

The Statue of Peace in Berlin: How the Nationalist Reading of Japan’s Wartime “Comfort Women” Backfired

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Abstract: *In September 2020 a Statue of Peace was installed in the German capital Berlin. The Japanese government attempted to prevent the installation of the statue, but in the end, it was allowed to remain. Based on participant observation and interviews, this article introduces the background and motives of the coalition of civic groups that installed the statue, how they frame the statue’s meaning, and how the statue has acquired new meanings through unplanned interactions with the local population in Berlin. Summarizing the events related to the installation of the statue, this article examines how the conflict between a national and a transnational understanding of the “comfort women” experience played out in Berlin.*

Keywords: *“comfort women,” Statue of Peace, transnational feminism, Germany, Japan*

Introduction

In September 2020, a Statue of Peace (in Japanese, *Heiwa no shōjo zō*, or “girl of peace statue”) was installed in the German capital Berlin. The original Statue of Peace was created by the Korean sculptors Kim Seo-kyung (1965-) and Kim Eun-sung (1964-) in order to memorialize the suffering of women who were raped by Japanese men in military brothels set

up between 1937 and 1945. It goes without saying that the sculptors, activists, and others have aimed through this memorialization to promote peace and the rights of women around the world.¹ At least since the time when such brothels were set up, the euphemism “comfort women” (*ianfu* in Japanese) has been used, and that euphemism is still usually resorted to in Japanese as well as in English and other languages.

Every time such a statue referencing the wartime “comfort woman” experience has been erected, representatives of the Japanese government and members of the Japanese right wing have sought to have it removed. In Berlin, after initial confusion on the part of the local authorities who were intimidated by the statue’s powerful opponents, it was eventually allowed to remain.



The Statue of Peace in Berlin (photo: Korea Verband)

The statue has sparked debates in Germany that reach beyond the issue of the former “comfort stations,” and has taken on a life of its own. It has created spaces where both universal and locally specific issues of gender oppression and conflict have been articulated. Along its now 10-year-journey across several continents, the Statue of Peace, which originated in Seoul, South Korea, has acquired multiple meanings and has provided opportunities for painful and long-overdue debates. It not only has had an impact on international disputes over the acknowledgement of war atrocities and individual compensation of war victims but also on debates over the adequacy or inadequacy of memorialization of the War and colonialism, and makes possible new forms of cross-border women’s solidarity, as well as new representations of diasporic communities in their new home countries.²

The Statue of Peace in Berlin was neither the first nor the last one on German ground. It was, however, the first and to date the only one intended for permanent installation on public land in Germany. After a failed attempt to install a bronze statue in Freiburg (Baden-Württemberg) in 2016, one was erected in the Nepal Himalaya Park in Wiesent, a village near Regensburg, Bavaria in 2017, and shortly after a second one on the property of the Korean Evangelical Church Congregation Rhine-Main in Frankfurt, Hesse, both on private ground.³ In April 2021, a fourth bronze statue appeared on public ground as part of a temporary exhibition of the Dresden State Art Collections in Saxony.



The Statue of Peace (bronze version) in the inner courtyard of the ethnological museum in Dresden (photo: Martin Andreas Arendt)

In addition, there are currently two mobile statues made of hard plastic. The home of one is in the Korea Verband “comfort women” museum in Berlin. It was sent to Germany in 2019 for an exhibition in Bochum during the German Evangelical Church Assembly. Afterwards, it performatively “travelled” by train to Berlin and has been lent to various exhibition sites. The other mobile statue came to Munich as part of an exhibition on arts and democracy in the summer of 2021.⁴ According to the creators of the Statue of Peace, there are currently 98 bronze versions and 6 plastic versions in existence throughout the world.⁵

When Berlin got its own replica of the bronze statue, the city representatives were involuntarily drawn into a decades-old diplomatic conflict in East Asia, a conflict that then spread to Germany. This conflict started in 1991 when former “comfort woman” Kim Hak-sun (1924–97) first stepped forward to testify. After Kim Hak-sun’s testimony, many other survivors supplied first-hand accounts of the reality of the “comfort” stations, contributing much to our understanding of sexual violence.

Already with the erection of the first statue in Bavaria in 2017, Germany had turned into one of the so-called “battlefields” in the “History Wars” (*rekishisen*) promoted by the Japanese right wing, which considers “the removal of the ‘comfort women’ memorials one of the core fights.”⁶ On the other side of these “History Wars” are memory activists,⁷ who have moved from the fight for compensation to the fight for heritagization⁸ of the “comfort women” and their legacy. Their work is supported by museum directors, curators, artists and scholars.

At the Statue of Peace, two views of the “comfort women” and their activism collide. On the one side, there is the nationalist frame, represented in Berlin by the Japanese embassy and the Japanese right wing, who harshly oppose erection of the statue.⁹ In the words of Elizabeth W. Son, this view “ghettoizes” the “comfort women” issue “as simply a nationalistic issue between Korea and Japan.”¹⁰ Part of this view is the conviction that governments can settle this problem diplomatically through bilateral agreements on the state-level.

On the other side is the transnational feminist understanding of the memory activists, who are part of a transnational civil society and do not represent a particular government. They position the “comfort women” as a universal example of human rights violations. As Hasunuma and McCarthy point out, “Civil society actors influence historical memory, identity, and meaning around the comfort women issue while simultaneously being shaped and influenced by these greater movements to advance women’s and human rights.”¹¹ They display a “cosmopolitanism” that “seeks to understand others’ perspectives” and connects with allies from very diverse backgrounds in multiple countries.

Just as on the other battlegrounds of the so-called “History Wars,” the dispute in Berlin

oscillates between the nationalist and the transnational/cosmopolitanist understanding. The nationalist narrative tends to hold more power and seems to be easier to grasp for a general audience. In Berlin, several representatives of local authorities succumbed to the nationalist framing, even though they had previously accepted the universalist framing. In the midst of the “History Wars,” therefore, a conflict also erupts between these two paradigms.

In Germany, as could be observed previously in the U.S., the statue has further signified a space for the representation and identity negotiation for the diaspora, which is articulated in the discourse on the “Postmigrant Society.” The term “postmigrant” was coined in 2008 by theatre director Şermin Langhoff to describe the lived experience of migrants of the second and subsequent generations in Germany.¹² This notion questions hegemonic concepts of ethnicity, nationality, and migration, and acknowledges their complexity. Shortly thereafter, scholars embraced the term to ask how a postmigrant society is negotiated beyond simple processes of othering and binary categories of “German” and “foreigner/migrant.”

While all these discourses and negotiation processes—the transnational/cosmopolitan and the diasporic/postmigrant—are not entirely new, they play out in a specific local context that shall be illuminated in this article. First, I discuss the transnationalism and cosmopolitanism of the “alliance” or coalition of groups that installed the Statue of Peace, which was key for the successful installation of the statue. Next, I explain the motives of the installers as they engaged in the predictably difficult task of erecting a Statue of Peace, and summarize how they gained approval from the local authorities to install the statue. In the third section, I further explore the discursive setting of the statue through the speeches at the unveiling ceremony. After this, the backlash

and the fight to keep the statue will be documented in detail in order to show how the opposing understandings - nationalist vs. transnationalist - were employed by different actors. The following section discusses some problems of the two understandings. Lastly, I show how the local population interacts with the statue, enriching it with unanticipated meanings and therefore bringing it “to life.”

My main proposition is that the Statue of Peace cannot be understood only by looking at the intention of the creators and the symbolism that they assigned it. Rather, its meaning is interactional, i.e., its meaning is also constructed through the specific local setting and the interlinking with local discourses and actors.

This article is based on participant observation of the statues in Berlin, Dresden and Munich.¹³ I joined the regular meetings of the Berlin-based Working Group “Comfort Women” (WGCW) in early October 2020, which took place online due to anti-COVID measures, and conducted online interviews with two activists. As soon as the lockdown was eased and travel was possible, I visited the statues and exhibitions taking students along, attended panel discussions and talked to organizers, museum directors, and curators.

The Alliance

First, when we look at the Statue of Peace in Berlin, what do we see? We see an adolescent girl in Hanbok, a traditional Korean dress, sitting on a chair with another empty chair next to her. Even though at first glance she has a peaceful and friendly appearance, her clenched fists indicate inner conflict.¹⁴ Two plaques created specifically for the Berlin statue explain its purpose and meaning to spectators in Germany:

The Meaning of the Statue of Peace

The statue’s attire refers to the time before World War II. The cut-off hair indicates the violent abduction of the girls and women. The fists and raised heels express a life of shame and isolation even after they returned home, yet also the strong will to never give up, despite humiliation. The bird sitting on her shoulder represents peace, liberty and the bond between the living and the dead. The shadow of the statue, embedded in the floor slab as a mosaic, traces the shape of an elderly woman. It signifies the time that has passed and emphasizes the long wait for justice. The white butterfly is a symbol of reincarnation and the hope for a sincere apology from those responsible. The empty chair invites us to take a seat next to the girl and to feel the emotions of the victims. It embodies the promise from all future generations to not forget, and to take action for a peaceful world.

The first Statue of Peace was erected in 2011 to commemorate the 1000th Wednesday Demonstration for the resolution of the Japanese military sexual slavery issue, which has been held since 1992 in front of the Japanese Embassy in Seoul, South Korea. The design was created by the artists Kim Seo Kyung and Kim Un Seong together with The Korean Council for Justice and Remembrance for the Issues of Military Sexual Slavery by Japan.

Statue of Peace

During World War II the Japanese military abducted countless girls and women from across the Asia-Pacific region and forced them into sexual slavery. The Statue of Peace commemorates the suffering of these so-called comfort women. It honors the courage of the survivors who broke their silence on 14th August 1991, and

who are seeking to prevent the repeat of such atrocities worldwide.

A gift from The Korean Council for Justice and Remembrance for the Issues of Military Sexual Slavery by Japan, established by AG “Comfort Women” of Korea Verband in the Alliance for the Statue of Peace.

14th August 2020

In Japanese publications, the installers of the Berlin statue are often misrepresented by reducing them to their ethnicity. They are called either *kankokujin dantai*, “a group of Koreans,”¹⁵ *kankokukei dantai* or *kankokukei shimin dantai*, “a group (of citizens) with Korean origin.”¹⁶ However, as the plaques say, we are talking not just about one actor, but actually about three different actors, albeit with partly overlapping entities.

First, there is “Korea Verband” (KV), which translates as “Korea Association.” It describes itself as a “politically independent and German-speaking information and cooperation platform for all who are interested in the history and culture of Korea as well as the latest developments on the Korean Peninsula.”¹⁷ While the topics focus on the Korean Peninsula, its members are in fact multinational. Among them are Germans and non-Germans with origins in Japan, Korea, Congo, the Philippines and other countries. Besides the “comfort women” issue, Korea Verband deals with a range of topics such as globalization, migration, nationalism, social change, and preconditions for a peaceful reunification of the two Koreas. Among many other activities, from 2012–2020, the association organized an intercultural exchange program between young people of neighboring countries in East Asia (mainly China, Japan, Korea) and Europe (mainly Germany, France, Poland).¹⁸

While Korea Verband filed the application, because it is a registered association (*eingetragener Verein*) and has the legal right to do so, the Working Group “Comfort Women” (WGCW) were the core organizers who worked on the installation of the statue. (In German the working group is called “AG ‘Trostrfrauen’,” but the abbreviation of the English name, WGCW, will be used below). The meetings of WGCW are coordinated by Korea Verband, but the members do not necessarily overlap. Membership in WGCW is loose, temporary, and fluid. Everyone joins with a different interest depending on their personal background.¹⁹

These two entities, WGCW and Korea Verband, garnered support from a broad alliance of 30 initiatives fighting sexual violence and/or representing Asian communities (of both Korean and non-Korean origin).²⁰ Installing the statue with the support of organizations such as the women’s rights and aid organization Medica Mondiale, the Yazidi Women’s Council, Women of Sudan Uprising and the Afghan Women’s Café Anahita, helped to discursively place it within the framework of anti-sexism, anti-racism and anti-colonialism. This cross-ethnic tie-up with non-Korean German groups in Berlin parallels the tie-up of the Glendale California activists with the Japanese-American and Armenian-American communities. Daniel Schumacher, describing the U.S. case, calls such tie-ups “inter-ethnic atrocity alliances.”²¹

For many years, WGCW and Korea Verband have been working together with such groups based on a common interest in the cause of ending sexual and racial violence. Most notably, in 2018 they launched the “Action Week against Femicide and Sexualized Violence” together with the Yazidi Women and several other feminist organizations. This Action Week takes place annually in the first two weeks of August, commemorating the anniversary of the femicide and genocide against Yazidis committed by Daesh (the so-called “Islamic State of Iraq and Syria” or

“ISIS”) that started on 3 August 2014 and the first public testimony by Kim Hak-Sun that she gave on 14 August 1991. Besides WGCW and the Yazidi Women’s Council, the coalition of groups which organized this year’s events include the Alliance of Internationalist Feminists; the Kurdish Women’s Council “Dest Dan”; the Network against Femicide “We Want Us Alive”; Medica Mondiale; MeTooAsians; and International Women* Space (IWS), “a feminist, anti-racist political group in Berlin with migrant and refugee women and non-migrant women as members.”²² Their alliance is based not on a particular nationality or a particular crime but on the general threat of sexual and racial violence directed at women across time and space. Their ethnic composition reflects both past and current migration patterns to Germany (e.g., refugees) and brings together people who arrived here only recently with people who have lived here for several decades, as well as people whose predecessors have been living in Germany for two or more generations.

Notably, the vigil in memory of the former “comfort women” in front of the Brandenburg Gate on 14 August, which marked the end of the Action Week(s), was organized by the Japanese Women’s Association, once again demonstrating that the dividing line is not one between nations, but between political beliefs.



Vigil for the “comfort women” held at Brandenburg Gate, Berlin on 14 August 2021, marking the end of the Action Week against Femicide and Sexualized Violence (photo by the author)

The Statue of Peace is set in this particular transnational and feminist discursive environment. The installers of the Berlin statue are transnational not only in the sense that they cooperate with associations outside of Germany, like the Korean Council for Justice and Remembrance for the Issues of Military Sexual Slavery or the Women’s Active Museum in Tokyo, and participate in the transnational network of “comfort women” activism across the globe.²³ Their transnationalism is also grounded in two more senses: 1) Some of them have migrated themselves and are thus inevitably confronted with questions of origin, ethnicity, and belonging, each of them embodying multiple ethnicities and nationalities. 2) They are linked-up with other diasporic or postmigrant organizations in Berlin, who share common goals of feminism, anti-racism and decolonization.²⁴

Note that by emphasizing the different nationalities of the installers, we might unintentionally cater to the nationalist mode of

speech, which has the tendency to equate a person's national belonging or origin to the political interests of a nation-state. If one says that "non-Koreans also support the statue" one risks re-essentializing national attributes. From the transnational feminist perspective, it does not matter whether one is Korean, Japanese, German, Congolese or Armenian, since the activists are not unified on the basis of nationality but through their common political perspectives. We should also be careful not to trivialize and neglect the work and activism of Koreans and people of Korean origin by bringing out the fact that non-Koreans are also members of the supporting alliance, even while noting that nationality is not entirely irrelevant. People do move through spaces that are defined by the nation-state, and so they inevitably have to negotiate their identities along an axis of nationality, but in a world with increasing migration flows nationality is not as simple as the nationalist approach makes it appear (especially the "Koreans" vs. "Japanese" approach). There are at least two reasons for this:

1. The national government of one country is not the same as the civil society of that country. Changing governments in South Korea have both supported and ignored the appeals of the "comfort women" movement there. Vice versa, the "comfort women" activists do not speak for their national government and its policies, but for the victims of sexual violence. Unfortunately, many of the involved parties and observers fail to acknowledge this fundamental difference.
2. The category "nationality" has become fluid and is challenged intersectionally by other categories such as "race." National identities are much more complex than the nation-state where one was born or where one's parents came from. Even if some Berlin activists were born in Korea, once they arrived in Germany, their

"Koreanness" was challenged and transformed by "Germanness"—and by whiteness. Even after becoming naturalized, or even if born in Germany, they regularly experience othering. Trying to integrate oneself into German society, to find one's place in it while also negotiating this new identity with one's origins is part and parcel of the migrant's experience.²⁵

The Application

Initially, WGCW had not been keen on erecting a bronze statue for fear of the costs and logistics, as Nataly Jung-Hwa Han, coordinator of WGCW since 2009 and chair of Korea Verband since 2012, told me in an interview. The idea of installing a bronze statue was born only in 2019 after a series of both positive and negative experiences with a plastic version of the statue that the association had acquired from the German Evangelical Church Assembly. First, on the positive side, the statue proved to be an ideal icebreaker for addressing the sensitive issue of sexual violence. When groups from local schools visited the exhibition on sexual violence and "comfort women" at Korea Verband, they were automatically drawn to the statue.²⁶ Han recalls, "At first I was nervous about how to start a conversation with the students about sexual violence. But when the kids saw the statue, they themselves started asking questions. 'Why are her fists clenched?', 'Why is there a bird on her shoulder?' They seemed to find the statue very approachable. It is colorful, which makes it child-friendly. It touches people's hearts. And it has charisma."²⁷

Especially with girls-only groups, the statue proved useful: "We have many refugees living in our district and some of them have undergone horrible experiences during their escape. The statue gives them an opportunity

to talk about this in a safe space.”²⁸ In another performance action, the activists drove the statue around the city in a wheelchair. Many passers-by approached them and asked about its meaning. There was no need to approach the people; the statue naturally drew attention. Han believes that the statue is particularly inviting because, unlike other monuments of sexual violence, the girl’s face is not convulsed. “You don’t see her pain at first glance. That makes her realer than real because actual victims of rape also don’t show you their pain [...] Such a shockingly high number of women among us have experienced sexual violence and it’s an illusion that you can see their pain even without their telling you. If they don’t tell anyone, no one will know about it.”²⁹

On the negative side, repeated attempts at censoring the Statue of Peace and other monuments for “comfort women” in Germany and across the world convinced WGCW of the need to erect such a statue.³⁰ There was, very prominently, the incident at the Aichi Triennale in Nagoya in August 2019, which even caught the attention of nation-wide press in Germany.³¹ Coincidentally, at the same time, a Berlin gallery (Gedok) wanted to exhibit the plastic version of the statue. The Japanese Embassy was invited to the opening of the Berlin exhibition, but instead of attending, it sent an official statement to the gallery. A similar statement was later sent to the organizers of a lecture series held at the Berlin Agency for Civic Education (*Landeszentrale für politische Bildung*), where Nataly Han was invited to speak about “comfort women.” The organizers were shocked about this, as Han reports, since they had never experienced such an intervention by a foreign government. Finally, Han learned about the removal in 2021 of a memorial in Manila commemorating Filipina “comfort women.”³² The statue was removed overnight, only four months after its installation – allegedly due to construction work on the street, but more likely it was the Philippine government’s reaction to pressure

from Japan.

In February 2020, Korea Verband submitted an application to install a bronze Statue of Peace for one year. The planned starting date was 14 August, commemorating Kim Hak-sun’s testimony in 1991. The application was submitted at the lowest level of local government, the council of the Berlin-Mitte district. Berlin has three different levels of government: as the capital of the Federal Republic of Germany, it is the seat of the Chancellor, the Parliament (*Bundestag*) and several, but not all, ministries. As a city-state with 3.6 million inhabitants, it is one of 16 federal states and is governed by the Senate of Berlin. Furthermore, there are 12 districts (*Bezirke*), each governed by a district council (*Bezirksamt*) and a district assembly (*Bezirksverordnetenversammlung, BVV*). The district council is headed by the district mayor (not to be confused with the Governing Mayor of Berlin). The district government further has different bureaus for matters such as Arts in Urban Space (*Kunst im Stadtraum, KiSt*). The latter was in charge of the application for the Statue of Peace. Therefore, the statue was not erected in Berlin as the capital of the Federal Republic of Germany, but in Berlin-Mitte as the district where the applying association has its office. The permission for its installation was neither under the jurisdiction of the state nor of the city-state. It is therefore a local memorial, not a national one.

The application was divided into five sections.³³ The first section explains the origin and the symbolism of the statue as well as its potential for educational activities with school students. The authors point out the relevance of the statue for Germany referring to the omnipresence of sexual violence even today. They scrutinize the structural problem of silencing the victims and underscore the legacy of the South-Korean “comfort women” movement as having broken this silence:

In Germany, too, sexualized violence is a repressed and taboo subject. One in seven women in Germany experiences punishable acts of sexualized violence on one or more occasions. [...] This violence concerns us all, because often the victims cannot seek help due to shame and fear and the perpetrators remain unpunished. The installation of the peace statue can therefore provide a broad awareness and help to find a common language. Indeed, the “comfort women” movement is considered one of the most successful feminist movements of the present day, as the affected women broke the silence and became activists for human rights and peace, encouraging many victims to no longer keep silent about their traumas. In addition, the erections of the statues around the world have proven time and again how artistically and educationally valuable they are, especially to young people, as they overcome all sorts of barriers of language or levels of education. Art acts as a “door opener” and its firm integration into everyday life helps to increase the visibility of this issue and to overcome shame and speechlessness.³⁴

Next, the authors discuss the misrepresentation of women in public memorials by giving local examples. They point out that among all the monuments, sculptures, and *lieux de mémoire* (sites of memory) in public spaces, only a very limited number are female. In the rare cases that women are actually depicted, however, they are “passive-decorative” or sexualized. Examples in Berlin are “La Bella” (The Beauty) by Richard Heß and “Erwachendes Mädchen” (Awakening Girl) by Joseph Limburg.

The only monument to sexual violence in Berlin, named “We have faces” (*Wir haben*

Gesichter) was erected in Viktoriapark in 2005,³⁵ but despite claiming to show faces, it is actually only a geometrical abstraction of a screaming face with hair standing on end. As if specifically designed to counteract the anti-rape message of this monument, not far from “We have faces” there is a statue by the name “Seltener Fang” (Rare Catch) by Ernst Herter, which is a typical 19th century neoclassical sculpture depicting a muscular fisherman proudly catching a helpless mermaid whose breasts are bare-naked and whose vagina is covered just enough to arouse sexual fantasies. The Statue of Peace, on the contrary, neither sexualizes women nor does it eternalize the raped woman in her pain by giving her a daunting expression.

Section 2 explains the planned position of the statue. The applicants chose Kopfplatz-square in the district Berlin-Mitte for several reasons. First, being less than 10 minutes walk from the association’s headquarters, the square is comfortably accessible for maintenance and educational activities. Second, worried about the area turning into a meeting point for drug trafficking, local residents had started a clean-up campaign some time ago.³⁶ Erecting the Statue of Peace on this square was integrated into this long-term plan.³⁷ For WGCW, in turn, installing the statue in an “ordinary” area emphasizes the fact that many victims of the “comfort station” system had been abducted from their familiar environments to serve in the military brothels. The choice of a residential area instead of touristy Berlin further underscores the omnipresence of sexual violence in everyday life and the desire for interaction primarily with the locals, not necessarily with tourists.

Sections 3 and 4 provide technical details of the sculpture and its creators as well as the applicants and the supporting initiatives. Probably the most important section is the fifth, where the expected intervention by the Japanese embassy is explained.

(5) Reactions of the Japanese Government:

Lastly, we would like to make an important remark about possible reactions to a setting up of the Statue of Peace on the part of the Japanese government. An article by [Kevin Scheerschmidt in the Süddeutsche Zeitung from August 2019](#) gives an overview of the interventions by the Japanese government in the past in response to the installation of the Statue of Peace. The Japanese government politicizes the Statue of Peace. Therefore, it must be emphasized that the statue is not being erected by the South Korean government, but by an independent non-governmental organization such as the working group “Comfort Women” in the association Korea Verband.

The governments of the affected women do not make any effort to address their needs and goals. Nevertheless, there is a general false impression that only the Japanese and South Korean governments are confronting each other on this issue. We do not want those affected to become the pawns of political interests. The victims and their demands for reconciliation [*Aufarbeitung*], apology and education as well as the wish for a peaceful world, free from sexualized violence, have to remain in the center and we want to join their demands in solidarity.

We want to erect the statue not with the intention to provoke conflict with the Japanese government, but because we are convinced, based on our experiences with the viewers, of the artistic power of the statue, that this subject, which is often treated as a taboo, can be sensitively brought into everyday life and into the public sphere. The Statue of Peace is a symbol in memory of all those affected and

a reminder that sexual violence is omnipresent, whether in times of war or peace, and that we must take it for granted to stand up against it every day.³⁸

Especially this last part proved to be very helpful later on, when a political and legal dispute ensued and the association’s integrity was at stake. The local government could not convincingly claim that it did not know what was going to happen. Nevertheless, the district council of Berlin-Mitte must have been very intimidated once the reaction actually erupted. Even in the case of the Dresden exhibition, the museum’s director, after having thoroughly educated herself on what was coming and being 100% sure that she wanted to exhibit the statue nevertheless, still was startled when the mails, calls, and visits actually began.³⁹

The district council of Berlin-Mitte approved the application for the Statue of Peace in Berlin in April, 2020, only two months after it was received. The representatives of the district council assured the applicants repeatedly that they would stand behind the statue and would properly deal with any objections made by the Japanese Embassy.

The Unveiling Ceremony

Due to construction work at the square, the inauguration of the statue was delayed by six weeks, until 28 September 2020. At the unveiling ceremony, the speakers framed the statue as a universal monument against sexual violence.⁴⁰ Nataly Han of WGCW/Korea Verband and a representative of the Working Group reUnion (see endnotes 36 and 37) made the first welcoming remarks. Han strongly emphasized that the “statue is not directed against the Japanese government. Rather, it is an invitation to come to terms with the past together for the future.”



**Unveiling ceremony on 28 September 2020
(photo: Dong-Ha Choe | Korea Verband)**

Speeches were given not only by representatives of the district, the WGCW, the artists, the Korean Council, and one former “comfort woman” (some of whom via video stream due to COVID restrictions), but also by a representative of the Yaizidi Women’s Council and two German scholars. The first speaker, Insa Eschebach, is a scholar of religious studies and the former director of the Ravensbrück Memorial Museum.⁴¹ The museum was built at the site of a former Nazi Women’s Concentration Camp that supplied some 220 sex slaves to ten Nazi concentration camp brothels during World War II.⁴² In these camps, the most hard-working male inmates were “rewarded” with sex. This situation put them in the ambivalent position of being victims and perpetrators at the same time.

Eschebach explained that they were victims of the Nazis even as they were perpetrators of sexual violence against the women, women whom they looked down upon. In her speech, Eschebach interpreted the statue both as a representation of the particular event of the military brothels of the Japanese military as well as a universal monument against the

sexual exploitation of women. For this reason, a miniature of the Statue of Peace was exhibited at Ravensbrück. She explained how the camp brothels functioned to restore the masculinity of the otherwise emasculated concentration camp detainees: “Masculinity is constituted here through the sexual subjugation of women.” Eschebach said that it was mainly thanks to the “#MeToo-movement of WWII,” initiated by the first public statement by Kim Hak-Sun in 1991 and women’s and human rights organizations in the beginning of the 1990s that the issue of National Socialist camp brothels began to be investigated more thoroughly. Only recently, in 2006, the museum in Ravensbrück opened the first exhibition on this issue.

Kien Nghi Ha, a scholar of Cultural and Postcolonial Studies of Vietnamese-Chinese origin and the only male speaker at the unveiling ceremony, framed the “comfort women” within global history, whose aim it is to overcome the limits of national isolation by acknowledging global intersections of colonialism and racism.⁴³ In his view, Germany can learn from the “comfort women’s” experiences with colonial amnesia and the evasion of responsibility, especially in coming to terms with its own colonial past. He finds the Statue of Peace relevant for Germany not only because it honors the “anti-nationalist women’s solidarity in the Asian-diasporic context” but also because it inaugurates a debate on “cross-origin identification, belonging and politics in migrant and postmigrant communities in Germany.” He explicitly placed the statue within the postmigrant debate, which pursues an inclusion of migrant experiences and histories into German national history and discourse. He further underscored the transnationalism of the “comfort women” activists, who never limited themselves to (South-)Korean victims and always included victims from the other affected countries, and declared their solidarity with victims of the mass rapes committed by South Korean

soldiers in the Vietnam War.

The Backlash and the Fight To Keep the Statue

One day after the inauguration of the Berlin Statue of Peace, Japan's Chief Cabinet Secretary Katō Katsunobu announced at a press conference that "We will approach various parties involved toward the removal of the statue."⁴⁴

The Japanese Embassy re-uploaded a statement on its website, in which it says that "Japan has sincerely dealt with" the "issue of comfort women between Japan and the Republic of Korea," (sic)⁴⁵ which is defined as a purely diplomatic issue. The statement notes the efforts of the Japanese government to resolve the issue, such as the Asia Women's Fund established in 1995 and the Reconciliation and Healing Fund established in 2016. It goes on to say that the governments of both countries "confirmed that the issue of comfort women was 'resolved finally and irreversibly' with the agreement reached at the Japan-ROK Foreign Ministers' Meeting in December 2015."⁴⁶ It then takes a revisionist turn, when it states that "Despite such sincere efforts by the Government of Japan, there are claims that can hardly be said to be based on historical facts, such as the allegations of 'forceful taking away' of comfort women and 'sex slaves' as well as the figures '200,000 persons' or 'several hundred thousands' for the total number of comfort women."⁴⁷ They argue that the government finds no documentary confirmation either of a "forceful taking away" or for the number of 200,000, and that the expression "sex slaves" "contradicts the facts" and therefore "should not be used."⁴⁸ But their claims are in conflict with the conclusions of historians,⁴⁹ as well as with the assessments of the United Nations.⁵⁰

In the reading of the Japanese embassy, the

statue symbolizes a bilateral conflict between Japan and South Korea, in which third countries like Germany or the U.S. should not intervene. Advocates of this nationalist reading in Japan include the current Japanese LDP-government, especially since the second Abe Shinzō cabinet. Within the LDP, a particularly conservative group advocates the removal of the statue (and all other such statues).⁵¹ Conservative media such as *Sankei Shimbun* (including its monthly magazine *Seiron*), the monthly magazine *WiLL* that is published by WAC, Inc., as well as ultranationalist and denialist organizations such as Nadeshiko Action Japanese Women for Justice and Peace support this interpretation and take it to the extreme.⁵²

This nationalist understanding is in stark contrast to the transnational reading by WGCW, Korea Verband and the Alliance that installed the statue and regard it as a universal matter of women's rights and want to link it with new, local meanings. In the following weeks and months, the different actors each tried to convince the responsible authorities of their particular reading: the diplomatic/national(ist) reading, or the transnational/universal/cosmopolitan reading.

First, Japanese authorities approached the national level. In a video conference between the German and the Japanese foreign ministers that took place a few days later, Motegi Toshimitsu brought up the statue and asked his German counterpart Heiko Maas (political affiliation: Social Democratic Party, SPD) to have it removed.⁵³ The German Foreign Office, however, saw it strictly as a matter for the local district Berlin-Mitte to handle, and not the responsibility of the national government, and therefore stayed out of the matter.⁵⁴

The Japanese embassy then approached the municipal level: the Senate of Berlin.⁵⁵ Fully adopting the national-diplomatic reading of the Japanese Embassy, in a letter addressed to the

district council of Berlin-Mitte and dated 12 October, the Senate welcomed the “decision of the District Office Mitte to revoke the permission to erect the statue.”⁵⁶ The Senate was concerned that the “issue of the ‘comfort women’” has the “potential to permanently threaten the relationship between the capital cities Tokyo and Berlin as well as between Berlin and Japan.” It goes on to explain that Berlin is also the seat of the Japanese-German Centre (JDZB), which is partly funded by the city of Berlin—as if the statue was a direct attack on all Japanese institutions in Berlin, including those where critical scholarship is part of the program. By adopting the reading of the Japanese Embassy, the Senate indirectly framed the statue as “anti-Japanese,” and lumped together the levels of civil society and government.

However, the level which was probably subject to the most pressure from outside (through e-mails and letters from Japanese authorities, organizations, and individuals), as well as from above (the Berlin Senate), was the district council of Berlin-Mitte,⁵⁷ which is the authority responsible for giving permission to install the statue. Overwhelmed by the sheer magnitude of the protest, district mayor Stephan von Dassel officially revoked the permission on 8 October only ten days after the statue was erected, and asked the applicants to remove it within one week.

What followed was a multi-level protest organized by WGCW, demonstrating the manifold ways in which protests are staged in the 21st century. On their homepage, [WGCW introduced seven different ways to support the cause](#): by sharing the news, by signing an Open Letter and two online petitions, by contacting the responsible authorities directly, by donating, by taking a photo sitting next to an empty chair and posting it on social media with the hashtag #WeSithWithYou, and of course by participating in a live protest in front of the statue, which took place on 13 October, just

one day before the demolition of the statue was due.



Demonstration on 13 October 2020 against the Berlin-Mitte district council’s order to remove the statue
 (photo: Dong-Ha Choe | Korea Verband)

Several Berlin politicians, academics, NGOs and groups of individuals voiced their disapproval of the order to remove the statue.⁵⁸ For instance, the co-chair of the Social Democratic Party (SPD) in the district Berlin-Mitte, Yannick Haan, said that “good relations with Japan and the twinning with Tokyo are important to the SPD district association, but coming to terms with history should also involve the broader civil society.”⁵⁹ Von Dassel also received an open letter from Watanabe Mina, the director of the [Women’s Active Museum on War and Peace](#) (WAM) in Tokyo, who pointed out that according to a 2014 report by the UN Human Rights committee, the “recruitment, transportation and management” of these women was done in many cases generally against their will” and is thus to be considered a human rights violation. She also underscored that the issue is “not merely a diplomatic issue between Japan and South Korea; rather, it involves the human rights of

women in almost all the Asia-pacific region.” Attached to the letter is a map of “comfort stations” and the 2007 Resolution on Justice for the “Comfort Women” by the European Parliament, in which it “Calls on the government of Japan to refute publicly any claims that the subjugation and enslavement of ‘comfort women’ never occurred.”⁶⁰

At least two groups of people with Japanese origins living in Berlin sent open letters in support of the statue to the district council. They both refer to the historical conscience that they have encountered in Germany and that they find lacking in the Japanese government’s reaction:

We are aware of the Japanese government’s view on the issue of the “comfort women,” namely that it should be considered “finally and irreversibly” settled with the agreement between the Japanese and South Korean governments in December 2015. However, we cannot accept that the Japanese government thereby intends to put an end to the history of its own war crimes, because this is exactly the opposite of what we have learned from the Germans and what we consider to be an exemplary attitude, namely that there can never be an end as far as coming to terms with the Nazi past is concerned.⁶¹

This letter proves that the issue is not simply one between Korea and Japan, but that even within the Japanese diaspora there is support for the statue. Another e-mail by a group of Japanese artists, musicians and designers in Berlin makes a similar point:

We, the signatories, have chosen to live in

Berlin for many different reasons. But what has certainly played a role for all of us is the responsible handling of history by German politics, the acknowledgement and naming of historical crimes and the uncompromising commitment to a future that does not allow these crimes to happen again. Many of us find it shameful how the Japanese government tries to enforce its interests on the backs of victims of sexual violence, and prevents the commemoration of historical atrocities through blatant censorship.⁶²

Of all places, they claim independently from each other, Germany with its specific culture of *Geschichtsaufarbeitung* (coming to terms with history), should not be a place where victims of war crimes are silenced. Crucial to this conscience of historical reconciliation and coming to terms with the past is that it is an ongoing process that can never be finally completed. This implies both that the memory has to be kept alive and that hitherto neglected or insufficiently investigated issues are uncovered and firmly incorporated into the memory culture. Therefore in Berlin, the Statue of Peace not only informs the German public on the “comfort women” system in Asia, but also encourages locals to recall Germany’s own wartime history of sexual violence: forced prostitution/sexual slavery in military brothels of the German Wehrmacht and in concentration camp brothels as well as mass rape in occupied territories. These topics do not occupy a prominent role in German history education. In terms of commemorating wartime sexual violence, the “comfort women” movement can serve as a role model for Germany because the victims publicly spoke up for themselves and participated in establishing a memory culture for their suffering - while most of the victims of wartime sexual violence in Europe remained silent to their graves.⁶³ What is more, the “comfort women” grassroots memory activism

has produced a plethora of audiovisual material that can be employed for educational purposes, such as victims' testimonies, documentaries, fictional movies, animations and photographs.

At the demonstration on 13 October, around 300 supporters gathered at the Statue of Peace. Among the speakers was a representative of the professional association of visual artists "[berlin \(bbk\)](#)," who defended artists' freedom of expression. That freedom is one of the reasons why so many artists from all around the world choose to live and work in Berlin. Other speeches were held by the Yazidi Women's Council and Medica Mondiale. The protesters then marched to the district council pushing a wheelchair with a plastic replica of the Statue of Peace. There, district mayor Stephan von Dassel surprised the crowd by stepping out and making a public statement. In the past couple of days, he said, he had "learned a lot about the dispute between South Korea and Japan surrounding the so-called 'comfort women'."⁶⁴ He announced that his office would retract the order to remove the statue, and that he wanted to discuss the issue further with the involved actors and try to find solutions. Owing to the vast support by defenders of the statue, the district office had changed its mind.

After that, the issue was moved to the district assembly of Berlin-Mitte. It is a parliament-like body at the district level, consisting of 55 members who meet once in a month. After thoroughly discussing the issue at its November and December 2020 sessions, the district assembly agreed that the statue should remain at least for one year, as initially approved by the district council, and that talks should be held on finding a permanent place for the statue. One idea by the district mayor, for example, was to universalize the statue more explicitly by changing the wording of the two plaques (considering the Japanese government's stance on the 200,000 figure, and on the terms "forceful abduction" and "sex

slaves"), and by explicitly including other instances of wartime sexual violence. He approached the Japanese embassy several times with suggestions, but could not reach an agreement. Another suggestion came from the opposition, the Free Democratic Party (FDP)⁶⁵ who wanted to launch an open call for a "conflict-free" monument of sexual violence against women in armed conflicts—a motion that would effectively mean the removal and replacement of the Statue of Peace with another, "less controversial" one. In reaction to this, the party Die Linke ("The Left") initiated a new, urgent motion in the March assembly meeting, asking "that the district office finds a solution together with the applicants in order to preserve the 'Statue of Peace' permanently in the district."⁶⁶ The motion was approved with 23 votes in favor and 5 against. In its April 2021 session, however, the FDP motion for a "universal" monument was resubmitted and approved as well. The district council Berlin-Mitte has therefore two conflicting tasks: 1) to preserve the Statue of Peace permanently in the district, and 2) to start an open call for a permanent memorial to sexual violence in armed conflicts.

As of September 2021, the district council has approved a one-year extension of the installation period and rules out applications for further extensions, referring to a guideline according to which permanent memorial projects are subject to a competitive design process. The Statue of Peace will therefore remain in Berlin-Mitte at least until 28 September 2022. As of February 2022, the stance of the district council is that no further extension will be legally possible. WGCW continues to fight for the statue to remain.

The National(ist) vs. the Transnational Understanding

The Statue of Peace is a travelling monument with almost 100 replicas across the world. In

each locale, it acquires new meanings that may travel with it to future destinations.

As Stuart Hall points out, meaning is not just reflected in a word or object itself nor is it reducible to the intention of the author.⁶⁷ Instead, it is constructed within the code, which is a system of differences where signs operate in relation to each other to co-construct meaning. While the creators of the Statue of Peace used specific symbols (the bird, the clenched fists, the hair, the dress, the empty chair, etc.) to convey an intended meaning, the statue “lives” because people interact with it in their specific ways and thereby attach new meanings to it. There is not just one meaning but many, and some of them are in conflict with each other. The meaning of the statue is co-constructed by the symbolic relationship of the people who set it up, the place where they choose to set it up, the additional information material like plaques, leaflets, catalogues, accompanying exhibitions and educational activities surrounding the statue. Setting up the statue in front of a Japanese embassy, for example, gives it a different meaning as compared to setting it up in a random square of a residential area or on private or church property. We must also be aware that the meanings, which are added with every replica set up somewhere in the world, may travel with it as a palimpsest. One cannot easily do away with those prior meanings, even though some of them are more visible or more desirable to certain groups than others. Whether these meanings travel along also depends on how strongly they are claimed by their stakeholders.

The first Statue of Peace in Seoul was placed in front of the Japanese Embassy. As Elizabeth W. Son writes, “Though the statue is called the Peace Monument, its location and the positioning of the girl launch an undeniable accusation directed at the Japanese government.”⁶⁸ Son shows that the statue in Seoul is sometimes even used for patriotic and

nationalistic performances (both by South Korean and by Japanese actors).

The statues outside of South Korea, however, defy clear-cut national(ist) ascriptions and do not lend themselves so easily to such performances. Already the first bronze statue overseas in Glendale was carefully framed “as a nonpartisan issue that cuts across national and ethnic differences.”⁶⁹ The Berlin statue follows this pattern, considering that neither WGCW and Korea Verband, nor the supporting alliance, are made up entirely or even predominantly of Korean-German members. As described above, they are multi-ethnic and united through the feminist cause to fight sexual violence. Not just in terms of the composition of the group, but also in terms of motivation, just as in the U.S.,⁷⁰ the Berlin activists were spurred on to install the statue in large part because they were enraged about the repeated attempts to have “comfort women” memorials removed. In other words, they are invested in the feminist cause rather than in any particular ethnic identity. The statue then comes to represent not only a) the “comfort women” and b) the activist movement in South Korea since 1992 but also c) the backlash to the nationalist-patriarchy that aims to silence the victims, who in turn fight back even more vehemently.

The installation of the statues in the U.S. and Germany further reinforces a non-nationalist reading. In Berlin, the statue was installed in a quiet residential area, closer to Korea Verband’s office than to any national (Brandenburg Gate) and international (Japanese Embassy) symbols. Nevertheless, both Brandenburg Gate and the Japanese Embassy are undeniably located in the same district, at a certain distance. (Maybe more significant for memory culture is the fact that Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe, also known as the Holocaust Memorial, is located in the same district as well, just a couple of footsteps away from Brandenburg Gate). All in

all, the siting of the statue does not address the state-level and clearly places the focus on educational and community-building activities with the local population.

Within the activities of Korea Verband, ethnicity and nationality are only secondary. The association does not address any national government; they aim to reach local citizens and especially students. “The participants [of our events] come together on the basis of being female, experiencing what it means to live in society as a woman. It is very simple. Nobody cares about nationality,” explains Korea Verband’s director Nataly Han. “They [the opponents of the statue] work with their old categories - Japanese vs. Korean, men vs. women, perpetrator vs. victim, nation-states. They are trapped in these dichotomies and do not see that we are on an entirely different page. We have crossed these national borders long ago.” Their approach is, therefore, not “anti-Japanese” or even anti-men but anti-patriarchy.

A negative consequence of the continued nationalist attempts at removing the statues is that they systematically divert the attention away from the victims as well as the fight against sexual violence, education, and memory culture, and onto the nation-state. In the immediate aftermath of the intervention of the Japanese foreign ministry, Berlin’s Korea Verband was so busy dealing with the diplomatic issue that the planned educational activities involving the statue and dealing with the actual topic of the statue, i.e., sexual violence, had to take a backseat.⁷¹ In a panel discussion with the creators of the statue, Japanese-German artist Tsukasa Yajima and historian Regina Mühlhäuser, the discussants were so busy explaining the diplomatic issues between Japan and South Korea and the “comfort women’s” role in it, that there was no time left to discuss the artwork itself, which was supposed to be at the center of the discussion.⁷²



Students participating in an educational activity at the “Comfort Women” Museum on the premises of Korea Verband in August 2021 (photo: Dong-Ha Choe | Korea Verband)

Interactive Meanings

Despite the interventions that consume a lot of time and energy to fend off, WGCW tries to make as much use of the statue as it can for the time that it remains. Just like in Glendale and elsewhere, the installers use the statue actively for demonstrations, conferences, vigils, music and dance performances, podcasts and vlogs, and projects with local schools. (“Vlog” is an abbreviation of “video blog” or “video log.” It is kind of blog which transmits a message via video and audio). Especially in the spring and summer of 2021, when people were not allowed to meet in larger groups inside, the statue proved to be an ideal and COVID-safe meeting space.

WGCW set up an online calendar where every member can sign in for daily cleanups of the statue. The cleanings are part of a performative practice of care.⁷³ As a welcome side effect of the cleanups, at least for several hours a day

there is someone at the statue who can answer questions to passers-by. There have been several encounters with people who shared their personal stories, like one German man whose mother had been a victim of wartime sexual violence and who was grateful for this opportunity to talk about it. The WGCW members keep journals of these encounters and plan to publish them.

While WGCW, Korea Verband, and the Alliance installed and framed the statue within a certain paradigm, it took on a life of its own once it was there. After the nationalist backlash made the national headlines, new organizations started making use of it to advance their particular causes. One such organization is a German branch of [Grannies against the Extreme Right \(Omas gegen Rechts\)](#), a citizen group of mainly retired women, who protest the recent resurgence of racism and extreme-right wing positions in Austria and Germany. In November 2020, the Grannies started holding regular vigils at the statue, which they see as a “symbol for a cosmopolitan, anti-racist Berlin.”⁷⁴ On 19 February 2021 they dedicated their vigil at the statue to the victims of the Hanau shootings in 2020, in which a far-right extremist motivated by a racist ideology massacred nine people before he killed his mother and himself. Although none of the victims of this shooting had a background in East Asia, racialized violence is relevant for all people of color and their allies. By holding a vigil for the Hanau victims at the Statue of Peace, the Grannies highlighted the fact that the statue is relevant not just for the Asian diasporic community, but for all racialized citizens of Germany.



Statue of Peace in Berlin with a pin button of Omas Gegen Rechts (Grannies Against the Extreme Right, photo by the author)



Vigil for the victims of the racist mass shooting in Hanau, held on 19 February

2021
(photo: Korea Verband)

The statue also served as a space for Asian people of color to mourn those killed in the Atlanta mass shooting on 16 March 2021 in the U.S. Through Instagram, WGCW invited people to a vigil:

We, as part of the Asian Diaspora community, are hosting a vigil and demonstration in memory and in resistance for the 8 victims of the shooting in Atlanta on March 16th, 6 of whom were Asian women. We refuse to name this shooting as anything other than a massacre done in light of the white supremacy, misogyny and capitalism that thrives in both the U.S. and Germany and globally! (Instagram @trostfrauen, March 22, 2021)

WGCW invited PoC from all Asian communities in Berlin and worked with anti-racist organizations and networks such as *DAMN* Berlin* (which is an abbreviation of *Deutsche Asiat*innen, Make Noise!* [or in English, “German Asians, Make Noise!”]), *Ich Bin Kein Virus* (I am not a virus), and *Korientation* (which is a combination of the two words “Korea” and “orientation”). Here, the statue is framed as a representation of Asian people, which seems to have been long overdue in a society that is predominantly composed of whites as in Germany.



Vigil for the victims of the racist mass shooting in Atlanta, held on 23 March 2021
(photo: Korea Verband)



Vigil for the victims of the racist mass shooting in Atlanta, held on 23 March 2021
(photo: Korea Verband)

Berlin is a multicultural city, where one in three citizens has a “migration background” (out of these, 40% have a German passport).⁷⁵ In Berlin-Mitte, the district with the highest number of migrants, as many as one half the

citizens have such a background. It is hard to think of any place in Germany where anti-racist and postmigrant activism is so widespread, commonplace, and strong. In this setting, the Statue of Peace is able to partly fill a void. Migrant organizations are able, through the installation of the statue, to stake a claim in which they produce their own representations of migrant experiences and histories.

One member at that time (March 2021) of WGCW, a 34-year-old first generation migrant from South Korea, has dedicated her activism specifically to solidarity with people of color:

Despite the personal difficulty [of ethnic/national identity], I find the “Berlin” peace statue an absolutely important political issue, because we live exactly *now* - a time of the outbreak of hegemonic powers in all scale and their alliances in a very skillful form - and *here* - in a city that is one of the few that still have great potential regarding grassroots movements. I joined the Working Group “Comfort Women” because the “Berlin” peace statue already has a different context than the peace statues in Seoul, Glendale, or elsewhere and it will continue to write its own history in Berlin. In this new movement of the “Berlin” Peace Statue I will not only think of the victims and survivors of the “comfort women,” but also (maybe more) of my comrades-in-arms and friends in Berlin, who fled from war and conflict zones and patriarchal oppressions. No one has chosen their identity. We are all forced to live in certain identities and to manage our own political privileges and weaknesses. Therefore, solidarity would be the only way to balance the inequality of destiny and it should indeed continue to work that way in the specific context. (Young-Rong Choo, emphasis added)⁷⁶

Choo’s take on the Statue of Peace is very complex and nuanced. She is active in other initiatives that advocate justice for victims of misogynist and racist violence and, compared to the “comfort women,” receive very little to no media attention.

In that regard, the Statue of Peace is at the same time representing otherwise underrepresented people and issues, but it is also privileged in a way, because it receives more care and attention than other acts of violence happening right here, right now. (Young-Rong Choo)⁷⁷

She hopes that the Statue of Peace in Berlin will be just the beginning for many more public memorializations of cases of violence. In her vision, they could help to form an alliance of solidarity between different people and communities in Berlin. In this sense, the Statue of Peace has further come to symbolize how migrant histories have yet to be included in the dominant historiography and be remembered as part of German history.

Furthermore, the postcolonial meaning of the statue also allows activists to connect it to local discourses of colonialism. The aftermath of Germany’s colonialism is much less critically addressed in public education and public discourse than its national-socialist past. A central debate in Berlin in the last few years has been the reconstruction of the Berlin City Palace, which houses the Humboldt Forum, a museum of non-European art. In 2017 the museum’s reluctance to investigate the provenance of its ethnologic collection caused a controversy.⁷⁸ Decolonial activists argue that the City Palace’s architecture symbolizes German imperialism and that the exhibits are in large part looted art. On the day of its opening (20 July 2021), Korea Verband’s Nataly Han was invited to speak at the demonstration

organized by the Coalition of Cultural Workers Against the Humboldt Forum. The hosts described Humboldt Forum as a “neocolonial structure... the most revisionist building in Berlin today and also the most heavily funded.”⁷⁹ In her speech, Han related white European colonialism to Japanese colonialism in Asia. She mentioned that during the debate in the district assembly of Berlin-Mitte some assembly members had suggested that the Statue of Peace be replaced with a “universal” statue, and criticized this suggestion for being racist. She asked why they fail to accept the Statue of Peace as a universal symbol, and suggested that it is because the girl looks Asian and not white. “We fight the idea that violence has a nationality and that non-white victims are not accepted as a universal symbol,” she concluded. She then suggested that the space that becomes void after colonialists’ statues are dismantled could be used to erect monuments like the Statue of Peace, which stands for marginalized, silenced women who in the end found the courage to speak up.

Conclusion

The main conflict at the Statue of Peace in Berlin has been the conflict that erupted between a nationalist and a transnational/universal interpretation of the “comfort women.” At every possible occasion, the installers have made it clear that they are driven neither by national nor by nationalist intentions. They are members of German civil society and act independently from national governments. The nationalization of the Statue of Peace in Berlin happened only after the Japanese government intervened and convinced local authorities that this is a diplomatic issue to be handled by South Korea and Japan alone. Some of the local politicians and representatives, like the FDP and the Berlin Senate, accepted the nationalist reading as the dominant reading. Others, like the district

council Berlin-Mitte, which is directly responsible for the permission of the statue, are torn between meeting the legitimate demand for a memorial from the civil society of their own district and not getting themselves into diplomatic trouble.

Since the Japanese Embassy’s intervention, the installers have moved heaven and earth to convince the authorities and the public (again) that feminism, education, and memory culture, not nation-states, are what matters to them. Using their transnational and cosmopolitan network, WGCW, Korea Verband, and their supporters have carefully connected the “comfort women” issue to multiple local discourses, such as sexual violence in WWII Germany, Germany’s special *Geschichtsaufarbeitung* responsibility (i.e., the responsibility to come to terms with the past), freedom of artistic expression, the construction of a postmigrant society, and decolonization/postcolonialism. Thereby, they have made the statue and the “comfort women” history relevant and palpable for a broad audience in Germany. At the same time, the Statue of Peace and the “comfort women” are framed as global history that should be taught at German schools—not just because there is an East Asian diaspora living in Germany but because the “comfort women” issue is a human rights issue.

The statue found many supporters in Berlin aside from the initial applicants. It has become part of the movement within diasporic communities to include their histories and experiences with racist violence within German mainstream history. It is noteworthy that the support for the statue reaches way beyond the East-Asian diaspora and extends to “migrants” from all over the world, including people of color of the second and subsequent generations of immigrants, who live in Berlin in disproportionately high numbers. Their solidarity is based on common causes such as anti-sexism, anti-racism, and decolonization. As

Nataly Han once aptly put it, “The interaction with the Statue of Peace exactly corresponds to what Berlin is.”

Finally, the Statue of Peace is a “living” memorial. Its meanings constantly evolve according to the local framing and the interaction of the local citizens with it while carrying older meanings from other locales along the way. As the experiences in Berlin illustrate, it cannot be pinned down to just one fixed meaning. With its empty chair that invites anyone to sit down next to the girl, it is open to new linkages, associations and references. Several artists, scholars and activists whom I have spoken to agree that the empty chair is probably the most ingenious feature of the statue, since it allows for multiple possible extensions. Many of the meanings of the statue are constructed locally through the interactions at and with the statue, and they must not be neglected if one is to attain a deep understanding of the statue’s significance.

German translation of this article is available [here](#).

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Notes

¹ See Arirang.TV, "[The Innerview \(Ep.196\) Kim Seo-kyung and Kim Eun-sung, the sculptors _ Full Episode.](#)"

² See also Daniel Schumacher, "[Whose History Do We Tell in Public?](#)" *Public History Weekly* 9:2 (18 March 2021).

³ See Esther Felden, "[Freiburg und die Trostfrau](#)" [Freiburg and the Comfort Woman], *Deutsche Welle* (21 September 2016).

⁴ The title of the exhibition in Munich was "[Art 5 Kunst und Demokratie.](#)"

⁵ Personal communication, July 2021.

⁶ The history of the "history wars" over the Statue of Peace is summarized by Tomomi Yamaguchi in "[The 'History Wars' and the 'Comfort Women' Issue: Revisionism and the Right-wing in Contemporary Japan and the U.S.,](#)" *The Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus* 18:6:3 (15 March 2020).

⁷ On the useful distinction of the four terrains of memory and their respective agents see Carol Gluck, "Operations of Memory: 'Comfort Women' and the World," Sheila Miyoshi Jager and Rana Mitter, eds., *Ruptured Histories: War, Memory, and the Post-Cold War in Asia* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard UP, 2007) 47-77.

⁸ See [The Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus special issue "The 'Comfort Women' as Public History"](#) (March 2021) as well as Pyong Gap Min, Thomas R. Chung, and Sejung Sage Yim, eds., *The Transnational Redress Movement for the Victims of Japanese Military Sexual Slavery* (Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter, 2020).

⁹ Of course, nationalist interpretations can also occur on the side of the defendants of the statue.

¹⁰ Elizabeth W. Son, *Embodied reckonings: "Comfort Women," Performance, and Transpacific Redress* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2018) 161.

¹¹ Linda Hasunuma and Mary M. McCarthy, "Creating a Collective Memory of the Comfort Women in the USA," *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society* 32:2 (2019) 148.

¹² See [Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung \(bpb.de\), "Interview mit Shermin Langhoff: Die Herkunft spielt keine Rolle - 'Postmigrantisches' Theater im Ballhaus Naunynstraße"](#) [Interview with Shermin Langhoff: Origin does not matter - 'Postmigrant' Theater at Ballhaus Naunynstraße] (10 March 2011). For academic accounts using the term "postmigrant society" see Naika Foroutan, *Die postmigrantische Gesellschaft. Ein Versprechen der pluralen Demokratie* [Post-Migrant Society: A Promise of Plural Democracy] (Berlin: Transcript Verlag, 2018). And in English see Naika Foroutan, "[Post-Migrant Society,](#)" *Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung* (21 April 2015).

¹³ Although there is a lot to say about the statues in Dresden and Munich, for the sake of brevity this article will only deal with the statue in Berlin, with articles about Dresden and Munich to follow.

¹⁴ On the symbolism of the Statue of Peace see also Nataly Jung-Hwa Han, ed., "[My Little Statue of Peace around the World](#)" (Berlin: Korea Verband e.V., date not noted) 14-23.

¹⁵ Pyōn Chin-il, "['Ososugiru ,Berurin ianfuzō' tekkyo yōsei no jimintō yūshi gi'in no seimeibun: Kōka wa aru no ka?](#)" 遅すぎる「ベルリン慰安婦像」撤去要請の自民党有志議員の声明文 効果はあるのか? [Too Late: Statement by LDP Diet members Calling for Removal of Berlin

Comfort Women Statues: Will it Work?]" *Yahoo News* (21 November 2020).

¹⁶ For example, Nembutsu Haruna, "Shōjozō wa doitsu de ukeirerareta no ka: gimon no saki ni miete kita mono 少女像はドイツで受け入れられたのか 疑問の先に見えてきたもの [Is the Statue of Peace accepted in Germany? What we can see beyond this question]," *Mainichi* (11 April 2021).

¹⁷ Korea Verband, "About Us" (Berlin: Korea Verband).

¹⁸ For more information on the project, see [Exchange Program for Regional Integration in East Asia and Europe \(Berlin: Korea-Verband\)](#) and the [video summary "EPRIE 2017"](#) (Berlin: Korea-Verband, 15 February 2018).

¹⁹ In the ten months that I have attended the meetings of WGCF, almost every time there were new participants. Therefore, every session started with a round of self-introductions. This was in part triggered by the heightened media attention after the district's order to remove the statue. The participants are of diverse ethnic and national backgrounds and display a variety of personal interests and circumstances that motivated them to join the group. For example, some of them are students or scholars of East-Asian history and have a primarily educational or academic interest. Others have been interns at Korea Verband and stayed in the group ever since. Some have been in the group for 30 years, while others have joined only recently. Some have South Korean, Japanese, Vietnamese, or Chinese roots; others have no background of migration.

²⁰ The full list (*Die Mitglieder des Bündnisses für die Friedensstatue in Deutschland*) of the alliance supporting the Statue of Peace is available at the [website of Working Group "Comfort Women"](#).

²¹ Daniel Schumacher, "Asia's global memory wars and solidarity across borders: diaspora activism on the 'comfort women' issue in the United States," *The Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus* 19:5:6 (1 March 2021).

²² Quoted from International Women* Space, "About Us". The full program of the Action Week against Femicide and Sexualized Violence is available at "[4. Aktionswoche gegen Femizid und sexualisierte Gewalt, 02.- 14. August 2021](#)" (in German).

²³ For more on the Korean Council see "About Us." Note that until 2018 the Korean Council was called Korean Council for the Women Drafted for Military Sexual Slavery by Japan. For more on the Women's Active Museum on War and Peace (WAM) see "About Us."

²⁴ Feminism, anti-racism and decolonization are combined into the single concept of "cosmopolitanism" by Hasunuma and McCarthy in "Creating a Collective Memory of the Comfort Women in the USA" 150.

²⁵ See, for example, Alexandra Bauer, "[To free oneself from this inflexible sense of belonging...](#)". [Transnational biographies and multiple senses of belonging among South Korean women in Germany](#). *EPRIE Journal for Regional Integration in East Asia and Europe 2017* ("Migration, Integration, and Belonging") 10-12, and her monography "Von dieser verkniffenen Zugehörigkeit frei machen..." *Transnationale Lebensgeschichten und Mehrfachzugehörigkeiten unter südkoreanischen Frauen in Deutschland* (Berlin: Weißensee Verlag Berlin, 2017).

²⁶ The exhibition entitled "MuEon DaEon | Sprachlos Vielstimmig" (MuEon DaEon | Speechless Polyphonic) opened in January 2019 and is currently closed for redesigning. Its topic was sexual violence in war and peace, with a focus on "comfort women." Besides the

“comfort stations” of the Japanese military, the exhibition showed several comparable cases of sexual violence against women in war, such as German military brothels, sexual violence committed by allied soldiers after WWII, sexual violence in the Vietnam War committed by South Korean soldiers as well as contemporary events like the case of Yazidi women, who were sexually enslaved by Daesh. See the [official MuEon DaEon website](#) and the [introduction of the museum on the website of Korea Verband](#).

²⁷ Interview by the author, 10 November 2020.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ For Germany, Korea Verband has compiled a (non-exhaustive) list of interventions by the Japanese embassy: [“Interventionsversuche durch die Japanische Botschaft gegen eine Friedensstatue in Deutschland”](#) (Intervention attempts by the Japanese Embassy against a peace statue in Germany).

³¹ Kevin Scheerschmidt, [“Japanische Reflexe”](#) [Japanese reflexes], *Süddeutsche Zeitung* (13 August 2019); Janine Muckermann, [“Ein Tabu geht auf Reisen. ‘Trostrfrauen’ im Asien-Pazifik-Krieg”](#) [A taboo goes on the road. ‘Comfort Women’ in the Asia-Pacific War], *monopol Magazin für Kunst und Leben* (21 August 2018). In English see David McNeill, [“Freedom Fighting: Nagoya’s censored art exhibition and the ‘comfort women’ controversy,”](#) *The Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus* 17:20:3 (15 October 2019).

³² See Raissa Robles, [“‘Comfort women’ statue missing in the Philippines as Japan’s wartime legacy under focus,”](#) *This Week in Asia* (14 February 2021); Rappler.com, [“Comfort woman statue in Manila removed,”](#) *Rappler.com* (28 April 2018).

³³ Korea Verband, [“Antrag auf Sondernutzung für Kunst im Stadtraum. Die Friedensstatue”](#) [Application for Special Use for Art in Urban Space: The Peace Statue] (19 February 2020). On file with the author.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ See English translation of the German Wikipedia page [„Wir haben Gesichter“](#) [We Have Faces].

³⁶ JMD, [“reUnion! Von der Reanimation eines Platzes in Moabit-West”](#) [reUnion! About the crime-reduction program for a square in Moabit-West] (2018).

³⁷ The local Working Group “reUnion” initially supported the statue, but withdrew after witnessing the reaction of the Japanese embassy.

³⁸ Korea Verband, [“Antrag auf Sondernutzung für Kunst im Stadtraum. Die Friedensstatue.”](#)

³⁹ Personal communication with the author, 11 July 2021.

⁴⁰ The [full program can be accessed on the website of Korea Verband](#).

⁴¹ Read more about the [Ravensbrück Memorial Museum here](#). For more information on Nazi sexual slavery, see the publications of Insa Eschebach, Regina Mühlhäuser, and Robert Sommer. The former two are regularly invited to speak at events related to “comfort women” and the Statue of Peace, e.g., at a panel discussion at the ethnographic museum in Dresden and at an exhibition in Munich, both in July 2021.

⁴² Some of these sex slaves also came from the camp in Auschwitz.

⁴³ Ha modified the word *Trostrfrauen* (“comfort women”) to *Trotzfrauen* (defiant women) in order to honor their fight for acknowledgement.

⁴⁴ See Kyodo News, [“Japan regrets new Korean ‘comfort women’ statue set up in Berlin”](#) (29

September 2020). Japanese names are written in the Japanese order with the surname first.

⁴⁵ The issue of “comfort women” is not only an issue between Japan and South Korea. It involves all countries and regions from which women were recruited, including China, Taiwan, Southeast Asia, islands in the Pacific, the Netherlands, Australia, Okinawa, and other parts of Japan. It will surely eventually also involve the “comfort women” of the DPRK (North Korea).

⁴⁶ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan (MOFA), [“Japan's Efforts on the Issue of Comfort Women”](#) (27 December 2021). (Note: the statement has been updated in December 2021).

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ For example Yoshimi, Yoshiaki. *Comfort Women: Sexual Slavery in the Japanese Military During World War II* (New York: Columbia UP, 2002).

⁵⁰ See Radhika Coomaraswamy, [“Report of the Special Rapporteur on violence against women, its causes and consequences, Ms. Radhika Coomaraswamy, in accordance with Commission on Human Rights resolution 1994/45”](#) (Geneva: United Nations, 1996). Also see Women's Active Museum (WAM), [“Compilation of Recommendations by the UN Human Rights Bodies on the ‘Comfort Women’ Issue,”](#) Appendix No. 1 of Japan/Alternative Report: On the Issue of Japan’s Military Sexual Slavery (May 2014).

⁵¹ A statement demanding the demolition of the Berlin statue, which was sent to district mayor Stephan von Dassel on 18 October 2020 was signed by merely 82 of more than 800 diet members. There were no signatories from other parties beyond the LDP, and make up only one fourth of the LDP. (Pyōn 2020, “Ososugiru ‘Berurin ianfuzō’ tekkyo yōsei”).

⁵² Yamamoto Yumiko of the far-right group Nadeshiko Action Japanese Women for Justice and Peace (*Nadeshiko Akushon* Japanese Women for Justice and Peace) sent a [“plea to the district mayor of Berlin-Mitte and to all Berliners”](#) to remove the statue. In it, she spreads anti-Korean hate and uses *ad hominem* arguments against Korea Verband, Korean Council, and Koreans in general. (Her accusation that all Koreans are “liars” is only the tip of the iceberg). Yamamoto is the former vice-president of Zaitokukai, the ultranationalist hate group opposing basic human rights for resident Koreans (i.e., Zainichi Koreans). “Zaitokukai” is short for *Zainichi Tokken o Yurusanai Shimin no Kai* (Citizens Against the Special Privileges of Zainichi Foreign Residents. For more on Zaitokukai, see articles at *The Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus*, such as Jackie Kim-Wachutka, [“When Women Perform Hate Speech: Gender, Patriotism, and Social Empowerment in Japan,”](#) *The Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus* 17:11:1 [1 June 2019]). For more context on Nadeshiko Action see [Japan-U.S. Feminist Network for Decolonization \(FeND\): Nadeshiko Action](#).

⁵³ See *Sankei Shimbun*, [“Nichidoku gaishō ga kyūkyo denwa kaidan e: Chūgoku to no Keizai kankei jūshi kara tankan. Ianfuzō no tekkyo mo motomeru”](#) [Foreign ministers of Japan and Germany hold hurried phone talks, shift focus from economic ties with China, and call for removal of comfort women statue], *Sankei Shimbun* (1 October 2020).

⁵⁴ While the German Foreign Office has not publicly taken an official position, it insists that “at no time has [it] made recommendations to the responsible Berlin authorities on how to deal with the statue there” (Sven Hansen, [“Kein Schlussstrich. Konflikt um Berliner Mahnmahl”](#) [No drawing a line under the past: Conflict over Berlin memorial], *die tageszeitung* (14 October 2020).

⁵⁵ The Senate of Berlin was at the time headed by Governing Mayor Michael Müller, SPD, in a coalition of SPD, the Left, and The Greens. See Sven Hansen, “[Tokio gegen Frauenstatue in Berlin. Umgang mit sexualisierter Kriegsgewalt](#)” [Tokyo against women’s statue in Berlin: Dealing with sexualized war violence], in *die tageszeitung* (7 October 2020); and Alexander Fröhlich, Lorenz Maroldt, “[Verantwortung ‚für die Sicherheitslage in Ostasien‘. Senatskanzlei drängte auf Abbau der Berliner ‚Friedensstatue‘.](#)” *Der Tagesspiegel* (25 October 2020).

⁵⁶ The letter is on file with the author.

⁵⁷ Similar to the situation in the Senate, the district council Berlin-Mitte was run by a coalition of the SPD, the Left, and the Greens at the time.

⁵⁸ Sven Hansen, “[SPD will ‚Friedensstatue‘ erhalten. Trostfrauen-Mahnmal in Berlin](#)” [SPD wants to preserve ‘Statue of Peace’: Comfort women memorial in Berlin], *die tageszeitung* (13 October 2020).

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Women's Active Museum (WAM), “[An Open letter to Mr. Stephan von Dassel, the district mayor of Mitte, Berlin,](#)” 12 October 2020.

⁶¹ Open letter by a group of Japanese people in Berlin sent to district mayor Stephan von Dassel on 14 October 2020. On file with the author.

⁶² E-Mail sent by a group of Japanese artists in Berlin to district mayor Stephan von Dassel on 12 October 2020. On file with the author.

⁶³ Insa Eschebach and Regina Mühlhäuser, “[Umkämpfte Erinnerung. Die ‘Trostfrauen’-Statue in Berlin und der Umgang mit sexueller Kriegsgewalt](#)” [Contested Memory. The ‘Comfort Women’ Statue in Berlin and Coping with Wartime Sexual Violence], *geschichte der gegenwart* (14 October 2020).

⁶⁴ Hansen, “SPD will ‘Friedensstatue’ erhalten. Trostfrauen-Mahnmal in Berlin.”

⁶⁵ The motion can be accessed on the website of the Mitte district assembly: [Drucksache - 2865/V.](#)

⁶⁶ The motion can be accessed on the website of the Mitte district assembly: [Drucksache - 3029/V.](#)

⁶⁷ Stuart Hall, “The work of representation,” in Stuart Hall, ed., *Representation: Cultural representations and signifying practices* (London; Thousand Oaks; New Delhi: SAGE Publ., 1997) 24-26.

⁶⁸ Son, Embodied Reckonings: “Comfort Women,” Performance, and Transpacific Redress 153.

⁶⁹ Son, Embodied Reckonings: “Comfort Women,” Performance, and Transpacific Redress 157 and 170.

⁷⁰ Son writes that “After hearing of the Japanese government’s request that the Palisades Park memorial be removed, Korean American organizations and citizens in twenty-two other US locations began planning additional memorials”, p. 166. Schumacher makes a similar observation regarding the installation of a “comfort women” memorial in San Francisco: “Michael Wong, a member of the CWJC, felt that official Japanese efforts to suppress commemoration had been one factor contributing to the Coalition’s motivation and momentum.” (Schumacher, “Asia’s global memory wars”, p. 9).

⁷¹ This included organizing protests, talking to politicians and administrative staff, and giving interviews to local and national media. There was no direct interaction between the installers

of the statue and the Japanese embassy. In fact, the strategy of the embassy and of the revisionists seems to be to address every involved party *except* the installers themselves. This could be observed in the case of Munich as well, where the organizers only learned about the revisionist backlash from their sponsors, who received around 300 (mostly fake) e-mails from allegedly German opponents of the statue.

⁷² The panel discussion took place in Munich on 28 July 28 2021 as part of the exhibition “Art 5 – Arts and Democracy.”

⁷³ See also Son, Embodied Reckonings: “Comfort Women,” Performance, and Transpacific Redress 147-75.

⁷⁴ Omas Gegen Rechts, “[Mahnwache an der Friedensstatue](#)” [Vigil at the Statue of Peace] (13 November 2020).

⁷⁵ Berlin.de (the official website of the city of Berlin), “[Berlin international: Migrationsanteil bei 35 Prozent](#)” (35 percent of Berliners with foreign roots) (27 February 2020). ([English translation available here](#)).

⁷⁶ E-Mail communication with the author.

⁷⁷ Oral interview in April 2021.

⁷⁸ Gero Schließ, “[Is Berlin’s Humboldt Forum shying away from colonial history?](#)” *Deutsche Welle* (14 August 2017).

⁷⁹ Fugitive frequency, episode 08, “[The H Word](#)” (August 2021).