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Absent the Silently Invisible: Rethinking Model Victimhood under the “Comfort Women” System

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Abstract

(Re)visiting the testimony exhibition part of Women’s Active Museum on War and Peace in Tokyo, I focus on one testimony in particular. This testimony was given by a survivor of the “comfort women” system, a state-sponsored regime of military sexual exploitation and core institution in the Empire of Japan’s expansion 1932–1945. The testimony was then withheld before the exhibition opened. I approach this “withheld testimony” as an invocation of rupture to the time, space, and positionalities informing the museum narrative. The paper interrogates the interplay of the survivor’s act of withholding her testimony, the curatorial decision to represent the absence that followed on the withholding, and the disruption to the museum narrative that the withholding prompts. By exploring the withheld testimony as a speaking silence, visible emptiness, and present absence, the paper offers a rethinking of model victimhood under the comfort women system.

1. Rethinking model victimhood under the “comfort women” system

Silence and voice are in the feminist literature scrutinized as gendered sites of agency and performance (Parpart and Parashar 2019). By problematizing the supposedly emancipatory notion of “speaking truth to power” as a democratic problem whose means are not freely available to all, this highlights how “speaking for” from a position of privilege ventriloquises the silences of others and, thus, actively silences (Spivak 2010). The ethical problem that silences present to feminism is captured in the question about how it is possible to “give voice” without “speaking for” (Hutchings 2019, xii).

In addressing the performative aspects of silence and voice, attention productively shifts from a representational mode of analysis that separates social practices from the reality they are assumed to reflect to a relational approach to social practices as co-constitutive of reality (Kontturi and Tiainen 2007, 246). By differentiating

representation (following Elizabeth Grosz): “to present again in a different form, and to act on behalf or in place of something” (Kontturi and Tiainen 2007, 247) from a mode of analysis that makes historiography a product of the relation of a museum to its visitor, in this paper I elaborate on the problem of how to “give voice” without “speaking for.”

To explore the relational constitution of historiography, I visit Women’s Active Museum on War and Peace (WAM) in Tokyo. WAM collects testimonies about the Empire of Japan’s wartime sexual slavery system (Yoshimi 2000), which was silenced for nearly 50 years until the courageous survivor Kim Hak-sun came forward to testify to her experiences as a “comfort woman” in 1991 (Brownmiller 2002, xv). It does this to establish a historiography about the comfort women system against the Japanese government’s denial of responsibility for its past (Nishino et al. 2018).

WAM opened in 2005, 60 years after the war’s official ending in 1945 (Tai 2016, 35). The museum was opened to preserve the history and memory of the gender violence (Nishino 2007, 3) that subjected an estimated 20,000 (Hata 2018, 295) to 400,000 (Qiu et al. 2014, 38) women and girls to sexual subjugation in so-called “comfort stations.” These were located on and near the front lines (Nishino 2007, 1; Tanaka 2002, 11; Yoshimi 2000, 91) and formed a core institution in the Empire of Japan’s expansion 1932–45 (Hicks 1994;¹ Ueno and Sand 1999, 130).

Modeled after the Topography of Terror (Nishino 2007, 5), one of the most visited documentation centers of remembrance in Berlin,² WAM was established as a people’s initiative to influence state politics by creating an exhibition space dedicated to war crimes. Like the Topography of Terror, WAM both displays testimonies and other historical records and serves as a center of information, education, and empowerment, which aims to transform individuals into societally active citizens (Nishino 2007, 5).

WAM emerged as a part of the transnational comfort women redress movement (see Min et al. 2020), which was enabled by feminist achievements in international fora in the 1990s. In this, international law standards established possibilities for individual redress—as opposed to the previous standard of settlements that were negotiated by state leaders (Hein 2003, 134). In 1991, almost 50 years after the war’s official ending, courageous survivors filed a lawsuit in the Tokyo District Court to seek recognition for their ordeals by demanding legal justice (Watanabe 1994, 3). Nine years of preparations later, Women’s International War Crimes Tribunal on Japan’s Military Sexual Slavery emerged as the first People’s Tribunal of its kind as it centered women’s experiences (Dudden 2001, 592). Twenty years in retrospect, Women’s Tribunal is remembered for the most gendered judgment to have ever been made (Chinkin 2020).

WAM is the first and only museum of its kind in Japan.³ It gathers testimonies and documents the comfort women system and other histories of wartime sexual violence (Nishino 2007, 3). With limited availability of official documentation⁴ about the comfort women system,⁵ survivors’ testimonies take center stage in WAM’s exhibitions (Kimura 2008, 7). The museum displays survivors’ subjugation through testimony panels that are carefully crafted to portray the experiences as a part of each survivor’s life story, rather than to being reduced to an isolated wartime event (Watanabe 2015, 236). One such testimony panel measures roughly 60 × 85 cm and typically comprises a story and a few photographs (Watanabe 2015, 240). WAM aims “to represent the person as a whole, . . . rather than extracting the harsh experience in an isolated way” and testimony panels are written in the first person “to give visitors the feeling that they are listening to the testimony” (Watanabe 2015, 241).

WAM is located in an apartment-like space in a church building in central Tokyo. Apart from the testimony exhibition, it outlines an historical overview of the comfort

women system, hosts an archive with material about wartime sexual violence, and dedicates a special area to its founder, the journalist and feminist activist Matsui Yayori, who willed her assets to founding WAM (Tai 2016, 41).

Visiting WAM, at the exhibition's core, I am faced with what at first appears as an empty testimony panel with a caption that states that the testimony was withheld at the survivor's request before the exhibition opened. I initially find myself tempted to understand this silent emptiness as yet another piece of evidence that proves the ongoing contestation over the comfort women system's historiography, a proof of the survivor's hesitancy to testify, a moment that seems to, in part, almost reverse the "breaking of silence" in 1991. The withheld testimony, however, sticks and my mind starts pondering other possibilities to make sense of it, instead of simply assuming that it fails to maintain the silence breaking. In the absence of an established historiography, the survivors' coming out to testify to their experiences under the comfort women system is after all what enables this history to being remembered.

Without a story, this leaves me as a visitor without the possibility to approach survivors' testimonies in the representational mode by retelling them after my visit in the museum. This unsettles the practice of retelling stories as history that Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (2010) warns against, because it leaves intact the history of oppression that the stories feed into.

Relying on the possibility of redress (Hein 2003, 134), the comfort women system's historiography calls on survivors' testimonies to unsilence previously silenced histories (see Altınay and Pető 2016). To withhold the proofs that there were atrocities and that survivors are still alive—in a representational mode of historiography—refuses that possibility to unsilence. To acknowledge that there was a withheld testimony might, accordingly, appear as anti-feminist, since the gap that the withholding produces might be approached to compromise the rupture that broke the almost 50 years of silence.

To shift out of the representational mode that made me listen to the survivor's testimony in a listening-and-retelling mode based on the assumption that, to learn history, I first have to listen and then to retell, implies to shift out of the practice of reading and representing (presenting again—Kontturi and Tiainen 2007, 247) in a way that is external to my being in the world.

In the history of the comfort women system, this is crucial because of what Chizuko Ueno (2006; Ueno and Sand 1999) has named as a "model victim" narrative, which appropriates survivors' agency by feeding their stories about survival into a mode of sense-making that conforms survivors' stories to a standard narrative of innocence as opposed to providing nuance to the multiplicity of experiences of subjection to the comfort women system.

By making history ongoing and incorporating the visitor's sense-making practices, rather than assuming that the representations of the survivors in the testimony panels take a different form and occur on behalf or in place of their experiences (Kontturi and Tiainen 2007, 247), a relational mode of historiography withholds the possibility to affirm my visit to WAM as separate from the comfort women system's history.

If sovereign modes of representation—which are sustained by practices of separating identity from difference (Edkins 2000)—condition the modes of sense-making that connect the museum visitor to history by affirmation, a relational mode of historiography makes the museum visitor and history parts of an imaginary that withholds the possibility of affirming the visitor as separate from history.

Historiography—in a representational mode—is contingent on the availability of a story to be retold (see Altınay and Pető 2016) and an image for the visitor to mirror

themselves in (see Audette 1993). What the withheld testimony does is to withhold such possibilities of affirmation. By unsettling the possibility to represent as the condition to make sense of and relate to the comfort women system's history, the withheld testimony opens for a rethinking of knowledge production.

While representational modes of historiography reduce resistance to a question about having one's story and image recognized to establish the comfort women system as a part of national history (Watanabe 2015, 236) as a countermeasure against having one's existence denied in history revisionist accounts (Nishino et al. 2018), the withheld testimony opens for thinking apart from such a binary approach to identity and difference based on recognition and denial.

In addition to reducing the comfort women system's history to a product of the visitor's self-narrative and mirror image, a binary approach to identity and difference comes with the unfortunate implication of assigning the authorization of historiography to the same sovereign that established the comfort women system in the first place (see Prokhovnik 2016). This makes the differentiation of lives worthy of reckoning with (Tsukamoto 2023) from "bare lives" that (not who!) were possible to kill, yet not be sacrificed (Agamben 1998) in the war's aftermath the condition of possibility for establishing the comfort women system to begin with.

In response to the feminist argument that the withholding of a testimony would mean to withhold a piece of proof that the comfort women system ever existed, the withheld testimony unsettles the expectation that feminist resistance must operate by unsilencing previously silenced histories (Altnay and Pető 2016) by disabling "us" from undertaking such a project on the survivors' behalf (see Spivak 2010; Chingja 2018, 183). This redefines feminist resistance by shifting from a linear progressive ethics that is contingent on temporal rupture to differentiate the "before" from the "after" the silence-breaking and instead points to the dynamics of backlash (Faludi 1993; Nishino 2007, 2; Chinkin 2020) that are suggestive of a circular rather than linear temporality (see Hutchings 2008).

To center my own positionality, I turn to the expectations that I bring to the museum. To this end, in the paper, I use insights from music theory, art theory, and art photography to conceptualize the withheld testimony as a speaking silence, visible emptiness, and present absence. Elizabeth Hellmuth Margulis's (2007) work in music theory here helps me access the role of expectations by addressing historiography based on her insights about the role that silence plays in music. Similarly, Anna Held Audette's (1993) work in art theory inspires me to scrutinize the role of resources by exploring the demands that the blank canvas places on the artist. Robert Lyons (Lyons and Straus 2006) and Ly Daravuth (Reyum 2000), additionally, lend me insights about the relational constitution of historiography through their work in art photography.

2. A speaking silence

To begin with Hellmuth Margulis's (2007, 485–86) work on silence in music, silences are almost as important as the tones, as they condition the production of rhythm, which, repeated, is what makes the listener take an active part in the music. Silence, in her work, takes on the role of gaps that materialize in the place of expected continuations. Following Hellmuth Margulis, I assume that the withheld testimony takes on the role of a gap in the museum narrative.

By redirecting the focus on the gap from the tones (the history) to the rhythm (the relational production of historiography) by connecting the gap/withheld testimony to

the listener's active partaking in the music/historiography, the stakes of the withheld testimony shift from a missing history to the rupture in the relation of the history to the museum visitor that it prompts.

Against the accusation that it would be anti-feminist to acknowledge that one of the exhibited testimonies at WAM was withheld, as every piece of evidence about the comfort women system is needed to establish the system's history, the possibility of there being a withheld testimony to begin with relies on the affirmation of the exhibited testimonies. To assume that these are somehow insufficient to prove the horrors of the comfort women system would indeed be to take an anti-feminist stance.

The accusation that it would be anti-feminist to undermine the logic that the model victim narrative (Ueno 2006; Ueno and Sand 1999) operates by, which relies on the temporalization of what was before the silence-breaking and what came afterwards, assuming that there is no going back on the silence-breaking (Chinkin 2020), might be problematized by addressing the static conception of gender (Roof 2016) that informs the linear temporality (see Hutchings 2008) that produces feminist backlash (see Faludi 1993).

In this, the model victim narrative (Ueno 2006; Ueno and Sand 1999) relies on the assumption that the silence is forever broken (Chinkin 2020), while the revisionist political right suggests that there was no such thing as a silence to begin with, since the survivors voluntarily participated in the system and therefore were not violated (Ramseyer 2021).

The task that confronts the analyst is to scrutinize both "sides" of discourse without issuing critique. Returning to Grosz: "Critique always affirms the primacy of what is being critiqued, ironically producing exactly the thing it wants to problematize. But more than that, critique is a negative exercise. It is an attempt to remove obstacles to one's position" (Kontturi and Tiainen 2007, 255).

The backlash that defines the debates over the comfort women issue since their onset (Nishino 2007, 2; Chinkin 2020), in this view, results from the positioning of the one side against the other side. To reinforce one position in relation to the other position, rather than to acknowledge the grievances that spurred the debates to begin with, ends up affirming the primacy of what they critique, thus fueling the debates to the point of evoking backlash.

For Grosz, "a critique of patriarchal discourse . . . was necessary in the first place to leave open the option of something like feminist thought. But once feminist thought has erupted, it is important that it not be defensive, that it not be attracted to its lowest enemy rather than aspiring to something higher" (Kontturi and Tiainen 2007, 255). Against judgments about anti-feminism, drawing on Grosz, the danger does not reside in any potential "contamination by patriarchal thought, since we are already contaminated by patriarchy." The question, rather, is how to break out of the logic of patriarchy (Kontturi and Tiainen 2007, 255).

Inspired by Judith Roof (2016), who organizes the logic of patriarchy in gender regimes that separate what gender *is* from what gender *does*, I could approach the debates as a competition over plausible grounds for historiography, with the allegedly "lesser" comfort women system herstories juxtaposed against idealized national history, delivering poorly on expectations that are ill suited for them to be judged against. In this, invocations of historical "facts" (see Hata 2018; Mera 2018) would take on the role as producers of an idealized history and testimonies would take on the role of the lesser counterparts of that ideal (Eriksson 2023b).

To introduce the unexpected to highlight how the withheld testimony resists affirmation as neither idealized history nor the lesser counterpart of Roof's (2016) gender regimes to break out of the logic of patriarchy (Kontturi and Tiainen 2007, 255), I return to Hellmuth Margulis (2007). While Hellmuth Margulis and Roof both address unfulfilled expectations, Roof does this to establish a lack in relation to a regulative ideal, while Hellmuth Margulis, instead, highlights the role that expectations play in representational modes of sense-making. Thus, while Roof addresses the lack of feminist herstories in official history in a way that makes me expect that an addition of herstories would suffice to achieve a gendered national history (hence the stress to focus on the available testimony panels), Hellmuth Margulis's work, applied to the comfort women issue, foregrounds the role that expectations play not to make gender "complete" as a complementarity of feminine and masculine (her/hi)stories, but as a provocation to interrogate how the binary organization of herstories and history is produced to begin with (see also Eriksson 2023a). In this, it is the unspecified character of Hellmuth Margulis's gaps that unsettles the modes of representation that condition Roof's constitutive organization of gender.

3. A visible emptiness

Drawing on Robert Lyons's exhibition *Intimate Enemy: Images and Voices of the Rwandan Genocide*, which displays photographs of faces after the 1994 genocide on the Tutsi, Hutu, and Twa (Lyons and Straus 2006), I next introduce the genocidal dimension of the comfort women system (see Min et al. 2020) to illuminate how the expectations that guide a representational mode of historiography might take on a life of their own (Eriksson 2023b).

Lyons scrutinizes the expectations that inform representational modes of sense-making by questioning what we can claim to know based on photographs. His exhibition shows photographs of faces without immediately providing the viewer with the grounds for categorization that a representational mode of historiography requires. Lyons's intervention is set against the demonization that follows from sensationalized portrayals of genocide as "tribal" and aims to engage the common humanity in the encounter of the viewer and the photograph. Lyons's photographs depict convicted prisoners, presumptive prisoners awaiting trial, minors too young to be tried, survivors, court officials, and prosecutors. By separating the section of photographs from the list of plates that categorizes them, Lyons initially disenables differentiation of perpetrators from survivors.

While Lyons addresses practices of differentiating perpetrators from survivors, the ground for categorizing survivors that applies to the comfort women system is the criterion of chastity, which separates "innocent victims" from "willing prostitutes" (see Soh 2001, 2008). While to differentiate perpetrators from survivors might at a first glance seem different from passing judgment on survivors' sexual experiences prior to their subjection to a sexual slavery system, these practices might be equal in their impact on the possibilities of life in the war's aftermath for those who are deemed to be "unworthy" victims (see Tsukamoto 2023).

Lyons's intention is to (re)present human beings without categorizing them to make his audience ask questions from the space of ambiguity that arises in visual resemblances. By presenting his photographs without captioning them, Lyons hopes to collapse time and positionality so that past-and-present and perpetrator-and-victim come together as indivisible as the result of the constitutive impossibility of categorizing

human beings. In this way, portraits of the living—perpetrators and survivors alike—are understood to bear traces of those who perished (Lyons and Straus 2006, 32). Lyons, in this way, questions how humanity can be separated from inhumanity based on claims to knowledge and justice and challenges the assumption that knowledge can be produced based on visual resemblances. Testimonies of survival after subjection to the comfort women system, likewise, illuminate the inseparability of subjection—irrespective of prior sexual experiences—for survivors’ lives (Tsukamoto 2023).

While Lyons’s provocation seems to open for a rethinking of the relationalities of the viewer to the photograph/the museum to the visitor, it upon further scrutiny disregards the structural conditions that enabled atrocity to begin with. In a structural view, the uncategorized encounter of human to human that Lyons envisions relies on a representational mode in demanding resemblance of the viewer to the subject in the photograph/the museum to the visitor. Lyons also retains the possibility of categorization that is *de facto* offered in the possibility to turn to the captions that affirm survivors’ statuses as the condition for which there can be a relation in the first place by turning the pages in his visitors’ book (Edkins 2015, 28). Likewise, the space of ambiguity that arises in the resemblances of survivors and perpetrators, based on the possibility to categorize, ultimately relies on a lack of challenges to representational modes that inform dominant imaginaries as their limit condition to sustain sovereign power.⁶ In the comfort women issue, this applies to the grounds for judgment that make visitors affirm survivors’ testimonies as either worthy or unworthy (see Tsukamoto 2023).

WAM’s testimony exhibitions were initially divided by nationality so that nationals’ testimonies were exhibited together. While the first such exhibition was dedicated to testimonies that were given by survivors of Korean ancestry, the exhibition under scrutiny concerns the final country exhibition in WAM’s history, which was dedicated to survivors of Japanese origin.

Survivors of Japanese origin were until recently largely disregarded (Tsukamoto 2023) in both the transnational comfort women redress movement (see Min et al. 2020) and comfort women studies (Norma 2016). Even when the comfort women issue rose to the fore of international attention in 1991, as Kim Hak-sun and two fellow survivors testified and filed a lawsuit in the Tokyo District Court to demand apology and compensation for their ordeals (Brownmiller 2002, xv), the Japanese government admitted state involvement, and the International Criminal Court and the United Nations condemned the comfort women system as a crime against humanity, the comfort women system’s initial victims remained neglected. Survivors of Japanese origin were then excluded from the government’s atonement scheme and left unmentioned in the two reports that were published by United Nations rapporteurs (Coomaraswamy 1996; McDougall 1998), even though, in the first case it was ironically acknowledged that comfort stations were set up in Japan (Norma 2016).

While the withheld testimony is conditioned by the remaining testimony panels for its contextualization in the museum and the comfort women system’s history, it at once adds to the remaining testimony panels an opening for the majority of the victims, who remain unknown to the public (see Soh 2008, xiv), an acknowledgment akin to that of the unknown soldier’s monument (see Hicks 1994).

4. A present absence

Ly Daravuth’s installation *The Messengers* (Reyum 2000) forms a part of a group exhibition called *The Legacy of Absence: a Cambodian Story* and exhibits photographs of

faces after genocide. The messengers were children and teenagers who delivered messages for the Pol Pot regime in Cambodia during the Khmer Rouge. Daravuth's intervention furthers Lyons's challenge to representational modes by playing with knowledge claims that depart from the assumption that viewers expect photographs to reflect experiences (based on the assumption that the photographs are exhibited "instead of" experiences—Kontturi and Tiainen 2007, 247). Daravuth manipulates his photographs to look like mugshots of prisoners to make it seem as if perpetrators are survivors (Edkins 2015, 22). He then infiltrates his exhibition with manipulated images of contemporary children to fuse messengers—who actively served the regime, but had their photos manipulated to appear as survivors—and contemporary children, in photographs that are manipulated in the same way.

While Lyons intended to disenable the viewer's expected ability to differentiate perpetrators from survivors, Daravuth disrupts the possibility to also differentiate coevals from inheritors of genocide. By doing this, Daravuth complicates the periodization of history as before and after atrocity. Thus, while both Lyons and Daravuth seek to establish continuities to challenge and disrupt representational modes of historiography—Lyons of perpetrators and survivors and Daravuth also of coevals and inheritors of genocide—Lyons ultimately retains the possibility to resort to categorizing by turning to the relevant pages of his visitors' book. Meanwhile, Daravuth undermines the possibility to establish a "truth" about faces in photographs that is based on categorization (Edkins 2015, 31–32; Reyum 2000). Daravuth hereby highlights the ongoing burdens of history.

What differentiates Daravuth's intervention from Lyons's is that Daravuth introduces unknow-ability without offering the opportunity to resort to categorizing, and that he does this in both space and time. The withheld testimony furthers Daravuth's intervention by shifting attention away from the imposition of categorization to the modes of representation that the categorizations evoke. My intention here is not to suggest that representations of survivors' statuses do not matter. What interests me is, rather, the representational urge to impose categorization as the rationale to make sense of history (see Edkins 2015, 33).

Returning to Women's Active Museum on War and Peace, the withheld testimony could simply have been ignored. Instead, it was (re)presented as an absence. In this way, it is affirmed as what might be understood as a resistance to an exposure that would reactivate structural oppression and depoliticize the survivor's ordeal, as it would intensify the polarization of the comfort women issue by reducing history to discourse (Eriksson 2022). The testimony, unwithheld, would at once have offered the survivor the opportunity to restore her agency and dignity, and made her story susceptible to appropriation (Ueno 2006). By this, it would effectively have contributed to sustaining the deadlock in the debates over the comfort women issue (Eriksson 2022) by reinforcing the model victim narrative (Ueno 2006; Ueno and Sand 1999), as opposed to standing for itself as one life story that entailed subjection to the comfort women system.

Lyons (Lyons and Straus 2006) and Daravuth (Reyum 2000) implicitly caution against reducing faces in photographs to mirror images of the viewer as that makes the survivor's life story contingent on whatever is deemed intelligible and relatable by the visitor. Without an image to mirror their self-narrative, the visitor is left without the possibility to affirm their self-identity. What happens when the possibility of

affirmation is withheld is that the visitor needs to draw on other sources than those offered in representational modes of historiography. This makes the knowledge production that the withheld testimony demands supersede the life story and image(s) in one or a few photographs for the visitor to relate to by identifying with and differentiating themselves from. Instead, it prompts the visitor to interrogate their ways of approaching historiography. Without possibilities to identifying themselves by retelling and mirroring, the visitor is left to draw on what in art theory is referred to as unexpected imaginaries of sense-making (Audette 1993). The withheld testimony—akin to the blank canvas in the arts—here effectively demands the visitor to relate to history in a different register than representation. This demand unsettles the expectation that selfhood forms the ground of historiography and has crucial implications for connections of history to nationalism.

The withheld testimony detaches the imperative that the model victim narrative (Ueno 2006; Ueno and Sand 1999) operates by (see Shigematsu 2011, 214): for the State of Japan to assume responsibility for wartime history (see also Koyama 2018) by disabling the possibility of reducing historiography to the sum of individual stories of survivors' selfhood. The withheld testimony here effectively prompts an unsettling of the representational mode of historiography as the condition to understand the comfort women system's history (Eriksson 2023a) not as incorporated into the museum visitor's personal life story (see Ueno and Sand 1999, 150; Kimura 2008, 5)—as suggested by the museum narrative—but by unsettling the possibility of reducing history to a reflection of self-narratives.

Without the withheld testimony, the visitor could have left the museum having made sense of the comfort women system's history as an add-on to their self-narrative and mirror image. By unsettling the possibility of sense-making in a representational mode, however, the withheld testimony acquires a function akin to the blank canvas in the arts, which at once risks overwhelming the artist by the unlimited range of possibilities that it offers and demand them to draw on unexpected, yet unimagined, sources (see Audette 1993).

By absenting the possibility of affirmation, the withheld testimony unsettles the possibility of a sense-making that relies on differentiations of identity from difference, because representation ceases to operate without such affirmations. What remains in its wake is to think otherwise about history and historiography than in terms of affirmation of identity and difference.

This shifts viewpoints to the thought figure of an unfulfilled expectation, a material manifestation of absence—as opposed to a representation of voice and image that affirms the museum visitor's self-narrative and self-image in time. This silent emptiness withholds the affirmation that I know—and can know—history by retelling the survivor's life story as a ready-made history and identifying likeness by mirroring myself in the testimony panels' photographs. It also disables the certainty with which I otherwise might have claimed to know history (see Edkins 2019). The withheld testimony here emerges as a refusal to affirm my positionality in relation to the survivors' life story and the comfort women system's history. This refusal leaves me unable to position myself in the hierarchical order of representation and thereby denies me the possibility to establish myself in the way that the museum narrative prompts me to.

Left without the possibility to establish myself by retelling and mirroring, the sense-making strategies that remain available in this absence demand that I scrutinize the practices that I employ to establish myself in history, to address my positionality in the museum and in history, as well as to actively engage the limit conditions of that possibility. This invites a thinking about the survivor's withholding of the content on her testimony panel that is set apart from the hesitancy to testify and the polarized organization of comfort women discourse (see Eriksson 2021). The hesitancy to testify, presented to the visitor at the intersection of representational modes of historiography, demands a mode of knowledge production that organizes representations as differentiations of identity from difference (Edkins 2000), because it juxtaposes survivors' herstories at WAM against national history as either/or alternatives (see Soh 2001) in discourse (see Kimura 2016).

This demands a thinking about the withheld testimony as an agential act that supersedes the affirmation of image and voice that telling one's story produces (see Kimura 2008, 5; Parpart and Parashar 2019). It also addresses the agency of the curatorial decision to represent the absence that follows on the withholding. Finally, it highlights the museum visitor's role in affirming this survivor as either a life worthy of reckoning with (Tsukamoto 2023) or a "bare life" that cannot be sacrificed yet can be killed (Agamben 1998).

The withheld testimony's invitation to rethink the absence that prompts the visitor to interrogate their positionality in the museum comes at the expense of my initial inclination to understand the withheld testimony as a manifestation of the impossibility to "come out" to testify, which remains as one option to make sense of this history, but not the only one. As the withheld testimony is exhibited as a part of an exhibition of testimonies that were given by survivors of Japanese origin, the nearly 50-year-long neglect of history here highlights lingering structural oppression by illuminating the kinds of representations that might be available to a survivor who is identified as an "outcast" (Norma 2016; Tsukamoto 2023) and per definition affirmed as a difference rather than an identity.

By opening for the possibility that sovereign power, amidst the feminist backlash (Nishino 2007, 2; Chinkin 2020), can indeed be challenged by refusing to draw lines between forms of life and by assuming bare life (Edkins and Pin-Fat 2005, 1; Agamben 1998), the withheld testimony opens for a form of resistance that undoes the sovereign's capacity to define the form of life that the sovereign seeks to impose on the subject by refusing to conform to its demand of being (Zevnik 2009, 105).

5. Absent the silently invisible

By prompting a thinking about the experience of the gap as an unfulfilled expectation (Hellmuth Margulis 2007), the withheld testimony highlights how comfort women discourse relies on a kind of knowledge production that centers the provision of survivors' stories and mirror images, framed as truths for the museum visitor to retell and mirror themselves in during and after their visit (see Edkins 2015: ch. 1).

Unfulfilled in the slate of the withheld testimony, these expectations are left unanswered. By disabling the affirmation of identity and difference, and thereby

unsettling representational modes of historiography, the absence that follows on the survivor's withholding of her testimony calls for a relational mode of sense-making.

Understood as an absence, the withheld testimony might be interpreted as yet another silencing. Understood as a representation of absence, it might instead be approached as a form of resistance that not only protects the survivor from exposure, but which simultaneously demonstrates the survivor's assumption of bare life (see Agamben 1998). The act of withholding is here understood to resist individual exposure, illuminate how lingering class structures apply to the comfort women issue, and demonstrate how the survivor's assumption of bare life (Edkins and Pin-Fat 2005) unsettles the mode of representation that sustains sovereign power (Zevnik 2009).

A silencing here differs from a withholding, approached as an act of resistance, in that the silencing is conditioned by sovereignty for its coming into being, since the silencing is produced because of the structural enforcement of the sovereign's denial to recognize the survivors and the violence—in this case the current Japanese government's denial of their historical responsibility. By contrast, the possibility of resistance that the withheld testimony offers unsettles representational modes by refusing to affirm identity and difference. The withheld testimony thus disenables the possibility to sustain the representational mode of sense-making that is required for a silencing to work.

Approached as a material manifestation of absence, the withheld testimony emerges as a call on the museum visitor to ignore the model victim narrative (Ueno 2006; Ueno and Sand 1999) and the museum's approach to knowledge production as based on affirmations of identity and difference (see Edkins 2000).

Resistance here connects to the exposure that the testimony would have subjected the survivor to in exhibited form. It also addresses the structures of oppression that make the act of coming out to testify particularly difficult for survivors who are subjected to classed categorizations, because the representations that result from the act of coming out reinscribe the survivor into the lingering structures of oppression that enabled the violence in the first place. In this light, the withheld testimony offers the survivor the opportunity to have her subjection acknowledged without having to be exposed; to assume bare life in a position of strength (see Edkins and Pin-Fat 2005).

By unsettling the authorization that sustains representational modes of historiography, the withheld testimony detaches the authority over the testimony from the sovereign and connects it to the survivor. Exposure, in this, shifts from taking on the form of an expected requirement for survivors to seek justice (see Chingja 2018, 183), for the museum to establish history (Watanabe 2015, 236), and for the visitor to relate to history—to instead materialize as potentially oppressive, depoliticizing, and polarizing to the point of triggering feminist backlash (Eriksson 2022), and, consequently, ending up compromising survivors' needs and attention to gender violence (Eriksson 2023b).

Taken together, music theory, art theory, and art photography offer possibilities to rethink the comfort women issue apart from the representational modes of historiography that prescribe inscriptions of a survivor as either an identity or a difference; apart from modes of sense-making that reduce history to either speaking-or-silent, visible-or-empty, and present-or-absent.

By highlighting how representational modes of historiography end up sustaining the structures of oppression that feminist historiographies seek to challenge—but fail to address—by leaving the structures of representation unchallenged (Spivak 2010), in the

withheld testimony, the complementary acts of withholding, representing, and absenting at once produce material and immaterial silence, emptiness, and absence.

The withheld testimony here emerges as a form of resistance that materializes in the survivor's refusal to be spoken for and being reduced to somebody else's mirror image. Their supporters' representation of the absence that follows in its wake honors the survivor's refusal and prompts the visitor's engagement with their sense-making strategies in their visit to the museum. To address the withheld testimony as a relation of constitutive resistance, as a speaking silence, visible emptiness, and present absence implicates the museum visitor as a part of the comfort women system's historiography by affirming their production of seeming silence, emptiness, and absence as either sovereign impositions or challenges to dominant imaginaries, thus shifting the representational mode of sense-making from self/other relations to affirmations of life.

As a speaking silence, the withheld testimony demands a listening that supersedes representational modes of sense-making. As a visible emptiness, it requires a mode of seeing and attention to the other that is set apart from self-reflection. As a present absence, the withholding prompts the visitor to think otherwise than what self-and-other binaries prescribe as the condition to make sense of the comfort women system's history (see Eriksson 2023a), which touches and concerns the visitor themselves.

An engagement with the unsettling absence that materializes in the withheld testimony invites the visitor to partake in the comfort women system's historiography as an arbiter of life. By affirming life as either proper or bare in their judgment (Agamben 1998), the visitor is implicated in either continuing denial or unsettling of the modes of representation that condition the sovereignty that enabled the Empire of Japan to establish the comfort women system to begin with.

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Notes

1 Aware that Hicks's (1994) work has been subjected to critique after one of his informants confessed that he had fabricated his testimony, this testimony forms a minor part of Hicks's work.

2 <https://www.topographie.de/topographie-des-terrors/>.

3 <https://peacewomen.org/content/museum-womens-active-museum-war-and-peace>.

4 This is due to the concerted effort of the state, the military, and the military police to destroy existing documentation about the comfort women system as the war was being ended (Ueno and Sand 1999, 131, 135).

5 While survivors are commonly referred to by this euphemism, I make it a point to address the comfort women system—the system rather than the women—to shift out of the polarized juxtaposition that informs the comfort women discourse, which targets individual subjects as opposed to structural constraints, highlight the systematicity of the violence, and establish a continuity that lasts after the survivors' passing (see also Eriksson 2022).

6 This argument is inspired by Jenny Edkins's work in *Face politics* (2015, ch. 1).

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