

Patriarchal Education and Erasure of the “Comfort Women”: Addressing Historical Amnesia in California High School Curriculum

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She was at home when the Japanese police called. It was a normal day--at least as normal as a day in wartime can be. She was simply helping her father's business, with only her thoughts and worries about her recently drafted fiance to keep her company. The police told her she *had* to come because they had a job for her. *It's mandatory, they said, under the General National Mobilization Law¹ in Taiwan. Don't worry, they said. You'll just be mending clothes and preparing meals for the soldiers.*

And so she went. During the daytime, she did do laundry and cooked meals for the soldiers. But then, as soon as the sun set, she and the other women were summoned and confined to a room. Man after man came in and did whatever they wanted to these women, who wept and cried until all the soldiers decided they were done. She escaped her brutal reality for a brief few hours of sleep, only to rise with the sun, start the day, and endure the endless night that followed.

After the war, her fiance returned and they married. Fifty years passed, and she could not find a way to tell her husband about what she had suffered during the war. That is, until the fateful day in 1991 when she learned she wasn't the only one. She finally told her husband what had really happened during the war, that she was not just a daytime cook and launderer for the Japanese soldiers.

“At night, I died,” she told him. “I was dying. I felt as if I was dead.”²

The above paragraphs retell a true story from a 1996 interview with an anonymous Taiwanese “comfort woman.” “Comfort woman,” a translation of the Japanese word *ianfu*, is a euphemistic term for the nearly 200,000 women who were systematically forced into sexual slavery by the Japanese military in countries they occupied during World War II,

¹ “Testimonies of the Comfort Women.” Asian Women's Fund. Accessed 08 March 2019.

² Direct quote taken from testimony.

including Korea, the Philippines, China, and Indonesia.³ This anonymous Taiwanese woman is only one of the hundreds of “comfort women” who came forth after being emboldened by Kim Hak-sun when she became the first comfort woman to come forward in 1991.

Rarely does a woman’s decision to break the silence mean a clean, straightforward response from society. The last two decades have seen Japanese governments refuse to acknowledge their responsibility in establishing any form of institutionalized rape⁴, while survivors have grappled with issues of recovery, remembrance, and restitution.

The struggle continues today as the last of the comfort women pass away⁵, entrusting future generations with ensuring that the stories they told do not fade into obscurity. Undoubtedly, one of the most powerful mechanisms of keeping these stories alive is through education. Not only does education honor the memories of these victims, but it also instills future generations with the idea that atrocities like these are a violation of fundamental human rights. As the popular adage says, those who do not learn history are doomed to repeat it.

However, as history is currently being taught in American classrooms, it seems we are indeed doomed: it was only in 2016 that California became the first U.S. state to include comfort women in its public high school social science curriculum. Outside this new curriculum, comfort women do not fit within mainstream dialogue about World War II. Artist ChangJin Lee, who creates “Comfort Women Wanted” posters to raise awareness, says it best: “Whenever there’s a war we hear about the suffering of soldiers, yet we hear almost nothing about the plight of women who are kidnapped and raped...throughout history women like this are too often invisible.”⁶

This paper will examine how patriarchal structures have worked to exclude comfort women from historical narratives, and consequently, how this exclusion leads to miseducation, creating widespread ignorance that only works to perpetuate patriarchal dominance. First, I will discuss how the California curriculum framework proposal makes an effort to disrupt patriarchal structures by including comfort women but falls short in its execution. Then, I will examine the societal and political factors that have contributed to the shortcomings of the proposed California curriculum and

³ “Who are the ‘Comfort Women?’” Accessed 23 January 2019.

⁴ Haejin Choi. “South Korea’s surviving ‘comfort women’ spend final years seeking atonement from Japan.” *Reuters*, Nov. 2018.

⁵ Lucy Williamson. “Comfort women: South Korea’s survivors of Japanese brothels.” *BBC News*, May 2013.

⁶ “Comfort Women Monuments.” Accessed 04 February 2019.

the exclusion of comfort women in general. Finally, we will consider what constitutes a just and equitable curriculum for teaching this issue--one that equips educators and students alike with the necessary tools to recognize and challenge sexism even beyond the comfort women's stories.

Case Study: The California State Board of Education's Social Science Framework

On July 14, 2016, California State Superintendent of Public Instruction Tom Torlakson announced that the State Board of Education had officially approved a new History-Social Science Instructional Framework for California. In the official news release, communications director Bill Ainsworth makes a special note that "many topics in the Framework sparked spirited debates," including 'comfort women' in World War II, the Bataan Death March, the Armenian Genocide, and the roles of LGBTQ+ Americans in U.S. history.⁷ Ainsworth also noted that the Department of Education (CDE) received an "unprecedented amount of public comments" during the review period; the online survey garnered over 700 public comments, and the CDE received over 10,000 email comments.⁸

The sheer volume of public reaction to this proposed framework should dispel any doubts about the perceived importance of addressing social issues in secondary education. As curriculum theorist Michael Schiro notes, education is fundamentally a social process, with the classroom serving as an arena in which children are prepared for adulthood within society. "[Education's] fundamental responsibility is to prepare for the fifty years of adulthood," he writes, "not just for youth."⁹ Schiro's comments help explain why so many people would reach out to express their opinions on the CDE's framework: what students are learning in the classroom shape their identity, perspective, and propensity to support certain views, both now and later on in life.

If education plays a crucial role in adolescents' intellectual and social development, then curricula should accurately reflect the problems students will encounter in the real world. Furthermore, curricula should provide strategies for thinking about and grappling with such issues, lest students leave the education system without the appropriate tools to face reality and even create a better society. Thus, information about

⁷ Bill Ainsworth. "Superintendent Torlakson Announces Approval of History Social-Science Framework." *CA Dept. of Education News Release*, July 2016.

⁸ Ainsworth

⁹ Michael Schiro. *Curriculum Theory: Conflicting Visions and Enduring Concerns*, 2013.

controversial yet historically significant narratives—like that of comfort women or the Armenian Genocide—should not have to be sought out via outside resources. Rather, these stories should be brought to students in the classroom for two primary reasons. First, it is unlikely that students will be seeking these histories out in the first place, and even if they do, it will be difficult to find adequate information about excluded narratives. Second, a classroom environment allows students to safely explore these sensitive, weighty topics with a teacher’s guidance.

On the surface level, the CA Board’s decision to include comfort women seems to be cause for celebration: after all, students all over the state will soon know who the comfort women were. However, upon a closer look at the actual framework’s text, it becomes clear that students are only obtaining cursory knowledge:

“Comfort women” is a euphemism that describes women who were forced into sexual service by the Japanese Army in occupied territories before and during the war. Comfort Women can be taught as an example of institutionalized sexual slavery; estimates on the total number of Comfort Women vary, but most argue that hundreds of women were forced into these situations during Japanese occupation. On December 28, 2015, the governments of Japan and the Republic of Korea entered into an agreement regarding the issues of Comfort Women. Two translations of this document can be found at...¹⁰

These are the four brief sentences that the Department of Education found sufficient to cover the nuanced, complicated topic of sexual slavery. By boiling down such a complex topic, the framework fails on two front. First, the framework lacks the contextualization appropriate for such a complex social controversy, and second, it lacks detailed, thoughtful guidance for schools and their teachers.

Perhaps some of us suspect that the Department of Education simply did not have enough room to provide detail and guidance in this 61-page framework for tenth grade teachers. After all, this is just a curriculum framework, used to outline the basic topics teachers must address in tenth grade world history. As long as we look at the paragraph in isolation, this seems plausible. However, to better understand to what extent the Department of Education provides guidance to teachers, we must compare the paragraph about comfort women to the coverage of other sensitive topics.

¹⁰ “History Social Science Framework: Chapter 15: World History, Culture, and Geography.” Accessed 12 February 2019.

One does not have to look far to find a comparable topic: the genocide of millions of Jews in the Holocaust during World War II. Of course, the Holocaust and the trafficking of comfort women as sexual slaves are very different, but we should not get caught up in comparing the gravity of either issue or arguing that one was “worse” than the other. Without a doubt, they are both examples of the immense cruelty human beings enact on each other. Both topics therefore require facilitated discussions about how and why an entire government can commit such a heinous crime against humanity, especially since students are unlikely to have been previously exposed to atrocities of this scale and nature.

So, how is the Holocaust presented in the framework? There are five detailed paragraphs addressing a range of concerns: the framework recommends teachers use “sensitivity and careful planning,” and encourages teachers to use memoirs, recorded testimonials, and primary-source documents so students can develop a “deeply personal understanding” of the Holocaust. It also gives a brief overview of how the German Nazi machine carried out the Holocaust in the context of the war. Finally, the framework explicitly reassures teachers that although the topic is “incredibly challenging to teach...it is important for teachers and students to examine how, in wartime, ordinary people might do terrible things.”¹¹

Within these paragraphs, the framework achieves goals that the California Department of Education outlined when the revision process started in 2018.¹² In particular, the CDE mandates that social science curriculum frameworks promote “values of civic engagement and responsibility,” and describe how recommended content can be delivered to intentionally build skills such as critical thinking, communication, and “constructing new understandings of knowledge.”¹³ Without such recommendations for teachers, the curriculum framework leaves too much room for any individual teacher to merely insert their own opinions about a topic, which takes away the students’ right to critically examine evidence presented and form their own beliefs.

Let us return to the paragraph dedicated to comfort women. The text surrounding the paragraph raises the first red flag: the paragraph is abruptly introduced after a discussion about the Battle of Midway and Japanese-American fighting and immediately followed by details about

¹¹ History Social Science Framework.

¹² “Updated History-Social Science Framework Timeline.” Accessed 12 February 2019.

¹³ “Curriculum Framework and Evaluation Criteria Committee Guidelines for the History-Social Science Framework for California Public Schools Update.” Accessed 13 February 2019.

the dropping of atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Unlike with the Holocaust, there is no attempt to address how something like this takes place institutionally, as the Japanese military used “comfort stations” as part of its military strategy¹⁴ and legitimized the kidnapping and luring of women to be sexual slaves. Although there are dozens of testimonials from comfort women as well as published memorials, the CDE does not encourage teachers to use them for students to develop a “deeply personal understanding.” They do include two hyperlinks about the 2015 “agreement,” which the framework conveniently avoids describing.¹⁵ Furthermore, the framework never reminds teachers that the topic of institutionalized rape is challenging to teach, and it never explicitly states the importance of learning about comfort women.

Evidently, the coverage of comfort women fails to meet the goals that the Department of Education set for itself. Consequently, the curriculum framework fails the teachers and students it is supposed to guide. When we learn about atrocities like the Holocaust, we learn why it is wrong to discriminate on the basis of race or religion, and we thus condemn genocide. However, when we do not talk about the violation of women’s rights, especially in extreme cases of institutionalized rape, something goes amiss in our education. While the CA Department of Education’s inclusion of this topic in the first place is commendable, its framework ultimately falls short by not exploring the role of sexism in atrocities against women. In a way, the absence of such detail sends the message that violating a woman’s rights is somehow not a violation of human rights at all.

Comfort Women in Curricula: A Dangerous Dialogue

Why exactly do students not learn about comfort women with the same depth and intention as they do about the Holocaust? I argue that talking about comfort women in a high school classroom is what feminist education theorist Leila Villaverde calls a “dangerous dialogue”: a topic or issue that is considered controversial, or a historical event that has been marginalized to maintain social control and complicity with dominant

¹⁴ The Japanese military created comfort stations to improve soldier morale, control soldiers’ sexual behavior, “prevent” rampant rape in occupied territories, and prevent venereal diseases. Williamson (2013).

¹⁵ The framework is referring to a 2015 backdoor deal between South Korea and Japan, which announced that the comfort woman issue was “finally and irreversibly solved.” Abe has yet to make an official public apology on behalf of Japan, and no comfort women were consulted for this 2015 agreement. Source: “The Comfort Women Movement in the US.” Accessed 23 January 2019.

discourse.¹⁶ Consequently, the labeling of the comfort women issue as a “dangerous dialogue” is precisely what works to perpetuate patriarchal education. That we learn about the Holocaust but not about the comfort women supports the idea that *societal resistance to acknowledging gender-based oppression*—rather than the traumatic nature of an event itself—leads to the exclusion of comfort women from social studies education. As we will explore shortly, including comfort women in high school curricula encounters so much resistance because it goes against the dominant discourse of our patriarchal society, which follows political decisions made by men and consistently dismisses stories of female oppression.

A controversy involving American textbook company McGraw Hill sheds light on why exactly the topic of comfort women is a dangerous dialogue. In December 2014, 50 Japanese diplomats and scholars demanded that McGraw Hill make revisions in a college history textbook that included two paragraphs about comfort women. McGraw Hill ultimately rejected their request to change the passage to say “comfort women” were not actually sex slaves; they were merely wartime prostitutes.¹⁷ One of the scholars, Nippon University Professor Ikuhiko Hata, said that “prostitutes have existed at every time in human history, so I do not believe that comfort women are a special category.” Hata also disputed the widely accepted estimate that comfort women, on average, serviced 20-30 men a day. “If that were true, soldiers would have had no time to fight the war,” he told the *Washington Post*. “They would have been too busy going to the brothel all the time.”¹⁸

In response to these 50 Japanese revisionists, American scholars fired back with facts. In a letter, 20 American scholars highlighted the evidence backing McGraw Hill’s passage on comfort women: various UN Human Rights reports have concluded that Japan had indeed used comfort women as military sexual slaves. The surviving comfort women have been acknowledged as real by prior Japanese administrations and countless Japanese historians and journalists.¹⁹ And although Japanese authorities attempted to hide or destroy evidence of war crimes at the close of the war, there are still 142,000 documents relevant to Japanese war crimes--a

¹⁶ Leila Villaverde. *Feminist Theories and Education Primer*. 2008.

¹⁷ Magdalena Osumi. “Fifty Japanese scholars attack McGraw-Hill, U.S. academics on ‘comfort women’ issue.” *The Japan Times*, Dec. 2015.

¹⁸ Anna Fifield. “Japanese historians contest textbook’s description of ‘Comfort Women.’” *Washington Post*, March 2015.

¹⁹ The 1993 Kono Statement was the first time the Japanese government acknowledged that the military was involved in establishing brothels across Asia.

number that the Japanese scholars say is “too low” to conclude comfort women were really sex slaves.²⁰

Historian Suzanne O’Brien notes that “privileging written documents works to exclude from history... the voices of the people comfort women represent--the female, the colonized, and the racially and ethnically oppressed. These people have left few written records of their experiences, and therefore are denied a place in history.”²¹ By excluding female voices, Japanese scholars take a perspective informed by what Villaverde calls *androcentrism*.²² Androcentrism is the tendency to place masculine perspectives as the foundation for societal beliefs and practices, consequently discrediting the voices of female experience. The voices of Japanese men trying to bury historical evidence has far outweighed the voices of hundreds of comfort women who have come forward with their own stories. This is a pattern that still holds true today for countless women who come forth about their sexual assault stories, only to have their stories doubted and their accusers absolved.

It is clear that foreign Japanese scholars and government agents have a political agenda in suppressing any and all talk about comfort women internationally. The Wall Street Journal notes that the McGraw Hill dispute is the latest of Prime Minister Abe’s efforts to tone down negative depictions of Japan internationally; in 2015, he dedicated \$500 million in the federal budget to promote “global understanding” of the country, especially in “reframing” (read: covering up) its wartime history.²³

It is likely that the comfort women issue being a dangerous dialogue made the CA Board of Education hesitant to add too much detail in the curriculum framework’s description of comfort women. Before the Board approved the new framework, they were met with vicious backlash.²⁴ Many Japanese Americans protested the definition of “comfort women” as sexual slaves, directly paralleling the McGraw Hill controversy. A Change.org petition to call comfort women “well-paid prostitutes”

²⁰ Osumi 2015.

²¹ “Comfort Women Monuments.”

²² Villaverde, pp. 106.

²³ Alexander Martin. “U.S. Publisher rebuffs Japan on Comfort Women revision.” *Wall Street Journal*, Jan. 2015.

²⁴ Japan’s efforts to suppress any and all dialogue about comfort women extends far outside realm of education. In 2007, the Japanese government urged Japanese Americans to lobby Congressmen to reject House Resolution 121, which requested that the Japanese govt. Accept responsibility for crimes committed against comfort women. There was even a federal lawsuit against the CA city of Glendale, because it was the first US city to install a monument in remembrance of comfort women. (“The Comfort Women Movement in the US.”)

garnered nearly 7,000 signatures. “Comfort women issue is what news media created,” commented one signatory, Ferguson Shun. “News media always search for something dramatic for their headlines.”²⁵ Another signatory, Hiroyuki Miyoshi, expressed concern that his children would face animosity in school based on what he believes is an “unsettled point in history.” To Miyoshi, the matter between two East Asian neighbors has “no place in California textbooks”—notably, the social science curriculum includes *world* history.²⁶

The lack of detail and guidance in the California curriculum framework thus makes more sense when considering the immense political pressures the Board of Education faced. Nonetheless, the exclusion of comfort women works to perpetuate patriarchal structures, precisely by reinforcing androcentric standards of evidence: female testimonies are not enough to “prove” that comfort women were wronged by the Japanese military. Without sufficient “evidence” and in the face of vehement opposition from Japanese deniers at home and abroad, the Department of Education found it unfeasible to include comfort women’s full stories in an official curriculum framework, let alone provide teachers adequate guidance for teaching the topic.

Moving Forward: What an Inclusive Curriculum Framework Looks Like

As *Los Angeles Times* journalist Victoria Kim writes, “California classrooms are becoming battlegrounds in which recent immigrant groups wrestle over whether and how their ancestors’ stories are told to the state’s next generation.”²⁷ Thus, we must now ask ourselves this: how can we design a curriculum that breaks down patriarchal standards, without leaving these voices who deny history unchallenged?

Villaverde advocates for the adoption of feminist pedagogy, which she summarizes as teaching that “engages students in political discussion of gender injustice.”²⁸ In this way, Villaverde goes directly against what the CDE framework has done. Rather than shying away from politics in these issues, educators must readily acknowledge the fact that discussing gender injustice is inherently political, and that there are strategies to engage students of all different backgrounds—including those of Japanese

²⁵ “Write ‘Comfort women were well paid prostitutes, sold their service to US Army as well.’” Change.org petition. Accessed 10 March 2019.

²⁶ Victoria Kim. “Comfort women and a lesson in how history is shaped in California textbooks.” *The Los Angeles Times*, Feb. 2016.

²⁷ Kim 2016.

²⁸ Villaverde, pp. 121-2.

descent. She describes specific standards that facilitate fair political discussions: proceeding nonjudgmentally, promoting collective and ongoing discussion, challenging oppressive power relations, and generating political agency. When applied to education about comfort women, this theory would require teachers and students to engage in genuine, fact-based discussions, while remaining cognizant of the ethnic diversity many California classrooms represent.

Luckily for California, someone is already working on a curriculum guide that I believe fits Villaverde's model. In January of 2019, San Francisco activist group Comfort Women Justice Coalition (CWJC), in conjunction with the Korean American Forum of California (KAFC), created an entire teacher's handbook to supplement the shortcomings of the CA Board curriculum guide.²⁹ According to Phyllis Kim, executive director of KAFC, members of both CWJC and KAFC will pitch their handbook to every school district in California. Additionally, they are willing to provide any educator with materials, regardless of geographic location; they have already received requests from as far as Germany.³⁰ The Glendale Unified School District³¹ in Los Angeles was slated to review the material last month and will begin the process of adopting new instructional materials within the next two years, according to district communications director Kristine Nam.

The 13 page curriculum was written by 3 historical scholars and reviewed by two veteran educators, and provides all the materials necessary for teaching such a sensitive and impactful topic, including Powerpoint presentations, group discussion questions, news articles, YouTube clips, memoirs, and a list of credible resources and extensive research.³² One source is a recent video showing surviving comfort women speaking out against the 2015 agreement between South Korea and Japan, in which state officials dismissed the comfort women issue as "finally and irreversibly resolved," without ever consulting a single survivor. This is the very same agreement that was merely hyperlinked in the CDE curriculum framework.

Much like the recommendations made by the CDE for teaching the Holocaust, the CWJC curriculum's guidelines help contextualize the

²⁹ Agnes Constante. "New teacher's guide on 'comfort women' to be distributed across California schools." *NBC News*, Jan. 2019.

³⁰ Constante 2019.

³¹ As mentioned earlier, Glendale is the city that was sued by the Japanese government for dedicating a statue to the memory of comfort women.

³² "Who were the comfort women and why is it so important to know about their struggle for justice?" Beverly Bisland, Sunhee Shin, and Jimin Kim. Accessed 23 February 2019.

comfort women's stories as emblematic of larger societal issues. Suggested discussion questions like "How are the crimes against the Comfort Women an ongoing issue?" and "Do victims of sexualized violence today still face shame and stigma from society?" are excellent examples of reframing the issue as a product of sexism, not a sin unique to Japanese soldiers during the war. This reframing works to reassure Japanese Americans that they are not being singled out for their history; rather, the conversation is shifted to examine how patriarchal structures are to blame.

When we fail to give context and thought to our discussion of comfort women—and when we fail to discuss comfort women at all in our high school classrooms—we are ill prepared to talk about sexism in all its forms, whether we are talking about large scale sex trafficking, sexual assault on college campuses, or gender discrimination in the workplace. In the 21st century, human trafficking has surpassed drug trafficking to become the second largest "business" in the world. The comfort women issue illustrates both the victimization which women have historically suffered, and how women continue to be as a disposable commodity. To address historical case studies of gender-based oppression like this one is by no means an easy task. Indeed, it is far easier to contribute to historical amnesia by leaving these discussions out of our classrooms altogether. However, if schools truly serve the purpose of equipping students to address contemporary issues, including sexism, the history of the comfort women must be taught with thought, sensitivity, and depth, putting the issue in the context of the historical and worldwide oppression of women. Our efforts to bring comfort women's stories to light are steps in the right direction, but it is only the beginning of our attempts to learn from our past, rather than burying it.

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