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## Responding to “Comfort Woman” Denial at Central Washington University

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## Responding to “Comfort Woman” Denial at Central Washington University セントラル・ワシントン大学で「慰安婦」否定論に応える

Mark Auslander, Chong Eun Ahn

This article is the third of a three-part symposium. See parts [one](#) and [two](#).

In early April 2015, we learned that a Japanese language instructor at the university where we teach had invited online broadcaster Taniyama Yujiro to campus to screen his film *Scottsboro Girls*, a quite amateurish three-hour video devoted to the proposition that “comfort women” were not sexual slaves but instead were well-paid, self-interested prostitutes, who serviced the Japanese military of their own free will. Looking at the [YouTube preview](#), we were struck by how the film repeated the standard revisionist talking points, with which we have become all too familiar over the past several years, along with various ethnic slurs against Koreans and others<sup>1</sup>. Announcing the screening, [Taniyama published on his website a letter of invitation by the Japanese language lecturer and his own response](#).

This correspondence refers to the possibility that Korean (or Korea-associated) faculty might interfere with the screening. This is clearly a thinly veiled attack on our colleague, the political scientist Dr. Bang-Soon Yoon, who has published extensively on wartime sexual slavery and “comfort women,” and who in 2006 brought surviving comfort woman Yong-soo Lee to speak on campus. Taniyama praises the lecturer, Mariko Okada-Collins, for her valor in standing up against Chinese and Korean “propaganda.” He also makes disparaging references to the “rotund” statues of comfort women erected by Korean Americans in the United States.

We were appalled by the film’s title and its implicit claim that the African American young men falsely accused of rape were entirely equivalent to the case of Imperial Japanese military personnel accused of mass sexual assault. The film previews were so off-putting it seemed hard to imagine that anyone would take them seriously. Taniyama, who also ran in 2011 for Tokyo Governor (polling .02 per cent of the vote), has manifestly not engaged seriously with the scholarly literatures. Some of our colleagues urged us to ignore the whole thing, noting that any protest would call vastly more attention to this “shoddy piece of propaganda” than it deserved.

The film screenings were scheduled for April 28 and 29, precisely during Japanese Prime Minister Abe Shinzo’s visit to the United States, on the dates of his White House state dinner and his address to the Joint Meeting of Congress. The latter event was, as many have noted, on the 114th birthday of the Showa Emperor (Hirohito), a date with particular resonance for the Japanese nationalist right. To us, it seemed that the film screening was part and parcel of a larger effort by the Japanese right, backed to a significant extent by the Japanese Foreign Ministry, to stifle research and publishing on the “comfort woman” sexual slavery system and the Imperial Japanese wartime atrocities. Readers of *The Asia-Pacific Journal* will be familiar with the [public letter](#) by US historians, primarily of Japan, decrying this systematic pressure on critical scholarship. (We should note that Ms. Okada-Collins insists to us that she did not know the Emperor’s birthday

date or the dates of Abe's visit, and the scheduling was simply coincidental.)

A little background on the authors. Chong Eun Ahn is a historian specializing in the historical production of ethnic identification process among Koreans in northeast China. She has strong interests in comparative colonialism, nationalism, and ethnic identification and has been active in critical East Asia circles. Mark Auslander, an anthropologist who works on the politics of historical memory in Africa and the African Diaspora, is not an East Asianist but is "married into" Japan Studies through his wife Ellen Schattschneider; he's lived in Japan and through Ellen has many close colleagues and friends in East Asian studies. Both of us felt a deep sense of responsibility to our broader professional network, especially as more and more of our colleagues in the United States and East Asia wrote to us, asking how in the world our university could be sponsoring (or allowing the screening of) this deeply offensive film. Many noted that as the battlefield over the comfort woman issue has increasingly moved to the United States, Japanese nationalist revisionists have sought a "beach-head" in an American university. Wittingly or unwittingly Ms. Okada-Collins had provided them precisely with the point of entree they had longed for. Surely, they said, we had to stop this assault in its tracks.

### **Students and Staff Respond**

Students and staff held many conversations among themselves and looked into various options in response to the scheduled screening. For instance, a student majoring in Asia-Pacific Studies visited the public affairs office to ask why and how the film, which to her mind violated human rights by re-traumatizing sexual slavery survivors, was being screened at a public institution. While committed to academic freedom and freedom of speech as foundations of academic integrity, several History students joined the public outcry by

actively discussing the matter on Facebook and Tumblr. One of the students later informed us that she had hoped such an outcry would persuade Ms. Okada-Collins or the university to cancel the film screening. These students also expressed their disappointment on several points: the lack of interest in joining the outcry or supporting the proposed counter panel on the part of the centers, committees, and students involved in social justice; the university administration's unpreparedness for dealing with such sensitive matters; and the general ignorance about "comfort women" on campus.

Elizabeth Lee, an associate director of analytics and research, solicited input from other staff members, including those in the university's wellness center. Lee and some other staff members discussing the issue shared their concerns as they learned that a person could screen any type of film at the student union building with permission from the copyright holder, and that there would be no trigger warnings for students sensitive to issues of sexual assault.

### **Pondering the Faculty Response**

In this context, we initially toyed with trying to shut the screening down. A little investigation revealed that Ms. Okada-Collins had reserved rooms for two screenings of the film through her home department, even though the department was not in any formal sense "sponsoring" the screenings. Indeed, all departments and programs that had been asked to sponsor Scottsboro Girls refused to fund or endorse the screening. There thus were potential grounds for arguing the event should be cancelled or re-organized as a "private" event.

Upon reflection, though, this seemed churlish and mean-spirited. We are committed to principles of academic freedom, and even though the film strikes us as unscholarly and on the verge of hate speech in its depictions of

Korean women, we didn't want to be on record, at the end of the day, for denying anyone's free speech rights. Preventing the screening would reinforce the nationalist right's perspective that they are the true "victims" of the reigning consensus. Much better, we concluded, to make this a "teachable moment" and help give our students the intellectual tools for critically assessing historical evidence and understanding the fraught politics of historical remembrance at this complex moment. We understood why some colleagues felt that a high profile panel would "dignify" the nationalist revisionists but the more we thought about it, we concluded that not to organize a counter-point would be, in a sense, to be complicit with the screening. We have, we kept telling ourselves, a special pedagogic responsibility to model effective and thoughtful academic responses to such traumatic fault-lines. So we decided to organize a high profile panel of scholars who could defend the well-established historical record and help our students and other members of the campus community understand why the comfort woman denialist narrative has gained such public traction in recent years in Japan.

As we began to plan the panel, we agreed on a few ground rules. As much as possible we would foreground many different voices from multiple disciplinary perspectives with a range of geographical foci. We wanted to demonstrate that this was not a "Korea/China vs. Japan" issue; rather, we wanted to expose students to scholarly inquiry that critiqued conventional nationalist distinctions and interrogated the at times cynical nationalist appropriations of the comfort woman issue in Japan, Korea, China and elsewhere. We were also mindful of the "optics" of this event; it was, we agreed, vital to have at least one Japanese scholar speak and for there to be visible diversity on the panel. We also agreed that we'd avoid all ad hominem attacks on Ms. Okada-Collins and Mr. Taniyama, while not holding back from a vigorous critique of their unsupported

historical claims. Mark met for an hour with Ms. Okada-Collins and reassured her that he and Chong Eun would do everything possible to keep students and external protesters from disrupting her events, and that we hoped she'd reciprocate, so that we could keep everything civil and courteous, even as we passionately disagreed with one another. (Some of our colleagues and students, we should acknowledge, were convinced that in not intervening to stop the screening we were ethically complicit in the revisionist event. We take the point, but at the end of the day are convinced it is a better strategy to be on record in defense of rational and civil discourse, whenever possible.)

Part of our challenge, with which we continue to wrestle, is that the whole controversy rather feels like a family quarrel. We are a unionized faculty at Central and strongly committed to solidarity among all staff. We're a moderately sized, regional comprehensive university in a rural setting, located in a conservative part of the state of Washington, a state that ranks among the very lowest in the nation in terms of legislative funding of higher education. We are mindful, as well, that so many of our Japanese American neighbors are descended from families unjustly interned during World War II, and that there is still considerable anti-Japanese prejudice at play in the region. At any given moment, Central has about 100 exchange students from Japan enrolled. We both feel deep attachments to Japan and our diverse Japanese friends, colleagues and students. We also wanted to understand why launching the event that denies "comfort women" in the US was so important to Ms. Okada-Collins and others. How, we kept on asking ourselves, could we defend the historical record to our students while not demonizing our colleague or fanning anti-Japanese sentiments on or off campus? How could we best restore or defend our university's reputation, in the eyes of scholars at other institutions around the world and in the eyes of community members rather

skeptical about the academy to begin with?

We had hoped for a strong statement of support from our senior university administration, declaring that the university stands clearly and unequivocally for rigorous scholarly inquiry, that the institution in no sense endorses a film that verges on hate speech, and that the school resists all efforts by the Japanese Government and other entities to suppress research into human rights atrocities. Instead, the senior administration limited their public statements to asserting the value of free speech and explained they would stay entirely neutral in the controversy. The leadership chose not to attend the academic panel out of concern that they might appear to be “taking sides” in a quarrel among faculty members. In the midst of all this, we each were subjected to a good deal of very unpleasant communication on line from historical revisionists in Japan and the United States. We’re aware of persistent rumors that nationalist activists have threatened cyber-attacks as well as litigation against scholars who work publicly on the “comfort woman” issue. It was a stressful three weeks.

We were, however, enormously buoyed by the support of Stacey Robertson, our Dean of the College of Arts and Humanities, a historian who specializes in gender and slavery; she agreed to serve as moderator for the panel. Many departments and programs across campus contributed financially to supporting the forum. Our colleague in Theater, Jay Ball, volunteered to organize a reading of testimonies of “comfort women” survivors by students and faculty. And we were greatly relieved to receive constant messages of support from concerned East Asianist scholars in North America and East Asia.

We decided to term the panel, **“Sexual Slavery in the Wartime Japanese Empire: The Historical Record and the Politics of Memory: A Panel of Concerned Scholars.”**

We invited three external scholars, all working in Washington state: Davinder Bhomik and Justin Jesty from the University of Washington in Seattle and Yukiko Shigeto from Whitman College in Walla Walla. We also invited our colleague at Central, Anne Cubilie, who has extensive experience working with women testifying on wartime sexual assaults in diverse conflicts around the world.

### **The Events of 4.28.15**

The day before the panel, we learned that Ms. Okada Collins had invited Mera Koichi, particularly known for his role in the lawsuit seeking to block the “comfort woman” statue in Glendale, CA, to speak before the film screenings. (He was joined via Skype from Tokyo by Justin Morgan, a graduate student from the University of Wisconsin currently on a Fulbright at Waseda, who also insists the comfort women were not coerced or enslaved by the Japanese Imperial military.) Taniyama Yujiro was accompanied from Tokyo by the nationalist politician Miyake Makoto, a recently elected city council member for Komae, in the Tokyo metropolitan area.





**At the start of Mariko Okada-Collins' session, Mera Koichi gave a lecture. His opening slide reads, "Comfort Women, Not Sex Slaves". (Photo by Mark Auslander) Downstairs, in the Student Union "pit", students and faculty read aloud from comfort women testimonies. In the background is a small exhibition about the comfort woman issue, put up by students in History, Asia and Pacific Studies, and Museum Studies. (Photo by Mark Auslander)**

Right before Scottsboro Girls began, a group of students from China staged a dignified, silent vigil in front of the theater room in the Student Union, where the film was being screened, without any unpleasant incidents. A Korean Association chartered a bus from Seattle, and we had many fascinating and moving conversations with community members as everyone milled around waiting for the events to start. Our History and Museum Studies students worked closely with Bang-Soon and Chong Eun to create in the student union a striking small exhibition about comfort women and their long-term Wednesday protests in Seoul. About twenty faculty and graduate students in East Asian Studies from the University of Washington drove 100 miles from Seattle across the Cascade Mountains to attend the panel.

At the opening of the revisionist event in the

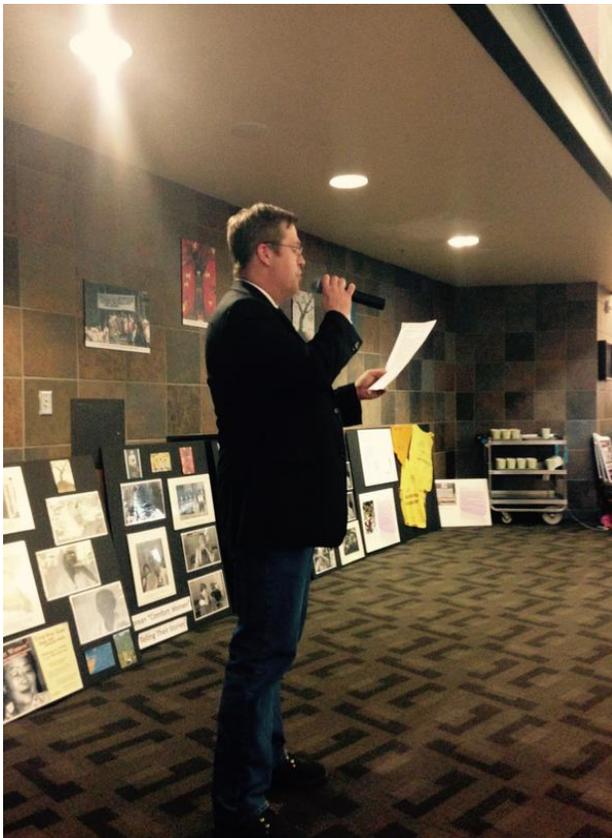
Student Union theater, Ms. Okada-Collins initially spoke about how she came to invite the director, Taniyama Yujiro. She explained she was doing all of this in part to redeem and defend the memory of her grandfather who had died, perhaps of starvation, in combat operations in New Guinea during World War II. She held up his photograph as she spoke and noted that her family had never even gotten his bones; she feels called to defend him, in effect, from charges of rape.

We then went downstairs for a screening of a film about "comfort woman" activists, *The Butterflies Flying High with Hope*, in the student union "pit" area. We were gratified to see a substantial crowd that swelled to about 140 for the readings of comfort women testimonies. Jay Ball, in consultation with the rest of the organizing committee, was careful to incorporate testimonies by Korean, Chinese, Filipino and Indonesian women; the team worked hard to complicate standard nationalist narratives by including different kinds of accounts from diverse sources. They also practiced in an aesthetic sense what Julian Bonder has termed an 'ethics of deferral': they strove to speak clearly and simply, not emoting or 'acting' out the testimonies but, as much as possible, serving only as channels for the testimonies themselves. (Inevitably, given the power of the material, some emotions did break through.) The readings were restrained and dignified, with haunting moments of silence along the way.

Brian Carroll of our History Department then read aloud the widely circulated letter by US historians of Japan, submitted to the American Historical Association, and noted that all members of the CWU History Department had added their names to the letter in solidarity.



We then moved upstairs to the ballroom, just down the hall from the theater where *Scottsboro Girls* was playing, for the academic panel. At least 285 gathered in the room, and the great majority stayed for the whole two-hour session. We'd agreed to keep ourselves to strict time limits to allow for serious discussion with the audience, and we were grateful that Dean Robertson, our moderator, was able to keep us right on track, never easy with a group of scholars! We began with a keynote by political scientist Bang-Soon Yoon providing an overview of the state-sponsored system of sexual slavery known euphemistically as the "comfort woman" system, first developed by the Japanese Imperial Navy in Shanghai in the early 1930s and then adapted by the Imperial Army. She then reviewed some of the solidarity work done by the comfort women activists and their close allies in support of victims of military rape in other contexts around the globe, from the Eastern Congo to (most recently) Vietnam. Later she projected paintings created by comfort women, in some cases in art therapy contexts.



Yukiko Shigeto (Whitman College) took us in a quite different direction from the narrative historiography of the keynote, noting the challenges of any process of representing the pain of others, especially those, like the comfort women, whose voices have been so long effaced or erased. How do we begin to hear their voices in performance or in written texts without unintentionally erasing them? She linked this challenge to the insidious dangers of the discourse of "multiple perspectives" within the normative American ideological framework of academic freedom and the co-equal marketplace of ideas. The revisionist film's title, *Scottsboro Girls*, implies that the testimonies of the women are fabricated, inflicting in her view an epistemic violence that pushes their voices into oblivion. How, she asks, in the face of all of this do we learn to listen, "beyond our conventional hearing range"?

**An audience of about 140 listens to the reading of the comfort women testimonies (Photo by Mark Auslander)**

**History Professor Brian Carroll reads aloud the public letter by historians of Japan to the AHA, and explains that all members of the CWU Department of History have signed the letter in solidarity. (Photo by Mark Auslander)**

Justin Jesty (University of Washington) then took us through the twists and turns of public discourse in Japan and the wider region of the comfort woman issue across seventy years, noting that while there was nothing new in the historical record as such (no new documents or substantial novelties in witness testimonies have recently come to light), the political valorizations of the narratives have dramatically altered over time. He gave particular attention to developments following the 2012 election of Prime Minister Abe's government, including the often signaled desire by the current Cabinet to revisit the Kono statement on the "comfort women", the increasingly toxic pressure placed on Japan's print and broadcast media, the much-discussed fallout from the Asahi Shimbun apology in August 2014, and the public assaults on journalist Uemura Takashi (who was starting his national speaking tour through the United States as our event took place).

Davinder Bhowmik, also at the University of Washington, considered the various nationalist re-metaphorizations of the comfort woman issue; as in other post colonial contexts, the image of the violated women's body becomes useful for patriarchal nationalists in remasculinizing the postcolonial state. Picking up on Yukiko's points, she noted that this often happens in such a way as to undo the integrity of women's experiences of suffering and subvert potential transnational solidarities among women. Art and literature, she emphasized, are vital media for recovering those voices and productive potentialities, in the face of cynical nationalist deployments of the comfort woman issue, across the political and geographical spectrum. To illustrate the point she read a selection from the novella *Tree of Butterflies* (Gunchō no ki, 2000), by Medoruma Shun, set during the tumultuous battle of Okinawa in spring 1945. A group of women seek refuge in a cave, a deeply resonant trope in postwar Okinawa literature, redolent with the imagery of the many civilians killed by

Imperial Japanese and Allied forces during the battle. The cave in the story is simultaneously figured as a kind of tomb and womb, a site of nearly unbearable loss as well as potential coming to consciousness. An Okinawan woman is "comforted" (a term replete with irony in these contexts) by a Korean "comfort woman," who caresses her back as they cower in silence. Later the Okinawan woman realizes she never even thought to ask the Korean women her name. The challenge of that silence, of the unnamedness, haunts us still as we struggle to trace the all-too-tenuous lines of connectedness among women in the Asia Pacific region, so easily fractured by multiple nationalist projects.



**The panelists in a row: from left: Davinder Bhowmik, Justin Jesty, Stacey Robertson (Photo by Mark Auslander)**

Chong Eun in turn picked up on themes in Davinder and Yukiko's comments; she spoke to the complexities of colonial subjectivity in occupied Korea and Manchuria. For all the simplistic efforts to cast comfort women histories in binaries (Korea vs. Japan, colonizer vs colonized, etc.) the experience of colonial women in the system can't be reduced to resistance or complicity; there is a complex intermediate space inhabited by colonial subjects, and most complexly by women

coerced into sexual subjugations in wartime. Similarly, the categories of race and ethnicity in the discourse of ultranationalist revisionists, and of nationalists elsewhere in the region, need to be critiqued and rethought. How do we acknowledge the vast weight and numbing terror of oppressive systems of structural violence, while also recognizing subaltern agency and dignity, amidst all that which seeks to strip them of dignity? To do this she turns to DeCerteau's distinction between strategies (generally available to the dominant) and tactics (generally available to the subaltern). Our challenge in alliance with the oppressed, past and present, might be conceived of as transforming tactics (of everyday survival and resistance) into strategies (of long term empowerment, dignity, solidarity, and nurturance) that cut across putative nationalist distinctions.

Anne Cubilié, who has written extensively on women's wartime narratives of human rights atrocities, spoke to the profound value of women's first hand testimonies. Like others, she noted that for all the minor variations, there is a profound consistency to the deep patterns of the events described, a consistency that speaks to their great evidentiary value, which had been dismissed at some post-conflict tribunals. She emphasized the enormous courage it takes for women to tell of sexual violence and rape, of the need to respect meaningful silences, and of the necessity of art, fiction, poetry and other media that transcend conventional language to evoke, explore and redress the fundamental assaults on language, meaning and bodily integrity associated with rape in wartime.

Mark closed with some reflections on how the problem of the un-mourned Dead is interpolated into these crises of historical interpretation. At the revisionist event earlier in the evening, he had been struck by how Ms. Okada-Collins began her remarks by holding the photograph of her dead grandfather, killed

in war in an unknown place, his remains denied to his loved ones. Mark recalled Roland Barthes' famous observation that in the era of photography, we all die two deaths: a physical death and the second death when our face in the photograph is no longer recognized. Photographs of the under-recognized dead are also held in Seoul in the weekly comfort women Wednesday protests by survivors and their allies. For all the bitter arguments that divide us, how striking that we all turn to that familiar everyday icon of modernity, the family photograph, to express the un-expressible pain of loss. How do we make sense of the ways in which the unsettled Dead weigh upon the minds and hearts of so many in the wider Asia Pacific region? (John Dower, in *Embracing Defeat* encapsulates a fundamental cultural challenge of the Occupation era to Japanese psyches in his pithy phrase: what do you tell the Dead when you lose? There are a multitude of other voices of the unrecognized Dead in the devastated lands of the war's ostensible victors.) How, Mark asked, do these un-mourned souls enter into our undertakings at this moment, in the adjacent room of the revisionists and among us pondering this scholarly panel tonight?

In *The Body in Pain*, Elaine Scarry notes that a primary function of torture is to erase the voice of the tortured. This is true from Treblinka to Guantanamo, and surely there was an aspect to this dynamic in the comfort woman brothels and encampments, a silencing, erasure and shattering of language intertwined with the most intimate forms of violence against bodily integrity. Against that history, cruelly echoed by postwar structures of shame and overt repression, how do we heed Yukiko's call for learning to listen beyond our own hearing range? Art is more than solace; it is a vital point of departure and return for the reconstruction of narrative coherence

That image of the lost name in Medoruma Shun's Okinawan cave, the name never asked

for in the darkness, calls to mind Shoshanna Feldman’s re-reading in *The Judicial Unconscious* of the famous incident discussed in Hannah Arendt’s *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, in which a witness, a former inmate at Auschwitz, is asked his name by the Prosecutor. He responds: here on Planet Auschwitz we have no names, the names are somewhere else, on the planet of the living. He begins, in panic to hear the voices of the unnamed Dead. He tries to escape from the voices summoned up by the trial by leaving the witness box and is ordered back in by a magistrate. In terror, he collapses.

For Arendt, such moments demonstrate the futility of public tribunals predicated on survivor testimony, on what she views as unseemly spectacle, in contrast to the gravitas of Nuremberg in which evidence was grounded in the written documents of the perpetrators. For Feldman, in contrast, the witness’s collapse, the embodied performance of omission, is the most eloquent responses to the unspeakable terror and violation of the Shoah.

Theater, dance, fiction, poetry, visual art are all highly mediated engagements with such eloquent, even involuntary performances by the wounded, by the primary witnesses of terror. As illustrated by the readings Jay organized earlier in the evening, they often seem most effective when guided by an ethics of deferral that doesn’t claim direct mimesis but forges a space of distance in which, paradoxically, we the living may sense remarkable intimacy with the voices and traces of the violated dead.

Those voices in the cave, in the dark, are not the monopoly of any given nation or people. During the war, the national radio broadcasts of the Yasukuni Shrine enshrinement rites were unexpectedly punctuated by the cries of mothers and sisters, who did not find solace in the Shinto state’s claim that the military war dead were being apotheosized as national divinities. We need to hear the cries of those bereaved women of Japan as well as the cries of

those coerced in sexual slavery as comfort women. Not because they are all the same, or can all be considered without regard to measures of complicity, but because they all demand our sustained attention if we have any hope of escaping the cycles of revenge and mutual recrimination that still seem to plague the Asia-Pacific seven decades after the war’s end.



**The audience of about 300 persons for the academic panel in the ballroom. (Photo by Mark Auslander)**

We then turned to discussion. Audience member John Treat (Yale, emeritus) noted the Second World War is, in a sense, still not over in East Asia: Russia and Japan have not signed a peace treaty, the Korean peninsula remains divided. Do the comfort women stand in for the absence of resolution to the war?

We found this question fascinating. Davinder brought up Yoshikuni Igarashi’s *Bodies of Memory* as she pondered why the image of the body of the “comfort woman” seems so endlessly productive across all the regions caught up in the Asia-Pacific conflict. For Chong Eun, the war’s important legacies include long term patterns of poverty and economic inequality. Surviving comfort women

were problematic and at times silenced in part because they were low income and lower class, belying mythologies of postwar economic miracles in Korea and elsewhere. (Later, it occurred to us we should have discussed the partial continuation of the Comfort Women system under American occupation of Japan.)

Audience member Madeline Dong (University of Washington) discussed the challenges of vocabulary. Former comfort women in the early days struggled over how to characterize themselves, given that no other term than “prostitute” existed in their mother tongues when they returned home. The term “military sex slave” is also rejected by some former comfort women, while supported by others. What new kinds of terminologies must be developed in these contexts?

An older gentleman who had come out from Seattle on the chartered bus shared stories from his own youth in northern Korea under Japanese colonial rule, of young women fearful of going out on the street, of being taken away from college in forced comfort women recruitment. We were moved that as he spoke he noted that the suffering of Korean women, as terrible as it was, was not unique; that we had to remain mindful of all women raped in war, including German women at the war’s end as the Red Army advanced.

In similar vein, others noted that the comfort woman case should never be used to excuse other perpetrators of injustice, including the United States. We need to concentrate at certain moments on specific cases, to be sure, but we should do this with the ultimate goal of refining comparative understandings of global gender injustice and militarism. Our colleague in American Indian Studies, Marna Carroll, picked up questions about the pedagogic challenges of historical self-critique: we critically examine histories of Native American genocide, she often reminds her students, not because we hate America but because we love

America, because we wish to help all of us to live up to its inspiring founding promises. Similarly, to critically examine Japan’s histories of wartime atrocity is not to engage in “Japan bashing” but to be attentive to dialectics of oppression and liberation that exist in a vast number of historical contexts.

One student asked about the challenges faced in educating and empowering youth to engage with these historical narratives, whether about the Holocaust or slavery or comfort women, when there has been a profound rupture in generational transmission. The question struck us as especially salient in the wake of Baltimore’s responses to Freddie Gray’s death, as young protestors decry not only decades of police brutality but also the failures of leadership on the part of older generations. What new kinds of media, from Slam Poetry to Spoken Word to Hip Hop, are needed as global youth take up the challenge of recovering histories of suffering and recasting them in ways to extend the bonds of human community?

Afterwards, a number of students told us how much they enjoyed watching their professors argue among themselves on the panel (without being disagreeable) and that they appreciated that while there were profound critiques of the narratives being promulgated next door in the revisionist forum, there was never a trace of personal hostility or ad hominem attack. We had been hoping to model for our students rigorous and mature scholarly discourse, not holding back from expressing our significant disagreements with one another. At the same time, we tried to make clear our shared, fundamental commitment to the principle that there is, at the end of the day, such a thing as evidence—which can be rationally and responsibly assessed in our never-ending search for deeper understandings of history and of the potential pathways forward.

As we left the ballroom two students from

Japan approached a panelist and explained their disappointment over the panel. As they saw it, Americans were attacking Japan without any reflections on their own sordid past or present activities in the world. They were distressed the panel had taken place in the United States, where they and their fellow Japanese are, as they see it, frequently subjected to racism. (In subsequent days, other Japanese exchange students have told us how much they valued the panel.) We take that the point that we could have done a better job clarifying the global intersections of militarism and sexual violence, and better spelled out how the American military has contributed, directly and indirectly, to violations of women's human rights. We are left pondering how, in the future, we might help nurture spaces to allow for productive conversations across the putative dividing lines of nation, race, and ethnic difference, rather than falling back into the balkanized, polarized stances that seem increasingly to characterize arguments about the "comfort woman" case.

## Epilogue

What long-term impact might the events we organized in a great hurry have on our campus and environs? A number of us initially discussed a campus year of dialogue during 2015-16 on issues of gender injustice and sexual trafficking, placing the "comfort women" in a much broader, comparative framework. Mark, as an African Americanist, got a number of messages in the days that followed the panel from African American students and staff, wondering why the faculty wasn't organizing a comparable panel on Black Lives Matter, on the seemingly endless instances of police brutality against men of color. We take the point, as well as the critique by some that, as hard as the comfort woman issue is to engage with, it is even harder to deal responsibly with the urgent crises of race-based official violence right here in the U.S., especially on a majority white campus. Our current campus discussions are

still evolving, but as of this writing, it appears that the dialogue year will foreground issues of mass incarceration, in the United States and globally, allowing us to engage both with Black Lives Matter and with the coercive politics of trafficking at home and abroad. We would certainly like to hold at least one academic event during the coming year on the "comfort women" in history and memory, perhaps with special attention to the emerging historiography on China and Chinese women.

As we have spoken with our students over the past two weeks, we find ourselves more and more aware of the deep sense of injury that permeates so many experiences of pastness. We also find ourselves grappling with problems of academic freedom and intellectual responsibility. Some of our colleagues continue to assert that our panel was censorious against a minority view on campus, especially since the panel was held on the same evening as the first film screening. The claim of "academic freedom" was also used on social media by Japanese revisionists in their critiques of our panel and our associated commentaries. This experience helped to convince us that we all need to become more sophisticated in our thinking about the meaning of academic freedom and intellectual integrity in a highly wired global mediascape, in which all opinions, however detached from serious evidence-based inquiry, can make claims to co-equal value in the marketplace of ideas.

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for Humanistic Anthropology.

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> See [here](#).