

Reflections on the Symposium at Marquette University: “Integrity of Memory: ‘Comfort Women’ in Focus”

Eunah Lee

The following is a series of reflections upon *Integrity of Memory: ‘Comfort Women’ in Focus*, which took place on 1 May 2015 at Marquette University. Readers will find out, first, what motivated me - neither historian nor East Asianist - but someone in philosophy - to take up this project. Secondly, I will report on how the symposium proceeded and was received by the Marquette community. Subsequently, I will talk about the phenomenology of the “apology contention.” Lastly, I will share how I came to incorporate the “comfort woman” issue into my ethics and epistemology course as a case study.

widespread neglect of these women may explain the difficulty of establishing the museum, the lack of support in its preparation, and finally, the invisibility of its current location - a residential area in Seoul. The story behind the WWHRM aptly illustrates the double injury inflicted on these women and the complexity of the issue even in the victims’ own country. This is precisely what kept the women from coming forward for half a century: they feared that they would be regarded as prostitutes whose very existence would besmirch the honor of their family and nation.

1. Prelude

In 2014, the “House of Sharing” for the former “comfort women” in South Korea was reshaped into The War and Women’s Human Rights Museum. The opening of the WWHRM was a big achievement after almost 10 years of preparation, yet the current location tells a lot about past challenges the museum project faced. Initially, it was thought the museum would be located adjacent to a memorial museum dedicated to those who fought for the nation’s independence against Imperial Japan. However, organizers had to find a new location due to the long time indifference and insensibility of their compatriots towards the “comfort women.” Critics said that because these women were used to satisfy the sexual desires of the enemy during colonial occupation, they were not as important as those who sacrificed their lives for national independence and therefore did not deserve the same kind of honoring. This ongoing controversy and, more seriously, the





The WWHRM in Seoul is a renovated formerly private residence. The yellow butterflies put up by the visitors symbolize the lost innocence of victims. (This and other WWHRM photos in this article by Eunah Lee.)

The invisibility of the museum in a largely residential area: Can you find the yellow placard in the shape of an arrow?

The first time I learned about the plight of the “comfort women” was in the late 90s when I was working as a student reporter at college. I thought to myself, “If a woman is raped once, it’s hugely damaging; if twice, perhaps even more so; but what does it mean for a young woman about my age to be raped 50 times a day for years in confinement?” I *observed* groups of feminist students attending the weekly Wednesday Demonstration in front of the Japanese Embassy in Seoul. They were discussing the need and the means to preserve their memories. It was not long after these “comfort women” had come forward publicly in the early 90s. At that time there was a palpable sense of optimism amongst intellectuals and

activists that the victims’ voices would be heard and their demands officially met someday. At the least, their suffering was finally made public after 50 years of oblivion.

As I stood on the balcony of the museum in the summer of 2014, I was proud of the fruits of two decades of activists’ labor. At the same time, however, as I looked at the names of the deceased “comfort women” inscribed on the bricks - each one a tiny monument - I could not wrap my mind around the fact that the majority of the “comfort women” who were determined to fight *then* are *now* gone without getting the “official apology” from the Japanese government they had demanded. (I will elaborate more on this question in section 3.) To make matters worse, the renewed intensity of “comfort woman” denialism in the last decade has turned the clock back in the face of their demands for justice.





On the balcony of the museum: the bricks bear the names and death dates of the deceased “comfort women”
An exhibition room with video viewing

The visit to WWHRM was a sobering experience to me. The names on the bricks stared at me and asked whether I was doing my duty as a scholar and as an educator. I started thinking about how to incorporate this into my teaching.

2. The Symposium at Marquette University

In the winter of 2014, my proposal “Integrity of Memory: ‘Comfort Women’ in Focus” was selected, in a competitive process, as the first workshop series at Marquette University’s Center for Transnational Justice. With additional support from Marquette’s College of Arts and Sciences, what was supposed to be a workshop turned into a full-day symposium accompanied by a week-long exhibition. The aim of the event was to raise public awareness of “comfort women” and the revisionist controversy as it has spread from Japan to the U.S. at Marquette and in the wider Milwaukee community. The special contribution that Marquette’s event made for the larger intellectual community in the U.S. and to the readers of *APJ-Japan Focus* was the participation of Mr. Uemura Takashi as the keynote speaker, which then led to his national tour across the country.



Entrance corridor mural leading to the museum

Since Mr. Uemura’s reflections will also appear in this collection, I will confine my story to how I came to invite him to Marquette and the responses to his speech from the audience. I shall also report on other presentations at the symposium, together with a description of an exhibition, “Comfort Women Wanted,” which accompanied the symposium.

In the initial proposal, I had planned to invite a Japanese speaker who could convey efforts within Japanese civil society to support the “comfort women,” as I believe it is critical to go beyond a parochial, nationalistic approach. Without the efforts of many Japanese activists such as Ms. Matsui Yayori, who organized the 2000 Women’s War Crimes Tribunal on Japan’s Military Sexual Slavery¹ together with Yun Chung-ok (Korea) and Indai Sajor (Philippines), and who subsequently proposed the establishment of the Museum of War and Peace (WAM) in Tokyo, the “comfort woman” issue would have been caught up in bitter rancor fueled by deep-seated nationalist sentiments. Prospects for obtaining a “sincere apology” are dim unless Japanese society can reach a sense of consensus. In my search for a suitable speaker from this perspective, I came up with a

civic group in Japan that launched a coalition among progressive politicians to persuade their own government and a group that has assisted former “comfort women” to bring lawsuits in local Japanese courts.

At that point, Richard Friman, the director of the Marquette University Center for Transnational Justice (MUCTJ), brought my attention to the two articles on Mr. Uemura that had recently appeared in *APJ-Japan Focus* (see [here](#) and [here](#)). When I learned of his plight and the nature of the controversy, it was immediately clear to me that Mr. Uemura was the speaker I had been looking for. In the next few days, I tried to contact Mr. Uemura and, to my surprise, he agreed to accept the invitation to Milwaukee. Within a month or so, I was surrounded by a community of historians and anthropologists who were also supporting his battle. Soon after, Mr. Uemura’s visit to Marquette turned into a series of events across the country hosted by many other institutions, including the University of Chicago, DePaul University, NYU, Princeton and UCLA.

2015 CENTER FOR TRANSNATIONAL JUSTICE WORKSHOP



INTEGRITY OF MEMORY: “COMFORT WOMEN” IN FOCUS



“Comfort Women Wanted” by Chang-Jin Lee

Workshop location: 1442 W. Wisconsin Avenue,
Milwaukee, WI

Parking location: 749 N. 16th Street

This program is open to the public.
Advance registration required for lunch.
To register, contact Eunah Lee by April 24th:
eunah.lee@marquette.edu

The exhibition entitled “Comfort Women Wanted” is
on view
from April 24th until May 1st at AMU 2nd floor lobby.
During the exhibition period,
additional photographs & archival materials are on
display
in the lobby of the Raynor Library.

This workshop is sponsored by the Marquette University Center for Transnational Justice through
its Interdisciplinary Workshop Grant. The “Comfort Women Wanted” exhibition was made
possible by generous support from the Helen Way Klingler College of Arts and Sciences.

Friday, May 1st
Alumni Memorial Union, Rm 163

9:00-9:10 Introduction
Eunah Lee, Marquette University
Conference Organizer

9:10-9:40 – Pre-screening talk
Chang-Jin Lee, Multimedia Artist

9:40-10:40 – Documentary Film
Comfort Women Wanted
Directed by Chang-Jin Lee (2013)

10:40-11:30 – Keynote Address
Uemura Takashi, Journalist and Lecturer
Hokusei Gakuen University (Sapporo, Japan)

Reporting on the “Comfort Women”:
*The Experiences of a Journalist
Now Fighting a Backlash*
With interpretation by Norma Field, Univ. of Chicago

11:30-12:00 – Q&A Discussion

12:00-1:00 – Lunch

1:00-2:00 – Combined Session
Nan Kim, UW-Milwaukee
*War Memory in the Present and
the Threshold of Forgetting*

Michael Wert, Marquette University
*The Fantasy of “Comfort Women” Denial
in Contemporary Japan*

2:00-2:40 – Legal Dimensions
Lisa Laplante, New England Law School
“Comfort Women” & International Reparations Law

2:40-3:05 – Breakout Session
Integrating the “Comfort Women” Issue
into our Teaching

3:05-3:30 – Concluding Discussion

May 1st Event Flyer

On May 1st, the event began with a lecture by a multi-media artist, Chang-Jin Lee, followed by her documentary film, “Comfort Women Wanted” (2013). In her lecture, Lee emphasized that House Resolution 121 found “comfort women” were one of the largest cases of human trafficking in the 20th history. She further emphasized the need to educate the public about their story in the larger context of ever-increasing sexual violence against women both during war and times of peace. In the subsequent film viewing, shot in seven different countries, the audience listened to testimony by the victims and by a Japanese veteran of WWII. Despite their different languages and various pathways to being swept up in the systemic violence, the hour-long film powerfully represented an underlying commonality in their experience, that is, deception or violence involved in their recruitment and the inhumane

conditions of the “comfort stations” where these women were raped. The artistic device of the film was impressive in that the viewers were invited to focus on the victims’ words, which were subtitled in English, as each of them spoke in their own language. An excerpt of the film can be viewed on the [artist’s website](#).

Around 100 audience members attended the hour-long keynote speech by Mr. Uemura, translated by Norma Field. After his presentation, a couple of students came to me to talk about Mr. Uemura’s courage and ask whether he would have written the same article if he had known at the time that it would cost him so much. Despite Mr. Uemura’s personal plight, his analysis of the situation was even humorous, which highlighted the absurdity of the intense attack from the rightwing revisionists. Mr. Uemura illuminated the significance of the current legal case, not only in order to regain his tarnished honor as a journalist, but also to reiterate the authenticity of the victims’ testimonials.



Uemura Takashi speaking at Marquette University, with Norma Field as interpreter. Photo by Tokosumi Yoshifumi

In the combined session of historians in the afternoon, Michael Wert (Marquette

University) gave a presentation titled “*The Fantasy of “Comfort Women” Denial in Contemporary Japan.*” Wert focused on how the revisionist view is getting much more play in the mainstream media in Japan in comparison to the past decade and asked why such irrational views are becoming more prevalent. “Since using logic will not convince comfort women deniers, in much the same way that one cannot logically argue with climate change deniers, or evolution deniers,” Wert argued, “the proper response cannot occur at the level of positivism (presenting more evidence) but should be to ask what conditions exist to create historical denial?” Drawing on the Lacanian notion of “fantasy,” which is not a mere illusion opposed to reality, but a necessary mechanism for living with reality, Wert concluded that “comfort women” denialism serves as such a “fantasy” for contemporary revisionists in Japan.

Subsequently, Nan Kim (UW- Milwaukee)’s presentation titled “War Memory in the Present and the Threshold of Forgetting” spoke about the urgency of “official apology” by the Japanese government. Based on the “apology movement” following the model of Germany toward the Holocaust victims, she analyzed the limitation of the current Japanese government’s attempt to deal with the “comfort woman” issue. The issue is, *if* indeed Japan has made apologies (although this itself is a point of contention), what accounts for their insufficiency or inacceptability to the former “comfort women” and their advocates? She summarized this inadequacy by referring to it as an “apology failure” not a “failure in apology,” quoting Alexis Dudden.² Lastly, she pointed out the fact that only 60 women are still alive out of approximately 230 identified “comfort women,” and urged that this 70th anniversary of the end of WWII was high time for the Japanese government to act before it was too late.

As the last speaker, Lisa Laplante (New

England Law School) addressed the meaning of international legal reparations and the need for a holistic approach in transitional justice projects based on her expertise in South America. She also discussed how the “comfort woman” case may be better approached from a “humanitarian” perspective, rather than as a violation of “human rights,” the latter being a concept conventionally rooted in nation states. Laplante expressed concerns about reparations for “comfort women” once the women had all passed away. In the Q&A session, Norma Field commented precisely on this point, urging that “Even if these women are all gone, we might still want to pursue this issue, beyond the effort to secure reparations for these particular women.” This remark is memorable because it invited the audience to think about the responsibility of the next generation who would remain after all these women have passed, as members of a community with this shared memory.

During the week leading up to the symposium, a companion exhibition was set up at Marquette’s Raynor Library. At the entrance lobby, I arranged four glass cases holding a series of victims’ testimonies, photos, books and documents, including copies of Mr. Uemura’s two articles on “comfort women” from 1991. On the morning of the event, this exhibition was relocated to the symposium venue, Alumni Memorial Union, for participants to view. On the upper level of the same building, Chang-Jin Lee’s artwork, “Comfort Women Wanted,” was also on display. Her series of three faces of former “Comfort Women” in the format of an enlarged newspaper ad in three different languages was inspired by her encounter with a real ad recruiting “comfort women” in a local newspaper during the Asia Pacific War. Next to Lee’s art exhibit, a video set was installed for the viewing of *Breaking the Silence of History*, a documentary film on the Women’s International War Crimes Tribunal on Japan’s Military Sexual Slavery, also known as the

Tokyo Tribunal of 2000.³

Marquette’s event was open to the public because I was again and again struck by the sheer lack of awareness, not to mention the paucity of public discussion of this important historical subject. My students were asked to write a short observation report on the symposium for minor extra credit. Often students’ responses started with a lamentation: “I was surprised at *how much I did not know* about such a gruesome topic” or “I had absolutely no idea what was meant by ‘comfort women’ before attending this event.” A good number of students thanked me for giving them an opportunity to learn about such an important historical issue which most of them had never heard of. What stood out from these reports was the sense that leaving these women’s stories in the dust is to double the injustice done to them. The way these women were dehumanized matters not only to the victims or to women, but it matters to us *all*. All in all, this experience reminded me of the educational importance of this historical tragedy. At the same time, I realized that I have neglected my responsibility to teach my students this part of history, not because of purposeful neglect, but my reluctance to move beyond recognized canons or cross rigid boundaries.

3. Phenomenology of Apology

The need for apology deserves special concern since it is the demand of the victims and at the same time, the epicenter of contention. What does it mean to apologize meaningfully for a crime that occurred 70 years ago and whose perpetrators and victims are now mostly gone? According to UN Special Rapporteur on violence against women, Radhika Coomaraswamy’s 1996 report (available [here](#)), the demands of the former “comfort women” can be summarized into three keywords: recognition, apology and compensation. Among them, apology seems to be the keystone that

connects the recognition of the crime of the Japanese Imperial Military and the possibility of compensating for the damages done to the victims. The need for apology has been shouted at every demonstration on the issue. However, it is precisely the contention of the right-wingers that Japan has already apologized over and over. This claim is half-true and half-false.

The Kono statement of 1993 (unofficial translation [here](#)) admitted to the involvement of the Japanese military in the coercive recruitment of “comfort women” and expressed the Japanese Government’s “apologies and remorse” for the misery and suffering it had caused them. Subsequently, the Asian Women’s Fund (1995-2007) launched under the Murayama government made efforts to heal the scars by sending individual letters with the offer of financial compensation.⁴ After the onslaught of criticism stirred by his denialism, Prime Minister Abe himself expressed “pain” about this tragic past (see [here](#)) and announced in March 2013 that his cabinet would not, after all, be reviewing the Kono Statement. For some years, on 15 August, the anniversary of the end of WWII, conscientious Japanese citizens have gathered to express remorse on what their government had done, perhaps even before they were born. Despite all of these “apologies,” what is yet to be done? Are these “comfort women” taking advantage of their position as “victims” in making these demands? I would argue no. The key to understanding the insufficiency or inadequacy of these “apologies” is the standard of “clean and unequivocal” as the US House Resolution 121 of 2007 stated (text available [here](#)). Prime Minister Abe’s “remorseful” announcement was issued along with an excuse that still there is “no” evidence of forcible recruitment and removal.

The Japanese military, however, organized the system, it transported women and girls throughout the empire, it brought them even to the front lines in battle, it organized

inspections for sexual diseases. The engagement of private brokers, all too often the victims’ compatriots, in the abduction or the recruitment of these women does not alter the fact that they were acting at the behest of the military and, more importantly, the degree to which these women were abused by the Imperial Japanese military. Therefore, it is necessary to assign responsibility squarely to the government and not leave this matter to voluntary civil movements and charitable organizations.

Even at the inception of the Asian Women’s Fund, rightwing politicians found it outrageous to concede any responsibility for this “non-existent” problem. Recently, the Abe government has pressured media outlets not to use the word “sexual slavery” - a term recognized by the international community as applicable to the wartime system. Because of recent revisionism, even the apology made by the Murayama Statement was perceived by the victims as having been rescinded. If Prime Minister Abe fails to even acknowledge the involvement of the Imperial Japanese government, what does he have to atone for? Denying responsibility while simultaneously claiming that apology has been made again and again is nothing other than self-contradiction. This farcical situation, however, has turned into a tragedy as it gains alarming populist appeal.

Apology evokes curious phenomena. Apology is an act of communication that is addressed to the victim by the wrongdoer. It is an attempt by the wrongdoer to acknowledge that what he or she has done was wrong and that the doer regrets the deed, regardless of the fact that it may be impossible to undo the damage or appropriately compensate by apologizing. However, no matter how sincere or insincere, adequate or inadequate, an apology may not be accepted by the victims. Although the acceptance of apology would be more likely to lead to forgiveness or peace-making, the decision remains in the hands of the victims.

In 2001, Kim Dae-Jung, then President of South Korea, delivered an apology for the atrocities committed by the Korean Army during the Vietnam War, but it was refused by the Vietnamese government. Because the official apology was not accepted, does that mean it had no value? The refusal may suggest that the conversation should continue. Whether or not an apology is accepted, it is the moral duty of the wrongdoer to pursue forgiveness for the pain and suffering caused. Even if an apology is accepted, culpability is not erased. If the Korean government were to support a distorted view of the history in question or quietly encourage denialists, it would be violating its duty to its citizens by “equivocating” about its crime against the Vietnamese. If it were to be negligent in educating its citizens on the past tragedy, this, too, would cancel out what the previous apology attempted to heal.

As I revise this piece, major U.S. newspapers cover their front pages with the apology made by Dzhokhar Tsarnaev, Boston Marathon Bomber. He stated in court, “I am sorry for the lives that I’ve taken, for the suffering that I’ve caused you, for the damage that I’ve done” before he was sentenced to death.⁵ Response to this atonement varied. Some victims refused to accept it saying, “What he said does not mean anything to me” or “What he said showed no regret, no remorse” while others embraced it, saying, “To hear him say he’s sorry, that is enough for me” and added “I *hope* his words were genuine and heartfelt.”

Apology differs from *repentance* in that it is not completed on a subjective level but depends on the response of the addressee. Yet, the uncertainty about acceptance or denial does not alleviate the necessity and the importance of seeking forgiveness. At the same time, its acceptance may not terminate either moral culpability or legal responsibility. Nevertheless, if we ever wish to claim that learning from history is possible, there seems to be no better way than to face up to the painful past and try

to make amends.

4. Teaching “Comfort Women” Stories in Philosophy Classes

In my philosophy class, the “comfort woman” issue is a telling example of “the irresolvable epistemic disagreement” or “the need for the ethics of memory” wherein important questions of ethics and epistemology seem to overlap. Enlightenment thinkers such as John Locke believed that humans are equal in their belief-forming capability, thus given similar evidence, everyone will arrive at the same truth. Knowledge was also believed to be an individual matter, depending primarily on deliberation or reflection. However, examples of group-based ignorance constitute the antithesis of such epistemic universalism and individualism.

Recent developments in social epistemology powerfully address the prevalence of ignorance or false beliefs that are often described as “objective truth” or “historical facts.” Such group-based ignorance heightens the importance of epistemic virtues on the level of community that encourage good knowledge practices and discourage the promulgation of false beliefs or the obfuscation of true beliefs. Toward the end of my epistemology class, students are asked to do research on “memories” that have been almost expunged from official history and to discuss what would constitute better knowledge practices. Here the “comfort woman” issue is one of many case studies that I can introduce to the class to discuss the nature of memory and testimonial knowledge.

One of the common revisionist claims is that discrepancies among the testimonials of the “comfort women” and even of Japanese soldiers show that their stories are inaccurate, fabricated and thus slanderous. I point to a more rational approach to explain such variances expounded in Annette Wieviorka’s *The Era of the Witness*. After all, individuals

never experience events in their entirety but only from their own perspective. Due to their subjective condition, such discrepancies should not be held to negate the validity of the testimony; rather, they in fact present something that needs to be accounted for.⁶ A holistic picture of massive systemic violence, whose records are often destroyed or suppressed, can appear only after variations in testimony are communicated and integrated. The need for mediation is, according to Avishai Margalit, what distinguishes *shared* memory from an *aggregate* of individual memories. Fragments of each memory enter into the public realm only through this inevitable “mnemonic labor.”⁷

I believe if the revisionist view prevails in Japan, it will result in a serious “epistemic imbalance” between Japan and other countries - something that may be comparable to the lack of knowledge of King Leopold II’s Belgian colonial history in Congo resulting from the government’s willing the suppression of the memory. In *King Leopold’s Ghost* (1998), Adam Hochschild reminds us of a Belgian Ambassador who was shocked by a “slandorous” account of his country in a local newspaper when he visited West Africa in the 70s. But he, too, realized, slowly and remorsefully, that “millions of people had died, we Belgians knew absolutely nothing about it.” My hope is that Japanese citizens and government officials realize the moral harm of such epistemic imbalance not only to the victims but also to Japan’s future generations.

Such “willful ignorance” is a public achievement. It helps no one because the memory one community prefers to forget is precisely the one that other communities insist on remembering. When I look at revisionist claims, I realize that they do not come from evil intentions, but rather from a benign desire - something we all share to an extent - to preserve the honor of ancestors and country. However, what I do not see is how efforts to

silence those such as Mr. Uemura who wish to talk about the difficult past and make peace with neighboring countries, sometimes even at the risk of their own security, can ever help achieve this goal.

5. Epilogue

Lastly, I would like to add a few words on two extreme responses to “comfort women” from which I wish to distance myself. On one hand, we have the “pseudo” universalism regarding others’ pain. This can be seen in the trite denialist argument, “This is what happens to women in a war.” It waters down the particular importance of the “comfort woman” issue and implies, therefore, that there is no need for special apology or compensation. Such “pseudo” universalists attempt to evade responsibility by claiming “We are all sinners” or, to the contrary, “I, too, am a victim.”

On the other hand, we have another well-trodden nationalist approach which is often fixated on the “singularity” of the event. This can lead to false reification of one’s national identity as one of “victimization,” resulting in blindness to one’s own history as “victimizer.” The collaboration of Korean brokers who were part of the forcible recruitment of these young women tends to be elided, while the deeds of Japanese perpetrators are demonized to fuel hatred. Each historic event - whether the Holocaust, the “comfort women” in the Asia Pacific War, the atrocities during the Vietnam War or the genocide in Rwanda - is unique, if only because the suffering of each person is neither fungible nor comparable. However, emphasizing the uniqueness of the suffering must not come at the cost of losing the universal value of sympathizing with other kinds of suffering.

The story of the “comfort women” must be remembered for its own sake, but it would be even more meaningful if it were to become a vehicle of solidarity and struggle against sexual violence anywhere and anytime.

Eunah Lee studied philosophy at Seoul National University in South Korea and Stony Brook University in New York. Her doctoral dissertation, *Ethics of World Citizens: Kantian Cosmopolitanism*, revisits Kant’s proposal for “eternal peace” and asks what contemporary conditions need to be added and obstacles overcome in order to approach this ideal. She taught philosophy at Marquette University as a visiting assistant professor for the year of 2014-2015.

Please see parts [1](#), [3](#), [4](#), and [5](#) of this series.

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Notes

¹ Watch the documentary at the Women’s Active Museum [site](#).

² Alexis Dudden, *Troubled Apologies Among Japan, Korea, and the United States* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008).

³ I would like to take this opportunity to extend my gratitude to the librarians at Raynor Library as well as the curators at the Haggerty Art Museum who helped with the preparation of these exhibitions.

⁴ Wada Haruki, "[The Comfort Women, the Asian Women’s Fund and the Digital Museum](#)" in the *Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus*, February 2008.

⁵ "[Breaking Silence, Dzhokar Tsarnaev, Apologizes for Boston Marathon Bombing](#)," *New York Times*, 24 June 2015.

⁶ Annette Wieviorka, *The Era of the Witness*, trans. from French, *L’ère du témoin* (Plon, 1998) by Jared Stark (Cornell University Press, 2006).

⁷ Avishai Margalit, *The Ethics of Memory* (Harvard University Press, 2002).