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## **Women of Bronze: Memorialization as an alternative reparation for comfort women survivors**

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### **Introduction**

Amidst the lush greenery of Glendale's vibrant Central Park sits a bronze girl in traditional Korean dress, waiting beside an empty chair. Though visitors leave flowers in the chair beside her, or wrap her in scarves during the winter months, her expression is solemn, as if reminiscing a painful past.

This is just one example of the memorials, monuments, and statues dedicated to comfort women within the last few years. This term *comfort women* refers to the young women and girls—as many as 200,000 and as young as fourteen—who were forced into sexual slavery for the Imperial Japanese Army during World War II (Soh 2008). While they were largely ignored following the war, the survivors have gained recognition within the past twenty years, due to the growing strength of women's and human rights movements. The construction of these memorials therefore mark a revival of interest in their stories and suffering, although they have also been met with numerous obstacles. Not a single comfort women memorial has been erected without great efforts by individuals, organizations, and even the Japanese government to remove them. More than fifty years have passed since the end of World War II, yet the recognition of comfort women is still seen by some Japanese nationals as an attack on their country's history, government, and honor. These memorials have become a site where opposing political and historical narratives can confront—or deny—wartime atrocities.

The issue of comfort women encompasses more than just Korean and Japanese postcolonial relations—it is an example of the long-standing structural violence and human

rights abuses toward colonized women (Soh 2008). To this day, there has yet to be an official apology or form of compensation that the survivors deem acceptable and sincere.

Yet in December 2015, the Korean and Japanese governments, with US prodding, reached a “final” and “irreversible” agreement on the issue, promising 1 billion yen (\$8.3 million) worth of government funds to support comfort women medical and welfare programs, as well as an apology by Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe (Jun, Martin 2015). In return, South Korea has promised to relocate its comfort women statue—which sits outside the Japanese embassy in Seoul—to a more remote area (Jun, Martin 2015).

This decision, however, was largely rejected by the remaining survivors and their supporters, as it was made without their consent or approval. What both governments have overlooked in this settlement is that the survivors seek more than monetary reparations for the abuse and trauma they experienced during the war—they seek acknowledgement of their past. While monetary compensation is a common and legitimate form of reparation, the utilization of public memory may be more meaningful to survivors and their descendants than any amount of money. I examine these comfort women memorials, and the legitimacy and recognition they offer survivors, and its broader implications toward reconciling with human rights abuses of the past.

### **Historical Overview: The origins of comfort women**

The first comfort station was established in 1932, during a failed military expedition in Shanghai, which later served as the model for comfort stations used throughout the war.

These stations relied on the recruitment and abduction of women from Japanese colonies, with the majority of the women coming from Korea<sup>1</sup> (Howard 1995:31). While some women

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<sup>1</sup> While there were some Japanese comfort women, most of the Japanese women involved were prostitutes assigned to safer bases and higher ranking officers (Hicks 1994:48).

were sold by their parents or abducted through physical force, most were recruited by civilians working in conjunction with the military; they were recruited as factory workers or laborers abroad, and only realized the true nature of their work upon arrival (Yoshimi 2000:107). The frequent targets of this recruitment tactic were the impoverished and less educated lower-class women from rural areas (Howard 1995). By recruiting women from the lower classes, it “minimize[d] public criticism and any potential condemnation of their forceful and deceptive ways”, conveying both ethnic and class-based discrimination (18). Yuki Tanaka (2002) argues that this system “was established in direct relation to the Japanese policy of obliterating the colonial races”, while conveying the message that women from the territories are a form of commodity (15).

While many militaries in various countries have taken part in mass rape in the past, the comfort women system is unique for several reasons. Keith Howard (1995) deems it unprecedented for “the number of women involved, the international scope of the operation, the scale of the military-organized system required for procuring women, [and] the length of time over which the system operated” (167). Yet the soldiers “undoubtedly viewed their [going to comfort stations] as honorable” (Howard 1995:3). Comfort stations were thought to prevent the spread of venereal diseases, and reduce the occurrences of civilian rapes, which were not only shameful for the military, but contributed to local uprisings (Tanaka 2002:14). Yet, by taking part in this system, “they were completely unaware that their moral standards showed a profound lack of humanitarian concern for others and that the system they had set up would victimize others irrevocably” (Howard 1995:3).

For several years, the women were confined to small rooms under strict surveillance, and raped numerous times a day. Nearing the end of the war, facing Japan’s surrender, the women

were forced to take their own lives alongside the soldiers, while others were simply abandoned, left to die in the stations (Howard 1995). Those who survived were left with severe chronic health problems, suffered from venereal diseases and infertility, as well as psychological trauma and the difficult task of reintegrating into post-war society (Howard 1995:24).

For many decades, the comfort women survivors lived in silence. Traditional, underlying beliefs regarding women's sexual purity prevented them from coming forward, out of fear of further stigmatization and shame for their families. And with much of the documentation destroyed during the war, the women faced a long, uphill battle for recognition. Although the existence of comfort women was common knowledge for many Koreans, it was an embarrassing admittance for the South Korean government—a form of emasculation in their inability to protect their women. And with an already fraught post-colonial relationship, both the South Korean and Japanese governments chose to ignore this issue. It was not until feminist groups advocating for the comfort women challenged this silence, and “the traditional condemnation of prostitution” that underlay both societies (Hicks 1998:173). In 1991, three former comfort women from South Korea sued the Tokyo District Court for their abduction and coercion into the comfort women system, making history as the first women during the fifty years since the war's end to publicly admit to this past (Hicks 1994:214).

### **Apologies and Denial: *What is an apology?***

Though various Japanese officials have recognized and apologized for the comfort women system since the first survivors came forward, they have yet to release an official apology and a developed plan towards reconciliation that has the survivors' support. This includes the creation of the Asian Women's Fund in the 1990s, which was established to pay 480 million yen (or \$4 million) worth of reparations towards individuals, as well as medical and

support programs dedicated to the surviving comfort women (Yoshimi 1995:24). The entirety of these funds, however, was collected through private donations, thereby “den[ying] any legal responsibility vis-à-vis former comfort women and refus[ing] to compensate them directly” (Yoshimi 1995:24). Further, the letter of apology from the Prime Minister was only given to those who accept the compensation, rather than to all known comfort women (Yoshimi 1995). There is also no compensation given to the families of the deceased. For these reasons, few comfort women have considered these reparations acceptable.

However, some Japanese citizens question if reparations are necessary, arguing that they should not be held responsible for the acts their country had committed in the past. Japanese right-wing attitudes regarding comfort women range from outright denial, to excusing the military’s actions as a reality of war (Hicks 1997:214). Some even argue that the women were already compensated at the time, and “that it was much too late to revive such an outdated issue” (Hicks 1997:214).

According to a 2001 survey of 423 college students in Japan, the majority agreed that “‘Japan’s war in Asia’ and ‘Japan’s Pacific War/World War II’” were shameful events in Japanese history (Kim 2014:86-7). However, they also agreed that today’s generation was not responsible for these wartime atrocities, including the compensation of comfort women, as “the shameful past had nothing to do with them because it happened before their birth and they should not be held accountable for the sins of their ancestors” (Kim 2014:87).

While this argument may hold in regards to monetary compensation, it does not justify the desire to remove or relocate the comfort women memorials in South Korea or the US. In 2013, I had the opportunity to visit the home of the first comfort women memorial ever constructed, in Palisades Park, New Jersey. Installed in 2010, one could hardly call it a

monument; an unassuming boulder no more than three feet tall, it blends easily into the lawn of the public library where it stands. Yet it was the cause of controversy in 2012, two years after it was built, when Japanese delegates visited the town to lobby for its removal.

According to one of the memorial's creators, the memorial did not receive international attention<sup>2</sup> until the comfort women statue in Seoul was created. He tells me, "This is the first [comfort women memorial] in the world, and as far as we know, the first one on public property...What had happened was after the Seoul one...there were articles saying, 'Seoul's monument wasn't the first one, there's one in Palisades Park.'"

Its design is simple, with an engraved plaque on a boulder depicting a soldier and a crouching woman. The inscription intentionally makes no reference to Korea, in an effort to represent all comfort women, and to direct the conversation towards human rights and women's rights rather than Korean and Japanese relations.<sup>3</sup> Another memorial collaborator explains to me, "It's not an anti-Japanese campaign. We're not attacking Japanese, we're only pro-rights, we're only pro-comfort women." The creators of the memorial, many who are not ethnically Korean themselves, argue that it serves to acknowledge crimes against humanity, an issue of recognition, of human and women's rights over nationalism.

This use of memorials marks a shift in "[t]he usual historiographical practice of keeping records", from a national perspective to "individual- and group-based recollections" (Kim 2014:85). According to Mikyoung Kim (2014), "Memory is about lived and felt experiences: Bottom-up memories [are beginning] to replace top-down historiography" (85). In this case,

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<sup>2</sup> I would like to add that the memorial *did* have local opposition when it was first unveiled, mainly due to what some community members perceived as mature content.

<sup>3</sup> The inscription says, "In memory of the more than 200,000 women and girls who were abducted by the armed forces of the government of Imperial Japan. 1930's-1945. Known as "comfort women," they endured human rights violations that no peoples should leave unrecognized. Let us never forget the horrors of crimes against humanity."

however, the memorials are also a site of conflicting narratives. While Japanese lobbyists failed to convince the town to remove the Palisades Park memorial, the statue in Glendale I mentioned earlier was also threatened for removal by a resident of Japanese descent, although the court later upheld the city's right to keep the statue last year (Mikailian 2016).

This opposition to the comfort women memorials shows the lack of self-reflexivity and acknowledgement of past crimes needed for reconciliation. Further attempts at erasure include textbook revisions in Japan, which Norma Field (1997) argues were aimed to “free Japanese children from a ‘dark’ education about their nation’s past and, specifically, to prevent mention of the military comfort women episode in history textbooks” (39). This directly conflicts with the goals of the apologies and reparations, for which “the acknowledgement of the *truth* of their suffering is [a] key element” (29).

Here I am reminded of a similar movement, the Japanese American redress movement of the 1970s, in which community leaders protested for government compensation for the internment of thousands of American citizens during World War II. In 1978, local Japanese Americans in Seattle held a “Day of Remembrance” to publicly commemorate and reenact the evacuation into internment camps. Participants gathered at a former temporary internment camp, wearing replicas of the internees’ numbered name tags, and participated in a Fun Run of 9,066 steps, representing Executive Order 9066 (which had authorized internment) (Takezawa 1995:42). According to Yasuko Takezawa (1995), “The reenactment proved profoundly effective. For the old it brought back long-repressed memories of shame and injustice [while] the young were made to realize just what their parents and grandparents had experienced” (44). This reenactment also sparked other communities in the US to hold similar events as well.



The Day of Remembrance was crucial in gaining official recognition and compensation for former internees. In 1988, the federal government offered an official apology for Japanese American internment, as well as monetary reparations for internees and their descendants (Takezawa 1995:56). But for those who received the funds, it was not the monetary compensation which constituted the apology, but the open acknowledgement of their past (Takezawa 2008). According to Takezawa (1995), “In the early 1970s, redress and even camp experiences were taboo subjects. [But] today, to say ‘Let’s just forget about camp’ has become unacceptable” (59). The efforts made to publicly commemorate internment has served to educate the public, as well as to reconcile with a once shameful past.

I mention internment for its relevance to the movement for comfort women recognition. Memorials and public acts of commemoration challenge the version of the past which is “recollected by the powerful”, and instead allow disenfranchised groups control over their own history (Kim 2014:93). I argue that the first steps toward reconciliation is official recognition. This includes revisions in Japanese textbooks to recognize comfort women, “and to critically examine the historical processes...[which] led to the formation of the comfort women system” in the first place (Tanaka 2002:182).

## **Conclusion**

With the 2015 agreement to remove the comfort women statue in Seoul in exchange for monetary reparations, survivors and activists are left wondering if these reparations reflect honest and sincere remorse for the past. Because memorials reflect a physical effort to create a public narrative, the proposed relocation of the statue in Seoul undermines “the relationship between public memory and national responsibility” (Kim 2014:85).

The memorials, statues, and monuments dedicated to comfort women represent the survivors' struggle for retroactive justice, through public recognition unconfined to national borders. While the Japanese government has previously argued for their removal, it needs to fully acknowledge its past crimes by allowing the comfort women memorial in Seoul, and elsewhere, to remain. In a further step towards reconciliation, perhaps they may even consider creating their own comfort women memorial on Japanese soil.

The comfort women memorials in the US and in South Korea offer insight regarding how “memories and human rights debates shape the reconciliation process between two former adversaries—Korea and Japan” (Kim 2014:85). Although they are currently a site of conflicting narratives and interests, their presence contributes to a greater understanding of public memory's role in the discourse of human rights and atonement. And through public recognition of these past crimes and the commemoration of its survivors, Japan can take the first step towards contributing meaningful and sincere compensation for the former comfort women.

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