

Incomplete Stories: Experiences and Memories of Japanese Imperial Army's Comfort Women

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(In lieu of an abstract) Somewhere in their mind, everyone has memories that they wish they did not, because of pain, because of shame, because of pent-up anger, or for any other number of unpleasant reasons. Stored in some personal private corner of our minds, we want to deny the very existence of these memories. However, these private memories, though perhaps not created through one's own volition but at the hands of someone else or through an unforeseen circumstance, can be excavated and evoked, and subsequently reconstructed as social memories.

1. Introduction

Somewhere in their mind, everyone has memories that they wish they did not, because of pain, because of shame, because of pent-up anger, or for any other number of unpleasant reasons. Stored in some personal private corner of our minds, we want to deny the very existence of these memories. However, these private memories, though perhaps not created through one's own volition but at the hands of someone else or through an unforeseen circumstance, can be excavated and evoked, and subsequently reconstructed as social memories.

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Since 1991, the personal experiences of the former Comfort Women¹ have been included, through a variety of methods, in numerous projects of reconstructing history. In particular, the testimonies of these women have exposed the “truth” of the, until then, unknown Japanese Imperial Army’s Comfort Women issue, both domestically and internationally; their testimonies have served as the driving force in both academia and the social movement sphere to actively work towards resolving this problem. Recently, however, the limits of research focused on ascertaining this “truth” have come under discussion. What has been emphasized particularly is an argument that the issue of the Japanese Imperial Army’s Comfort Women is not merely a reality of the past, but continues to exert influence on the whole of Korean society. The Comfort Women issue does not merely have significance as an event or truth that ontologically existed in the past. But more importantly, it exists as an undeniable social reality of the present and continues to influence various aspects of our lives, ranging from the patriarchal family relationships of the surviving former Comfort Women to the imbalanced relations between Japan and Korea (Jeong H. 2003; Shin Y. 2002).²

Upon examination of literature regarding memories of the Japanese Imperial Army’s Comfort Women, I found that research on the “testimonies” of such subjects has grown and progressed significantly. However, the existing literature pays less attention to issues such as the factuality of memory and memory mechanisms, the significance of reproducing these memories through present-day oral statements, and the personal and societal context of the construction of these memories.³ In

¹ (Editor’s note) In the original article, the author put single quotation marks for the term *wianbu* (‘위안부’) honoring the decision by The Korean Council for the Women Drafted for Military Sexual Slavery by Japan, when referring to former Comfort Women. However, in translation, single quotation marks are replaced by upper case letters (Comfort Women). Upper cases are used likewise for *wianso* (Comfort Station), in order to designate it as a proper noun.

² This research was conducted in 2003 with support from SBS Cultural Foundation’s Overseas Research Grant for professors.

³ The issue regarding the truth of memory is about more than whether memories of the past are factual or not. It is about trying to revive incidents or experiences that have already transpired in the past by recollecting them in the present. Memory reconstruction can never actually bring the past to the present moment, but exists only in the present as a form of representation. In other words, incidents which occurred in the past and the reconstruction of them in the present inevitably have temporal and contextual gaps.

this article, recognizing the limits of extant collections of testimonies, I intend to more clearly illustrate the position of the victim subject through thorough analysis of oral accounts of former Comfort Women. That is, while analyzing the Comfort Women's testimonies, I investigate the subjectivity of these female victims and the process of their change of consciousness (namely, the process of moving from being silent about their experience to speaking out).

In this article, I emphasize that the Japanese Imperial Army's Comfort Women issue is not a problem of the past but a present one, and I argue that rather than determining whether the testimonies of these women are "true or not," it is more pertinent to focus on how they came to testify. This is a project to restore the voices concealed behind the androcentric and generalizing orientations of written history. Furthermore, it is an endeavor to examine the contemporary state of the so-called Japanese Imperial Army's Comfort Women issue, by focusing on dynamic interactions of hegemonic ideologies permeating the lives of the surviving women. This article is based on research conducted in 2002 with 16 research assistants who together gathered the oral testimonies of surviving Comfort Women about their past experiences. This project was funded by the Ministry of Gender Equality under the supervision of The Korean Council for the Women Drafted for Military Sexual Slavery by Japan (*Hanguk jeongsindae munje daechaek hyeobuihoe*, hereafter referred to as The Korean Council (*jeongdaehyeop*)). Of the 202 women registered as former Comfort Women by the government, 65 women have been included in previous testimony collections and 61 women have passed away. Of the remaining 76 women, we selected 16 women as subjects for this project on the basis of their health conditions and relative ease of contact.

2. Who are the Comfort Women?

1) *The Comfort Women Epithet and the Comfort Women System*

Much like the discussion surrounding the Comfort Women system itself, there has been debate regarding the title of Comfort Woman. That is to say, the expression chosen varies depending upon the viewpoint one takes on colonialism and whose perspective is at issue. Aside from Comfort Women (*wianbu*), these women have commonly been referred to as

“Volunteer Labor Corps” (*jeongsindae*), “enlisted comfort women” (*jonggun wianbu*), and “Japanese Imperial Army sex slaves” (*ilbongun seongnoye*) amongst other epithets.

“Volunteer Labor Corps” is defined as “without designating their sex, a (military) unit which devotes their bodies for their country,” and is described as “a group which performed special labor to fortify Japan’s combat strength under Imperial Japan’s wartime mobilization” (Kang M. 1997). After 1943, the term was used to more limitedly refer to “Women’s Volunteer Corps” or “Women’s Volunteer Labor Corps.” As the end of the Pacific War drew nearer, Japan deceived Korean women saying that they could earn money in the “Women’s Volunteer Labor Corps” or kidnapped them, relocating them to the front lines and coercing these women into the role of Comfort Women.

Since its creation by the Japanese Imperial Military in the 1930s, the term “military comfort women” (*gunwianbu*) has been used ubiquitously in Japanese military documents (Halmeonigrimjeon silhaengwiwonhoe [Grandmothers’ Drawing Exhibition Executive Committee] et al. 2000). To this day, the expression standardly used in Japan has been “enlisted military comfort women” (*jonggunwianbu*). However, the term “enlisted” implies that these women accompanied Japanese troops and labored of their own volition, while the title “comfort women” reflects only the viewpoint of Japanese soldiers who “received comfort” through the sexual service of these women. As an expression, “comfort women” cannot remotely reflect all the various forms of violence that Korean women had to face in the subhuman living conditions where they were forced to provide “comfort” to Japanese soldiers. In fact, among all the subjects of this research, not one referred to herself as a “comfort woman”; instead they described their experiences as Comfort Women with expressions such as “on my first night, I had seven men” or “I was touched by many men.” Considering the ways in which they were mobilized at that time and the daily life of the Comfort Stations, the term “Japanese sex slave” seems to convey more accurately the truth of the affair. However, due to the strong undertones of this terminology, women who had such Comfort Women experiences are reluctant to use it themselves.

As was pointed out above, the meaning of the term “military comfort women” can be distorted and misunderstood, and it must also be differentiated from terms like “Volunteer Labor Corps” or “Women’s Volunteer Labor Corps.” However, during the Third Asian Solidarity

Conference on the Comfort Women Issue in 1995, when the historical significance of this issue was revived, the terms “Japanese Imperial Army’s Comfort Women” (*ilbongun wianbu* ‘일본군위안부’) or “Military Comfort Women” (*gunwianbu* ‘군위안부’) were proposed by The Korean Council, with the inclusion of single quotation marks and proper noun designation (Hanguk jeongsindae munje daechaek hyeobuihoe 1997). Henceforth in this article I follow the conventions put forth by The Korean Council.

The construction of the Japanese Imperial Army’s Comfort Women facilities in the 1930s was directly related to Japanese soldiers’ overseas deployments and invasions. As one former Comfort Woman said in her testimony, “if it weren’t for that war, why would they take us to those places?” Though the installation of Comfort Stations began in earnest after the Nanjing Massacre in 1937, their origins can be traced back to the early 1930s. Japanese troops deployed in places across Asia frequently raped or otherwise sexually brutalized local women, which not only provided an impetus for antagonism and anti-Japanese sentiment, as well as lessening the prestige of the Japanese Imperial Army, but also resulted in sexually transmitted diseases becoming a problem for the military. When the military’s stringent rules of conduct failed to control this behavior, military leaders installed Comfort Stations near the front lines and in occupied territories for the purpose of refining the sentiments of the troops (Jeong J. 1997). At the same time, by providing “mental comfort” they attempted to “raise the morale” and mitigate the dissatisfaction of troops who would attempt to flee from the war which had no end in sight. By specifically “hiring” colonized women who could not speak Japanese, they intended to reduce the risk of military secrets being leaked (Oogoshi 2004). Initially, the Japanese military brought prostitutes from their homeland to fill the role of Comfort Women. However, as the war protracted and grew in scale, young, unmarried, and colonized Joseon (Korean) women who, having been raised as daughters in strict, traditional, Confucian households, were virgins, were brought in by the Japanese military in order to prevent the spread of sexually transmitted diseases (Yun J. 1997). Of the estimated 80,000 to 200,000 Comfort Women, 80 percent were Joseon women.

The women who participated in this research experienced life at Comfort Stations in the following places: Japan (Sasebo, Shimonoseki, and Osaka), across Manchuria (Harbin and near the Mudan River), China (Beijing and Shanghai), inner Mongolia, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and even in Singapore and Indonesia; in every place where the Japanese army expanded

military influence, these women were taken and lived as Comfort Women.

2) *Experiences and Characteristics of Former Comfort Women*

In this section I briefly introduce the personal, familial, and social characteristics of the 16 Comfort Women who participated in the author's 2002 oral testimony project. The sentences with quotes are pulled, unaltered, and directly translated from their testimonies.

Level of Education

The former Comfort Women who participated in this study were all born in the 1920s, were elementary school age between the late 1920s and early 1930s, and are now elderly women in their late 70s or 80s. A majority of them grew up in poor families during Japanese colonial rule and could not reap the benefits of a proper education. Their education level is very low, with 8 having never gone to school, four having dropped out of elementary school, and four not responding to this question. They are mostly illiterate and have a tenuous grasp on numbers. One Comfort Woman, when asked about her experience with school, had this to say:

I learned *bangul* (Korean alphabet) until grade two. After that, I couldn't, and I wasn't allowed to speak Korean. If I did I got slapped across the ear... I couldn't graduate fourth grade and then I was taken [to the Comfort Station].

Age when Taken

Of the former Comfort Women I spoke with, one was from Seoul, three from Chungcheong-do, three from Jeolla-do, 6 from Gyeongsang-do, one from Busan, and two from Pyeongan-do. This indicates that rather than

Table 1. Profile of the 16 former Comfort Women research participants

Case	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16
Year when taken	'38	'42	'37	'43	'42	'35	'37	'42	'42	'37	'44	'42	'43	'40	'43	'38
Age when taken	17	14	14	16	17	16	18	18	16	16	18	19	16	13	15	16

taking women from just one area, the Japanese army took women born all across the country to the Comfort Stations. Table 1 covers the years these women were taken and the age they were then.

As shown in Table 1 above, most women were taken to the Comfort Stations between 1935 and 1944, a period spanning from before the start of the Pacific War until just before its conclusion. Especially in what could be called the critical moment of World War II, 1942, five [of the 16 women we interviewed] women were taken: the most taken of any year. The Comfort Women were between 13 and 19 years old when they were taken, with 6 of them being 16 years old. The following quotes are what the women who started the Comfort Woman life when they were teenagers had to say about their first experiences.

I hadn't slept with any man before. With the bottom down there that one couldn't even get in, I had to take my first seven visitors.

My limbs were all scraped up. I can't describe it with words. A 17-year-old⁴ is still a child, no?

Before I was even 15, I was already a cripple.

Abductors and Method of Abduction

There were many methods by which women were sent to the Comfort Stations. Among the women we interviewed, two were taken to the Comfort Station directly by Japanese soldiers, but in many cases, they were taken by the Korean personnel sent ahead by Japanese police (five women) or by Japanese troops (two women). Under the order of the Japanese Military, one woman was sent to the Comfort Station by a Korean soldier, one was sent by a Korean policeman, and three were sent by Korean citizens. Two other women went following the recommendation of a village leader or elder. Half of the participants in this research were tricked with employment fraud, having gone after being told they would find a good job and instead becoming Comfort Women. Six other women were taken by force (38 percent of respondents). These former Comfort Women

⁴ (Editor's note) Here "17 years old" can be either 15 or 16 years old, depending on the date of her birthday during the year. In everyday usage, Koreans count their age not by their birthday, but by the New Year's day; Koreans also count the period of pregnancy as one year, so start from being 1 year old upon birth. This applies to references to age by other informants as well.

said the following about the situations that led to their being taken to the Comfort Station.

[They] said there was work making dyed skirts [at the neighborhood spring] and took me somewhere. I was just squatting down when something tapped me on the back. I quickly turned around and it was a Japanese soldier. He had a star here [on his shoulder], and was wearing a sword and a hat.

“Young lady, come here,” he said. “Why, what’s the matter?” I asked. “Young lady, don’t work like a dog in Korea. I know a good place to work at, follow me,” he said.

If I went to Japan, to a silk weaving factory, there the pay would be *damn* good, it was going to be comfortable, it was going to be nice, I could tour around, and I would earn a lot of money, so I could send money to my parents, so they could buy a rice paddy and a field to plow. Yeah, and I found out they were just playing me.

Daily Lives of Comfort Women

The duration of these women’s stays at the Comfort Stations ranged widely from one year to 8 years. Of these, only four women had relatively short stays of about one or two years, five women stayed from three to four years, and 7 women were confined at lengths of five to 8-year periods. At the time that they were taken, these women were unaware of the existence of Comfort Stations and, having not known why or where they were being transported, only after arriving did they realize they had been deceived. Accounts of their subhuman daily lives at the Comfort Stations, where they wielded no control over themselves and were subjected to sexual and physical violence, are as follows:

It wasn’t even the corner of some factory or something like that. There was just a wire fence put up there and long rooms with small booths where they left us to do their business to us and we waited. In there [women] were herded inside and left there, all kinds of strange men came in. Strange men...

Those guys treated us like animals. They didn’t treat us like humans... as soon as they ate breakfast they started coming in.

On Sunday, th-- oh, I’m seething... I mean, we dealt with 30, 40 soldiers a day... I don’t know if it took 10 minutes or 20 minutes. I just closed my eyes tight and something grabbed my flesh. Meat being spread open and torn to pieces, that’s all we were.

On Sundays, my heart was pounding before it even started. I took up to 27 men in a day. They didn't even take off their shoes, they only put on a condom, came in, and left. Ah, and they would be waiting outside the door in a line, knock knock knocking and saying, hurry up." After a little while the one would leave and another one would come in, while one was dressing and leaving the room, another was undressing and entering. That time, that time was *the most* terrible.

The time was set exactly; those bastards were busy. There was no spare time to take off clothes, nope. The arrogant bastards just took out their thing and would go at it... from outside the room came the sounds of guns, the sound of artillery, the sound of airplanes. It was a ruckus.

They put us in there by force. Did they take off our clothes? No, they just tore them off, didn't even get to undress. It was like that, then later on, they told me to not even wear underwear, just a skirt. That way when they came they could just flip up the skirt, I asked the other women and they were all the same as me.

You can't have an attitude. They clobbered us women, uhh.

If you say no, they ask what you said to them. They treated us as if we were their possessions, and they'd hit you while speaking in Japanese asking what you said.

Listen, criminals are one thing. Even criminals wouldn't do what they did.

Disease

While living at the so-called Comfort Stations, the former Comfort Women not only experienced every type of physical and psychological oppression and sexual exploitation imaginable, but also contracted various diseases. Of the 12 former Comfort Women who disclosed their medical records, 8 contracted sexually transmitted diseases and two were forcibly sterilized. To mitigate their lives of suffering at the Comfort Stations, two women became addicted to opium, one woman developed a mental illness, and five attempted suicide or escape. On their physical and mental suffering, the Comfort Women said:

Oh gee-- of course I was torn up and turned inside out down there, blood was normal. Oh, just thinking of it, uhh-- I struggled to walk. So, they took me to the hospital. I tried to get some treatment, of course... the next year I was about fifteen years old. I got an STD so I kept getting shots of #606...., I did opium too, because of one of the women.

The easiest way to say it honestly is that I was crazy, I went completely crazy.

After a few months had passed I thought that I should die, I wanted to. So, to try and kill myself I took 40 pills of that medicine you take when you get malaria, all at once. But I couldn't even die like I wanted to. I found out later that blood had been coming out from down there, my mouth, and my nose. I woke up two days later...

I even took rat poison. I tried to hang myself. I wanted to die, too. I wanted to die.

Because many of the former Comfort Women were reluctant to talk about their medical records, or were unable to discuss it at the time of our interviews, we can presume that there were other ailments sealed away in their medical records. Aside from detailed medical records, all of these Comfort Women mentioned the fact that they could not easily acquiesce to the one-sided sexual demands of the Japanese soldiers, so they were frequently beaten or cut with knives. In the following accounts, they discuss the past abuse that led to distinct scars covering their bodies to this day.

The officers would get drunk and come in with their swords. They would take it out and if we didn't do as they said, well they would throw a fit. Said they would slit our throats and kill us...Uhh, they would just cut us up like that.

I was in pain one time...I was in pain so I didn't take my clothes off quickly, and they used their knives to cut off the clothes I was wearing. Ohh--just like that they cut my clothes into tatters, and they cut my stomach too. It was an *extremely* hard time. Not a part of my stomach was left wholly intact.

They'd sometimes cut my sides [with a knife]. My friends [couldn't endure it and] we all took pills, several of them died.

He took off his belt and hit me again and again and a fresh bruise appeared each time. The next day, when I was entertaining some other soldiers, they took my top off and were surprised. They ran off saying "what is that?"

I was beaten with some wooden clogs here like this.... I, uh, I tried to run away so they did that.

The ailments that these former Comfort Women contracted almost 50 years ago continue to have immense impact on their daily lives, even now.

Because of the severe physical/mental exploitation that they suffered from a young age, the former Comfort Women have begun to contract illnesses and disorders generally regarded as those occurring with old age. These women I spoke with have suffered from the following ailments: skin disease, stomach disorders, migraines, repressed rage, tightness of the chest, nightmares, mental illness, anxiety, depression, social phobias, trust issues, alcoholism, slipped discs, arthritis, constipation, asthma, pneumonia, esophageal varicosity, heart disease, cirrhosis, high blood pressure, diabetes, cataracts, loss of eyesight, osteoporosis, and gum disease. These women have suffered illness such as those listed above, as well as others, often from early ages and for a prolonged period. The former Comfort Women said these things about the current state of their bodies and their minds:

I was hit, and it knocked my spine out of place a bit. When I was young it wasn't so bad but these days, because I've aged so much, my lower back always hurts. Like this, ah-- if I think about it I have outbursts of anger where my face gets *red* and I flip out. Of all the women who went and came back [from the Comfort Stations] there's not many with a good heart. If I don't take my medicine, my heart starts beating out of control and I can't manage it. Because of that I guess my personality has gotten pretty abrasive.

I have repressed anger. When it swells up it's as if my house will collapse around me and I can't take it. I get so uncomfortable and my heart starts racing. In the course of my life I've gone from one hardship to the next and my body aches, do I have to keep having difficulties? My goodness. I don't have just one disease. This heart is no good, I have diabetes too, and osteoporosis; my whole body hurts. My surviving through those hardships feels like a dream. Though, if it's a dream it's a threatening nightmare.

Sometimes when I sleep I see those men clearly.... Every time I wake up suddenly and [sounds of exasperation].

Even after returning home these women experienced social and family lives markedly differentiable from those of other women. The next section concerns these differentiating characteristics.

Marital Status

Most of the Comfort Women returned home after the end of World War II, at a time when they were between the ages of 16 and 27 years old. Despite being relatively young, there was only a single woman who married and led a so-called normal life (marrying only once and raising

kids without divorce). Of the other women, two were never married, five became second wives, and six cohabited with a partner. Among these five married women, the fact that there were four women who divorced demonstrates the general difficulty these former Comfort Women experienced in maintaining a stable marriage. They had the following to say about their thoughts on marriage:

After liberation, when I came back, I was still young. [Nevertheless,] I hated the thought of getting married or finding a man. The thought of a man made me shudder... But, seeing others getting married made me sad. I experienced all those things; my adolescence was gone entirely.

When I die I'll become an unwed ghost. I tried to get married; I tried. I am an aging 80-year-old bachelorette. I have a lot of *han*.⁵ If I talk about it I'll start to cry so I haven't talked about it much.

I've thought that I should get married. But it didn't happen as I thought it would. I mean, I can't even have kids.

I lived thinking "if there's a man who's looking for a woman..." and I was married for a while, but I left it because I didn't like it. [He] had been married before, and had two kids.

Having Children

Over half the Comfort Women were infertile and thus could not have children at all, but four of them raised stepchildren or adopted children and in doing so alleviated some of the *han* they felt at not being able to bear and raise their own biological children. They said the following in regard to having children:

We don't have children because we can't. After servicing so many men and washing in such cold water, can we even [get pregnant]?

I was at home for a year or two when I met a married man. He was about 10 years older than me. He had accidentally had another son who wasn't even one-year old. He brought that kid to give away to someone else to raise. I told him not to give it to anyone, I would raise the child. I had grown connected to him and I couldn't have my own children so, it was about the same as having my own.

⁵ (Translator's note) *Han* is a word used in Korean to express a complex emotion which does not have an exact counterpart in English. It can mean sorrow, regret, grief, resentment, and a general aching of the heart.

Current Life

After returning home, the former Comfort Women had persistently unstable family relations and lived solitary lives. Currently, three women are living alone, six are living in the role of adopted mother, two are living together with other former Comfort Women, and only two are living together with a husband. Most of these women are remorseful about not being able to lead so-called normal family lives. In many cases, the Comfort Women ameliorate their loneliness with cigarettes and alcohol with religion also playing an important role in their daily lives. The former Comfort Women say the following about their current lives:

I have to smoke cigarettes, if I didn't I would die. Here [My heart]... how should I say it, it's full of anger. If I think about the things I suffered because of those bastards, I just can't stand it. They all became anger inside me.

Now smoking is my husband and my children. It's been like that until now. If I didn't have cigarettes I would have no pleasure. Back then, when I was 16, I learned to smoke from one of my sisters (another Comfort Woman) and I haven't been able to quit since then, I guess.

If I get a bottle of *deodeok makgeolli*,⁶ I'll drink that for four days. Sometimes, even though I drink, I can't get much sleep. I think about this and about the past, about my hometown, and about how my life has been ruined. If I sleep two hours in a night, then I've slept a lot.

As a person, I don't have anyone to rely on, I don't have anyone to lean on. There's not a person who can understand how I feel.

3. Listening and Sharing the Comfort Women's Stories

1) *Breaking the Silence*

Memory, much like testimony, is discussed according to contemporary context. Like oral testimonies of the past, it is a reflection of present concerns. A life history, which is a record of an individual's life as told through his or her own words to another person, does not construct experiences within a single, consecutive time, but rather is characterized by

⁶ (Translator's note) *Deodeok* is a mountain herb (*Codonopsis lanceolata*) and *makgeolli* is a traditional fermented rice-wine.

its subjective, fragmented construction, including non-consecutive recall of events. The process of gathering life stories itself is a cooperative act between the storytellers and the researchers asking questions and recording. At the same time, the interpretation of these life histories commences the instant that they begin to be told. The moment a narrator recalls the past and speaks for an audience, portions of the memory they reproduce are selectively presented according to the current cultural/historical context as well as those listening (read: interpreting) (Yi S. 2002).

Memory, because it concerns the past as subjectively reconfigured by the recaller rather than the past factually reproduced exactly as it was, is disparate from history. The formation and conveyance of individual memories and experiences, as well as their interpretations are influenced by social factors. Thus, memory is intersubjective and can be understood as “agreed-upon memories” of the past (Kim Y. 1998). Specifically, in the construction of social memory there is a great deal of margin for various interests to intervene. For example, as with the Japanese Imperial Army Comfort Women issue, in the act of remembering the scrupulously formulated “technology of forgetting” is utilized, and the struggle of memory itself becomes a “politics of memory” complete with its own political implications. Because oblivion of the past does not happen merely by chance but is systematically induced, the act of remembering itself is political.

Choe Gija (2002)⁷ summarized the political implications of the Japanese Imperial Army’s Comfort Women testimony project with the following statement:

Researching an individual’s memory through oral history is not limited to merely an analysis of that individual’s memory. [...] Beyond bringing an individual’s experiences into the discourse, by focusing on the experiences of women located within the political/historical context of a society, oral history illuminates the systems of oppression that victimize all women of that society. This is how it has political power. In fact, the testimonies of the Military Comfort Women survivors will not end with exposing the brutality and silence of the Japanese state. The survivor’s stories are playing a central role in revealing the Korean state’s silence about the hardships suffered under colonialism as well as the patriarchal society which silenced the former

⁷ (Editor’s note) The following quote is from Ewha Womans University Graduate School Newspaper; the date was not given in the original Korean text, other than the year.

Comfort Women for nearly 50 years. [...] These oral histories, through simply having women narrate their life stories, invite them into debate on history writing. They are an endeavor to deconstruct the patriarchal historiography which had for so long been Othering women. Furthermore, by exposing the systems of oppression in society which besiege women today, oral history can be considered a political act of putting the ideals of female liberation into practice.

For the roughly 60 years since their lives in the Japanese Imperial Army's Comfort Stations ended, the former Comfort Women have managed various difficulties on their own, hiding their past experiences and remaining silent. Living in a social atmosphere dominated by patriarchal morality and the value of chastity, they felt shame and could not actively reveal the harm caused to them through sexual exploitation, even after the War had ended. Most of the Japanese Imperial Army's Comfort Women victims lied to their families and close friends, saying that they had gone to work at factories or restaurants. Sealing their lips, they took the damage and scars their body had suffered and imputed them to fate, making strident efforts to forget (Yi J. 1998). After living like this for years, in 1991, they began to participate in testimony projects and mass rallies, recounting their "shameful" past and demanding an apology and reparations from the Japanese government. They broke the half-century silence about the Japanese Imperial Army's Comfort Women issue, exhibiting a transformation from simple victims to active agents.

Though not all experiences of the former Comfort Women can be likened to this drastic transformation, many women continued to have collections of their testimonies published, held public rallies like the Wednesday Demonstrations, and had their interviews picked up by a growing system of mass media (Kim S. 2000). The Korean government, which had until then consistently shown disinterest in this transformation, created a law (the "Law for the Support and Social Security of the Japanese Imperial Army's Comfort Women" established in May, 1993) supporting the victims of the Japanese Imperial Army's Comfort Women system.⁸ As momentum grew, a number of research papers on this topic

⁸ According to this law, starting in August of 1993 an individual who applied as a Comfort Woman through the government received a one-time payment of 5,000,000 won, a monthly stipend of 150,000 won, health coverage, and vouchers for permanent leases. Later they were raised to the current 30,000,000 won in a one-time payment and 700,000 won monthly.

were published and support groups began to form, and attempts were made to excavate official documents hidden for decades by the Japanese. This series of events was all connected to the changes brought on by the testimonies of the former Comfort Women (Yi J. 1998). As the Japanese Imperial Army's Comfort Women issue became known across Korean society, and was adopted as one of the core issues of the women's movement, former Comfort Women came to change the way they recognized themselves, and the general public, watching this issue unfold, also began to change their stances.

2) Testimony Project

Beginning with Kim Haksun's public testimony in 1991, social interest in the Japanese Imperial Army's Comfort Women has been inseparable from the domestic and international activities of social movement organizations such as The Korean Council, and the research activity of scholars. In relation to this issue, what has enlivened the activities of social movements and academia during the last ten years has been what could be called living evidence in the form of the valiant testimonies of the former Comfort Women. In 1993, the stories of 19 former Comfort Women were bound in a book, which became the first collection of testimonies. Following this, such collections continued to be published, and by 2004 six volumes of testimonies had been published.⁹ In this article, I discuss the methodological issues that I experienced while conducting the testimony project in 2002 with 16 former Comfort Women and analyze the implication of these issues in studying history. Specifically focusing on narrative performance, I intend to examine the various factors that influence it.

Personal Background of the Researcher

When speaking face to face with the former Comfort Women, the very first problem that arises is who seeks them out and meets them to talk. Of course, whoever it may be must possess a certain degree of knowledge about the Japanese Imperial Army's Comfort Women, as well as mastery

⁹ This research is based on the stories of the Comfort Women who participated in the sixth testimony collection authored by the research team of the War and Women's Human Rights Institute of The Korean Council. This collection was published under the title of 『역사를 만드는 이야기: 일본군 '위안부' 여성들의 경험과 기억』 [Stories that make history: Comfort Women's experiences and memories] in 2004.

of interview techniques. But additionally, other factors, such as sex, age, and marital status, have a direct influence on how the women recall and narrate their experiences. Particularly, the researcher's gender can be a deciding factor, because the former Comfort Women were reluctant to share their extremely private "sexual stories" with men. One former Comfort Woman said this:

Oh-- It would be nice to stop [the inquiry]. *Aigo*, really, how can I say [to a man] that I had to take a lot of customers? Really, really, I get very embarrassed. I think a woman would be better. I would be able to talk about those things more freely.

When the former Comfort Women have no other choice but to share their "shameful" stories in front of a male investigator, they self-censor their experiences, distorting the facts rather than speaking frankly. For example, in the late 1980s, the woman who uttered the quote just above went to register herself as a Comfort Woman at the government office, and the welfare worker who came out to interview her was male. When asked about her experience she responded that she was [at the Comfort Station] only for four years, although it was really five or six years. When describing her arrival at the Haeseong Comfort Station in 1937, though she was gangraped by 7 men on her first day there, she said of that day with the male interviewer, "my face turned red and my heart was racing telling him that "I took only three men then." Similarly, as the agents of narrative, many former Comfort Women choose to change their expressions or censor the content of their accounts while speaking about their past experiences. Of course, it is not a decision made simply of their own volition, but can be thought of as a method of interpreting and expressing their position within a given social structure. This method can be understood as exposing the precarious position of the narrative subject, that is, the paradoxical position of someone who simultaneously defies society's ubiquitous patriarchal principles while also having to accept them.

The marital status of researchers is also a factor that impacts the testimonies of former Comfort Women as much as their gender. In cases where the researcher was a young single woman, not only did the women not want to tell their painful stories of adolescence, which "wouldn't even be helpful educationally," but they also doubted whether a young single researcher would be able to understand or, moreover, if she would even believe what they had gone through sixty years ago. When the researcher

emphasized that the Comfort Women's past experiences held important historical knowledge for the current young generation of women and requested that she tell her story, a former Comfort Woman asked back; "if I told today's kids this story, would they accept it as the truth?"

Just as the researcher is interested in the former Comfort Women's personal background and life story, they were curious about the researcher when meeting face-to-face, often even asking questions of the researcher before interviews began. Among these questions, an important one was whether or not the researcher was married. Having come from a patriarchal society which emphasizes premarital virginity, they expected the unmarried researchers to be ignorant of sexual matters. Furthermore, they thought that by talking about their past experience they may not be providing a good role model to "innocent" young researchers. Thus, only after determining that a researcher was married were the women able to comfortably begin their in-depth testimony. For example, when a researcher [research assistant] was accompanied by a female welfare officer, one former Comfort Woman asked the officer about the researcher who she had been interviewed by last time. Upon learning that she was married she said, "Oh goodness, I thought she was a virgin. Oh, to say all those things in front of her, I was so ashamed." She let out a sigh of relief, then right away asked the researcher accompanying her, "Are you a virgin? Are you married?" The researcher knew that her response would affect whether the next interview would be a failure or a success, so without really thinking about it lied and said that she was married. However, the researcher's lie did not end neatly right then and there. The former Comfort Woman asked the researcher what her husband's family name was, what his job was, where her in-laws lived. Having been a shaman (*danggol*), she even prayed that the researcher would be able to have a son, and after their interview ended and they were parting ways, the former Comfort Woman thoughtfully handed a bottle of sesame oil from sesame plants she had grown with her own hands to the researcher, telling her to take it to her in-laws.¹⁰

¹⁰ When this researcher lied, the author was not present at the scene. She later disclosed what she had done in the book 「역사를 만드는 이야기: 일본군 '위안부' 여성들의 경험과 기억」 [Stories that make history: Comfort Women's experiences and memories]. Even though the author did not have any control over this situation and the researcher confessed in writing, our ethical responsibilities do not end there. The researcher is trying to meet the Comfort Woman again to confess to her in person, as well.

The former Comfort Women are aware of the patriarchal and nationalistic discourses that emphasize the image of them as “the innocent girls of Korea kidnapped and brutalized by the Japanese,” and because of this, they censor and regulate their own life stories, performing distorted testimonies. The testimonies recognize and challenge the image of the Comfort Women created by the nationalistic and patriarchal master narrative through emphasizing their personal subjectivity, while at the same time indicating the antinomy of their compliance to this master narrative. However, in speaking only about “truth,” researchers are similarly limited. As sympathizers trying to reconstruct the Comfort Women’s past experiences, the researchers are likewise placed in established social structures where they censor, regulate, and distort their experiences and identities, and make them into partial and incomplete stories.

Relationship between the Researchers and the former Comfort Women

It is hard for the former Comfort Women to conceal their discomfort when outsiders, such as researchers, visit them. This is because they live under the uncomfortable gaze of the people around them, their families, their close friends, as well as the country. Because of their conflicting relationships with organizations aside from The Korean Council, such as the Korean government, mass media, and the Japanese government, they see researchers as people who might expose their “secrets.” Researchers are thus regarded as “dangerous people” who must be constantly guarded against. Beyond their lives in the Comfort Stations, these secrets include experiences of the uncertainty of their identity in circumstances such as the process of registering as a Comfort Woman. For example, after registering as a Comfort Woman, and receiving the support of the Korean government or civic groups including The Korean Council, they have to constantly be cautious of their language. For if they “misspeak” and are consequently deemed as not meeting the standards for being a Comfort Woman, the government may wield the authority to suspend their welfare support, thus threatening their livelihood. To these women, silence and denial are critical strategies through which they have been able to maintain their human dignity. Moreover, when others are unaware of their identity as a Comfort Woman, they are able to build trust and *jeong* (affection or truthfulness), which allows them to, in turn, take part in meaningful social relationships. Alternatively, there have been instances in which a woman’s “secret identity” as a Comfort Woman was revealed; her husband becoming

furious left her, destroying her remaining familial relationships. Further, these women feel a sense of guilt at having lived half their lives as “lying criminals” and once again live in fear that their “secret” will come out.

An example of this discomfort can be found in my interactions with one former Comfort Woman whom I met at the Human Rights Camp in Jeju-do, organized by The Korean Council. The whole time I interacted with her, she was not at all “difficult to meet with” like The Korean Council had warned me, and she openly started sharing her story with no reservation. Every time she finished saying something, she would apologize out of shame from her experiences and then start up again in well-arranged language, speaking about her past pains and sorrows quite calmly. After parting, I thought that if I could meet her one more time I could “complete” her story and so visited her home two weeks later. We were speaking naturally and exchanging pleasantries when we started talking about her story. However, in the middle of her account she had a surprise visit from her younger sister and her sister’s friend, which is when I glimpsed the nervousness and discomfort in her eyes. A researcher with us at the time had the good sense to change the subject to something unrelated to Comfort Women and we posed as people who she had happened to meet in Jeju-do. Nonetheless, the former Comfort Woman kept shifting uncomfortably and signaled for us to leave with her non-verbal expressions. In the end, we had no choice but to leave, and after this I tried with great difficulty to obtain permission to meet her again, but she stubbornly refused. Ultimately, she said, “it’s all so troublesome really. Just let me live quietly.”

She described her experience as a Comfort Woman as “coming into contact with a lot of people,” and she was ashamed of this; she was afraid that her identity and experiences would affect the future lives of her adopted son and nephews. In 1945, when she returned home from a Comfort Station in China, she kept her “shameful experiences” a secret from her family by saying that she was a “live-in maid” while in China. Though she kept her secret to herself and got married, her husband found out and left her because of it. Such painful private experiences continue to be connected to negative social attitudes towards women who were Comfort Women. As a result, she lives a life of constant anxiety—both under the shadow of fear that her “secret” could be revealed and once again ruin any familial or social relations and because of the guilt of being a “liar.” In exceptional circumstances like the Korean Council led Human Rights

Camp, where one is surrounded by former Comfort Women who can understand experiences and identities as Comfort Women, the women can talk freely about their past experiences. But a majority of the time in their daily lives within a patriarchal social atmosphere which holds the power to destroy all security in their lives, they keep their identity secret and silent. In so doing, they resist the social atmosphere. The act of narration by these women paradoxically reveals the andro-centric perspective of history with the predominance of patriarchal discourse which dominates Korean society and simultaneously exposes the limited situation of the former Comfort Women as the powerless within society. One might describe the detailed contents of their testimonies as situated knowledge, produced both within their delimited context, as well as for its sake (Haraway 1988).

Between the former Comfort Women and researchers there is a degree of tension that arises from the fact that the former desire to keep their experiences secret and the latter want to expose the entirety of what happened in great detail. The former views silence as a life strategy, conversely the latter sees it as an obstacle to research. That is to say, the latter desires to remove the obstacle and break the silence of the former, so that they may better study them. The former can view the latter's attempts at persuading them to speak out as threatening. In order to ameliorate their pain, the former Comfort Women may intentionally try to forget their past. However, the researchers may feel it is their academic responsibility to try to preserve and reconstruct the former's memory in as perfect a form as possible. Through "painful" interviews with researchers, the former Comfort Women's regulated and self-censored stories they "want to share" encounter the stories that the researchers "want to hear." The following quotes from the former Comfort Women's testimonies highlight this point.

I've lived so terribly. If I tried to keep those painful and terrible thoughts, those thoughts that make my chest hurt, I wouldn't have lived this long. If I remembered it all, I don't think I could live.

History is good, but I need to live.

Don't ask me about the past. It hurts my heart.

If I dig around in my mind to tell you about the past, my chest would explode.

It's there in my dreams. In dreams, as if covered in fog, now.... I don't

remember, I won't remember, the memories are there in some corner. I didn't know there was a life like this one in the world. Still, my heart races, even still. It's a crazy world.

Process of Testimony and its Substance

The conducting of personal interviews with the former Comfort Women for the goal of testimony involves an extremely complex process. First, persuading former Comfort Women to talk 50 years after their experiences, when they have not attached much significance to digging them up, is in itself a formidable task. Though the revival of their past experiences is a meaningful project for researchers as well as for social organizations such as the Korean Council, for the women themselves it serves only as a painful reminder of the suffering they endured. For this reason, they begrudgingly agree to personal interviews, unilaterally decide the number of visits allowed, or insist on giving the shortest versions of their answers through self-censorship rather than giving a detailed account of their past experiences. Despite these personal interviews often functioning as a catalyst for their own healing, the majority of these women consider them a process of reviving a "tenaciously undying ghost." They view the past as an "eternally shameful experience," and thus consider interviews extremely uncomfortable not least because the truth they had kept secret (particularly from their husbands and children) could come out. As a result of this, when those who have experienced the Japanese Imperial Army's Comfort Women system are asked by researchers to speak, they commonly feel embarrassed by their past and have difficulty finding suitable words to describe their experiences. Additionally, in certain cases they are caught between rage and shame (guilt) and only passively take part in the interview. Their insecure position is apparent in the following oral accounts.

That history, it's too embarrassing so I could not talk clearly about it when meeting you for the first time.

To whom could I talk about it. Only the sky might know it?

It was because of the Japanese, but deceiving my husband was surely a crime... After he found out, he got a new woman and had two girls [with her].

Narrative performance of the former Comfort Women is not unrelated

to their past experiences. They take the topic of Comfort Women and speak of their past experiences, reading into their own family lives through the lens of such experience. The impetus for their giving oral accounts is in part to register with the Korean government as former Comfort Women, and this registration has affected their lives in numerous ways. For some, it has been a motivation for self-discovery, for others it has been a survival strategy that has resulted in practical profits, and for even others, it has been a force that has brought them out of the social margins and into small-scale celebrity. Additionally, such acts of orating are in themselves a portion of their personal transformation. Following the early attitudes they carried during the preliminary stages of the testimony project in which they steadily kept silent out of embarrassment or shame, the women became more confident. They grew to recognize that what happened to them in the past was not a volitional choice, but a violence forced upon them. As shown in the following, they are carefully navigating methods by which to hold accountable those who forced such violence upon them.

What do I have to do to get revenge?

I understand that [testifying and writing a book about it – author clarification]. 'Cause if a lot of people found out about what happened, the Japanese bastards, they'd really feel the stick up their ass. So that's why I'm talking to you. But absolutely don't use my last name or even my first. It is no good if my kids or grandkids find out later.

Among the former Comfort Women, there were those who were proud of their participation in writing a new history, who requested I use their stories actively. "If I had died there (Comfort Station) no one would have known [what happened to me]." Yet these women persevered and testified, being able to supplement history. And since they tell us these difficult stories, they request that we "come and listen, and give [them] a shoulder to cry on." Alternately, they say that we "can absolutely not forget" the stories that they told us, saying, "it'd be nice if I could at least get rid of some *han* (resentment) before I died." In the end, they emphasize that the ultimate purpose of them telling their stories to us is so that Japanese people and the Japanese state "come and compensate us and give us a loud and clear apology."

Beyond the complex relationship between researcher and the former Comfort Women that I have discussed hitherto, there remains an

important question of how to evaluate a detailed testimony's truthfulness and objectivity. As most former Comfort Women watch TV programs about the Japanese Imperial Army's wrongdoings during the War, they reinterpret their own past experiences as a Comfort Woman. Additionally, they participate in testimony and organizational activities held by The Korean Council, and in doing so learn not only about their private experiences but about those of other Military Comfort Women as well—once again encountering a social perspective on these experiences. The “background knowledge” (that is, public memory) that these women obtain through mass media and social activities directly influences the memories of their own personal experiences as well as their representations in oral accounts. Sometimes, they combine the stories of others that they learn through watching TV or participating in testimony projects or rallies, with their story of self, proposing a standardized “story of the past,” or producing the story that society wants to hear, for example a politicized discourse.

However, this situation applies similarly to researchers as well. Just like the former Comfort Women, researchers watch TV programs related to the Comfort Women, or in reviewing the literature, researchers pick up their own “background knowledge” and this background knowledge affects many aspects of their research, ranging from the method in which a researcher leads the testimonial interviews, all the way to the interpretation of testimonial content. When the former Comfort Women recount their stories, the researcher will often alter the words used to ones they are familiar with, and also tend towards interpretations of the peculiarities of the lives of the women they interview through the exclusive focus of their experiences as Comfort Women, ignoring other contexts. In such instances, the diverse experiences of former Comfort Women are fixed to the singular image of someone who has experienced being a Comfort Woman, or researchers make the mistake of reducing the women's varied experiences to the principal theme of Comfort Women.

Not unlike the ways Japanese soldiers who sought out the Comfort Stations dealt with fear of war and longing for maternal love through relationships with the Comfort Women (An Y. 2003), some Comfort Women said something like the following which surprised researchers, despite it being likely that they would desire warm, personal relationships while living a life forced upon them in a foreign land.

Even now I think about it, that person... I think it was about 5 months that we lived together. We had a lot of fun.

Scholars accustomed to nationalist narratives are perplexed by how, despite suffering from continual sexual assault at the Comfort Station, the Japanese Imperial Army's Comfort Women could feel the emotion of love, or how they could have "fun" living with Japanese soldiers. Many scholars expect that because Comfort Women were exposed to "atrocious sexual exploitation" at a young age, they would carry negative attitudes towards sex. Contrary to the expectation, however, many of the women often speak of diverse and positive sexual experiences. Furthermore, they are at once both the victims of patriarchal familism and its fervent devotees. After returning to Korea, those who married suffered from their husbands' economic incapability and habitual extramarital affairs, yet they did not discard their fantasy of marriage. Through their oral accounts, many of the former Comfort Women more often emphasize their lingering longing for the family life that they have not been able to have than they reflect on memories about the difficulties of life they experienced as Comfort Women when they were young. Bearing in mind the static form of the archetypal Comfort Women standpoint, researchers intending to use such oral statements for the sake of truth commissions cannot help but be baffled by this narrative attitude of the former Comfort Women. Even while carrying a critical awareness of the fact that study of the Japanese Imperial Army's Comfort Women issue has hitherto been carried out largely through a nationalist perspective, we are faced with the fact that the discourse itself on this subject deeply concerns the stance and attitude with which we confront former Comfort Women.

4. Incomplete, Fragmented Stories

Remembering, and orally accounting for the past, does not signify the same thing as recalling a past event spontaneously. There are numerous methods to orally account for events of the past, and oration does not occur in the far and distant past, but is realized within an explicit current context. Thus, in a time or place where memories of the past become a problem, we must ask who remembers the past, which past, from what perspective, and with what purpose, as well as why they intend to

remember now (Yoneyama 2003).

Though the experience of being a Japanese Imperial Army's Comfort Women is a deeply personal one, for over 10 years these women have fought to break the unrelenting silence, playing their part in the creation of official memories of Japanese colonialism; through the medium of nationalism, the individual selfhood of former Comfort Women even fashioned a collective Korean sense of self based on unjust suffering. Additionally, scholars approaching the issue of Japanese Imperial Army's Comfort Women from a feminist perspective emphasized that in the antagonistic structure of the Japanese state as the perpetrator and the Korean state as the victim, the fact being forgotten was that both Japan and Korea are patriarchal societies, and within such societies the social position of women is far different from that of men (Yang H. 1998).

Despite 50 years having already passed, when the former Comfort Women began to speak about their experiences, the public, the social movement sphere, academia, and the Korean government anxiously awaited what "news" they would bring, and demanded the telling of such "news." The women who had experienced being Comfort Women felt mounting expectations and pressure placed on them to share evidence of "historical facts," and those who listened to their stories were busy producing a "testimony collection" of their past. As a researcher, I also felt as if I had become a detective, wanting to complete some larger picture from the bits and pieces of information the women would reveal while speaking, and in my longing to expose the "concealed facts" within their stories and confirm such facts, I was "interrogating" them. As Visweswaran (1994) writes, the idea of "fact" has an inherent aspect which easily arouses the public interest, and at the same time, the attributes of such "fact" drive me, as a researcher, to involve myself in the "search for fact." However, we have now come to a point where the role of investigators "searching for fact" must be put aside, and we must ask ourselves what type of confessions we want to hear from these women, as well as what types of knowledge we are expurgating and producing in this process.

This research has attempted to go beyond the dichotomy of the established perspective of feminism vs. nationalism by focusing on meetings of researchers and former Comfort Women formed at the site of oral accounts, and by looking at the means which contribute to the effect of inter-narrative acts. As examined above, identity carries fluidity in which its construction is dependent on context, and conformance with such

properties plays a role in producing “fragmented, partial stories.” Through “testifying,” former Comfort Women intentionally connect their partial (or partially exposed) identity to their “partial stories.” At the same time, the series of distortion, omission, and disguised identities appearing in their narrative performance exposes the imbalance of power relations involved in the process of producing knowledge from testimony. These narrators, the former Comfort Women, reenact a complex of clashing social, lingual, and political powers. The narratives can be considered a means of rendering contradictions among social ideologies rather than one of exposing the “truth” about individual narrators’ personal (past) experiences (Weed 1989).

The oral accounts of former Comfort Women show us just how partial and mutually contradictory, or strategic their identities can be. Their silence and distorted accounts are at once a resistance to the dominant discourses of nationalism and patriarchy, as well as acts of compliance. Because their narratives expose the influences that our society’s dominant discourses have on the act of personal narration, they help us determine the source from which an agent’s ideological position is set forth. Inasmuch as their unexposed and incomplete stories are a means by which they can somewhat maintain subjectivity, their narrative accounts cannot be recorded as “fact” or seen as a subject necessitating completion. These women have reason for staying silent or altering their stories in narrative performance, and such acts are not dissimilar from the silence and alteration that I, a researcher, perform in an interview context.

Highlighting the problems of “universal history” emphasized in the writing of modern history, Benjamin (1970) criticized narrating the processes of history in a linear and evolutionary fashion. In his view, that fashion makes records of the past into “things that truly occurred” and homogenizes history as if there were no alternative possibilities. He claimed that this type of history writing helps maintain the current status quo as a narrative of progress which is attained only by those in power.

A holistic form of the past cannot be reconstructed; it can only be assessed through the “fragments” after the fact. Though these “fragments” of history signify the incompleteness of history, they simultaneously engender a critical awareness of history. According to Benjamin (1970), the elements of history which have been oppressed – missed chances and unkept promises, as well as unfulfilled dreams – are that which could have lead history in a different direction. They can connect us with other contemporalities, and inquiry into such elements is an important facet of

the politics of memory. In this article, I have attempted to show that one must focus not only on the content of narratives remembered and spoken by former Comfort Women, but also on their narrative acts as “critical” points of contact with the past. The core of this article asks through what methods of remembering the past can we produce “transformative knowledge” about the past and present, and in particular, about the lives of women.¹¹

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¹¹ A thought extending from this topic, despite having focused on the “narrative acts” of those who experienced the Japanese Military Comfort Women system, due to limits on length of this paper I unfortunately could not include a discussion of the diverse non-verbal acts of speakers (e.g., body language, facial expression) and the context in which narrative is enacted (place, number of people in attendance, and their characteristics). I intend to pursue these topics in later research.

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