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Behind the Mask of Human Rights: “Comfort Women,” Heteronormativity, & Empires

elisa lee

Introduction

Blocks away from the bustling main street of an ever-growing Koreatown in Palisades Park, New Jersey, are several memorials. Two tall stone monuments with bronze plaques are prominently erected in front of the borough’s library commemorating the United States veterans of both World Wars. Neighboring them is a much smaller stone with a simple inscription that pays tribute to the Korean War or “The Forgotten War”. An equally unembellished monument is tucked several yards away on a thin strip of lawn between the public library and a private residence. Two, knee-high United States flags and decorative greenery surround this small block of stone. Dedicated on October 23, 2010, this monument—the first of several dedicated to “comfort women” in the United States—became a source of tension two years later involving Japanese delegations, South Korean officials, and local lawmakers (Alvarado).

In this paper, “comfort women” refers to a group of mostly young women and girls of different ethnicities, nationalities, and socioeconomic backgrounds who served as sex workers for Imperial Japan’s military personnel throughout the course of the Pacific War (Soh, “From Imperial” 59).¹ Following nearly fifty years of international silence, “comfort women” became synonymous with sex slaves within a Western feminist, human rights framework, (59-60).² In May 2012, the Japanese delegation visiting Palisades Park requested that the mayor remove the memorial, arguing that these women were actually

¹ *Kijich'on* women or U.S. military camptown prostitutes have also been identified by some Koreans as *wianbu* or “comfort women” (K. Moon, “South Korean” 126-7).

² I use theorist Chandra Talpade Mohanty’s definition of the term as “a coherence of effects resulting from the implicit assumption of “the West” (in all its complexities and contradictions) as the primary referent in theory and praxis” (Mohanty 17-8).

paid for their work and that the sex slave narrative is a complete fabrication (Semple). This United States based memorial raises a question that I hope to address in this paper: What histories and structures are being elided when framing the comfort women issue through the lens of universal human rights?

In this paper, first I briefly provide historical background about the comfort women system and how the issue went from being a source of national shame to an international symbol of woman’s rights as human rights. In this paper, I use Women of Color Feminist Critique, Queer of Color Critique, and an Asian American studies framework. Using these frameworks, I examine the public discourses surrounding “comfort women,” particularly official statements put forth by governing bodies like the United Nations and the United States. I argue that current understandings of “comfort women” as sex slaves through a human rights framework erases the function of heteronormativity in the expansion and maintenance of empires. I map the emergences of the comfort women system from the modern licensed prostitution system to the Japanese Prostitution Abolition Movement fueled by racist, heteronormative, Western imperial ideals about the dignity and purity of women. Then I trace this imperialist lineage to the human rights rhetoric used to discuss the comfort women issue. I demonstrate that this framework elides the role of heteronormativity in imperial projects and the complicity of human rights work in shoring up Western imperialism.

This paper serves neither to erase or dismiss the violences Korean “comfort women” have experienced and continue to experience, nor do I criticize their motives, statements, or actions. Rather, my intent in this paper is to call for a queer reading of the state-sanctioned discourses surrounding “comfort women.” Thus, in this sense, queer is not a sexual identity but a reading practice that understands “the ways our multiple identities

work to limit the entitlement and status some receive from obeying a heterosexual imperative” (Cohen 442). I perform a queer reading to complicate and resist the current violences enacted onto these women and their narratives through heteronormative, Western paradigms. Thus, I refer to Korean “comfort women” as *wianbu* with the understanding that there are many limitations to the term and that using the term itself may reinforce certain violences.³ However, I use *wianbu* to refer to a group of heterogeneous Korean girls and women with complex stories who were victims and/or survivors of the comfort women system, and to distinguish this understanding of *wianbu* from current dominant Western notions of “comfort women” as sex slaves.

Growing up in a proud Korean immigrant household within a larger Korean American enclave in New Jersey, I was exposed to the sex slave narrative. These women were tragic, powerless victims who suffered unspeakable atrocities committed by the Japanese during Korea’s colonization. These women also represented the nation’s suffering under Japanese rule. I was not surprised then to learn that the Korean American Voters’ Council—a New Jersey based Korean American civic empowerment organization—spearheaded the movement to erect a monument remembering this history in Palisades Park, which neighbors my hometown (Semple). Sparking much controversy in the small town, the inscription on the memorial reads:

In memory of more than 200,000 women and girls who were abducted by the armed forces of the government of Imperial Japan. 1930’s - 1945 known as “comfort women,”

they endured human rights violations that no peoples should leave unrecognized. Let us never forget the horrors of crimes against humanity. (Lee, “Inscription”)

This inscription reproduces the dominant Western feminist notion of “comfort women” as “women and girls who were forcibly abducted,” who endured “crimes against humanity” by serving as sex slaves for the Japanese military. I argue that the memorial’s location and inscription reinforces the United States as the superior civilization where its white, Western women, defined in opposition to that of the helpless, subjugated Asian “other,” are liberated and autonomous.

Historical Background

The term “comfort women” comes from the Japanese, male-centered euphemism *ianfu* (Soh, “From Imperial” 59). This system operated within a logic of “masculinist sexism” implying the innate sexual needs of men that must be satisfied through heteronormative sex provided by women (61). Thus, “comfort women” not only provided the male troops with “comfort,” but also served as a mechanism for systematic control of Imperial Japanese troops throughout its extended military campaigns in Asia and the Pacific. For example, these women were thought to boost morale, prevent violences towards occupied peoples, and prevent the spread of sexually transmitted diseases among military personnel (Yoshimi 60).⁴ Thus,

³ *Wianbu* is the English translated & romanized version of the Korean term (위안부) derived from the androcentric Japanese euphemism, *ianfu* (Soh, “From Imperial” 59). I understand that while some former Korean “comfort women” identify with *wianbu*, others prefer different terms like *chöngsindae*, or no identification at all (Soh “The Comfort” 72).

⁴ “The setting up of such a large number of military comfort stations was intimately connected to the invasion of Nanking that gave rise to the Nanking Massacre. In November 1937, after ninety days of heavy fighting for control of Shanghai, the Central China Area Army (commanded by General Matsui Iwane) began to advance toward Nanking. It rampaged through the communities along the Yangtze River on the way, looting, massacring, setting fire, and raping.... Not only did the mass rapes earn the outrage of the international community, but Japanese military leaders knew very well that the Chinese looked upon rape with particular outrage” (Yoshimi 49).

around March 1932, the first of many military comfort stations was established in Shanghai to formally address the needs of the Imperial Japanese army and navy (43).

These comfort stations stretched all across the Japanese Empire: from its pre-World War Two colonies in Korea and Taiwan, to its battlegrounds in Northern and Central China, Southeast Asia, and islands in the Pacific (Soh, "The Comfort" 14, 136-9).⁵ In these areas, the military established comfort stations of varying conditions from seized homes, military tents, and school buildings. "Tatami mats... a chest of drawers... and colourful bedding" furnished comfort stations in urban areas while most other stations were small, dilapidated spaces divided by thin walls with no doors (Tanaka 51). In the early stages of the war, girls and women throughout the Japanese Empire were recruited for these comfort stations most commonly through deceptive practices like offering women lucrative jobs abroad in factories or hospitals as nurses by local recruiters. Others were forcibly mobilized by the government, recruiters, or even by family members (Yoshimi 116). As the war progressed, native girls and women, in addition to subjects of the Japanese Empire, were recruited similarly for the comfort stations (Soh, "The Comfort" 137). Though the

In hopes of controlling the spread of sexually transmitted diseases, the military established comfort stations where examinations of "comfort women" and treatments for disease were compulsory unlike civilian brothels. However, the military never examined the soldiers as thoroughly and consistently (Yoshimi 69, 71-2). "Not only were military comfort stations ineffective in preventing the spread of diseases, but they actually facilitated the infection of many more soldiers" (72).

⁵ Major countries, regions, territories with comfort stations--documented by survivors, veterans, and official documents--with their contemporary designations in parentheses are Japan, Korea (North Korea, South Korea), Taiwan, Northern and Central China, Philippines, Burma, Siam (Thailand), French Indo-China (Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos), British Malaya (Malaysia), Dutch East Indies (Indonesia), Palau, Timor (East Timor, Indonesia), and Guam (Soh, "The Comfort" 138).

number of "comfort women" are disputed, an estimated eighty percent of these "comfort women" were Korean subjects of the Japanese Empire (B. Oh 9).⁶

In close cooperation with the Imperial Japanese military and its colonial government in Korea, Japanese settlers and Koreans from all walks of life became complicit with the procurement of mostly poor and working-class Korean girls and women for the comfort women system (Soh, "The Comfort" 138-9). The lives of *wianbu* varied depending on multiple factors of which included the location of the comfort station and whether or not they were catering to high-ranking officers or lower-ranking soldiers (Yoshimi 139). Regardless of these circumstances, many, if not all, *wianbu* participated in highly regulated and controlled sexual labor, often rife with violence, to varying frequencies with personnel for the Imperial Japanese army (139-41). Near the end of the war, some surviving *wianbu* found their way back to Korea while others chose to live in the foreign land they were brought to, often "as second-class citizens" (Tanaka 59).

The issue of the *wianbu* remained largely silenced within South Korean public discourse until the late 1980s (Yang, "Re-membering the Korean" 123). South Korean feminist groups such as the Korean Council for the Women Drafted for Military Sexual Slavery by Japan worked with other Asian feminists groups to raise awareness about this issue both in their own countries and internationally. They sought redress for former "comfort women" by interviewing survivors in South Korea and China, publishing their testimonies, and seeking the support of international institutions like the United Nations (Yang, "Revisiting the Issue" 54). Attesting to this national shift away from publicly silencing the comfort women issue, "over one hundred women in South Korea... registered with the Korean

⁶ "The estimates range widely between 20,000 and 400,000" (Soh, "The Comfort" 23).

government as former comfort women” by December 1991 (Kim, “History and Memory” 74).

The comfort women issue gained an international audience following “a series of United Nations Commission on Human Rights (UNCHR) hearings that began in 1992” (Soh, “Prostitutes” 69). The UNCHR launched their own investigations—assigning Special Rapporteurs or investigators to the case—following the public testimonial of a former *wianbu*, Hwang Kum-ju, “in Geneva to the UNCHR Sub-Commission for the Prevention of Discrimination and the Protection of Minorities” in August 1992 (70). In Western feminist discourses “comfort women” became interchangeable with “sex slave” with UNCHR reports in 1996 and 1998 depicting the comfort women system as “sexual slavery” and comfort stations as “rape centers” (70-1). This conflation of “comfort women” with sex slave was an attempt to highlight women’s rights as human rights and bring international support to a form of violence against women (Ueno 88). After the early 1990s, dominant Western feminist discourses represent “comfort women” as girls and young women coerced, kidnapped, and tricked into “sexual slavery by the Japanese military during World War II” (Lee Hahm). In response, Japanese conservatives “in an effort to deny state responsibility” opposed the figure of the sex slave with the figure of the prostitute in which “comfort women” were compensated for their voluntary labor (Soh, “Prostitutes” 70).

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The last two lines of the Palisades Park comfort women memorial reads, “Known as ‘comfort women,’ they endured human rights violations that no peoples should leave unrecognized. Let us never forget the horrors of crimes against humanity.” These two lines of the inscription connect the suffering and violences endured by “comfort women” to larger human rights violations. The “horrors” the women experienced as sex slaves are classified as “crimes against humanity.” Furthermore, this identification with sex slave and its “international acceptance and

common usage, would emerge only in the 1990s in the post-cold war world politics of human rights” (Soh “The Comfort” 72). Since then, Korean survivors of the comfort system and their supporters have become “the most persuasive and omnipresent advocates of women’s human rights” (K. Moon “South Korean” 125). The movement has achieved success at least “in terms of raising awareness, presenting formal petitions to government and international institutions, building coalitions, and obtaining media coverage... [achieving] enormous visibility within just a few years” (125-6). However, the internationalization of the issue within a universal women’s human rights framework, I argue, fails to interrogate the heteronormative Western rhetoric that continues to be deployed to address women’s rights as human rights.

A pervasive logic of liberal multiculturalism undergirds this universal human rights framework. Though universal categories like women’s rights as human rights serve “some key strategic purposes for activists trying to build a transnational campaign because it allowed them to attract allies and bridge cultural differences,” these campaigns cannot come at the expense of disengaging with the role intersecting power structures play in producing the very lived realities in which the activists are campaigning against (Keck and Sikkink 172). Within a universal human rights framework, “comfort women” are seen merely as examples to support the shared sexist oppression that all women face, with this sexist oppression manifesting in different ways simply due to differences in cultures. However, as Women of Color Feminist theorist and activist Angela Davis argues, “Cultures are not politically neutral. A multiculturalism that does not acknowledge the political character of culture will not... lead toward the dismantling of racist, sexist, homophobic, economically exploitative institutions” (Davis 47). Thus, these static and essentialist notions of cultural differences, which a multicultural narrative of human rights evokes, fails to address the sociopolitical structures that have come to shape

and continue to reshape culture itself. “The production of multiculturalism,” argues Asian American Studies scholar Lisa Lowe “forgets” history” (Lowe 86). The universalizing of the comfort women issue, often deemed solely a by-product of a primitive and backwards sexist Japanese culture, erases the emergence of the comfort women system during a time of Western imperial expansion in Asia (Fujime 136).

The comfort women system emerged from the modern licensed prostitution system introduced in Japan during the late 1860s and the Prostitution Abolition Movement that began in the 1880s (Fujime 136, 49). Since opening its borders in 1868 to capitalist-driven, imperialist Western influences, Japan began to modernize. In the process, it adopted and “introduce[d] a European-style licensed prostitution system” (136, 8). At the behest of the Russian and British militaries, prostitutes serving white military personnel in Japanese ports like Yokohama, Nagasaki, and Kobe underwent “compulsory venereal disease examination[s]” (138-9). Reports of medical malpractice, state-sponsored abuse, and criminalization contributed to the fear, violence, and shame these women experienced (140-1). In the Gunma Prefecture, the Japanese Prostitution Abolition Movement sponsored by Christian civil rights groups, began seeing prostitutes as transgressors and violators of norms, undeserving of the benefits of civilization, and argued that the state needed to criminalize prostitution not support it through legalization and taxation. (149, 153-5). Some argued that since they were a “completely different [inferior] race than Japanese people” that taxation would allow prostitutes to earn civil rights despite their inferiority (154-5). Under this heteronormative Western logic, Japanese prostitution abolitionists asserted that prostitutes who failed to conform to Western ideals of womanhood be excluded from the privileges and protection of the heteronormative state. Sexuality is not only deployed “in nation-state formation,” Transnational feminist theorist Jacqui Alexander argues but “the complicity of the

state... in the manufacture of the citizenship normativized within the prism of heterosexuality” is essential “to the project of nation building” (Alexander 181). Similarly, these abolitionists adopted Western ideals of dignity and purity not only for Japanese women, but for the empire as well, and “desired to spread [these ideals] throughout Japan” (Fujime 154, 7). Many Japanese women who supported the Prostitution Abolition Movement supported Japanese expansion as a civilizing imperial project to lead the “barbaric” Chinese and Korean women, still relegated to concubinage and prostitution, towards “civilization” (i.e. white, heteronormative Western ideals of women’s dignity and purity) (158-9). As Japanese aggression continued from the Korean peninsula to Manchuria, the abolitionists advocated for a “Pure Japan” free of venereal disease and “urged the Japanese government to emulate American military protection policies enacted during the First World War” to model its own colonial prostitution systems after (159, 164). Thus, a comfort women system was born from a movement that upheld the Western ideals of purity and dignity, of not only Japanese women, but an ever-expanding empire.

These same heteronormative Western ideals of purity and dignity, which allowed some Japanese women to be excluded from the state while fueling Japanese imperialism, are evoked in international forums to offer redress for the comfort women issue. When apologizing for Japan’s war crimes, Japanese Prime Minister Tomiichi Murayama uses a similar rhetoric of women’s purity and dignity. During the remembrance of the fiftieth anniversary marking the end of World War Two, the Prime Minister offers his apology:

[The] problem of the so-called ‘wartime comfort women’ is one scar, which, with the involvement of the Japanese military forces of the time, seriously *stained* the *honour and dignity* of many women. This is entirely inexcusable. I offer my profound apology to all those who, as wartime comfort women—

suffered emotional and physical wounds that can never be closed [emphasis added]. (UN Sub-Commission).

This notion that the honor and dignity of women are stained as a result of their sufferings as “comfort women” invokes a hauntingly similar narrative of women’s purity that needs to be safeguarded or has the potential to be defiled. Furthermore, a similar narrative is echoed in the United Nations report regarding “violence against women, its causes and consequences” by Special Rapporteur Radhika Coomaraswamy. The report addresses the question of Japan’s moral responsibility surrounding the comfort women issue. The Special Rapporteur urges the Japanese government “that it is time to restore the *dignity of those women* who have suffered so much [emphasis added]” (UN Economic and Social Council). In its title, the report adopts the feminist rhetoric of “violence against women” to support the redress movement and connect this to other women’s movements organizing against violence. However, the heteronormative ideology of women’s dignity and purity, which shores up imperial projects, is in no way questioned. States universalize “liberal feminist political agendas that dovetail neatly with its own expansionist practices. Imperial rescue narratives are neutral neither in intent nor in design” (Alexander 186). Thus, feminist movements to connect comfort women issues with contemporary and historical violences experienced by women are co-opted by the state under the guise of universal human rights. Thus the restoration of the dignity and honor of “comfort women” is also a politically-charged imperial project of rescue. In this way, I argue that a human rights framework fails to address the function of heteronormativity in empire building and its continued complicity within the project of empire.

The United States has deployed this human rights framework to address the comfort women issue and in the process, renders itself a neutral arbiter for justice while continuing to shore up its influence in the region. In December 1996, the

United States Department of Justice announced that it would be placing suspected Japanese war criminals on a “watch list.” In the press release, the Director of the Office of Special Investigations notes that the increase in the international community’s interest in the issue has made it possible to name the suspects and in doing so “the United States government is demonstrating that it remember the victims and their suffering, and that it wants to deter others from committing such heinous acts” (U.S. Dept. of Justice). The United States positions itself as the beacon of human rights and justice that other civilized Western states can model themselves after. In this way, the United States justifies the policing, surveillance, and militarizing of its borders to protect itself and the rest of the world from those deemed a threat, such as those on the “watch list.” As Transnational and Postcolonial Feminist scholar Inderpal Grewal argues “human rights became not a means of ensuring the rights of individuals or collective subjects but rather a claim of good governance by states... showing that the juridical power could become governmentalized and move outside the plane of sovereignty” (Grewal 122). The United States, as a result, situates itself as the protector and champion of human rights, while expanding and justifying its own global sovereignty.

Under the guise of a human rights intervention, on July 30, 2007, the United States House of Representatives passed Resolution 121 to continue to exert its global sovereignty. The United States, positioned as the defender of human rights, “commends Japan’s efforts to promote human security, human rights...as well as for being a supporter of Security Council Resolution 1325.” With the mention of this Resolution that Japan supports, it appears that human rights is seen as something a state can easily adopt on paper but just as easily reject in practice (H.R. Doc. No. 110-121). Furthermore, the House recognizes that the “United States-Japan alliance is the cornerstone of United States security interests in Asia and the Pacific and is fundamental to regional stability and prosperity” (H.R. Doc. No. 110-121). The resolution

makes very clear that the continued human rights violation of *wianbu* is not the central issue. Rather, the interests are maintaining Japan's role as an ally in extending and securing U.S. imperial power in Asia and the Pacific.

This speaks hauntingly to the history of the international (i.e. Western) community's response to the war crimes committed by the Axis powers during the Second World War. For example, the Western Allied Powers addressed Germany for its war crimes capturing "the attention of the [Western] world in 1946" with the Nuremberg trials (W. Park 120). On the other hand, the Allies largely dismissed most of the Japanese war crimes committed in Asia against Asian women and men during the Tokyo Trials (W. Park 121). However, the comfort women issue for white Dutch settler women in Semarang of the Dutch East Indies, present-day Indonesia, was addressed in the Batavia military court (Soh "The Comfort" 20, 22). The white Dutch settler women belonged to the colonial propertied, upper class and thus their sexual violation by Japanese (i.e. non-white) soldiers marked a "racial transgression" and defilement of their white heteronormative womanhood (22). The Asian women, who were trafficked to Indonesia, and the native Indonesian women who also experienced sexual violence did not receive such a trial (Tanaka 82-3). These women are denied access to white, heteronormative notions of womanhood, and thus were and are never deserving of a trial in the eyes of Western Allies. Instead, the Tokyo Trials "were wrapped up with unseemly speed" with little representation and input from the affected Asian states (Park 122, Tanaka 87). "Advocates for peace treaties establishing relations between Japan and other Asian countries pressed all parties to sign quickly so as to reinforce regional barriers against expanding communism" (Park 122). Addressing the interests of Asian women, in particular, were neglected in favor of advancing the anti-communist interests of the United States. Following the war, "the occupation of Japan became the exclusive province of the United

States" (121). Though initially working towards complete demilitarization of Japan, the United States proceeded to "remilitarize so that [Japan] could serve as an anticommunist stronghold capable of protecting U.S. interests in Asia" fostering democratization and aiding Japan's economy (121-2). The United States' Resolution 121 passed by the House, masked by human rights rhetoric, echoes this history of prioritizing the imperialist interests of the United States. The House Resolution insists that Japan follow the "recommendations of the international community with respect to the 'comfort women'" (H.R. Doc. No. 110-121). With the erasure of this history, the United States' recommendation seems to bolster universal human rights in the region rather than its own interests. Though, once again, this recommendation places the interests of *wianbu* in the hands of the "international community" that has failed them during the Tokyo Trials and continues to this day.

Not only does a human rights framework cement Western nations, like the United States, as the protector and arbiter of universal human rights, but it reinforces the binary of Korea as victim and Japan as perpetrator. From the perspective of the international community, South Korea is seen only as a victim to Japanese colonization and Japan's continued denial of the comfort women issue. However, "the South Korean government's priorities for state-building, national security, and economic development, over any concern for the social welfare of women... have determined policies regarding prostitution" (K. Moon, *Sex among Allies* 41). South Korea, too, is complicit in adopting a heteronormative Western rhetoric of protecting women's dignity to sustain the trafficking of marginalized women to the U.S. military bases located in South Korea. However, "The president of the [Korea Special Tourism Association] claimed that their organization plays an important role in preventing GI harassment of Korean women... 'If it hadn't been for us, there would be sexual violations, maybe rapes'" (Hughes, Chon, and Ellerman 907). The dignity of certain

Korean women are seen as being something that needs to be preserved at the expense of trafficking and exploiting other women from developing countries, in addition to the Korean women already trafficked to U.S. military bases (901, 905-6). The women serving as prostitutes near U.S. military bases in South Korea have been unable to access the support of the international community as the comfort issue has been able to through the narrative of human rights. Not only are these women and their supporters pushing back against their own victimized government's complicity and active participation in sustaining these bases but also against the United States, deemed the neutral arbiter and champion of human rights (K. Moon, "South Korean" 135-6). Therefore, only with frameworks that can address the intersections of interlocking racist, heteronormative, imperialist systems can a more complicated story of the comfort women issue emerge, beyond a human rights narrative deployed to advance the interests of states.

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