

# Curating conflict-related sexual violence: Museological visibilities at the Imperial War Museum

Memory Studies

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[journals.sagepub.com/home/mss](https://journals.sagepub.com/home/mss)**Megan O'Mahony** 

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## Abstract

While often under-researched, mis-catalogued, and obscured from public display, conflict-related sexual violence is acutely entangled in the story of conflict that the Imperial War Museum tells its visitors, beyond the dichotomous characterisation of present/absent, hidden/revealed or remembered/forgotten. This article outlines and characterises ways in which the Imperial War Museum curates conflict-related sexual violence, illustrating how this equates to gendered and gendering arbitrations on what is appropriate, representative, and moreover what counts as conflict-related sexual violence and as the material and visual culture of war. Curatorial practices are found to both reflect and actively (re)produce patterns of representation in sexual violence discourse, through a prism of visual hierarchies inherent to modern museumification and the Museum's titular imperial legacy. Insights from this case can help guide ambitions of a more activist, feminist curatorial practice, one invested in disrupting harmful patterns and centring what is marginal.

## Keywords

aesthetics, feminism, gender, memory, museums, sexual violence

## Introduction

In 2016, Imperial War Museums (IWM) began to create new, permanent galleries dedicated to the Second World War at their flagship London site.<sup>1</sup> The ambitious project sought to correct the 'narrative imbalance' (Hawkins, 2020: 211) of previous galleries that had rendered wider experiences of the conflict, particularly the war in Asia, virtually invisible at the Museum. While searching for objects to fill these gaps, curators rediscovered a small wooden sign that had been donated by a former British serviceman in 1984. The only information recorded was that it had been taken from the door of a Japanese 'brothel', 'somewhere in Burma, sometime during 1944' (IWM EPH 5425, n.d.). Compelled by this limited provenance and by their own knowledge of the so-called 'comfort women' coerced or abducted into sexual servitude by the Japanese Army, curators took steps to

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re-interpret the object for display.<sup>2</sup> The sign's painted characters were translated to read 'sold out' on one side and 'closed/temporary rest' on the other. Further research and consultation with Chinese 'comfort women' museums brought the conclusion that, in all likelihood, the sign had been used to indicate the availability of women and girls for sexual services at the 'comfort station'. In October 2021, the sign was put on public display for the first time.

Until this point, many curators had assumed that IWM's collections did not have the capacity to address the subject of conflict-related sexual violence (CRSV).<sup>3</sup> But the productive re-discovery of an otherwise 'forgotten' object prompted new internal discussions: Where else in the collection might similarly 'hidden histories' be found? What other kinds of objects could be collected to bring stories of CRSV into the Museum? Initial plans for a temporary exhibition on the subject were postponed in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic, but resumed in 2023 with a newly assigned curatorial team and a provisional opening in 2025.<sup>4</sup> Well-intentioned as these efforts may be, a curatorial strategy motivated by the recovery and display of 'hidden histories' risks disregarding the conditions under which experiences of CRSV were hidden in the first place. In Maura Reilly's terms of curatorial activism, simply adding what has been long neglected does nothing to dismantle, and can even strengthen, the white male western canon (Lippard, 2018: 11).

This article offers an alternative, feminist route into thinking about the curation of CRSV. Having identified where these experiences are already acutely entangled in the story of conflict told to visitors, I ask: how do IWM's curatorial practices make CRSV differently visible in the museum space? To what extent do these visibilities perpetuate – or can they disrupt – the archetypes, assumptions and dichotomies that dominate societal discourse around sexual violence (see Boesten, 2021: 34)? In short, I argue that evolving curatorial practices not only reflect these marginalising patterns of representation, but actively (re)produce them through a prism of visual hierarchies inherent to modern museumification and IWM's own titular imperial legacy.

In museums as large and bureaucratic as IWM, individual curatorial decisions take place alongside and in relation to an institutional form of curation where 'best practices', protocols and policies are established to safeguard and standardise the museum's central narrative. I access both levels of curatorial practice through the triangulation of archival research into IWM's institutional records and collections; holistic analyses of existing (or recent) displays at IWM as experienced by a visitor/researcher; and semi-structured interviews and correspondences with current and former curators and members of academic advisory boards (AABs). From 2020 to 2023, I spoke with 16 individuals about their work relating to CRSV at IWM. These conversations supplemented my understanding of the collections, institutional policy, and importantly, allowed curators to narrate and justify their own practice. My position as a Collaborative Doctoral Partnership student allowed sustained access to interview subjects, in some cases over multiple sessions, as well as access to IWM's internal object management system.

While empirically novel, this article relies upon critical insights into the museumification of CRSV, largely in the context of the so-called 'comfort women' issue (see Joo, 2015; Tai, 2016) but also the Srebrenica genocide (Jacobs, 2017) and in Nazi concentration camps (Bogue, 2016).<sup>5</sup> More broadly, the stakes of this article are situated within a steadily growing scholarship regarding museums and memorials as sites of global politics 'where we least expect it' (Sylvester, 2009). Such literatures have often characterised national museums and their memory cultures as state tools of soft power, cultural diplomacy and securitisation (see Edkins, 2003; Levitt, 2016). A smaller section of literature, from which this article takes its inspiration, also accounts for the enactment of power *by* museums through analysis of curatorial practice as politics (see Reeves, 2018; Tidy and Turner, 2020; Van Veeren, 2020). This approach borrows theoretically and methodologically from Memory Studies, Museum Studies, and from affective and performative

International Relations to capture how the museum's 'very materiality and holistic organization, affect[s] passers-through in a culturally prescribed manner' (Beckstead et al., 2011: 211).

The remainder of this article is structured as follows: I begin by introducing visibility as a theoretical framework, applied to both curation and to feminist reflections on sexual violence. Following this, I present five ways in which experiences of CRSV are curated – or made differently visible – at IWM. I draw upon largely chronological examples to highlight aspects of both evolution and continuity in the last 30 years. First, I exemplify how legacy cataloguing practices continue to obfuscate what can be seen of CRSV in the collection. Next, I draw attention to a controversial decision not to collect on this subject, shifting curatorial practice away from total invisibility and towards highly conditional and selective references to CRSV. I examine how CRSV is narrativised as subsidiary story of conflict, trapped both in and outside of the public gaze, then how it is narrativised as 'other' conflict, far removed from righteously fought British wars. Finally, I return to the recent *Second World War Galleries* to address how new inclusions are regulated by problematic display criteria that restrict whose stories and which perspectives can be told. I conclude by reflecting on the conceptual and normative implications of museological visibilities of CRSV and suggesting how insights from IWM might guide ambitions of the broader sector to engage with CRSV in a more activist, feminist way.

## Curating as making (differently) visible

While recent museological scholarship and influential feminist theorists have favoured metaphors of speech and silence (see Mason and Sayner, 2019; Spivak, 1988) visibility is used here as a proxy to capture what is seen, known, and remembered about sexual violence. Characterised by Cynthia Enloe's (2014) famous question 'where are all the women?' (p. 6), visibility and the project to 'make the invisible visible' has been one of the first and most enduring goals of feminist scholarship. Nevertheless, such an expression relies and thrives on the construction of visible/invisible, hidden/revealed, and remembered/forgotten. This article searches instead for a multiplicity of intersecting visibilities: 'the seen, the barely seen, and the unseen; in the between, the margins, and the borders of visible reality; and through the power of blanks, holes, silences, and empty spaces' (Minh-ha, 2015: 132).

Museums are not passive repositories of the past but perform memory in the present through the active process of curation (see Erll and Rigney, 2009). Practically, this refers to the collection, conservation, interpretation, cataloguing, narrativisation and display of material and visual culture – a connected sequence of decision-making and protocols that determine what is kept and displayed. At every stage, such adjudications on cultural memory are 'always about the distribution of and contested claims to power. . . intricately bound up with issues of power and hegemony, and thus with gender' (Hirsch and Smith, 2002: 5–6). Museums and curatorial practice cannot be politically neutral because they have the capacity to enact epistemic injustice and violence, but also resistance, agency, responsibility, and advocacy.

Curation is about absence and omission as much as it is about presence and inclusion (Van Veeren, 2020). But the ontological power of museums also lies in 'how we are able, allowed, or made to see, and how we see this seeing or the un-seen therein' (Foster, 1988: ix). Museums' legacy as gatekeepers of hierarchical knowledge and taste conditions the manner in which we behave – and see – in such spaces (see Bennett, 1995). A particular scopic regime (Jay, 2008) instructs visitors to 'look but not touch', often through glass, at that which is deemed to be the most fragile, valuable and authentic. IWM (2024a), a self-proclaimed 'global authority on conflict', frames its narrative of British wars from 1914 to the present day as reliable and definitive, telling prospective visitors that 'no other museum tells stories that matter more than these'. Since Renaissance-era

‘cabinets of curiosity’, the museal scopic regime has also been deeply entangled with a colonial gaze that regulates how we view the ‘other’, typically through the lens of the coloniser in exploitative objectification practices or through stolen objects brought to the imperial capital (see Clifford, 1988). Simultaneously, IWM’s role as a national museum enables (domestic) visitors to view their own nation’s history through a lens of patriotic pride and honour, whereas unsavoury and incriminating colonial violence is omitted.<sup>6</sup> The case of curating CRSV at IWM demonstrates how the museal scopic fixation on the rarefied, the colonial ‘other’ and the glorified national self is a deeply gendered and gendering way of seeing and, in turn, how this visual hierarchy conditions the remembering of gender violence.

## Visibilities of sexual violence

Feminist scholars reflecting on the changing recognition and perception of CRSV also write in terms of figurative visibility, and increasingly note where different visibilities intersect or where ‘invisibility is built into each instance of visibility’ (Minh-ha, 2015: 132). Since mass media coverage of widespread and systematic rape in the Bosnian War (1992–1995) and Rwandan genocide (1994), the notion of ‘rape as a weapon of war’ has dominated sexual violence discourse. A desire to ‘break the silence’ and correctively emphasise the gravity of the issue led scholars and activists to document ongoing instances of CRSV that seemed to replicate the crimes in Bosnia and Rwanda, and to look for similar historical cases to remember and ‘make visible’ (Mühlhäuser, 2020: 22). This ‘new visibility’ was grounded in a liberal feminist presumption that visibility would necessarily lead to progress. While some concede that this was a necessary framing to incite immediate action, feminist scholars have suggested a paradox of (in)/(hyper)-visibility, where the essentialist representation of rape as a weapon of war leaves little room for the larger continuum of sexual violence that includes acts outside of rape and outside what might be considered as ‘strategic’ (Buss, 2009; Copelon, 1994).

Building on these initial provocations, researchers have worked to bring to light more liminal experiences of CRSV that have been subject to erasure, including sexual violence against men and boys (Touquet et al., 2020; Zalewski et al., 2018); against gender minorities (Loken and Hagen, 2022); occurring opportunistically, as a ‘practice’ (Boesten, 2010) or through strategic permissibility (Mühlhäuser, 2019); that which might be categorised as private or domestic violence (Gray, 2019; Swaine, 2015), transactional forms of sexual violence (Hájková, 2013); experiences that account for ‘the sexual’ (Eriksson Baaz and Stern, 2018); and acts perpetrated by peacekeepers (Moncrief, 2017).

Explanations as to why instances of CRSV are made differently visible vary contextually, but all relate to the gendered politics of victimhood, perpetration, sexuality and war. For instance, feminine-coded experiences of CRSV that conform to archetypes of helplessness and passivity of women in war – and those which happen to cisgender, female bodies – are considered more palatable, salvageable, and thus are made more visible (see Elshtain, 1982). The construction of such dichotomies obstructs visibility in a way that flattens what can be known about gender, broadly and sexual violence, specifically. Borrowing from Laura Sjoberg (2012: 344), we might consider how questions of the individual and the collective traverse these dichotomies, where a homogenised, collective experience of CRSV is made hyper-visible to conform to the dominant image of what CRSV looks like, who it can happen to or who can perpetrate it. In a sort of ‘visibility trade-off’, individual experiences are thus made invisible. Sjoberg (2012: 345) asks us to consider whether some people or groups can be trapped both in and outside of the public gaze. Chiseche Mibenge (2008: 147) applies mixed metaphors to note another transversal of linear visibility, where rape is simultaneously visible and silent in Rwandan politics, accessible only within the confines of a

particular discourse of genocide. Synthesising these arguments builds somewhat of a conceptual matrix for multiple visibilities within sexual violence discourse.

## Obfuscation in/by the archive

Although the process of cataloguing collection objects is sometimes misrepresented as a purely administrative task of museum work, both inherited and current practices of record-keeping are politically informed and rely on individual and systematised biases. These choices have a profound and long-lasting impact on how subjects are made visible to visitors, researchers and to future curatorial staff. I begin my substantive analysis by exemplifying how legacy cataloguing practices at IWM have aligned with contemporary misogynistic attitudes and ignorance. Left unrectified, these practices continue to obfuscate experiences of CRSV within the collection for decades to come.

Taking the mis-catalogued 'comfort station' sign as a point of departure, one can quickly identify further cases in which this experience of CRSV has been distorted in and by the archive. A set of photographs taken by the No. 9 Army Film and Photo Section, South East Asia Command (SEAC) during the Burma campaign includes several images depicting women and girls found with captured Japanese soldiers, many even referencing the 'comfort system' in their original captions (see IWM SE 4519, 1945). On IWM's public collections platform, however, these images are not tagged with search terms like 'sexual violence', 'rape', 'sexual slavery' or 'gender violence'. They are tagged instead with euphemistic perpetrator terms 'comfort women', 'comfort girls' and 'comfort corps', likely borrowed from the photographer's dope sheets and not revisited since. Similarly, in IWM's sound archive, British and Allied civilian and military oral histories speak euphemistically of 'comfort girls', or 'prostitutes' 'tarted up for the occasion' (IWM 8636, 1984; IWM 25574, 2003). On more than one occasion, the interviewer himself refers to 'prostitutes'.<sup>7</sup> The outdated way in which these women and girls are narrated in the archive is not as subjects impacted by conflict, but as sexual objects – a strange, exotic custom as witnessed by a civilised observer. Many stories of the 'comfort system' found in IWM's collections are only visible through this sexualised, orientalist gaze. The violent nature of the experiences is blurred, and their suffering made invisible to the public.

One of these same sound reels also describes possible acts of sexual barter between Allied forces and Japanese civilian internees. British missionary Norah Newbury Inge laughs as she describes how during the voyage transporting Japanese civilian internees from Singapore to India: 'the crew were inclined to slide through at night and have a little fun with the girls, the Japanese girls . . . they had their fun and the girls got their thing' (IWM 8636, 1984). Inge's casual attitude is reflected in the catalogue, which identifies the story vaguely as 'sexual relations between crew and female internees' (IWM 8636, 1984). While individual sexual acts may have, in theory, been voluntary, Japanese civilians were not voluntarily interned or deported. Balancing the recognition of agency with sexual power dynamics is an inherent complexity of accounting for and remembering diverse experiences of CRSV (Hájková, 2013: 506). Where this particular experience is taken at face value from Inge's perspective, the collection is robbed of such complexity where it matters most. A pattern is (re)produced in which only the most clear-cut, overtly violent instances of CRSV perpetrated by the most clear-cut enemy are made visible, serving to essentialise and flatten.

Remembering that CRSV has been a pervasive phenomenon across IWM's historical remit, we can assume that many more objects in the collection can tell diverse stories of CRSV. While curators in recent years have compiled ad hoc lists of relevant objects, collections management backlogs have meant much of this knowledge is lost in staff turnover. Disrupting these patterns will



require concerted effort and earmarked resources beyond the overturning of past curatorial decisions one by one.

### Collecting ‘for the record’

IWM’s handling of Peter Howson’s ‘rape painting’ in the mid-1990s demonstrates a decisive moment in IWM’s curation of CRSV. The Museum’s decision not to permanently collect one of these pieces, ostensibly because it did not ‘count’ as historical record, is an apt illustration of the gendered logics of authenticity that underlie curatorial practice. The decision proved controversial in a landscape of mass media coverage for CRSV and instigated a shift away from total invisibility as the norm.

In 1993, Howson was commissioned by IWM and The Times to document the Bosnian War, taking two trips to the region with the intention of capturing atrocities that the news cycle may not show to the public (Crampton, 1994: 13). When Howson returned, a temporary exhibition of 35 works was held at IWM entitled *Peter Howson: Bosnia* (1994). This included the oil painting *Croatian and Muslim* (1994), a graphic scene of sexual violence based on the stories of women Howson had met in UN refugee camps. With arresting brutality, Howson depicts the gang rape of a woman by two men, her head pushed into a toilet bowl as one of the men’s hands covers what appears to be a family portrait on the wall. At over two metres tall, the painting’s dark shadows were striking against white walls; works in the exhibition were displayed in such a way that visitors would encounter the subjects and their actions at practically eye level. Later, Howson would recount that ‘people were horrified . . . especially the Imperial War Museum’ (Brooks, 2023).

IWM had intended to select several of Howson’s pieces to purchase and accession into their permanent collection, to the maximum value of £20,000. To accession artworks into the collection acknowledges not only the technique of the artist, but the historical significance of its subject and the Museum’s commitment to care for and preserve future public access. *Croatian and Muslim* was shortlisted by Keeper of Art Angela Weight, who felt that the piece captured the harsh realities of war in Bosnia (Chicago Tribune, 1994). To IWM’s Artistic Record Committee (ARC), Weight expressed that they should purchase ‘the best painting – even if it were rape’ (IWM ARC Meeting Minutes, 1994). On 8 August 1994, Weight and Marina Vaizey voted to purchase *Croatian and Muslim*, but were outvoted by the other (male) members of the ARC (Brenard, 2023: 190; IWM ARC Meeting Minutes, 1994). Director-General Alan Borg argued against the purchase, citing the fact that the painting did not fulfil the Committee’s mandate of acquiring artworks to record conflict (Borg, 1994; Brenard, 2023: 190). Howson had not personally witnessed the scene, and his work was therefore considered an impression, rather than a record. Borg’s explanation demonstrates a revealing fact-value distinction: a gendered rift between what is considered an impressionistic or anecdotal telling, and what is considered ‘real’, ‘authentic’ material and visual culture of war. Curating along these lines (re)produces the notion that documentary or material evidence ‘bears witness’ and is a prerequisite to acknowledging that events occurred. Crucially, this standard was not applied equally to other art accessions.

Though a definitive reconstruction is not possible, it seems likely that rejecting Committee members were motivated not (only) by the secondary provenance of the piece, but by the taboo of its subject matter.<sup>8</sup> They voted instead to purchase Howson’s *Cleansed* (1994; IWM ART 16521, 1994), ensuring that Howson’s telling of rape would not persist into IWM’s own narrative of the war in Bosnia and of the nature of conflict in general. *Croatian and Muslim* was bought into the private collection of singer-songwriter (and avid art collector) David Bowie. Bowie’s intervention roused media attention and instigated a series of complaints against IWM, members of the public

indignant at what they considered censorship of the horrors of wartime rape. By 2000, curators in the Art Department had, too, become frustrated with the outdated concept of an 'artistic record' and the ARC evolved into the Art *Commissions* Committee. Nevertheless, when Bowie died in 2016, IWM made no attempt to purchase the painting on auction at Sotheby's.

## CRSV as a subsidiary narrative

From the turn of the millennium, IWM's curatorial practices regarding CRSV began to subtly shift. Increasing scholarship and public awareness meant the Museum could no longer evade acknowledgement of the issue, prompting several minor references in high-profile, long-term galleries. Experiences of CRSV, however, are made only partially visible, on the condition that they supplement or support another key narrative.

In the previous permanent *Holocaust Exhibition* (2000–2020) under the section 'Terror Strikes Poland', a photograph, enlarged to approximately 1.5 m tall, depicted a Jewish woman running through the streets of Nazi-occupied city of Lwów (now Lviv, Ukraine) in torn undergarments, being chased by uniformed boys holding planks of wood. The woman is in extreme distress, her body highlighted against the background by the bright white of her undergarments and the shallow depth of field. In the gallery, the enlarged photograph was prominently lit and positioned at the bottom of stairs, unavoidable to visitors passing through. The caption read only 'Local anti-Semites abuse Jewish women in the streets of Lvov. Dozens were murdered and women were raped'. Curators were unable to identify the woman, so visitors can learn nothing about her individual story. Yet, her distressed body is made literally hyper-visible in the dark gallery through the symbolic (and literal) lens of the perpetrator or bystander.

With such a convoluted provenance, it would seem as though IWM's decision to display this image at such a large scale has more to do with using the notion of rape and its horrifying image to 'jolt us into an appreciation of the enormity of Nazi crimes' (Struk, 2008: 113). The shock value of this photograph elicits discomfort among visitors, conditioning a 'correct' affective response to learning about the Holocaust, as if the image of feminine suffering alone is enough of a statement on the violence (see Jacobs, 2008). Meanwhile, the individual's story is obscured into the collective 'women were raped'. Returning to Sjoberg (2012), we might consider this person and the theme of CRSV to be trapped both in and outside of the public gaze where their experience is used to illustrate a more generalised message of Nazi terror.<sup>9</sup>

In a self-corrective effort, curators of *The Holocaust Galleries* (2021-present) were determined to avoid voyeurism or 'trauma porn' in their narration of violence. Photographs depicting undressed victims are purposefully not enlarged, nor are the most graphic experiences exploited simply for shock or illustrative value. In fact, after discussing with the AAB the recognition of CRSV as central to Holocaust history, curators ultimately decided that there would not be space to directly address these stories in adequate detail.<sup>10</sup> Curators frequently cite limited space and word count, but a professional, pragmatic explanation is not divorced from the politics of deprioritising CRSV. Curators may not consider the subject as unimportant, but ultimately, and frequently at IWM, a full explanation of CRSV is deemed less deserving of space.

## CRSV as 'other', not us

The selective 'new visibility' of CRSV is most observable at IWM in the exhibition *Crimes Against Humanity: An Exploration of Genocide and Ethnic Violence* (2002–2012). In this case, we see how particular instances of CRSV are made visible to meet contemporary expectations, but only when

they do not disrupt glorified conflict narratives and British imperial nostalgia. Built into this specious 'progress' is the museal (re)production of colonial difference.

The exhibition differed from most at IWM in that it did not include objects, but instead a 30-minute film. *Crimes Against Humanity* was also physically isolated from the Museum's most frequented galleries, due to serious concerns regarding access that younger visitors might have to the film's graphic content. The film included excerpts of a video interview with a woman systematically raped in the Bosnian War, as well as audio of historian and human rights activist Alison des Forges describing how rape was used as a method of genocide in Rwanda,

'with the idea that they were part of the enemy, and that by raping them they might be infected with AIDS and also with the express purpose of humiliating them and the men associated with them so that in a psychological sense, the community would also be destroyed'.

These inclusions were brief, but powerful in reproducing contemporary Western tropes that further specified and conditioned how CRSV could be conceived at IWM.

By way of IWM's in-built colonial gaze, genocidal 'rape as a weapon of war' is made visible only as an exceptionally perverse act of domination, perpetrated by exceptionally inhumane people in far-off places (see Du Toit, 2023). As Debbie Lisle (2006) observes, the choice to communicate almost entirely through film 'secures the viewer's passivity' (p. 856). The exhibition's strikingly minimalist design also sets it apart from the busy object-heavy galleries below. Spatially, visually, and materially, crimes against humanity are curated as different to the other forms of conflict at IWM. War rape becomes a 'horrific sublime' (Mookherjee, 2015: 382), a curiosity of foreign warfare fought by an uncivilised 'them', abstracted from the naturalised wars fought by British soldiers or 'us' in the rest of the Museum. Returning to the logic of Buss (2009), this rarefied, racialised narrative obscures what can be known about other, pervasive forms of violence perpetrated by more familiar actors.

Namely, IWM does not intentionally collect or display stories of CRSV perpetrated in British colonial settings. This practice can be understood within the Museum's general approach of brushing over or distorting the atrocities of colonial conflict, positioning modern Britain as a defender, rather than an abuser of human rights (see Lawson, 2013 [2012]: 162). By rendering experiences of colonial sexual violence invisible while spotlighting examples from other conflicts, IWM 'freezes the colony outside of "real" (modern western) history' (Du Toit, 2019: 48). The (sexual) violation of colonised bodies is normalised to the extent that appears not to be counted as 'conflict-related' at all (see Mühlhäuser, 2019: 5).

As before, IWM's problem is not necessarily a lack of relevant objects, but a lack of impetus to re-interrogate and re-interpret. One avenue for exploration might be the so-called Mau Mau Rebellion in British Kenya (1952–1960), in which colonial security services perpetrated various forms of sexual assault, sexual torture, castration and rape in detention camps and elsewhere (see Anderson and Weis, 2018). In a recent survey of IWM's collections relating to Mau Mau, Niels Boender (2023) highlights several, undisplayed objects with the capacity to help visibilise these stories. For example, a truncheon (IWM WEA 4040, 1945–1989) donated by former camp commander Terence John Image is powerfully symbolic of the extreme violence used to elicit confessions from detainees (Boender, 2023: 118).

With very little space allocated to colonial conflict altogether at IWM, the invisibility of CRSV in this context is a particularly elusive kind of absence – a void within a void, so to speak. Left unchecked, this pattern only serves to widen the chasm between which experiences of CRSV are spectacularised and which are marginalised.



## Contemporaneity as criteria for display

Finally, I return to the more recent *Second World War Galleries* (2021-present) to address how CRSV is curated as a theme of 'total war'. By all accounts, this development was driven by the work of individual curators who felt particularly strongly that a permanent acknowledgement of sexual violence was long-overdue. This was the first time since the 1994 Howson incident that addressing sexual violence had been so directly up for debate. They pushed back and won out against staff members who felt the subject might not be appropriate to include in the galleries, but were more significantly limited by a seemingly innocuous display policy. Here, I address the so-called 'contemporaneity rule' and how it limits which stories and which perspectives are made visible and become representative of CRSV at IWM.

Since 2014, curators of permanent galleries at IWM have followed an informal policy of contemporaneity, in which only objects from within the designated period of the gallery are displayed. The policy has no official justification, but 'allows IWM to present the war as it was seen and understood as it happened, without historical hindsight or tendency towards teleological inevitability' (Hawkins, 2020: 212). It is also tied to the inclusion of objects containing racist or otherwise offensive language to illustrate histories of violence; the logic being that when all material and visual culture is contemporaneous, it is better contextualised and can be viewed as historical rather than from the Museum's own perspective. But this kind of qualifying criteria impacts different histories with different weight, reproducing patterns of bias that make already marginalised experiences invisible and obstruct victim/survivor perspectives.

Where sexual violence is introduced in the *Second World War Galleries*, text reads promisingly that 'all armies committed acts of sexual violence', but goes on to only offer examples of German, Japanese and Soviet perpetration. There is no reference to sexually violent acts committed by American, British, or French soldiers as they liberated Europe nor to those committed by American soldiers at the Battle of Okinawa in 1945. Once again, a selective narrative implies that only an evil foreign enemy is capable of such atrocity and savagery, far from the civilising and liberating warfare of Allied forces and particularly the honourable British soldier.

Unsurprisingly, curators found it challenging to identify and collect objects to tell stories of Allied-perpetrated sexual violence that fit their contemporaneity criteria (Hawkins, in press: n.p.). The 'comfort station' sign, a perpetrator object taken by a British soldier, therefore became representative of CRSV in the galleries. We cannot know if the soldier fully understood the nature of the 'comfort station', but we can presume that taking the sign posed little personal or political risk to him. The same can unlikely be said for anyone attempting to contemporaneously record an experience of Allied-perpetrated sexual violence.<sup>11</sup>

Displayed alongside the 'comfort station' sign is a photograph of the heavily pregnant Park Young-Shim, who had been forced into sexual slavery by the Japanese army. The label tells us she is 'found by Allied forces', reflecting the contemporaneous perspective of Charles H. Hatfield of the US 164th Signal Photo Company, but does not mention how she was then taken as a prisoner of war by Allied forces where she suffered a miscarriage due to her repeated rape, left unable to bear children. Postcolonial geopolitics and cultural norms meant that most survivors of the 'comfort system' were unable to share their experiences or demand justice contemporaneously. Park Young-Shim did not reveal these details of her experience until the Women's International War Crimes Tribunal on Japan's Military Sexual Slavery in 2000 and in interviews given since (Nishino, 2003: 259 cited in Soh, 2008: 36).

A lack of formal, archived material on racial, colonial or gendered violence does not indicate a lack of evidence for that experience, but requires us to consider that the archival and curatorial practice itself serves as a structural and epistemic extension of such violence. Solely displaying

objects produced and collected by those in powerful positions ensures that much of the narrative power also remains in those hands. Although the *Second World War Galleries* contain more references to the subject than ever before at IWM, the implementation of the contemporaneity policy demonstrates a continued fixation on the authenticity and 'realness' of material and visual culture on display that keeps certain experiences and perspectives invisible.

## Conclusion

In this article, I have demonstrated how CRSV is curated across multiple, intersecting visibilities at IWM. Across a period of 30 years, curatorial practices have evolved from blatantly misogynistic cataloguing and a state of near-total invisibility to more subtle and selective limitations on the stories that get to be told. While some are kept invisible, certain experiences and perspectives are made temporarily visible, hyper-visible and conditionally visible. Visitors are enabled, at different moments, to see these stories as inauthentic, marginal, representative or symbolic. Yet there are also threads of continuity in IWM's curatorial regarding CRSV. Decades-old decisions to obscure, reject or deprioritise the subject might be made differently by today's generation of curators, but still profoundly inform what can be found in the catalogue or seen in the galleries. Institutional policies are amended and replaced, but often fall back on the same problematic logics of rarefied authenticity and colonial difference that curtail inclusive curating efforts.

Curatorial practices reflect marginalising patterns of how society recognises, represents and responds to sexual violence, but also actively (re)produce the gender politics of victimhood, perpetration, sexuality, and war through a prism of (also gendered) museal visual hierarchies. For instance, outside of the museum context, victim/survivor testimonies of sexual violence without documentary evidence are often subject to scrutiny, if not total dismissal based on their credibility and provability. IWM (re)produces this pattern when collection and display decisions are made based on what is considered as a 'real' material record of conflict worthy of collective remembrance. A scopical fixation on authenticity and rarefied value conceals accounts of violence that were not directly witnessed and documented contemporaneously, tacitly perpetuating a gendered burden of proof, and conveniently (mis)remembering only the honourable roles assumed by the national collective.

To designate curatorial practices at IWM as entirely state-directed would be an extreme overstatement. Yet, even as curators naturalise their own decision-making as grounded in pragmatism and bureaucracy, the resulting representations largely align with national accounts and essentialist tropes of sexual violence, sustaining cycles of epistemic harm. This is not to say that individuals working within the system cannot actively work to counteract these narratives and push for radical change. The possibility for such curatorial activism appears to hinge on how curators view their own roles and responsibilities at the Museum, and whether they feel adequately resourced and empowered to question historiographies, challenge policies and resist hegemonic structures.

To conclude, I consider how insights from this case might guide a more activist, feminist way of curating CRSV, one that aims to disrupt rather than (re)produce marginalising patterns of representation. Most importantly, I caution against any curatorial programme that sets 'making the invisible (CRSV) visible' as its absolute, unqualified goal. Museological expressions of visibility are multiplicitous and intersectional; any notion of 'total' or 'complete' visibility is unattainable and risks oversimplifying a necessarily complex subject. Instead, museums that are seeking to expand their engagement with CRSV should begin by reflecting on how their curatorial practices are already built to exclude and marginalise. They might then consider changing policies and priorities to introduce a greater diversity of CRSV experiences into the museum, beyond those which meet existing criteria and fit neatly into an overarching narrative. At IWM, this could look like

allowing the display of non-contemporaneous objects to illustrate British perpetration, a commitment to actively collect accounts of CRSV in British colonial settings, or even a re-evaluation of what should count as the material and visual culture of war (see Azoulay, 2018: 266). Equally, curators must consider *how* visitors are enabled to see these stories, avoiding the tendency to sensationalise with graphic images or tokenise unnamed individuals. Ultimately, an activist, feminist curation of CRSV should always strive to elevate the perspectives of victims/survivors and to centre what is otherwise marginal, often those subject to historical erasure on multiple fronts.

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### Notes

1. IWM collections are shared across its five museums, but this article's discussion of display and interpretation is limited to that of the flagship London site.
2. 'Comfort women' is a perpetrator term deriving from the Japanese euphemism '*ianfu*', referring to the 50,000- 200,000 women and girls estimated to have been coerced or abducted into this system (Soh, 2008, xii).
3. Here, sexual violence refers to a wide range of acts including but not limited to 'rape, sexual slavery, forced prostitution, forced pregnancy, forced abortion, enforced sterilization, forced marriage, [and] trafficking in persons when committed in situations of conflict for the purpose of sexual violence/exploitation' (United Nations Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Sexual Violence in Conflict, n.d.). My analysis includes these acts when associated directly or indirectly with armed conflict, perpetrated by combatants, civilians or peacekeepers.
4. To support the development of this exhibition, IWM proposed a PhD project funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (from which this paper results).
5. An exception to this is the doctoral thesis of Aisha Almisnad Almohannadi (2020) who addresses 'silence' on (specifically) wartime rape at IWM.
6. Officially an 'arm's length body' (ALB), IWM (2024b) receives just under half of its annual funding as grant-in-aid from the government, and is supposedly answerable not directly to the government, but to its sovereign and government-appointed trustees. As museums have become embroiled in the so-called 'culture wars', the veracity of the ALB principle has been called into question (see Redmond, 2020).

7. Experiences of ‘comfort women’ were varied, often along lines of ethnic hierarchy (Soh, 2008). Early on, the army recruited Japanese sex workers before targeting women and girls from other territories (Tanaka, 2002: 18). Some experiences could be described as forced prostitution, but flatly referring to these women and girls as prostitutes without qualifying the conditions of duress and coercion is an inaccurate and harmful simplification.
8. Handwritten meeting minutes include the abbreviated note ‘Cld we display’ below Weight’s comments on *Croatian and Muslim*, suggesting that the ARC discussed the suitability or appropriateness of the subject for display at IWM (IWM ARC Meeting Minutes, 1994).
9. A similar practice was replicated in the *First World War Galleries* (2014–present) where Belgian refugee reports detailing rape, gang rape and genital mutilation were displayed spread on a table, almost as props, to illustrate an overall narrative of German atrocity.
10. *The Holocaust Galleries* do include some very minor references to CRSV: a short definition of ‘*pipel*’, as ‘young male prisoners who served Kapos and were routinely subjected to sexual abuse in return for food and protection’ and the video testimony of Edyta Klein-Smith, in which she mentions that she was sexually assaulted in hiding at age 13 by ‘the man that lived there’ (IWM 19785, 1999).
11. Further on in the gallery, visitors are briefly introduced to the personal story of Marta Hillers, who experienced sexual barter, rape and gang rape at the hands of the Red Army in Berlin. Hillers famously recounted and anonymously published her story, *Eine Frau in Berlin*, but not for nearly a decade following the war.

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