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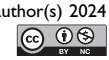

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Coloniality and decoloniality in 'comfort women' memory activism: Transnational and transgenerational truth-telling practices in Australia

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Abstract

This article explores the truth-telling practices of 'comfort women' memory activism through the lens of coloniality and decoloniality. It examines how the colonial legacy has silenced and marginalised the voice of survivors and activists in their past and ongoing pursuit of truth and justice. This study discusses the transnational and transgenerational aspects of truth-telling practices with a focus on memory activism in Australia. Australia's historical connections to 'comfort women' and diasporic space for decolonial encounters have enriched memory activism in Australia. The article highlights that truth-telling practices of survivors and activists have challenged the coloniality of power, knowledge and gender by valuing marginalised voices, contesting colonial imaginaries and constructing collective memory for the decolonial present and future. It suggests decolonial praxis as a direction for 'comfort women' memory activism in transnational and transgenerational spaces.

Keywords

comfort women, memory activism, truth-telling, coloniality, decoloniality

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Introduction

The term 'comfort women'[1] is a euphemism for wartime sex slaves, reflecting Japanese militaries' perspectives of 'colonised women's bodies to service and soothe Japanese military men' (Lee, 2023, p. 6). Before and during the Second World War, the Imperial Japanese army forced around 200,000 young women and girls, mostly from Asian countries and some from European countries, into sexual slavery. Their stories were not known to the world until Kim Hak-soon, at the age of 67, spoke up about her experience of being drafted to a comfort station in China in 1991. The half-century-long silence resulted from numerous structural factors, including world politics and social stigma attached to the victims of sexual violence (Carranza Ko, 2023). Survivors' and activists' long pursuit of truth and justice has been impeded by 'conflict with legacies of Imperial Japan and androcentric nationalism' that trivialised women's experiences as a source of nationalist discourses (Lee, 2014, p. 7) and anti-feminism both in Korea and Japan (Aya, 2017; Kwon, 2017).

The violations experienced by 'comfort women' have still not been redressed in the way the victim-survivors and activists have demanded. A controversial 2015 Korea–Japan agreement, which declared that the longstanding 'comfort women issues' were resolved, without the voice of victim-survivors in the process, reignited memory activism in Korea and across the globe. The agreement included the removal of the Statues of Peace, which 'symbolise the survivors' long search for justice' (UN News, 2016). The Statue of Peace of a seated young girl in traditional Korean clothing was first erected in Korea in 2011, and identical or different copies of statues have been placed across Korea and beyond. Taking down the statues from public spaces means silencing victim-survivors and activists (Shim, 2023).

The focus of this paper is on how coloniality relates to the experience of 'comfort women'. The majority of 'comfort women' are from colonised Korea and other Asian and Pacific countries invaded by the Imperial Japanese military. Thus, the paper aims to answer the following questions: 1) How does coloniality inform our understanding of 'comfort women' issues, particularly past and ongoing truth-telling practices? 2) How is decolonial praxis entangled in 'comfort women'-related activism?

I focus on transnational and transgenerational truth-telling practices of Australian or Korean survivor-activists and Korean migrant activists in Australia. Australia's history intersects with 'comfort women' issues in several ways. Significantly, New Guinea, which had been an Australian territory, reportedly had 'comfort stations' of 3,000 women during the Battle of Rabaul in 1942. Immediately after the war, Australia held trials on Japanese criminal charges under the War Crimes Act of 1945, but failed to investigate gender crimes against 'comfort women' by excluding crimes against Japanese or people from Japanese colonies such as Korea (Nelson, 2007). Australia has also been a significant site of 'comfort women' activism, including a leading activist, Jan Ruff-O'Herne (1923–2019), a Dutch-Australian survivor of Japanese military slavery. Korean first- and second-generation migrants in Australia have actively engaged in 'comfort women' activism in partnership with Korean and Australian communities using their transnational identities, capacities and positions (Noh, 2021). In this article, I expand discussions of memory activism, understood as 'strategic commemoration of

the past to challenge dominant views on the past and the institutions that represent them' (Gutman & Wüstenberg, 2022, p. 1070) by exploring how these might contribute to building a decolonial past, present and future (Castillo, 2022; Maldonado-Torres, 2007).

Coloniality and decoloniality in 'comfort women' issues

Lived experiences of 'comfort women' were shaped by imperialism and colonialism, as most of them were from Japan's colonies, including Korea (1910–1945) and Taiwan (1895–1945), and occupied territories in the 1930–1940s. Although these colonial occupations have ended, memory activism surrounding 'comfort women' and attempts to redress this legacy has been impacted by ongoing coloniality. Maldonado-Torres (2007, p. 243) articulates the differences between colonialism and coloniality as follows:

> *Coloniality, instead, refers to long-standing patterns of power that emerged as a result of colonialism, but that define culture, labour, intersubjective relations, and knowledge production well beyond the strict limits of colonial administrations.*

This paper highlights how coloniality and decoloniality are entangled in the lived experiences of 'comfort women' survivors and activists. Coloniality has a significant impact on the politics of knowledge production (Mignolo, 2007). Its pervasive impacts are observed in privileging European and Western ideas and approaches to modernity and reinforcing dominant epistemologies (Bhambra, 2014, 2023; Escobar, 2007). This paper examines present-day memory activism through the lens of 'decoloniality', which highlights the collective process of undoing the coloniality (Castillo, 2022; Maldonado-Torres, 2016). What is essential for decolonial praxis is 'delinking' from Western forms of knowledge production (Mignolo, 2020; Mignolo & Walsh, 2018) and promoting pluriversality by valuing subaltern and othered knowledges (Castillo, 2022; Walsh, 2012). Decoloniality examines 'who generates which knowledges and for what purposes, and what or whose knowledges are considered legitimate or valued' (Newman, 2023, p. 1232). Acknowledging the complicated dynamics of power and knowledge beyond the simple binary between the coloniser and the colonised is critical to deconstructing, reconnecting and reconstructing decolonial practices (Bhambra, 2023). The power of decoloniality lies in provoking critical reflection (Mafile'o et al., 2022) and developing alternatives that reflect the lived experience and views of affected people (Newman, 2023). Therefore, decoloniality is suggested as 'an orientation to a praxis of living' (Mignolo, 2020, p. 615).

The following sections explore how power and knowledge dynamics have silenced 'comfort women' survivors and activists and how memory activism has engaged decolonial practices. While there has been significant recognition of European colonialism, the Japanese colonial legacy has been overlooked. Japan controlled its colonies through oppressive colonial rule and exploited colonised people and resources for war. As a non-Western imperialist country, Japan promoted the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere[2] on the grounds of racial and cultural affinities, claiming a self-appointed role as 'the defender against Western imperialism' (Choi, 2003, p. 332). Japan imposed this vision on colonised people, but with discriminatory treatment by ethnonationality.

For example, it ratified the International Convention for the Suppression of the Traffic in Women and Children in 1925 but did not apply the treaty when recruiting women into the military from its colonies, excluding them from its territorial application (Tai, 2020).

Colonial hierarchies therefore also involve gender, sexuality, body politics and racism. Sexism and misogyny have often been associated with racism in the colonial system (Mohanty, 2003). Gendered violence, as experienced by 'comfort women', has been widely used as a colonial tool (Mack & Na'Puti, 2019). Invading other lands and raping women who have been objectified has been described as the 'gendering of colonial imaginaries' (Schiwy, 2007, p. 275). These legacies continue after the end of formal colonialism in the ongoing coloniality of gender, which has 'subalternised' women through intersectional oppression (Lugones, 2010). The coloniality of gender can elucidate the dehumanisation and sexual violence that 'comfort women' experienced and the gendered process of addressing this issue. After the war, male-dominated collectives in Korea saw the 'comfort women issue' as a 'humiliating and shameful memory' (Lee, 2023, p. 6). Korean patriarchy therefore increased victim-survivors' invisibility and sufferings after the war (ICJ, 1994; Lee, 2014).

Silencing through the politics of power and knowledge

Coloniality is evident in the overlooked history and ongoing struggles of 'comfort women'. Their stories could be shared only after 50 years. Power dynamics in international relations, which continue to reflect colonial patterns, have neglected 'comfort women's' stories and memories of survival (Hicks, 1995; Lee, 2014; Miyamoto, 2023). After the Second World War, Japanese war crimes were not fully investigated despite their scale and severity. Only a small number of European women who had been held as prisoners of war in the Dutch East Indies (now Indonesia) brought Japanese officers to trial after. There was no prosecution on behalf of Indonesian women who suffered similar experiences (Miyamoto, 2023). Nor were Japanese gender-based crimes against 'comfort women' separately discussed at the International Military Tribunal for the Far East in 1946 for crimes committed during the Second World War (Miyamoto, 2023). Hicks (1995) suggests that Western countries conveniently pardoned Japan because of its strategic importance for anti-communism in Asia. Japan also wanted to hide 'comfort women issues' to keep its victim status concerning the atomic bombings (Lee, 2014). Even when compared to other war rapes, such as the 1937 Rape of Nanking that involved mass murder and rape of Chinese local people during the Nanking invasion by the Imperial Japanese Army, 'comfort women issues' have been ignored and repressed (Miyamoto, 2023).

In the post-war period, Korean nation-building sought to exclude the memory of 'comfort women', who were seen as associated with its colonial past. This past was perceived as caused by a lack of modernity as the country attempted to pursue a Western development path, similar to the Japanese development model (Watson, 2007). This colonial concept of modernity and development (Escobar, 2007) hindered the possibilities of recognising violent colonial histories. Androcentric nationalism, which prioritised patriarchal values and national interests over

women's voices and perspectives, also silenced former 'comfort women' (Carranza Ko, 2023; Lee, 2014).

However, despite these gendered colonial structures, Korean feminist scholars and citizens have continued to make 'comfort women' visible (Carranza Ko, 2023; Lee, 2020). The first public testimony of Korean survivor Kim Hak-sun broke the long silence, provoking other victim-survivors from Korea and other countries to come forward with their stories. Victim-survivors' stories were shared at the International Public Hearing concerning Post-war Compensation of Japan in 1992 (Hicks, 1995). The International Commission of Jurists (ICJ) investigated this issue in 1994 by sending a mission to the Philippines, South Korea, North Korea and Japan, concluding that 'the Japanese military was responsible for taking women by force and deceit to serve in the comfort stations and the Japanese Government should therefore take full responsibility for these gross violations of fundamental human rights' (ICJ, 1994, p. 18). The United Nations (UN) referred to the 'comfort women' as experiencing 'sexual slavery' in the report of the Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women in 1996 (UN Economic and Social Council, 1996, in Carranza Ko, 2023). Victim-survivors' silenced experiences began to be heard and acknowledged in national and international space for the first time.

Thus, victim-survivors' narratives have been significant for revealing this history and constructing a collective memory of gendered violence during war. While this violence has now been recognised as a war crime, with the UN Human Rights Committee calling for Japan's official apology and reparation in 2014 (UN OHCHR, 2014), the Japanese government still refuses to accept any legal liability for this war crime. It has also demanded the removal of the Statues of Peace in South Korea and other countries, because of the Statues' significance to memory activism and preventing the denial of the experience of 'comfort women'. The South Korean government has also failed to protect the victim-survivors' rights and dignity. It made a 2015 agreement with Japan to 'settle' the 'comfort women issue' by receiving monetary compensation and agreeing to take down the Statues of Peace. Korean citizens and activists, including the Korean Council, heavily criticised the 2015 agreement, as it was made without the Japanese government admitting its official and legal responsibility and without the involvement of the victim-survivors in the process, perpetuating injustice (Carranza Ko, 2023; Shim, 2023). In 2018, the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination also emphasised the importance of a victim-oriented approach, noting that the 2015 agreement lacked the involvement of victims, thus adversely affecting their dignity (UN OHCHR, 2018). Recently, the UN Special Rapporteur on Truth, Justice and Reparation, Fabian Salvioli, reconfirmed the need to address the treatment of 'comfort women' as human rights violations connected to Korea's colonial legacies during his visit to Seoul in 2022 (UN OHCHR, 2022). However, South Korean President Yoon Seok-yeol suggested moving on to strengthen Korea–Japan ties, overlooking the unresolved suffering Japanese colonial rule caused Korean people, including 'comfort women'.

There are also continued attempts to deny the historical truth of 'comfort women's' violation, which has been established through survivor testimonies, academic research, and national and international juridical reviews (Hicks, 1995; Howard, 1995; ICJ, 1994; Simpson, 2000). History denialists and Japanese nationalists have defamed victim-

survivors as 'liars' or 'money grabbers' to invalidate the integrity of their stories (Dudden, 2022). Some academics joined this denialism, refuting Imperial Japan's operation of 'comfort stations' (Kim, 2021; Morris-Suzuki, 2021). One of the well-known and recent academic scandals is an article written by Professor Mark Ramseyer, Mitsubishi Professor of Japanese legal studies at Harvard Law School. His article claims that the 'comfort station' system was based on indenture contracts, implying legitimacy by suggesting that young women understood the nature of the work (Carranza Ko, 2023). This scandal raised a question about the knowledge generation system supported by national interests-driven research funds and scholarships for English-speaking and highly positioned scholars (The Korean Council, 2021).

However, victim-survivors and activists continue to challenge the repression and distortion of collective memories of the colonial past. In the following sections, I discuss how stories of victim-survivors and activists engage in decolonial truth-telling that demonstrate the linkage between colonial history and contemporary inequalities (Bhambra, 2023). I draw on survivors' memoirs and testimonies, archived data by the Korean Council and the Friends of 'Comfort Women' in Sydney, and publicly available reports and websites of the three Korean activists' groups based in Sydney, Melbourne and Brisbane: Friends of 'Comfort Women' in Sydney (FCWS), Friends of 'Comfort Women' in Melbourne (FCWM) (previously Melbourne 'Comfort Women' Memorial Task Force), and Justice and Human Rights for All in Brisbane (JHRA).

Truth-telling of victim-survivors

Victim-survivors' truth-telling played an important role in bringing this issue to national and international attention. The Japanese government has denied its involvement in the recruitment of the 'comfort women'. In its report to the UN in February 2016, it repeated its claim that 'forceful taking away of "comfort women" by the military and government authorities could not be confirmed in any of the documents that the Government of Japan was able to identify' (UN OHCHR, 2016). The absence of documentary evidence is due to Japan operating the comfort station system through verbal orders (Kim & Cho, 2023) and discarding relevant documents at the end of the war (Hicks, 1995; Kim & Cho, 2023). Korean feminist researchers and activists established the Korean Council for Women Drafted for Military Sexual Slavery by Japan, now the Korean Council for Justice and Remembrance for the Issues of Military Sexual Slavery by Japan (the Korean Council throughout this article), in 1990 to collect oral histories of survivors. In 1991, Kim Hak-soon publicly confronted Japan's denial of recruiting 'comfort women', stating: 'you say nothing like that happened, but I survived all that and I am living evidence' (The Korean Council, 2021). Following her testimony, other survivors spoke out. While most former 'comfort women' were killed or abandoned at the battleground (Carranza Ko, 2023), 240 survivors have registered with the Korean government, and 107 agreed to tell their stories so they could be publicly available (Kim & Shin, 2023). Speaking out was accompanied by pain, but victim-survivors' vivid and coherent stories have been powerful pieces of evidence of Imperial Japan's organised crimes (Tai, 2020).

Oral testimonies of victim-survivors have contested the state- and male-centric perspectives on gendered colonial violence and the prevailing colonial legacy in the production and validation of knowledge. The international community valued victim-survivors' oral stories, which have been conventionally regarded as a marginalised form of knowledge (Bhambra, 2023; Lander, 2019). For instance, their truth-telling practice challenges Japan's claim that there is no documented evidence of Imperial Japan's roles in the 'comfort stations' system. Illustrative are the following quotes, which show how the recruitment involved abduction and deception through colonial institutions controlled by the Imperial Japanese army (Miyamoto, 2023):

> *When I was 16 years old, Japanese officials told us that girls 15 and older should not stay in Korea but should go to Japan to work at military supply factories or become military nurses. (Kim Soon-duk, in Simpson, 2000, p. 37)*

> *One day my Japanese school teacher visited my home and asked me if I wanted to go to Japan to further my education and do something 'good' for the Emperor. I was flattered but was too shy to question his motives. So I said yes. When I showed up at the school grounds for the appointment, at least 50 other girls had gathered there. (Kang Duk-kyung, in Simpson, 2000, p. 15)*

It turned out that drafted girls were regarded as military supplies for Imperial Japan's army. The objectification of women's bodies and their dehumanisation by Imperial Japanese soldiers demonstrates the genocidal desire of colonial power (Maldonado-Torres, 2012). Victim-survivors shared their experiences of violence:

> *Verbal abuse from the soldiers was constant and unbearable. They told me 'Chosun' (a traditional name for Korea) people are liars, distrustful, sub-humans and have no ancestors. No one cares; no one can trace if Chosun people are killed, the soldiers said. (Kim Yoon-shim, in Simpson, 2000, p. 45)*

> *A soldier said that Korean race should be eradicated from the earth. (Moon Pil-gi, in Simpson, 2000, p. 66)*

The situation was not much different for European girls:

> *We started protesting loudly and with every gesture we could think of. We told them we would never allow this to happen to us, that it was against all human rights; that it was against the Geneva Convention and that we would rather die than allow it. The Japs stood there laughing at us. 'We are your captors', they told us. 'We can do with you what we like.' (Jan Ruff-O'Herne, Ruff-O'Herne, 2008, p. 78)*

The coloniality of gender was evidenced in women's subsequent shaming and stigma. This began with their intimidation in the camps that led them to be silent for decades:

> *As soon as we arrived at the Bogor prison camp, the Japanese told us that we were never to tell anybody, ever, or what had happened to us. If we did, we would be killed, along with our families. The silence began then and there, the silence that was forced upon us. (Jan Ruff-O'Herne, Ruff-O'Herne, 2008, p. 108)*

The silence was also related to social shame associated with sexual assault. A recent study suggests that most survivors chose not to disclose their experience as 'comfort women' to protect their family members from stigma or degradation (Kim & Shin, 2023). Victim-survivors explain:

> *None of the returning women admitted having been comfort women, claiming to have worked in factories or hospitals. (Kim Bok-dong, in Hicks, 1995, p. 207)*

> *Until recently, I had suffered from venereal disease. My parents and brothers didn't know what I had been through. My father was upset merely because his only daughter wouldn't get married. (Yi Yong-su, in Howard, 1995)*

However, victim-survivors could identify the source of their long silence and reclaim their voice through the act of sharing their stories. After a half-century of silence, Kim Hak-soon's testimony broke the silence of others in Korea and across the world. The transnational nature of 'comfort women' violations led to the first Asian Solidarity Conference on the Issues of Military Sexual Slavery in 1992 and the Asian Tribunal on Women's Human Rights in 1994. Jan Ruff O'Herne, a Dutch-Australian survivor, also spoke about her story inspired by Korean survivors' stories:

> *I felt that the story I had carried for all those years, in my heart, could now be told. The courage of those Korean women gave me courage. At long last, it could be told. (Jan Ruff-O'Herne, Ruff-O'Herne, 2008, p. 136)*

Jan Ruff-O'Herne was a survivor of Japan's occupation of the Dutch East Indies. She made a public speech at an international public hearing on Japanese war crimes in 1992, at the Women's Tribunal in 2000, and at the US House of Representatives in 2007. Jan Ruff-O'Herne understood that her European origin and Australian residence could create international attention:

> *I could see that the Asian 'comfort women' needed the support of European women. This had happened to Dutch girls too. Rape in war must be recognised as a war crime. Perhaps when a European woman came forward, Japan would take notice. (Jan Ruff-O'Herne, Ruff-O'Herne, 2008, p. 137)*

Her non-Asian voice had a significant impact:

> *When I spoke out in Tokyo, the whole world was there, wanting to know the truth. They weren't taking that much notice before because they were 'only Asian comfort women.' It's terrible to say, but that's the truth. (Jan Ruff-O'Herne, in Flitton, 2014).*

This different level of attention and credibility given to testimonies from Asian and European survivors can be explained by continuing global coloniality that decides whose voice and truth counts (Agostinho & Thylstrup, 2019; Mignolo, 2020). Jan Ruff-O'Herne knew the strategic significance of her position as a Dutch-Australian and stepped forward to elevate other victim-survivors' claims and 'to stop these atrocities

from continuing' (Ruff-O'Herne, 2008, p. 138). This suggests the complexity of decolonial practices of allyship and amplifying marginalised voices while fighting the hierarchies embedded in the coloniality of truth.

Beyond gaining recognition of the international community, 'comfort women' survivors also played a role in shaping the discourse around gendered violence and injustice at the international level (Lee, 2020). For example, a rape survivor from the Bosnian war noted the continuities between the wartime rape experienced by the 'comfort women' and that of women in the Bosnian conflict:

> *When I heard Kim Bok-dong, I felt a terrible void in my soul because what happened to the Korean 'comfort women' during World War II is still happening to women today. (Fadila Mesmiservic at the UN World Conference on Human Rights in Vienna in 1993, in the Korean Council, 2021, p. 264)*

These victim-survivors' courageous testimonies led to the first conviction for 'rape' as a war crime at the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia in 1996. Lee (2020) also suggests that 'comfort women' movements contributed to highlighting of war- and conflict-related violence against women in the UN's 1995 Beijing Platform for Action, which was a landmark framework that served as a reaffirmation of the global commitment to advancing women's rights.

At first, the discourse around 'comfort women' highlighted their victim status as those whom the colonial state and patriarchal society had not protected. The emphasis on the victim's status can be effective for gaining moral superiority and seeking justice; however, it can also yield contentions and further victimisation (Lastrego et al., 2023). As the movements have grown, some victim-survivors have actively sought truth and justice as peace and human rights activists. For example, Jan Ruff-O'Herne's inspiring activities led to the 2006 'Stop Violence Against Women' campaign with Amnesty Australia, Korean survivors and activists in Australia. The 2006 campaign could forge a relationship between Australian and Korean activists and broaden the understanding of the 'comfort women' issue by framing it within the contexts of human rights and feminist discourse (Song, 2013). In addition, some Korean survivors have been devoted to the fight for truth and justice, including Kim Bok-dong (1926–2019) and Gil Won-ok (b. 1928) who established the Butterfly Fund to support survivors of gender-based violence in armed conflicts across the globe, including the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Uganda, Palestine and Vietnam. In particular, the Fund's support for victims of sexual violence by Korean soldiers during the Vietnam War is valued as an act to highlight the shared values of peace and women's rights beyond nationalist frames (The Korean Council, n.d.).

Victim-survivors' truth-telling practice has been a decolonial process of reclaiming their voices and constructing collective memory in solidarity beyond national borders. Valorising their oral testimonies challenged Western-centric knowledge systems (Lander, 2019) and the androcentric nationalist framework that had marginalised their voice and experiences (Lee, 2014). Their lived experiences of suffering from the intersectionality of 'gender, ethnonationality and social class' (Tai, 2020, p. 132) were

articulated, represented and reformulated through memory activism, as detailed in the following section.

Decoloniality and activists' truth-telling

Individual and experiential truth became the collective memory of survivors and contemporary women. In Korea, out of 240 registered victim-survivors, 231 have passed away, and nine survivors are now in their 90s. With a sense of urgency, activists have kept tackling the experience of 'comfort women' with survivor-activists. Activist groups have also highlighted the importance of raising awareness through campaigns and public education and remembering history by including it in textbooks and establishing memorials and museums. These activities to call for remembrance have grown outside of South Korea in the United States, Germany, Canada, China and Australia (Dudden, 2022; Yoo et al., 2023). Activism outside Korea focuses on solidarity campaigns beyond nationalist sentiment (Carranza Ko, 2023). These movements outside of Korea have disrupted the silence about 'comfort women' in the Global North, including Australia.

Australian 'comfort women' campaigns were initiated by the establishment of Friends of 'Comfort Women' in Australia, which now has two associations in Sydney and Melbourne. With the significant presence of Jan Ruff-O'Herne, Australian activist groups, primarily consisting of Korean first- or second-generation migrants in Sydney, Melbourne and Brisbane, have actively engaged in 'comfort women'-related activism. These groups' activities include the erection of Peace Statues in Sydney in 2016 and in Melbourne in 2019, a memorial mural in Brisbane in 2022, street demonstrations, cultural events and peace education for future generations (FCWM, n.d.; FCWS, 2023; JHRA, n.d). Among diverse forms of memory work, this paper draws attention to commemorative statues and documentary films as a way of telling the truth beyond temporal and spatial boundaries (Horsti, 2019; Yun, 2023). Such activities can be understood as 'performativity' to construct 'a recognisable subject' of those who lived 'an unrecognisable life' as a result of colonial and gender politics (Butler, 2009, p. 12–13).

The installation of Statues of Peace in Sydney and Melbourne was critical for regenerating memory activism and public interest in Australia. In particular, the replica Statue of Peace in Sydney was the first statue erected outside South Korea after the 2015 agreement between Japan and Korea and was established despite Japan's attempt to halt its construction. These Statues of Peace in Australia demonstrate 'the power of transnational activism when the Korean government of the day failed to uphold the wishes of Korean survivors' (Jaung & Noh, 2022, p. 124). These Statues of Peace are part of an international movement to recognise the 'comfort women', with 145 in South Korea and 34 worldwide (Carranza Ko, 2023). The Statues of Peace have a figure of a young girl who symbolises the victims of sexual slavery, with hope represented by a bird on her shoulder. It also has an empty chair, which invites others to engage in solidarity (Yun, 2023). While most statues look similar, some statues include victims from other countries, depicting the transnational nature of the issue and solidarity. For example, in Shanghai a statue depicts a Chinese girl next to a Korean girl; another statue in San Francisco includes three girls from Korea, China and the Philippines holding

hands (Dudden, 2022). In Australia, activist groups have taken care of Peace Statues to protect them from any possible damage since the unveiling ceremonies, regarding them as a symbol of courageous truth-telling and peace without war crimes (FCWM, n.d.; FCWS, 2023). Activists' care of the Peace Statues shows the symbolic power of the commemorative artefacts and the embodied engagement in activism (Shim, 2023).

In memory activism, statues are highly valued as the materialised presence of historical narratives (Gutman & Wüstenberg, 2022). In the 'comfort women' movement, the Statue of Peace has been significant for bridging the past and the present, as it communicates the history of 'comfort women' and associated emotions to the public (Yun, 2023). For example, the symbols of the statues provoke dialogue and reflection: the mosaic shadow in the shape of an old woman represents the fragmented lives and prolonged hardship of 'comfort women', the tight-lipped face portrays her determination for justice despite her vulnerability expressed in her bare and unrested feet, and the inclusion of an empty chair invites the viewers to contemplate their roles in advocating for justice (Shim, 2023; Yun, 2023). The Statue of Peace can serve as a 'critical reckoning' with the colonial past, shared suffering and victimhood, and the associated responsibility (Castillo, 2022). As the name denotes, the Statue of Peace aims to prevent war crimes from occurring again. Japan has demanded the removal of Peace Statues in Korea and other countries, insisting they threaten bilateral relations by generating negative perspectives against Japan (Yun, 2023). Japan's attempts to prevent the recognition of 'comfort women' are in stark contrast with countries such as Germany, which has erected war memorials that recognise Nazi Germany's war crimes (The Korean Council, 2021).

Another form of activists' truth-telling is the screening of documentaries. Documentaries can reconstruct the present by merging the responses of film producers and viewers with victim-survivors' testimonies (Kim, 2022). Australian activist groups have hosted screenings of documentary films, including *The Apology*, *Shusenjo: The Main Battleground of the Comfort Women Issue* and *My Name is Kim Bok-dong*, released in 2016, 2018 and 2019 respectively (FCWM, n.d.; FCWS, 2023; JHRA, n.d). These documentary films have been used to enrich the public's understanding of the 'comfort women'. Given their truth-seeking nature, documentaries have shaped the audience's awareness of historical facts as well as generated emotional responses (Rabinowitz, 1993). In addition, films can be understood as a social practice (Schiwy, 2007). Film documentaries' temporality, which entails 'the past and the future into the act of bearing witness', is suggested as critical for building solidarity (Horsti, 2019, p. 7). 'Story-hearers and story-sharers' can co-produce knowledge by reflecting on the relations between history and current events and between individuals and socio-cultural and political power structures (Mafile'o et al., 2022). In this way, memory activism draws on memory to 'transform society from below' (Gutman & Wüstenberg, 2022, p. 1071).

The memory work and 'comfort women' activism discussed above sheds light on how the coloniality of power and knowledge can be contested. The continuing web of colonial power is demonstrated by ongoing attacks on truth-telling practices such as stopping installations of Peace Statues in the web of colonial power politics (Dudden, 2022; Lee, 2023) and distorting established narratives about the 'comfort women' (Kim, 2021; Morris-Suzuki, 2021). Activists' responses to silencing and denialism of colonial violence have included articulating why and how certain knowledge is generated and

circulated through public statements and events. 'Comfort women' movements have provided a platform for victim-survivors' voices by constructing the audience and enabling environment (Lee, 2020). The centrality of the perspectives and experiences of victim-survivors seeks to challenge gendered and racialised colonial imaginaries (Schiwy, 2007).

Commemorative statues and documentary films can function as decolonial practices. The public can participate in constructing new narratives by witnessing the past and appreciating ongoing memory activism (Horsti, 2019; Mafile'o et al., 2022). Feelings that are invoked enable the public to reflect on their common vulnerability and to share collective responsibility for redressing suffering (Castillo, 2022). This section elucidates that memory activism has expanded its reach to many of the oppressed and marginalised beyond its original scope and target through the collective processes of fostering critical reflection (Mafile'o et al., 2022) and a decolonial attitude (Escobar, 2007).

Transgenerational and transnational truth-telling and activism

Korean migrant activists have played a role in strengthening transnational and transgenerational activism in Australia. The diaspora position of activist groups increases their encounters with different political, social and cultural influences, which shape both their vulnerability and agency (Schiwy & Weber, 2017). Their participation in 'comfort women' activism involved accessing their transnational and transgenerational positionality and locating the movement beyond national borders. Examples include campaigning for city council motions in Sydney in 2007 and organising invited talks of a Korean survivor-activist, Gil Won-ok, in Sydney and Canberra in 2008 and 2009 (FCWS, 2023; Song, 2013). After the 2015 agreement, their joint efforts targeted collecting petitions for the '100 Million Signatures Campaign for the Resolution of the Japanese Military Sexual Slavery Issue' in 2016, as detailed in a narrative history of the Korean diaspora peace movements in Australia and New Zealand (Jaung & Noh, 2022). More recently, in 2021, the groups hosted two webinars. One was on 'Activism, inspiration and legacy' led by Associate Professor Tina Dologopol at Flinders University, who participated in a mission for the ICJ in 1993 and the Tokyo Women's Tribunal in 2000 as one of the chief prosecutors. The other was on 'Australian national responsibility for the "comfort women" of Papua New Guinea' by Senior Lecturer Caroline Norma at RMIT (FCWM, n.d.; FCWS, 2023). These webinars and educational workshops covering broader gender and human rights issues are designed to raise awareness in the Australian public. Framing 'comfort women' campaigns as transnational women's rights issues reflects these activists' 'symbolic terrain of meaning-making' as diaspora (Schiwy & Weber, 2017).

In Australia, Korean migrant activists' narratives have also been enriched by the transgenerational legacy of Jan Ruff-O'Herne. The late Jan Ruff-O'Herne's family was deeply engaged in transgenerational activism. Jan Ruff-O'Herne's daughter, Carol Ruff explained: 'there is a danger that these stories will die with my mother's generation … We can't give up on this; otherwise people like Mum will become ghosts of the past' (Stephens, 2018). Jan Ruff-O'Herne's granddaughter

also joined this storytelling by directing and starring in a short historical film called *Daily Bread*, which draws on Jan's memoir *Fifty Years of Silence* (Asia Policy Point, 2019). In addition to the historical linkage of Australia to 'comfort women' through its role in New Guinea in the Second World War, the collaborative relationship between Jan Ruff-O'Herne's family and Friends of 'Comfort Women' in Sydney and Melbourne enhanced Australia's 'comfort women' memory activism. Thus, linking the past, present and future in 'comfort women' memory activism can involve critical reflection and a liberating process for participating migrant activists. This contributes to what Jaung and Noh's (2022, p. 127) study on Korean migrants' activism notes as forming 'new and radical relationships in our respective settler-colonial states of residence'.

The activist groups' transnational and transgenerational activism has created a space for voices and perspectives of 'comfort women' in Australia. The efforts of activists have been influenced by their experiences as migrants to settler-colonial nations and their engagement with discussions on human rights and feminism.

Conclusions

'Comfort women' activism demonstrates how the lived experiences of going through gendered violence, being silenced and reclaiming their voices are entangled with the past and ongoing coloniality in the present. This article points to the need for greater attention to coloniality and decoloniality in understanding the experience of 'comfort women' and the struggle of survivors and activists in claiming truth and justice. It argues that their truth-telling practices have been silenced and marginalised through colonial, imperial and gendered knowledge systems and androcentric nationalism. This highlights how the continuity of coloniality plays a crucial role in deconstructing and reconstructing truth-telling.

Through exploring the relations between decolonial praxis and the practices of survivors and activists, I have revealed how truth-telling practices, such as oral testimonies, campaigns, memorial statues and documentary films, have attempted to shift how people feel and relate to 'comfort women' issues, from silencing and stigma to visibility and solidarities across colonised societies and borders. The transformative nature of decoloniality, such as reclaiming voice that challenges imperial militarism and formulating collective memory to build decolonial futures, is crucial for critiquing and dismantling coloniality in the present. The article also demonstrates that the transnational and transgenerational nature of 'comfort women' activism in Australia occurs in the web of colonial histories and a diasporic space. As a matter of decolonial liberation, women's rights and peace, the 'comfort women' activism and memory work transcends temporal and spatial boundaries.

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This material is the author's own original work, which is not currently being considered for publication elsewhere.

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Notes

1. Many scholars and activists, including myself, use quotation marks to indicate that this was a euphemistic term created by Japan's Imperial army to deceive and downplay the nature of sexual enslavement. In this paper, I sometimes put the phrase 'comfort women issues' in quotation marks when I want to note it as a euphemism given the difficulties associated with recognising and addressing 'comfort women's' experience of violation. In other cases, I use 'comfort women' issues to generally mean 'comfort women'-related matters.
2. The Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere was announced by the Japanese Empire in 1940 to establish a pan-Asian union of Japan, its occupied territories and allies from East Asia, Southeast Asia, South Asia and Oceania under the slogan 'Asia for Asians' (Magpantay, 2024).

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