

## Toward 'Translocal' Solidarities: the "Comfort Women" Issue and the Spatial Politics of Resistance

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When it comes to the Korean comfort women, I have been interested in the way in which it has become a global issue since its transnational acknowledgement in the early 1990s with the spread of the comfort women's horribly traumatic (post)colonial experiences,<sup>1</sup> and also the way in which the issue as such has served as what Edward Said terms a "travelling theory," specifically as an enabling condition of activist and intellectual engagements prompted and organized across national boundaries.<sup>2</sup> Until recently, I have paid particular attention to the concept of transnationalism to consider the significance of the transnational movement of comfort women's traumatic stories.<sup>3</sup> I have learned that such a critical perspective is quite useful to make sense of

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1) I use the term postcolonial here because comfort women's colonial experiences are something that not only happened in the past, but are ongoing in different ways.

2) Edward Said, "Travelling Theory," *The World, the Text, and the Critic*, Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1983, 226-247.

3) Yoo-Hyeok Lee, "Traveling or Troubling Memories: On the Transnational Movement of Korean Comfort Women's Trauma, Its Literary Representation, and Colonial Amnesia," *The Journal of the Humanities* 64 (April 2012), 267-300.  
\*Written in Korean.

the cultural and political impacts on a macroscopic level.

However, I have gradually come to realize that another critical concept is needed to more properly and delicately grasp what has been taking place on a microscopic (or local) level, particularly in relation to the formation of solidarities not only on a transnational, but also on a translocal level. The concept of translocality, I learn, can provide such a critical perspective. This is because transnational solidarities formed in pursuit of actual changes begin and are persistently based on local levels, that is, in specific places (or spaces) and regions, although political activities on a macroscopic level are more often highlighted in mass media than similar political activities at the grassroots level. My position regarding these two levels of political engagement is not based on the paradigm of either/or; instead, I suggest considering both sides in a more balanced manner. This essay therefore aims to touch upon similarities and differences between the paradigm of the transnational and the paradigm of the translocal in relation to the global spread of surviving comfort women's traumatic (post)colonial experiences, while giving particular attention to the way in which such phenomena lead to the formation of translocal solidarities.

## **The Comfort Women Issue: Translocal Rather Than Transnational<sup>4</sup>**

A further explanation on these two terms is necessary to show the advantage of each perspective in our understanding of the transnational spread of comfort women's traumatic stories and the formation of global

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4) This part is based on my earlier study on the differences and similarities between translocality and transnationalism. Yoo-Hyeok Lee, "On Translocality: How Is It Different from Transnationalism?" *The Journal of Localitology* 13 (April 2015). 265-275. \*Written in Korean.

solidarities. The prefix “trans” literally means “across or beyond.” It also signifies “overcoming or critical of.” The formation of each term—trans+local or trans+national—appears to clearly mark each one’s critical demarcation. Similarities and differences between these two concepts, however, are not so simple, but rather nuanced. A brief elaboration on this point will contribute to the clarification of why a translocal perspective on the comfort women issue is useful.

I here provide a very brief explanation about the term transnational largely to highlight what I propose as the advantage of observing and analyzing certain social phenomena from a translocal perspective. Steven Vertovec’s differentiation between “inter-national” and “transnational” helps to clarify the characteristics of the term transnational in relation to my point in this essay.<sup>5</sup> According to him, the term international is more appropriate to describe “interactions between national governments (such as formal agreements, conflicts, diplomatic relations), or concerning the to-ing and fro-ing of items from one nation-state context to another (such as people/travel and goods/trade)” (Vertovec 3). Furthermore, he says that “when referring to sustained linkages and ongoing exchanges among non-state actors based across national borders—businesses, non-government-organizations, and individuals sharing the same interests (by way of criteria such as religious beliefs, common cultural and geographic origins)--we can differentiate these as ‘transnational’ practices and groups (referring to their links functioning across nation-states)” (Vertovec 3). Here, I’d like to emphasize that Vertovec characterizes the term transnational by drawing attention to cross-border linkages and ongoing exchanges engaged in by non-state actors.

Vertovec’s characterization of the term transnational is also useful to consider the characteristics of the term translocal, particularly to clarify

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5) Steven Vertovec, *Transnationalism*, London and New York: Routledge, 2009. All citations of Vertovec are from this book.

how (or where) these concepts overlap and differ. Both are critical of what Vertovec calls an inter-national paradigm by focusing on non-state actors' cross-border linkages and exchanges, particularly on a microscopic (or local) level. Put simply, the translocal is a type of the transnational in the sense that it is paradigmatically based across national borders; hence, the translocal is not separated from the influence of the transnational. The translocal, however, is different from the transnational in the sense that it can serve as a critical paradigm through which to analyze diverse aspects of cross-border linkages and exchanges taking place between local regions or places situated within the boundary of one nation state, or across the boundary of two or more nation states. As scholars use the term "grounded transnationalism" to describe a main characteristic of translocality, the translocal is firmly based on specific local places,<sup>6</sup> while also dealing with the influence of the transnational. In this respect, viewing social phenomena from a translocal perspective allows us a critical position from which to analyze the features of such social phenomena, often characterized as complicated, dynamic, firmly based on specific local places (or spaces) and also involving different levels of non-state actors. Such a perspective, furthermore, can provide us with a lens through which to carefully observe what is often not properly analyzed, or overlooked from a transnational perspective. The comfort women issue can be seen either from a transnational or from a translocal perspective, as I have briefly suggested: either perspective will help us to highlight certain aspects of the issue. This essay is my preliminary attempt to consider the translocality of the comfort women issue, particularly the significance of the spatial politics of resistance, which is not only based on but also further promotes the formation of translocal solidarities.

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6) Katherine Brickell and Ayona Datta, "Introduction: Translocal Linkages," *Translocal Geographies: Spaces, Places, Connections*, eds. Katherine Brickell and Ayona Datta, Surrey, England: Ashgate, 2011, 7-11.

## **The Spatial Politics of the Comfort Women Issue: Politics of Locality and the Formation of Translocal Solidarities**

Regarding the spatial politics of resistance around the comfort women issue, I would like to draw attention to two places here: 1) a small urban space at the heart of Seoul where the Wednesday Demonstration has persistently taken place in front of the Japanese embassy for the last several decades; 2) The War and Women's Human Rights Museum, located in another part of Seoul.<sup>7</sup> By doing so, I will explore how the comfort women issue as a postcolonial problem is situated in specific local places that can serve for learning and unlearning so as to generate mind-change for a beginning to meaningful political engagements. Furthermore, I am interested in the way in which such locality-based political movements can lead to the formation of translocal solidarities not only epistemologically, but also for actual political engagements.

The Wednesday Demonstration takes place in a small urban space located at the heart of Seoul. When I participated in the Wednesday Demonstration on November 18, 2015, people gathered together around the Peace Monument--also called *Pyeonghwa-bi* in Korean--that is in fact a statue of a sitting Korean girl representing a comfort woman.<sup>8</sup>

The statue itself is quite unique and overpowering enough to attract people's attention immediately. Located in front of the Japanese embassy to Korea, it was first unveiled on December 14, 2011, to mark the 1000th Wednesday Demonstration: the first Wednesday Demonstration was officially launched on January 8, 1992. It has since served as a focal point of persistent political engagements taking place every Wednesday.

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7) I choose to highlight these two since they have served as the main places for political engagements around the comfort women issue for a long period of time.

8) In this essay, I sketch what I witnessed when I participated in the Wednesday Demonstration along with some of my impressions.



**Picture 1.** People gather around the Peace Monument during the demonstration. Taken by author.

Despite the rainy weather, many activists, ordinary people, and young school students gathered throughout the demonstration. I could see the small space in front of the Japanese embassy turning into a space of politics and pedagogy by allowing participants to actively engage in demonstration programs. I also could sense that all activities organized not only by activists, but also by students, were well-prepared and well-executed. This showed how well these demonstrations have been prepared politically and pedagogically.<sup>9</sup>

I was initially interested in observing people's reactions toward such a small place, particularly the change in people's reactions toward the Peace Monument, before, during and after the demonstration: here,

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9) For a further study on the spatial politics around the Wednesday Demonstration, refer to Heesun Chung, "Politics of Spatial Practice and Representation by Minority Resistance—The Case of Wednesday Demonstrations Demanding the Resolution of Japanese Military 'Comfort Women' Problems," *Journal of the Korean Urban Geographical Society* 16.3 (2013), 101-116. \*Written in Korean.

people include not only active participants in the demonstration, but also those passing by the statue. Although my stay of several hours was definitely not enough for me to draw any conclusions, I could observe some small yet significant change in the way people treated the space around the Peace Monument. Not only did the statue serve as a focal point around which people gathered for the demonstration, but it also served as the best place for photo taking after the demonstration, and (possibly) other times. I can guess that the same space might be treated more flexibly and even casually when there is no demonstration taking place there.



**Picture 2.** Some people still gathered around the Peace Monument after the demonstration. Taken by author.

As shown in picture 2, it is indeed an open space located on the edge of a pedestrian's way, and only the statue and some banners surrounding it serve to clearly mark the space as a location of politics and pedagogy. In this respect, I argue that how people react at the space around the

statue depends on how they connect themselves with it and its relevancy. Furthermore, how effectively the space can serve as a location of politics and pedagogy also depends on how people get involved with the comfort women issue. This is because such a space is not a closed one like a museum, where contents are often organized according to certain planned purposes. Hence, I also argue that such a public and outdoor space as a location of politics and pedagogy can serve as a much more dynamic and open space where unexpected political engagements happen, and thus the learning and unlearning process in such a space does not always go forward as planned.



**Picture 3.** the War and Women's Human Rights Museum. Taken by author.

Contrasted with the space where the Peace Monument is located in front of the Japanese embassy—which is an open, outdoor space, located right beside a street and surrounded by tall office buildings in downtown Seoul—the War and Women's Human Rights Museum is situated in the middle of residential house buildings, and is somewhat distant from any

street. Unlike the space in front of the Japanese embassy, which is completely open to the outside world, the museum appears to be closed and protected. When I visited the museum on November 20, 2015, I had to walk through small alleys until I found a house whose colorful decorations drew my attention immediately. These decorations and some words on the wall served as markers to differentiate the house from others.

Unfortunately, photo taking was not allowed inside the museum, so my description here is based on my individual experience.<sup>10</sup> As I have briefly suggested earlier, this museum is also well-organized to help visitors learn about the comfort women's traumatic experiences as sex slaves for Japanese soldiers during WWII through audio and visual materials. My impression was that each floor was set up so that visitors do not remain observers, but engage with what surviving comfort women have experienced. The basement and the second floor are arranged to assist visitors experience and learn about the comfort women's traumatic history. The structure of the basement was quite impressive. When I was told to begin my journey in the basement, I had no idea of what I would find there. It did not take long to finish my journey there. However, the audio-visual materials displayed were powerful enough to remain in my heart and mind for some time. Passing through a small alley listening to soldiers' overwhelming marching sound, and then observing comfort women's horrible experiences as sex slaves in such a young age in a small and dark room, rapidly led me to stand before comfort women's trauma. Also, I read surviving comfort women's written words inscribed on a brick wall while going up to the second floor. All these were

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10) The information about the structure of the museum—including how each floor is organized and what is displayed, etc.—is provided at [https://www.womenandwar.net/contents/general/general.nx?page\\_str\\_menu=2402](https://www.womenandwar.net/contents/general/general.nx?page_str_menu=2402). More relevant information about the ongoing struggle engaged by surviving comfort women and activists is available at <https://www.womenandwar.net/contents/home/home.nx>.

effectively arranged to help visitors feel such horrible history with their hearts and bodies. The second floor, on the other hand, is the place where people can contemplate why such things happened, and what people have done so far to deal with this event, what more needs to be done, etc. Diverse materials displayed on this floor and also available on the first floor are intended to help people have further knowledge about past history, present activities, etc.

Another thing that impressed me was the display of activists and some surviving comfort women's ongoing efforts to connect themselves to people in other parts of the world who have had similar experiences in wartime and afterwards. The display on the first floor was about how women have been victimized, and also how young boys have often been forcefully drafted in wartime. Brief descriptions and some pictures were displayed to show what has happened around the world, including Bosnia, Kosovo, Pakistan, Uganda, Sudan, Palestine, Rwanda, Somalia and the Philippines. Furthermore, a special exhibition has been taking place in another basement space located in a corner of a small yard outside the first floor of the museum. It is about how Korean soldiers horribly victimized Vietnamese civilians, including women, young children, and old people, during the Vietnam War. I remember some surviving comfort women along with activists visited Vietnam to meet some surviving female war victims to show their solidarity with them. Later, when some Vietnamese war victims visited Korea, surviving comfort women along with activists kept their solidarity with them, although the Korean government did not properly recognize their visit, and furthermore they had to realize the cold reality that what they experienced during the war has not been properly acknowledged and remembered in Korea.<sup>11</sup>

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11) The Korea Council for the Women Drafted for Military Sexual Slavery by Japan established the Butterfly Fund, originally initiated by surviving comfort women's wish that if they receive reparations from the Japanese government they would donate the money to female victim of sexual violence in armed conflicts around

In this essay, I have attempted to consider the significance of these local places in relation to the comfort women issue, and particularly how they serve as locations of politics and pedagogy that can lead to the formation of translocal solidarities. I only briefly suggest with regard to the latter point. I acknowledge that it needs further detailed explanation, which can possibly be done in the near future. Put simply, those two places were not left as locations where only a small number of Korean people gathered together to engage with domestic issues; more significantly, they have continually grown to serve as locations where translocal solidarities can not only be imagined and promoted, but also be actualized in diverse ways. Here, we need to consider how to deal with the layers of spatial politics of resistance generated in the process of the formation of translocal solidarities around the comfort women issue. This is particularly due to unbalanced interactions taking place not only horizontally, but also hierarchically between one nation state's context and another's, as well as between local contexts within one nation state. This is because each participant's different levels of political positioning in such a process generate different levels of political forces. Considering the comfort women issue from a translocal perspective can help us to more properly analyze such layers of the spatial politics of resistance.

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the world. This fund is used to establish translocal solidarities between surviving comfort women and other war victims around the world. Further information is available at <[https://www.womenandwar.net/contents/general/general.nx?page\\_str\\_menu=2405](https://www.womenandwar.net/contents/general/general.nx?page_str_menu=2405)>.

