

The Stakes of Historical Revisionism in Trump's America: Teaching about the Comfort Women Atrocity in the Japanese Empire

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This is the first in what we hope will be an ongoing series devoted to teaching sensitive historical and contemporary issues in an era in which 'trigger warnings' and competing nationalisms shape educational experiences throughout the Asia-Pacific and the world. We invite contributions.

The 2016 presidential campaign was hardly the starting point for surging neo-nationalism centered on a normative white male identity. Yet the election of Donald Trump reinforced certain links among racism, sexism, and neo-nationalism in the contemporary United States (and beyond). No less than the general public, universities across the nation have felt the impact of our forty-fifth president's supremacist and exclusionary rhetoric. Many students, faculty, and staff reacted to last November's results with shock and despair, while some felt acutely threatened by attacks on minorities, documented and undocumented immigrants, and other at-risk groups. In response, a number of universities have declared themselves "sanctuary campuses," pledging to shield students and employees of uncertain immigration status. Many others, including the University of Colorado Boulder, where I teach, have issued statements of support for diversity and have mounted various formal and informal discussions of how to meaningfully support impacted members of the community.

Understandably, most administrative and

faculty concern is focused on helping those whose vulnerability has increased in the current political climate. Meanwhile, relatively little thought is given to how we might reach and engage supporters of exclusionary and nationalist policies. Implicitly, many of us appear to hope that the much-vaunted "liberalizing effect" of higher education will transform students who hold such beliefs into more tolerant members of their communities. University policies such as consciously engineering diversity in dormitories, the promotion of study abroad, and "non-Western cultures" course requirements are intended to cultivate open-mindedness without burdening professors with sole responsibility for challenging student biases. Despite the benign objectives behind these measures, much recent social science scholarship suggests that exposure to diversity may actually contradict them by deepening certain forms of intolerance. In other words, greater intimacy does not always fulfill the liberal hope of furthering coexistence—quite the opposite in many cases. What can interested faculty do to encourage greater acceptance and inclusivity—or at least not further entrench chauvinism—on and beyond the university campus?

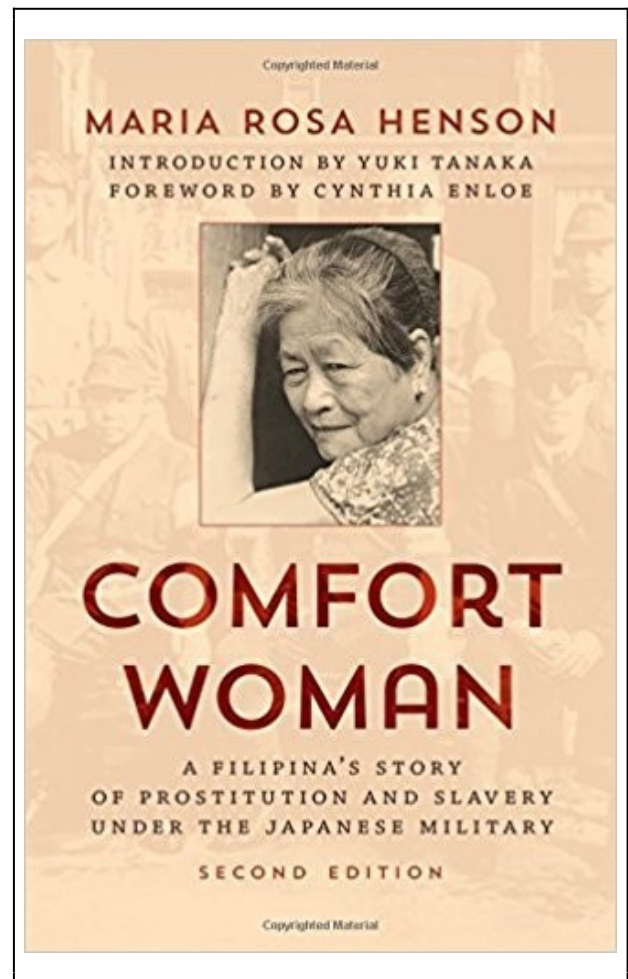
As a professor of modern Japanese history at a progressive-leaning institution in a liberal college town and now blue state, I often have the opportunity to reflect on this question. In particular, teaching about World War II—an unavoidable topic in nearly every conceivable course on my subject (modern Japanese

history)—almost always provokes latent and overt statements of nationalism by a number of students of diverse backgrounds. American-born students, often the grandchildren of veterans, are, for instance, frequently eager to debate and defend the dropping of the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. My courses also enroll increasing numbers of students from mainland China, many of whom have studied some history of the Sino-Japanese war in their home country. The discussion of Japanese imperial atrocities sometimes prompts these students to contribute PRC orthodoxy on matters such as the number of victims of the Nanjing Massacre (sometimes inflated by historians and journalists friendly to China and under-counted by sympathizers of Japanese nationalism). When students bring up the issue of numbers, I like to encourage them to speculate about why different nations and different historians within nations might advance different estimates. Ideally, regardless of their conclusions, my hope is that they will take away a better understanding of the ways in which the “facts” of past atrocities may be manipulated for domestic and international political advantages in the present.

Less common, though not unheard of in my classroom, are expressions of Japanese neo-nationalism. In the past, some students born and educated in Japan have made statements defending or denying crimes against humanity perpetrated by the Japanese military. In spring 2017, for the first time in my experience, a non-Japanese undergraduate student advanced a revisionist argument regarding the euphemistically named “comfort women.” During Japan’s conquest of Asia and the Pacific in the 1930s and early 1940s, the military and government recruited and coerced girls and women, mostly from colonized and occupied areas, to serve as sex slaves for Japanese soldiers. Today, some Japanese neonationalists, including many close to the ruling party led by Abe Shinzō, represent the abuse of these women as a post-1945 fabrication by the

nation’s enemies to vilify the state and emperor. Perhaps because the issue mobilizes not only racism but also sexism, it seems particularly prone to elicit (by comparison with war crimes and crimes against humanity) denial and apologetics.

The student in question was enrolled in an undergraduate course on Japanese militarism, which I was teaching for the fourth time in my career. I divided the twenty students into four groups and tasked each group with presenting a full-length primary source to the class. Each student also wrote an individual essay on the work, to be submitted a week after the presentation. One of the books I assigned was Maria Rosa Henson’s *Comfort Woman* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2017).



In barely one hundred pages, with a notable lack of self-pity, the Filipina narrator recounted the many ways she had been victimized before, during, and after World War II. Henson was the product of the violation of her early teenage mother by an aged local landowner. The assailant never publicly acknowledged his daughter. She grew up in extreme poverty, the threat of starvation omnipresent. At age thirteen she was raped for the first time by a Japanese military doctor, then kidnapped and forced to provide sexual services to as many as twenty Japanese soldiers per day. Sometimes they further dehumanized her by binding her leg to the wall. In one particularly stomach-churning episode, she was raped during a bout of malaria, inducing the miscarriage of a child she did not even know she was carrying.

I included the book on my syllabus because I wanted to emphasize that the study of “Japanese” history should include not only Japanese people, but also impacted non-Japanese people, particularly former colonial subjects. The book was also a rare opportunity, in a course on militarism, to hear a female voice. Looking back, I realize that I should have been more alert to potential problems. I did briefly wonder if I should caution the class about disturbing material in the book. My university is currently reviewing its policy on “trigger warnings,” although most faculty oppose them. In any case, the work’s highly descriptive subtitle—*A Filipina’s Story of Prostitution and Slavery under the Japanese Military*—seemed adequate notice of its contents. Too, the students had already read a number of difficult pieces: *A Record of the Jōkyū Years*, in which a warrior beheads his young son; Endo Shusaku’s *Silence*, with its graphic depictions of the martyrdom of early seventeenth-century Japanese Christians; and eyewitness testimonies of Unit 731, the biological weapons development and human experimentation squad in 1930s Manchukuo. Yet even given the subject matter of the course, *Comfort Woman* was decidedly horrifying.

Although I had encountered comfort women revisionism in past courses, I nonetheless failed to anticipate the possibility this time. Earlier experiences had involved Japan-born students, and this semester, no one in the class was of Japanese heritage. Moreover, although many students were taking the course simply to fulfill a university requirement, I had until then been pleasantly surprised by their rather high level of engagement. The class had responded thoughtfully during a discussion of the Nanjing Massacre, and I believed that we were prepared to grapple with another wartime atrocity.

The night before the presentation, I received the PowerPoint slides prepared by the group to accompany their remarks. A quick scan showed that the students had devoted too much time to summarizing the book, but nothing seemed out of order. I made notes on a few questions I might ask to round out the discussion and gave the matter no further thought.

The presentation on *Comfort Woman* began disarmingly enough, with four of the five speakers covering elements of the author’s victimization. Then the fifth speaker, Mohammad (not his real name), stepped up to the lectern. “Because this is a Japanese history class, I need to give the Japanese side,” he began. I scribbled a note to remind myself to issue a gentle but firm rebuttal of both the assumption of a univocal “Japanese side,” and the premise that we as historians owed partiality to our subject of study.

From that point, however, the presentation took an even more alarming turn, as Mohammad proceeded to recapitulate apologist arguments for sexual slavery. “Most of the women were Japanese prostitutes,” he began. “They were given three meals a day and tea whenever they wanted, even in the middle of the night. The ones who served officers were raped only once or twice a day. When they got sick, they got a break and doctors took care of

them.”

Mohammad was a senior math major. He had joined the course after the enrollment deadline with special permission, and I had regretted making the exception ever since. I braced myself each time I saw his hand in the air. Over the years I had grown accustomed to exoticizing statements about Japanese valor, diligence, and bloodthirstiness, as well as more troubling rhetoric about the Japanese “species.” “Before you turn in a paper, replace ‘Japan’ with ‘United States’ and ‘Japanese’ with ‘American,’ and check that you’re still comfortable with what you’re saying,” I routinely advised. But Mohammad tended to take essentialism a step further than most students. When we covered the significance of the Opium War to Japan, he speculated that “bushido prevented the Japanese from becoming addicts like the Chinese.” During a lecture on Japan’s colonization of the South Sea Islands, he asked if the indigenous population was inferior because they were smaller in stature than the Japanese. For the most part, I strained to tactfully redirect the discussion. For example, I used the above provocation to discuss the collection and manipulation of physical anthropological data to support the racial hierarchy of Japanese imperialism, which followed Euro-American models in equating height with superiority. Inwardly cringing, I had nonetheless tried to avoid embarrassing Mohammad. I was acutely aware that he was Pakistani, or of Pakistani descent, in a class in which Caucasian students tended to dominate discussions. Did I make allowances to ensure that he felt welcome in the classroom?

There was also the matter of my white skin. In my department I have two colleagues in Japanese history, one born and educated in Korea, the other Japanese-American, both women. Neither had experienced this kind of revisionism in the classroom. Did students think I might be more receptive to it because I was visibly non-Asian?

While I deliberated if and how to intervene, Mohammad’s fellow presenters jumped in to challenge him by pointing out ways in which he had misconstrued the text. One female speaker, who was generally quiet in class, observed that the author of *Comfort Woman* had not “gotten a break” during her illness, but was raped by her doctor. Another student gave page references where the testimony contradicted Mohammad’s claim that the women were given enough to eat. I might have begun from a wider premise, denouncing the exploitation of women regardless of national origin, sexual history, or “working” conditions. Yet it was a start, and I could not have been more proud of the students for using their knowledge of the reading to stand up to propaganda.

At the end of the period, I announced that we would resume discussion of the comfort women atrocity in our next meeting. Mohammad left quickly, while the other four members of the group surrounded me. “We had no idea what he was going to say,” one began. “That’s not what we think at all. We didn’t want to contradict him in front of the whole class.” I was honest with them. “I understand,” I reassured them. “I wasn’t expecting this either. I’m really proud of you all for challenging what he said. I’ll address this with the class on Wednesday.”

The incident preoccupied me for the rest of the day. That night, I woke up with a horrifying thought: what if a sexual assault survivor had been sitting in that classroom? (The possibility was not farfetched—the 2015 Association of American Universities Campus Survey on Sexual Assault reported that more than twenty percent of female and five percent of male students experience nonconsensual sexual contact during their time in college.) Wasn’t Mohammad’s implication—that feeding a woman sanctioned her violation—simply a justification of contemporary date rape culture?

I deliberated summoning Mohammad to my office to discuss his presentation. I thought of

many reasons not to do it. As a woman, was I really obligated to engage with a student who espoused the right of men to commit sexual assault? Our campus's concealed carry policy also made me uneasy about a private chat. In 2012, the Colorado Supreme Court upheld the right of licensed gun owners to bring firearms onto campus. Only a few months earlier, a few buildings had been placed on lockdown as police responded to an armed intruder. He was shot dead in the student center. The threat of violence from any disgruntled individual was small, but real.

I weighed my discomfort against the importance of doing what I saw as the essential task of a historian: teaching students how to evaluate the credibility of evidence and draw nuanced, fact-based conclusions. In rebutting Mohammad's contentions, the presenters had already shown the ability to sift truth from falsehood, but I wanted to cultivate their ability to think beyond the text to its implications. In this age of "fake news," it is more important than ever that students come to recognize the politicized agendas that may underlie even seemingly neutral statements. The hero teacher in my mind would welcome the opportunity to fulfill this educational mission. But in the end, my real self backed down. Whereas I was disturbed by Mohammad's words, I (in hindsight, too quickly) decided that he was a lost cause and shifted my focus to the other students. How could I use the revisionism they had heard to create a teachable moment about "truth" in history and the dangers of neo-nationalism?

I discussed Mohammad with my TA, who noted that he had used manga sources in a previous paper and suggested that perhaps he was responding to right-wing cartoon interpretations of the atrocity. Contemporary pop culture draws many American students to the study of Asia—in fact, I probably owe my employment to their interest in "cool Japan." Nonetheless, the world of manga includes some

stridently right-wing examples, which sometimes convey false impressions that are difficult to dispel. I thought that I might begin to counter some of these misconceptions, as well as more general confusion regarding trustworthy sources, by exploring the distinction between history and propaganda through the case of the comfort women.

In my next lecture, I began by talking about the vast industry devoted to cherry-picking and decontextualizing "facts" minimizing Japanese wartime atrocities. To avoid publicly singling out Mohammad and to illustrate the issue in terms familiar to American students, I used the foil of slavery in the United States. (I assumed that the class would agree that slavery was wrong, though in this day and age, perhaps I was inviting further trouble.) I asked: how would we feel about literature that defended slavery on the grounds that most of its victims were African-American? That the slaves were fed and housed? Provided with medical care? Only whipped when they "misbehaved"? Were sometimes allowed to keep their children or buy their freedom? As I spoke, I couldn't bring myself to make eye contact with Mohammad, but felt a warm understanding from the other students, some of whom nodded vigorously.

To bring discussion back to the comfort women, I related an experience of my own. In early 2015, I joined almost twenty scholars at universities around the nation in condemning the Japanese government's attempts to pressure Japanese scholars who oppose neonationalism and to censor the depictions of comfort women in an American textbook. We declared,

As historians and members of the American Historical Association, we express our dismay at recent attempts by the Japanese government to suppress statements in history textbooks both in Japan and elsewhere about

the euphemistically named "comfort women"...We support the publisher and agree with author Herbert Ziegler that no government should have the right to censor history. We stand with the many historians in Japan and elsewhere who have worked to bring to light the facts about this and other atrocities of World War II.

We practice and produce history to learn from the past. We therefore oppose the efforts of states or special interests to pressure publishers or historians to alter the results of their research for political purposes.

I passed around the copies of the textbook excerpt and the statement, which was published in part or full in the *New York Times*, the *Japan Times*, the *Korea Times*, the member newsletter of the American Historical Association, and other venues. Remembering Mohammad's invocation of the "Japanese side," I called attention to the reference to "historians in Japan." National identity as Japanese, I emphasized, did not predetermine a particular perspective vis-à-vis the Japanese past. Many Japanese citizens have been active in bringing attention to and seeking justice for the comfort women, indeed, the pioneering research that documented the plight of the comfort women was carried out by Japanese historians and journalists. From the other end of the spectrum, I showed the class some pamphlets by Japanese neonationalist organizations and individuals seeking to downplay or deny Japanese atrocities in World War II. Several students drew comparisons to "fake news," "alternative facts," and the "information war." Given the role of propaganda in shaping political discourse and outcomes in the contemporary United States, I was pleased to

hear them apply our lesson to the issue of critical media consumption in their own lives.

To drive home the need to remain alert towards latent agendas, and the ubiquity of those agendas, I acknowledged the manipulation of the comfort women by governments and interests beyond Japan. Rather than seeking genuine justice for survivors, many voices in former imperial territories hoped to capitalize on their suffering for political advantage. I gave each student a short selection about Japan's wartime conduct drawn from a textbook published after the year 2000 in Japan, South Korea, the People's Republic of China, Taiwan, or the United States. (I took the passages from Gi-Wook Shin and Daniel Sneider's *History Textbooks and the Wars in Asia: Divided Memories* (Routledge, 2011).) Students generally assume that textbooks are objective and trustworthy sources. However, I used this exercise to show that, like all sources, they demanded thoughtful evaluation, not least because any author may seek to manipulate facts for political purposes. I had the students try to determine the country in which each selection had been published. The exercise required them to distinguish the implications of language choices. Some Chinese excerpts described Japanese crimes in emotional terms as "monstrous," "inhuman," and "the heights of cruelty." More obviously biased Japanese selections obfuscated the declaration of war, referring vaguely to "expanded operations," and praised the emperor's "sacred decision" to surrender. Other national markers pertained to content: American textbooks, for instance, often offered elaborate justifications of the decision to drop the atomic bombs on Japan. Although the students didn't locate every excerpt correctly, I felt that the process of reflection had alerted them to the importance of critical analysis.

After the class, several students told me how much they had learned that day. Mohammad was not among them, and with the *Comfort*

Woman paper deadline looming, I passed an uneasy weekend. On Monday night, when I began grading, I deliberately marked the other essays first. Then, with trepidation, I opened Mohammad's document. I noted immediately that he had not followed the assignment guidelines. My prompt asked students to explore a particular theme within the book (a list of suggestions was provided) and to contextualize that theme within the larger history of militarism in Japan. Instead, Mohammad reiterated the need to "take the Japanese side." A representative paragraph (reproduced verbatim) read,

Also when the comfort women were under their care, they were not only given clothing for the day, along with their own private rooms and beds, which sometimes their private guards themselves would "help to clean up" (Henson, page 41). They were also given as much food as the soldiers could spare, since "[t]he garrison did not have much food." (Henson, page 41). "Thrice a day, a cup of rice, salty black beans and thin pieces of preserved radish. On rare, occasions eggs, fried chicken, or a block of brown sugar. They were, also given tea whenever asked." (Henson, page 41). When the officers could provide for them, they were also given fruits and free roam of the premises. Every conduct was measured and to the strictest schedule. Doctors were regularly sent to check on the women (Henson, page 41). This was done so as to prevent the spread of venereal disease. If the women were sick, they did not have to provide service for the day, sometimes the week. While camping at these Japanese sites,

along with the Japanese laws in place, the women as well as the locals began to learn through and about the Japanese.

Thinking of Henson's lifetime of suffering and courage in sharing her story, I could not imagine the mind of a student who was not only totally unable to feel empathy for her experience, but was even able to twist her words into a defense of sexual slavery.

I consulted my department chair, a scholar of Native American history and no stranger to offensive student comments. From my service on grade review committees and the like, I had come to respect her fairness and equanimity. I proposed giving the paper a zero, but after looking at my assignment guidelines and rubric, she suggested a grade of 50 percent. She pointed out that Mohammad had turned in the assignment on time and that it conformed to length and citation guidelines. Whereas an F was appropriate in light of his selective and distorted use of evidence, zero credit was not. She also suggested that I mark up the paper heavily to teach Mohammad the difference between history and propaganda. By the time I had finished, comment bubbles occupied the entire right margin.

I suspected that, upon seeing his grade, Mohammad would want to discuss it. Sure enough, the next time I appeared for office hours, he was waiting in the hallway. We were going to talk after all.

I greeted him neutrally. When students come to see me, I usually encourage them to chat a bit—about their backgrounds, experience at the university, career plans, impressions of the course—but in this case, we dispensed with such preliminaries. "I failed the paper," Mohammad said. "Why is that?" I reiterated the gist of my written comments: the essay was off-topic, lacked a thesis statement, and cherry-picked quotes to support a predetermined

hypothesis rather than assessing the total body of evidence.

“But aside from talking about her rapes, Maria [the *Comfort Woman* narrator] doesn’t say anything really bad about the Japanese!”

I raged inwardly at this casual dismissal of sexual assault, but Mohammad did have a point. The narrator’s tone was agonized, not angry. I had also attributed her remarkably measured stance to a victim mentality, which might have precluded recognizing just how terribly she had been abused. This perspective was also evident in other ways; for example, in her fear that coming forward as a survivor would shame her family. Colleagues subsequently pointed out to me that survivors of terrible atrocities (including but not limited to sexual slavery) often find it psychologically easier to discuss their experiences in less emotional terms. In any case, Henson’s life story was, perhaps, all the more powerful for its lack of embellishment.

“That’s an interesting observation. If you had thought about why Maria doesn’t express much hate towards her abusers, that could have been a better way to approach the paper.”

Having won this acknowledgement, Mohammad relaxed in his seat. Later, I remembered that brief moment as a lost opportunity to open a conversation about victimhood and the fallacies of defending sexual slavery through attempts to minimize its horrors. But before I could gather my thoughts, Mohammad asked how he could reclaim points lost on his essay. One of the most memorable teaching experiences of my career to date swiftly descended into a mere grade dispute. I declined to offer Mohammad a second chance, but pointed out that he could still pass the class, pending a strong performance on the final exam. He returned a few days later to pressure me again for a make-up assignment, threatening to petition the department chair to override my refusal. I must admit I took real

pleasure in telling him, “She’s read your paper and is expecting you.”

My chair called a few days later to inform me that Mohammad had indeed come to her office seeking an accommodation. She asked if I might reconsider allowing him to make up some of the points he had lost on the paper, in light of the fact that he was an international student and perhaps unfamiliar with “American culture.” I objected: especially in this moment of Islamophobia, did we really want to suggest that Mohammad’s Pakistani heritage in some way explained or excused his views? However he had come to his position, I wasn’t comfortable implicating his background. Nor did I wish to blame a “culture gap,” as though American universities set a standard of tolerance unmatched by the rest of the world.

Following our conversation, my chair wrote to Mohammad to uphold the grade and initiated the next step in the process: convening an ad hoc committee of three colleagues to review the decision. The committee chair invited Mohammad to his office to give him a chance to defend his paper. He reported,

I asked [Mohammad] what the thesis of the book was. His response, verbatim: ‘The author has no view whatsoever, no emotion whatsoever, and no opinion on the matter (of the subject of the book).’ I pressed him on this (I haven’t read the book, but I find this hard to believe), but he stood by this statement. When I asked why he thought that a woman who had suffered in this way would choose to write a book of this kind, he said ‘Because some organization asked her to.’ Oddly, he noted that he was laughing when he wrote it [his paper].

[Mohammad] feels that he

deserves a passing grade because he ‘did the work’ and believes that an F in the course was only merited if one did not do the work. When I informed him, however, that he could earn an F for a paper deemed ‘unacceptable’ as college-level work, he felt that this particular paper was unacceptable only with respect to its viewpoint (with no mention of the many formal problems in the paper, which is manifestly poorly written) and that he should be allowed to express his viewpoint.

The lack of empathy here is startling, but that is beside the point...The paper...does not meet the minimum standards that we expect of a college-level paper in terms of its argument and language.

The fact that the paper was a “disorganized mess,” in the words of the committee’s verdict to Mohammad, offered an unimpeachable justification for a failing grade. I wondered how we would have handled the situation if the paper had been well written.

The incident ended there. Mohammad reacted to the decision with equanimity. His response to the committee chair read, in its entirety, “That’s what I expected. Thank you for your time though. Hope you have a good summer!” By then, he had already received his final grade in the course: a D. Perhaps he only cared about passing.

Despite my eight years of teaching experience and past encounters with neo-nationalism in the classroom, I was uncertain how to respond to Mohammad. One colleague who listened sympathetically to my ordeal was puzzled by my shock. “Don’t we hear this garbage all the time in the media?” she pointed out. On the

other hand, another faculty member commented: it is not wrong to be horrified by apologism. Would a better professor, a better person, react less viscerally to hearing a justification of rape? Expect the worst whenever she introduced a controversial topic? Both during the presentation and conversation in my office, I found myself simply stunned into silence at moments when I might have seized the initiative to confront Mohammad with his own biases. In the end, he seemed not to learn much from the book, the assignment, or the course. In fact, it is likely that our encounter further solidified his stance on misogyny and support for right-wing Japanese nationalism. In its own way, his position followed a coherent logic that flowed from what he read. Helping him to rethink his position required not simply tackling ignorance but also countering “evidence” with context, discernment, and empathy. The task was more than I could accomplish during our short time together.

On the other hand, I felt somewhat validated by anonymous student evaluations of the course, which averaged to one of the highest scores of my teaching career. I did not attribute the favorable response to my handling of Mohammad’s remarks: I had sensed throughout the semester that the group was overall better prepared and more engaged than usual. But I did believe that if the students had disapproved of how I had dealt with the incident, their discomfort would have been reflected in lower scores.

Though I would not thank Mohammad for his outspokenness, he nonetheless gave his fellow students a memorable opportunity to respectfully yet resoundingly repudiate a particularly brutal form of colonialism, as well as the racism and sexism that feature so prominently in today’s world. Since our discussion of *Comfort Woman*, our president has moved to exclude certain individuals from the United States based solely on their national background, amnestied a police officer

convicted of racial profiling, and denounced African-American football players for peacefully protesting the contemporary state of race relations. He has made excuses for a white supremacist/neo-Nazi march in Charlottesville that culminated in the murder of a young counter-protestor. He has moved to end Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA), President Obama's extension of legal status to

certain immigrants who entered the U.S. without authorization prior to age 16. The list of assaults on inclusivity and freedom goes on. In this moment, it is more important than ever that our students do not simply accept diversity as a passive condition, but that they understand the stakes of conscious, articulate, and active commitment to developing a pluralist and open-minded society. That is the lesson I hope they take away from our course.

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