Japan’s flag to indicate “No to Japan,” or “anti-Japan.” In further contextualizing Moallem’s theory on citizenship and nationalism, the picture also shows how proponents of ethnonationalist discourse are taking away the agency from survivors by claiming to act on behalf of them as the ‘protectors,’ when in reality, this serves to reduce the women to nothing more than passive victims whose specific subject position is that of the ‘protected.’

Similar to the case of the NMKCH exhibition, the ‘comfort women’ survivors are relegated by Korean ethnonationalists to a one-dimensional, stereotypical position of the passive, helpless, feminine victim of sexual exploitation at the hands of Japanese imperialism. This has fueled nationalism as a gendered discourse that stems from “masculine memory, humiliation, and hope” for recovering a sense of androcentric national identity and pride following the failure of

⁵⁷ Ibid, 48.

⁵⁸ Reuters, “‘Comfort Woman’ Statue Pulled from Japan Exhibit after Threats,” Yahoo! Finance, August 3, 2019, <https://sg.finance.yahoo.com/news/comfort-woman-statue-pulled-japan-141110767.html>.

Korean men to protect their women physically and metaphorically from Japanese men, thus distinguishing “an inside and an outside,” “the protected and the protectors.”⁵⁹ In so doing, the ‘comfort women’ survivors are unable to claim complex identities that extend beyond the limitations of passive victimization, or as Moallem terms, “the construction of the female subject as victim, thus equating victimhood with helplessness.”⁶⁰ Ultimately, the discourses of ethnonationalism in Korea have co-opted the experiences of ‘comfort women’ survivors with a political agenda that does more harm than good to the survivors in telling their stories; thus, a nation-centric, masculine narrative for remembering ‘comfort women’ in Korea’s history can be regarded as yet another form of violence enacted upon these women that is preventing their full identities and experiences from being known.

Furthermore, while dominant political discussions and various academic literature have also examined the ‘comfort women’ issue from various perspectives such as nationalism and gender, much of the discussion has centered around establishing the historical ‘truth’ of the ‘comfort women’ system as a phenomenon situated in the context of World War II. However, given the sheer complexities and sociopolitical nuances of the experiences of ‘comfort women,’ which intersects with issues of race, class, gender, nationalism, culture, and much more, it is extremely difficult and counter-productive to attempt to dilute the experiences of hundreds of thousands of survivors into a singular, ‘true’ narrative of history. The multifaceted memories, histories, and stories of ‘comfort women’ during and after the war, as well as the trauma they continue to live with on a day-to-day basis decades after the official ‘end’ of Japanese imperialism, are truly complicated and sometimes even contradictory, and they oftentimes exceed the scope of human reason. Thus, it becomes impossible to produce a singular, exact

⁵⁹ Ibid, 48.

⁶⁰ Ibid, 50.

description of the 'comfort women' history, which continuously fluctuates between temporalities and spatialities of history.

PART II.) ALTERNATIVE HISTORICAL SOURCES

Referring back to the research question concerning the tension between 'public narratives' and 'individual recollections,' alternative historical sources would be categorized as 'individual recollections.' This term refers to what might traditionally be seen as more 'subjective' sources of historical information, in particular individual testimonies, oral histories, and self-mobilized narratives that are rooted in memory, whether these are included or excluded from official public narratives of history.

Body as History

This notion of alternative historical sources for understanding the complex experiences of subaltern identities who have been erased or concealed from mainstream historical narratives is something that medical anthropologist Kimberly Theidon has examined in-depth. Specifically, Theidon explores how, in cases where the history of a particular minority group or identity has been stifled or concealed from official narratives, it becomes necessary to decode other types of 'language' in order to gain a deeper and more comprehensive understanding of the past.⁶¹ One of the 'languages' Theidon identifies is the language of the body, which can provide cultural information on a particular historical experience. For example, experiences of civil war, such as torture, poverty, and starvation, that may have been excluded from official remembrances and documents are nonetheless clearly marked on the bodies of those who have directly lived and

⁶¹ Kimberly Theidon, "Disarming the Subject: Remembering War and Imagining Citizenship in Peru," *Cultural Critique*, no. 54 (2003): 67–87, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1354659>.

suffered through the war.⁶² As such, Theidon asserts that the body is a place of memory, or “bodily social memory,” a site in which important historical experiences and information are engraved.⁶³

Body as History: Scars + Physical Trauma

For the ‘comfort women’ survivors, the scars and physical pain of their experiences in the ‘comfort houses have continued to haunt them and be a part of their everyday lived experiences; their bodies continue to be battlegrounds of trauma and memory despite the war having ‘ended’ and archived into Korea’s so-called ‘colonial past.’ This is reflected in the stories of survivors such as Gil Won-Ok, who testified in December 2007 at a hearing at the European Parliament.⁶⁴ Parting her hair, she revealed a scar to the attendees of the hearing, showing how despite the war ending decades long ago, the violence and scar still remained there on her head.

*“A drunk officer came in and said I didn’t do as he wanted, then planted a knife in my head which was attached at the end of his rifle. So much bleeding ... my clothes became all red, wet, and soaked with blood. Not even easy to take them off, but he just satisfied his greed then left. ... No one applied medicine on me. Whenever I look back at that time, ah ...”*⁶⁵

Jung Ok-Sun is another survivor whose body is living evidence of the brutal history of ‘comfort women.’ In a 2016 interview, she reveals the scars and tattoos that Japanese soldiers

⁶² Ibid, p. 70.

⁶³ Ibid, p. 77.

⁶⁴ European Parliament, “Texts Adopted - Comfort Women - Thursday, 13 December 2007,” accessed November 3, 2022, https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-6-2007-0632_EN.html.

⁶⁵ Yoon, *25 Years of Wednesdays: The Story of the “Comfort Women” and the Wednesday Demonstrations*, 108-109.

forcibly injected on her back, chest, lower abdomen, tongue, and lips (Appendix C).⁶⁶ Her testimony during the interview roughly translates from Korean to, “Imagine how much I was beaten and out of my mind to the point where they broke my teeth but it didn’t hurt. All I heard was the cracking of my teeth breaking,” and, “Of course I lost my mind. How could I not lose my mind when they tattooed me with poison?”⁶⁷ It is not clear whether Japanese soldiers literally used poison in the tattoo ink, or if Jung Ok-Sun is using the word “poison” metaphorically. However, regardless of the nature of the tattoo ink that was used, the most significant thing to note is the symbolic implications of Japanese soldiers forcibly branding Jung Ok-Sun’s body when she was a ‘comfort woman,’ marking her body as the property of Japan, not only dehumanizing her but also ensuring that her body would carry reminders of her time as a ‘comfort woman’ for as long as she lived. Even as an elderly grandmother decades later, her tattoos and haunting memories of the events remain from when she was a young teenager.

Furthermore, in the drawing (Appendix D), which is from a series of sketches published online by prize-winning political cartoonist Park Gun-Oong depicting Jung Ok-Sun’s testimony, “Soldiers tattooed women with the intent to kill them from the start.”⁶⁸ The soldiers intended to erase the women’s bodies literally and metaphorically after they were done with them, intentionally removing them from history. As a survivor, Jung Ok-Sun’s body carries these tangible memories and histories of war, and her tattoos are living traces of the brutal abuse that the Japanese military inflicted on a 14-year-old girl, abuse that is left out of mainstream narratives and supposedly ‘objective’ historical records such as Prime Minister Miyazawa’s official apology.

⁶⁶ 홍떡, “‘위안부’ 할머니의 증언 ‘정옥순 할머니 - 문신,’” 네이버 블로그 | *Food Fairy Hongmeok* (blog), accessed November 27, 2022, <https://blog.naver.com/tnstnh0304/220924214245>.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Gun-Oong Park, “어느 일본군위안부 할머니의 이야기: 문신,” 무명의 더쿠 (blog), August 14, 2018, <https://theqoo.net/square/825180291>.

Body as History: Ongoing Medication + Coping Mechanisms

Similar yet individually unique testimonies of the extensive forms of violence committed against the victims — including beatings, torture, infection of sexually transmitted diseases, artificially induced abortions, sterilization operations, and hysterectomies — are not included in the mainstream narratives of the war experience in Korea, which is primarily viewed through a masculine-nationalist lens. The physical trauma and violence these women experienced has caused these women to live a life of ongoing suffering and struggle even after returning home to Korea, and the majority have lived in poverty due to their issues. Survivor Kang Duk-Kyung, who suffers from extremely weak kidney function, notes the continuous burden of the costs of her treatment:

*“No use to make money. It all goes to medical treatments. I was so badly screwed over at a young age, the money I struggled so hard to make was laid down before hospital bills. So that’s why I don’t have a single cent and live like this now.”*⁶⁹

To cope with the difficulties of her daily life, she turned to cigarettes as a form of solace. Eventually, her life ended with lung cancer.

Body as History: Sexually Transmitted Diseases

Perhaps one of the most serious after-effects of the “comfort women” experience was the sexually transmitted diseases. When the victims were in their early- and mid-teens, the average age demographic of the “comfort women,” they were raped uncountable times, for years, and

⁶⁹ Yoon, *25 Years of Wednesdays: The Story of the “Comfort Women” and the Wednesday Demonstrations*, 109-110.

therefore many of them were infected with sexually transmitted diseases such as syphilis.⁷⁰ As a quick treatment, 'comfort station' doctors prescribed something called a '606 injection,' which caused severe side effects.⁷¹ Most victims who were given '606 injections' immediately showed symptoms such as acute vomiting, stomach aches, severe bloody diarrhea, muscle cramps, and so on. Survivor Kim Kyung-Soon testified that just after she was injected, she felt nauseated and disgusted by the smell coming up to her mouth and nose.⁷² These immediate side effects clearly show how inappropriate and harmful the treatments carried out at the 'comfort stations' were.

Furthermore, with the stigmatization of 'comfort women' as impure, humiliating reminders of Japanese masculine domination, many women feared seeking the proper medical treatment they needed even in the years after the war, not just for sexually transmitted diseases but for other components of their health as well. Survivor Jang Jum-Suk recounts:

*"I went to a hospital to get cataract surgery and I was asked to get a blood test done for the surgery. So I did, and it resulted in the syphilis virus being found. So I never went back to that hospital again. I was afraid if the hospital finds out I was at a 'comfort station.'"*⁷³

Body as History: Daily Psychological Trauma

In addition to the physical pain, trauma, and violence that has been inscribed on the bodies of 'comfort women' as part of the untold history of World War II and Japanese imperialism, many victims experience serious psychological complications. In cases of sexual

⁷⁰ Jessica Wininger, "Broken Bodies, Shattered Dreams: The Aftermath of a Life as a Korean 'Comfort Woman,'" *The Gettysburg Historical Journal* 2, no. 1 (January 1, 2003), <https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/ghj/vol2/iss1/5>.

⁷¹ Sel Hwahng, "Vaccination, Quarantine, and Hygiene: Korean Sex Slaves and No. 606 Injections During the Pacific War of World War II," *Substance Use & Misuse* 44, no. 12 (2009): 1768–1802, <https://doi.org/10.3109/10826080902963480>.

⁷² Yoon, *25 Years of Wednesdays: The Story of the "Comfort Women" and the Wednesday Demonstrations*, 111.

⁷³ *Ibid.*

assault, many survivors re-experience incidents in their dreams that cause sleeping disorders.⁷⁴ They also experience hypersensitivity, however slight, that reminds them of the incident. Some victims attempt to end their lives, while others show hostility to people as a result.⁷⁵

Survivor Moon Pil-Gi could not sleep without the lights on, and she would sleepwalk — while sleepwalking, she talked to herself, begged for her life, asked for help, and ran away from home suddenly and then returned. She never knew about these symptoms.⁷⁶ Additionally, many survivors endured nightmares about their lives at 'comfort stations,' and they felt psychological agony when they saw anything related to 'comfort women.' Many have stated that they were unable to feel love anymore and were afraid of meeting new people. Whenever they saw men, especially military men, their 'comfort station' memories — of violence, torture, and death — would reemerge. When their 'comfort station' memories revived their fears, many survivors leaned on outlets such as cigarettes and alcohol to avoid the thoughts. These symptoms have continued on for decades, recurring again and again.⁷⁷

Body as History: Social Stigmatization

The painful bodily women's history of the Pacific War experience is demonstrated in the testimonies of women such as Chung Seo-Woon, who notes the fear, shame, and humiliation of being a former 'comfort woman' even after returning to her hometown. In the days after liberation in Korea, the traditional agricultural program and small villages remained, in addition

⁷⁴ Jeewon Lee et al., "Psychiatric Sequelae of Former 'Comfort Women,' Survivors of the Japanese Military Sexual Slavery during World War II," *Psychiatry Investigation* 15, no. 4 (April 2018): 336–43, <https://doi.org/10.30773/pi.2017.11.08.2>.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Yoon, *25 Years of Wednesdays: The Story of the "Comfort Women" and the Wednesday Demonstrations*, 112.

⁷⁷ Jeewon Lee et al., "Psychiatric Sequelae of Former 'Comfort Women,' Survivors of the Japanese Military Sexual Slavery during World War II."

to deeply embedded values of patriarchal Korean Confucianism.⁷⁸ Survivors such as Chung Seo-Woon struggled with the anxiety of the people in their village finding out or even accusing them of being 'comfort women,' and when this became a reality, many of them were forced to leave their hometowns. This experience was further burdening considering the different forms of violence and trauma that Japanese soldiers had enacted on 'comfort women,' which caused health complications that were hard to hide.

*"I often fainted when I dealt with soldiers because I was too young, so soldiers would inject drugs into me. ... So I became a drug addict after the end of the war. ... I came back home but my parents already passed away. It was a small countryside where I grew up, where women's virginity was considered very important, so I couldn't tell anyone that I was taken to the 'comfort stations.' But people in the village all knew that I was a "comfort woman" because I was a drug addict. Eventually, I couldn't help but leave my hometown."*⁷⁹ (Chung Seo-Woon)

Thus, as Theidon's theory on the body as a "bodily social memory" and place, or source, or history shows, the physical and psychosocial scars of the 'comfort women,' which deeply pained and haunted them for the rest of their lives, are an important part of the history of Japanese imperialism during World War II that has been left out of many mainstream narratives and 'objective' understandings of war.

⁷⁸ Watanabe Kazuko, "Militarism, Colonialism, and the Trafficking of Women: 'Comfort Women' Forced into Sexual Labor for Japanese Soldiers," *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars* 26, no. 4 (December 1, 1994): 3-17, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14672715.1994.10416165>.

⁷⁹ Yoon, *25 Years of Wednesdays: The Story of the "Comfort Women" and the Wednesday Demonstrations*, 104.

War & Women’s Human Rights Museum (WWHRM)

The War & Women’s Human Rights Museum (WWHRM) is a nonprofit museum located in Seoul, South Korea, that is dedicated to telling the stories and histories of ‘comfort women.’ Located in a quiet residential neighborhood, the museum space is situated in what used to be a modest three-story house.⁸⁰ The WWHRM opened in 2012 following nine years of fundraising efforts by ‘comfort women’ survivors, Korean citizens, and private international donors.⁸¹ According to its website, the museum strives to “remember and educate the history of Japanese military “comfort women” and work toward just resolution of the Japanese military sexual slavery issue.”⁸² It is also an activist museum that “attends to ongoing issues of sexual violence in armed conflicts and stands in solidarity for a world without war and violence against women.”⁸³ This subjective, social justice-centric positionality as an activist museum that fights against gendered violence and human rights violations, particularly in contexts of armed conflict and war, already distinguishes it from the museums and memorials sponsored by the Korean government, which present their archives and artifacts as objective, value-neutral truth and unquestionable facts.

WWHRM: Subjective Positionality as an Activist Museum

Since the museum was not built with government funds, the obligatory narratives of national triumph and patriotism are largely absent — there are no clean endings or boundaries between past and present. Struggles for eradicating violence, not only for ‘comfort women’ but

⁸⁰ Jessica Mairs, “Seoul House Becomes Museum of Women’s Human Rights,” Dezeen, March 20, 2015, <https://www.dezeen.com/2015/03/20/wise-architecture-museum-comfort-women-second-world-war-victims-seoul-south-korea/>.

⁸¹ “Information for Visitors,” 전쟁과여성인권박물관, January 24, 2022, <https://womenandwarmuseum.net/guide/en-information-for-visitors/>.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Ibid.

for women on a global scale, are emphatically characterized as 'ongoing,' ergo decentering the nation and instead highlighting the global nature of sexual violence. This emphasis on social justice activism and the ongoing, unresolved, and complex histories and memories of 'comfort women' survivors was met with backlash from various individuals and domestic groups, including 32 veteran associations and independence heritage management members of Korea (*Gwangbokhoe*).⁸⁴ The backlash was so vehement that, despite receiving approval from the Seoul City Government for a lot in the Independence Historic Park in Seodaemun District in 2006, the museum organizers had to cancel this plan in 2011.⁸⁵ The opposing argument to creating the museum was primarily centered around the nationalistic sentiment that discussing the topic of sexual slavery would defile the pure, cherished grounds of an independence memorial, in addition to disrespecting the patriotic martyrs and soldiers who gave their lives to the nation.⁸⁶ As Hongik University professor Cheeyun Lilian Kwon notes, this harsh nationalist criticism can be understood as "another form of patriarchal social oppression that discriminated against victims for the second time as subjects not worthy of public space" and inclusion in the country's official history.⁸⁷

Correspondingly, the museum's persisting existence despite this backlash and opposition can be understood as a form of resistance against the state-sponsored spectacle of national museums and memorials that do not acknowledge the complex histories and sometimes even contradictory experiences of 'comfort women' survivors that do not fit into a single national narrative of post-war triumph and liberation. As one of the alternative historical perspectives through which the ongoing experiences of 'comfort women' can be examined, WWHRM

⁸⁴ Cheeyun Kwon, "Sexual Violence, Imperialism, and Museum Activism: The Case of the War & Women's Human Rights Museum," *Museum International* 72, no. 1–2 (2020): 42–53, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13500775.2020.1743056>.

⁸⁵ *Ibid*, 45.

⁸⁶ *Ibid*, 45.

⁸⁷ *Ibid*, 45.

presents an interesting case study for rethinking not only how the 'comfort women' histories are told, but also the social and political roles of museums in constructing national identity in South Korea; specifically, how independent, feminist museums such as the WWHRM can reveal the underlying power dynamics of knowledge creation and public cultural memory on a regional, national, and international scale.

WWHRM: Self-Mobilization of Historical Narratives

In further examining the historical and sociopolitical potentialities of the WWHRM as an alternative historical source for understanding the complex experiences of 'comfort women' survivors along lines of nationalism, culture, and gender, I turn to Stuart Hall's theory of culture and representation. According to Hall, "Meaning does not inhere *in* things, in the world. It is constructed, produced. It is the result of a signifying practice — a practice that *produces* meaning, that *makes things mean*."⁸⁸ Following this definition, the self-mobilization of Korean 'comfort women' survivors and activists through the platform of this museum to speak up about their experiences and advocate for transnational women's human rights suggests that this process of testimonial knowledge construction is not only about a 'falsity/truth' dichotomy, but rather a process of making meaning. Specifically, the consistent activism of the museum is a "practice that *produces* meaning" — the meaning of the multifaceted identities of 'comfort women.'⁸⁹ By utilizing the WWHRM to tell their stories and reclaiming the narratives that have been reduced or erased in the masculine, official historical narrative told in national museums, the 'comfort women' survivors have been able to actively self-determine their own complex, gendered identities that break the passive, stereotypical, misogynistic mold of wartime victimhood, ergo

⁸⁸ Stuart Hall, "The Work of Representation," in *The Applied Theatre Reader*, 2nd ed. (Routledge, 2020).

⁸⁹ *Ibid*, 21.

moving beyond the dichotomy of history as a matter of 'true' versus 'false.' As survivor Song Sin-Do asserts, "I am not an absolute victim, but instead I have a victimized experience like other women."⁹⁰

CONCLUSION

With the 'comfort women' issue, there is particular tension between the concept of 'history' versus 'memory,' and which one should be prioritized as the most 'truthful' record of the past. However, both are limited not only in their access to the past but also do not exist in a binary, mutually exclusive relationship. Through investigating the potentialities of bodies and small, independent museums as two sources for understanding alternative histories and experiences, this paper sought to explore the possibilities and importance of including a significant diversity of approaches to understanding the past, specifically in the context of the 'comfort women' issue; these approaches cannot be value-neutral and objective, but rather are continuously permeated by fluctuating tensions, relations, and conflicts between different political actors and social subjects. The experiences of memory, history, forgetting, and nation are unique, necessary experiences that neither amalgamate nor harmonize with each other.

That is, by incorporating multiple perspectives and subjectivities into historical studies of 'comfort women' into existing dominant narratives, it opens the possibility of creating a deeper, complex understanding of war not just when it is occurring but also the lasting aftereffects on the various individuals and groups. Alternative approaches, such as examining the multifaceted subjectivities of bodies as history, thus can be a useful research object and tool for investigating memories, emotions, and histories, as well as how people of a nation interact with such

⁹⁰ Lee Na-Young, "The Korean Women's Movement of Japanese Military 'Comfort Women': Navigating between Nationalism and Feminism," *Academy of Korean Studies* 17, no. 1 (2014): 71–92.

interpretations. Just as the experiences of war and imperialism are inscribed in the day-to-day lives of 'comfort women' survivors, not just in the years during which they were 'comfort women,' the experiences of constructing and reconstructing histories is an ongoing process of productive knowledge creation.

By interweaving multiple interpretations and possibilities of understanding history, memory, and forgetting, this thesis presents a critique of history and methods for coming to terms with the past. This entails working with and in between lines of knowledge, morality, power, and exclusion, as well as the politics of memory, in a broader sense. That is, the nuanced experiences and subjectivities of actors in history and the human condition must be incorporated into existing historical narratives to create ambiguous, open spaces for effective political negotiation and reconciliation. Thus, I aim to show how attempts to reconstruct and remember the past, as well as attempts to intentionally forget, must be considered in tandem with each other to more fully address the limitations of representation, particularly through a gendered lens and in the context of war and trauma.

In this regard, until the stories of 'comfort women' are explored not only in the present but fully incorporated into the historical narrative of the nation as a whole, existing scholarly rhetoric will continue to create exclusionary zones of tremendous magnitude that render subaltern experiences and identities such as 'comfort women' invisible. By bringing in multiple perspectives through the theoretical lens of Theidon's 'bodily social memory' for understanding the histories of 'comfort women,' I aimed to present a critique of history as a singular narrative and objective 'truth.' The 'comfort women's' complex identities and experiences must be fully included in existing mainstream narratives to create ambiguous, open spaces for more effective political negotiation and reconciliation that truly brings honor and human rights to them.

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APPENDIX

Appendix A — Kim, 2015 (Alamy [image])



("Young girl, don't cry. I will protect you to the end!")

Appendix B — Reuters, 2019 (Yahoo! Finance)



(“Condemn the Abe administration. Apologize for forced labor.”)

Appendix C — 홍떡, 2017 (Food Fairy Hongmeok [blog])



Appendix D — Park, 2018 (무명의 더쿠 [blog])



(“Soldiers tattooed women with the intent to kill them from the start.” — Jung Ok-Sun)