

Documenting War Crimes Onstage in Kyo Choi's *The Apology*

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Abstract:

This essay discusses Kyo Choi's play *The Apology*, which was first produced in London in 2022, as an example of activist theatre, meant not only to educate British audiences about the ongoing controversies over the so-called "comfort women" issue, involving Japanese military sexual slavery during World War II, but to move viewers to action. Choi's drama does so through a form of emotional documentation, which supplements and amplifies actual documents related to this war crime.

Keywords: "comfort women", military sexual slavery, World War II, human rights

Literature is always linked to the world beyond the text, whether for ill or for good. At its best, it can promote social justice, awareness, and empathy. Often, it intersects, too, with academic disciplines such as legal studies, gender studies, historical studies, and studies in global politics; then it becomes a pedagogical asset, giving research immediacy and enabling it to assume concrete and accessible form.¹ Theatre in particular can be a valuable educational force. It works with and for diverse communities, while bringing alive individuals and individual situations, both past and present; it invites audiences to learn and then to respond actively in order to create positive change, not merely to watch passively.

Within the framework of human rights activism, among the most important tools are documents and archives, as these help to establish and preserve records of injustice and abuse. *The Apology*, by the South Korean-born British playwright, Kyo Choi, which was first produced in London in 2022, is a notable example of a drama about the problem of documentation. It focuses on what happened when the known paper archives were inadequate to document a gendered war crime committed throughout World War II, and dramatizes how, in the early 1990s, a variety of Asian women—including survivors of Japanese military sexual slavery, their feminist supporters, and human rights workers—labored, fought, and also suffered to bring the truth to light. Choi's play not only recreates that process of recovering a hidden history, but also serves for the audience as a form of what we might call *emotional documentation*. It stages before their eyes the crimes of

the past, along with the pain of those who felt compelled to come forward to testify to those crimes and, in doing so, to relive these horrors. And it also puts what occurred on a mass scale into an individual and very personal framework, centered on a small number of protagonists, whose fates the spectators are made to care about.

One of the questions this play raises is what it means, in the first place, to document a war crime—especially one that still is as little known to Western audiences, whether in Britain or throughout Europe and the United States, as the so-called “comfort system.” This was an organized system created and overseen by the Japanese government, both before the official start of the Second World War and then throughout the first half of the 1940s, until Japan’s defeat, and supposedly maintained for the benefit of the morale of the Imperial Japanese Army.²

It involved the trafficking of thousands of underage girls, along with women, across the Pacific, to military brothels in a variety of countries occupied by Japan—including China, the Philippines, and Indonesia. Many of the underage girls and women exploited by this system came from those countries, too, but the largest numbers were Korean, as Japan had invaded Korea in 1910 and continued to control its population and government. The girls and women were “recruited” by a variety of means, from coercion, to trickery, to threats, to the use of violence and force. Once confined to these military brothels, they were subject to daily rapes by Japanese soldiers and officers, as often as thirty to forty times a day. They were imprisoned there for months and, in some cases, for years. If they tried to resist or escape, they were beaten, tortured, or murdered, as examples to others. It is estimated that there were upwards of 200,000 victims of this system, but large numbers of them died from abuse, sickness, and also from being killed by their captors at the end of the War, to erase this living evidence of illegality and inhumanity.³

These underage girls—some as young as twelve, but most between fourteen and eighteen, with the majority sixteen or seventeen years of age—and the older women, too, were euphemistically called “comfort women.” But the aging survivors who first came forward in the early 1990s to testify to the atrocities committed by the Imperial Japanese Army and overseen by the Japanese government throughout Asia in World War II have rejected that term. They and their feminist and human rights supporters refer to them instead as “military sex slaves.” This is a designation to which successive Japanese governments have strenuously objected, doing so to this very day, insisting that no such enslavement was involved.

Rightwing Japanese nationalists, in particular, continue to assert—entirely without documentation—that these underage girls and women were merely sex workers, who volunteered and were well paid for their services. Recently, a new group of denialists have appeared, claiming that these underage girls and women must have signed legal contracts, agreeing to work as prostitutes, even though they have been unable to produce any evidence that such contracts ever existed. The denialists have no answer, moreover, as to how underage girls would have been bound by contracts, had those existed, nor how any contract would have made legal the assaults and beatings to which girls and women were subjected, while confined and prevented from leaving their

imprisonment in these rape camps. But again, there are no documents whatsoever to prove that this situation was voluntary.⁴

Thus, the whole question of documentation itself is rightly the centerpiece of Kyo Choi's 2022 play, *The Apology*, as this has been and remains a fraught issue. So much has had to rest on the testimony of the survivors as to *how* they were made part of this so-called "comfort system," and of what happened to them while they were then appallingly victimized and exploited—with their individual trauma mirroring, of course, what was done to the many thousands who did not survive. As one of the protagonists of Choi's play—the fictional "Priyanka Silva," a Sri Lankan-born human rights worker assigned by the United Nations in 1991 to begin investigating reports of what occurred fifty years earlier and had been silenced ever since—says to a fictional American diplomat, regarding this matter of the survivors' testimony: "Isn't it bad enough that their lives are on hold, at the mercy of their former captors to validate their narrative. It's like they're still *enslaved* by the past" (Choi 2022, 67; italics in original).

This is not to suggest, however, that the archives are empty, and that there is no material evidence of the so-called "comfort system" itself. But certainly, there is nothing equal to the massive documentation of the European Holocaust. As everyone knows, there are extensive film and photographic records from the liberation of the Nazi extermination camps—contemporary images of the piled-up corpses of Jews and other targeted groups, as well as of the skeletal bodies of those still alive, starved and abused. As always, seeing is an important component of believing, and what remains to be seen of Japanese military sexual slavery is scarce in comparison and conveys little of its horror.

There is, for instance, a widely circulated photograph, now the property of the U.S. National Archives and Records Administration, that was taken by the Allied forces in 1944. It shows four young survivors, one of them pregnant. (Japanese soldiers were, technically, required to wear condoms in these military brothels. But survivors have said that there was no enforcement. If they protested the absence of condoms, often the individual soldiers would hit and kick them into submission.) Kyo Choi incorporates this photograph into her play, making the fictional character of "Bok-Hae," who is sixteen when forced by trickery into military sexual slavery, the pregnant girl in the image. This, of course, is precisely what historical fiction—and, moreover, its theatrical equivalent—can do so well: it turns large-scale events involving now-anonymous or forgotten figures into representations of flesh-and-blood characters, with backstories and with fates that unfold in front of an audience, engaging spectators emotionally and, in this case, politically, too.

Throughout *The Apology*, Choi's characters—especially the onstage recorder of testimony and the voice of conscience, Priyanka Silva—make clear why such figures are both unidentified and have been, by Western nations in particular, largely ignored, whether in 1944, or in the early 1990s, or even today. As Priyanka Silva puts it, "Nothing complicated about good ol' fashioned sexism and racism" (Choi 2022, 66). Choi's drama is a moral and dramatic exercise in combating both of these negative forces.

But *The Apology* is by no means the first play to try to bring attention to these past and present

concerns, focusing on Japan's military sex slaves. Perhaps the most commercially successful, at least in the U.S., has been *Comfort Women: A New Musical*, which was staged in New York City at an Off-Broadway location in 2015, then revived in 2018, and produced again in Los Angeles in 2019. The musical, written by Dimo Hyun Jun Kim with several collaborators, is set in Indonesia in 1941, where Korean girls and women are imprisoned as military sex slaves. It largely represents sexual violence in stylized and non-graphic form, especially through dance. And it has, in effect, a positive conclusion, as it shows a few of the victims escaping their captivity and finding a way to return to Korea—an imaginary ending designed, in effect, as a gift to those victimized, by offering them a degree of agency onstage that was never possible in actuality.

Kyo Choi's *The Apology* is very different in tone, structure, and purpose. At one point, however, there is singing in this play, too. The character of "Bok-Hae," in her 1944 incarnation, is present onstage as a "ghostly" figure at the same time as her elderly self in 1991—a woman who has hidden her identity and taken the name of "Sun-Hee" (Choi 2022, 18). Bok-Hae begins singing a Korean folksong, titled "Doraji," about a bellflower. When her voice "falters," as the stage directions tell us, Sun Hee "takes over... louder and louder, clenching her fists. Tears flow down her cheeks" (Choi, 2022, 18). It is a moment in which two aspects of a fractured and damaged self are seen to come together, in shared and unresolved grief and pain. Simultaneously, these emotions are also generated in the audience in a way that no mere reading of a document or published testimony can fully convey.

Choi's play was produced in London at an Off-West-End venue, the Arcola Theatre, which bills itself as a space dedicated not merely to entertainment, but to community engagement.⁶ Although the author of *The Apology* was one individual woman playwright, Kyo Choi, its development and production were very much a community-supported effort, involving Arts Council England, the British Korean Society, and North End Theatre, which is a venue committed specifically to advancing works by British Asian creators. In interviews, Choi has spoken about her dependence on research, preceding the writing of the play—of reading the many volumes of survivors' testimony; of looking closely at the January 1996 report by Radhika Coomaraswamy, who was Special Rapporteur for the United Nations Commission on Human Rights, which outlined Japan's legal responsibility for the war crime of military sexual slavery across Asia; and also of consulting documents—as some documents do indeed exist—attesting to the Japanese government's meticulous organization and oversight of the so-called "comfort system."⁷

One of these documents was made public by a former American Intelligence officer, Grant Goodman, who had discovered it immediately after the liberation of the Philippines, but had kept it in his personal files for fifty years, releasing it only after news broke in the early 1990s, with the public testimony of a Korean survivor, Kim Hak-Sun, about the responsibility of Japanese officials for her wartime suffering. Goodman later published his account of how he came to have this document in his possession, as well as why he decided to disclose this to a Japanese journalist. He called this account "My Own *Gaiatsu*: A Document from 1945 Provides Proof," using the Japanese

word *gaiatsu* to refer to “foreign pressure” put on the Japanese government to accept legal responsibility and apologize to the survivors of the so-called “comfort system” (Goodman 2001, 142).

This document, however, merely proved that there was official Japanese governmental involvement in the oversight and the management of what were, in effect, rape camps. It did not touch upon the process by which underage girls and women were recruited, whether forcibly or through deception, for these sites of imprisonment, nor could it begin to communicate the stories of violence inflicted on the victims or the lifelong trauma that survivors experienced. For that, the testimony of the aged women themselves has been necessary. To bring this testimony before a wider public, as well as to make it relevant to present-day audiences, who are now more familiar with the concept of rape as a war crime and as a weapon of war than most people were before the 1990s, theatre has stepped forward and taken up this duty. That is precisely what Kyo Choi’s *The Apology* did in 2022, garnering a great deal of positive critical attention and response from reviewers for the *Guardian*, the *Evening Standard*, and other British papers, both in print and online.

Choi’s title, *The Apology*, employing the singular form of this noun, suggests that only one such act of admission of guilt and attempt at reparations is at stake. In fact, there are multiple instances of apology, of inadequate apology, and of non-apology all addressed in the course of the drama, some of them referring to actual historical events. The most famous of these is referenced throughout—the one known as the Kono Statement, which was issued by Japan’s Chief Cabinet Secretary in August 1993, admitting that the Japanese government had indeed overseen the “comfort system,” but never clearly acknowledging that it had used force to recruit victims and accepting no legal responsibility for what happened to the girls and women in the so-called “comfort stations.” Because of this, the ongoing absence of justice and the presence of unhealed psychic wounds haunts Bok-Hae/ Sun-Hee, the fictional character in Choi’s play who is based on the real-life Kim Hak-Sun, the Korean survivor who first gave testimony in 1991. For Choi’s fictional protagonist, there is no coming to terms with the wreckage of her life—the blighting of her young self, the ruin of her later years—without this justice and closure.

So damaged and haunted has the protagonist of Choi’s play been that, in 1955— while living in Seoul with the Korean man who married her and behaved as though he were the father of the child she was carrying when liberated in 1944—she had run away, abandoning both her husband and her daughter, as well as changing her name. Her trauma, moreover, becomes intergenerational trauma. The audience meets that abandoned daughter, Yuna, at different stages of her life, until she learns in after years about her mother’s hidden history.

But the crux of Choi’s play is its focus not merely on this victim or on her irreparably damaged daughter; it is on the dramatization of multiple scenes representing Priyanka Silva’s determined attempts to uncover the truth of what was done to the survivors and also to those who did not survive. She does so in order to be able to document what had been largely undocumented—and thus to trigger both a condemnatory statement by the United Nations and an official call for Japan to admit that it was both morally and legally responsible, then to apologize to and compensate the survivors,

as well as to make this past episode an acknowledged part of its history, going forward. Audiences watch her interviewing Sun-Hee at different times in the early 1990s and increasingly losing her initial reserve and attempts at objectivity. She becomes instead an ally in a fight for justice, while bringing along the audience in this process. And that is the crucial moment—when the simultaneous learning curves of this sympathetic character and of the audience come together, resulting in a new political awareness both onstage and off.

There are complications and plot twists along the way, regarding Bok-Hae/Sun-Hee's marriage, as well as the tense and ambiguous relationship between Priyanka Silva and a fictional male US diplomat, who plays a double game. What is most important to emphasize, however, are two critical authorial decisions on Kyo Choi's part. One is to give the aged Sun-Hee the status not only of an activist, but of an artist, thus multiplying her agency and prominence. In fact, several of the actual Korean survivors who spoke out in the 1990s and became residents of the "House of Sharing" —as the group home created in 1992 and maintained for them in Seoul, allowing them to live together, is called—did produce works of art, usually autobiographical, depicting in visual terms what they either witnessed being done to others or what they endured themselves, under military sexual slavery.

Here, Choi makes her fictional character, Bok-Hae/Sun-Hee, a sculptor. In this play, she is, moreover, the creator of what has become the globally recognized symbol of the so-called "comfort women" and of their ongoing crusade for a legal resolution to this still unresolved historical matter. Sun-Hee, who is shown onstage sitting in a chair, a frozen figure, waiting, produces a representation in clay of Bok-Hae, her young self. The audience is meant to understand that she is thus the model for an actual, not fictional, work of public protest art—for what is usually known as "The Statue of Peace." This is a depiction of a young barefoot schoolgirl—a victim, rendered in bronze, who is seated next to an empty chair, in memory of those like her who did not survive.

The creation and public use of this statue was the idea of the South Korean organization that has, from the 1990s on, supported survivors and aided them in their quest for justice, the Korean Council for Women Drafted for Military Sexual Slavery by Japan. This bronze sculpture was first mounted outdoors, opposite the Japanese embassy in Seoul, in 2011, and its presence there occasioned fierce objections by the Japanese government. Since then, copies of it have been installed, controversially, in cities around the world. It was actually designed by a Korean couple, Kim Seo-kyung and Kim Eun-sung. But Kyo Choi takes dramatic license—literally—to make this an image both of and by her play's survivor-protagonist.

Choi's other important decision is not to end *The Apology* merely with her own fictional character's death and onstage funeral procession, carried out by means of a video projection, but with a video and audio montage. In this series of clips, Choi brings the past wrongs forward into the present and, moreover, moves beyond this one specific violation of women's human rights, to connect it with others—both historical abuses and more recent ones. These include instances of sexual slavery carried out by ISIS, the Islamic State, and also worldwide reports compiled by ACLED

(the Armed Conflict Location Data) of “over 100 government-perpetrated sexual violence events since the beginning of 2018” (Choi 2022, 77). Choi also highlights reminders that the United States did not have clean hands, when it came to the military sexual exploitation of girls and women at the end of the Second World War, as the U.S. cooperated with Japan in the setting up of “a similar ‘comfort women’ station for American G.I.s until the spring of 1946” (Choi 2022, 77). And Choi looks, too, beyond sexual slavery alone, when it comes to matters of gender-based injustice, quoting a 2022 Global Citizen report about the U.S. Supreme Court’s overturning of *Roe v. Wade*, removing the right to abortion, which concluded that “women’s choices and freedoms are threatened” (Choi 2022, 77). The final video clip, nonetheless, is of a “Wednesday Demonstration” in Seoul—one of the weekly protests outside the Japanese embassy there, demanding justice for the so-called “comfort women” survivors and a legal resolution to this historical war crime. Onstage, the last thing the audience sees is that same “Statue of Peace” outside the embassy—the sculptural representation of a young girl victim.

But merely looking is clearly not the last thing the audience is meant to do. Choi’s dramatic presentation onstage of the heroic activism of both her fictional survivor—her version of Kim Hak-Sun, who was indeed a fighter— and of her fictional interviewer, who becomes the United Nation’s Special Rapporteur by the end, thus reflecting the career path of the real-life Radhika Coomaraswamy—is an incitement to political action, locally and globally. By the time the curtain goes down, this play not only models, but demands from its audience, new and unflagging awareness, involvement, determination, and perseverance—an urgent push for justice, on behalf of the aged survivors who remain and in memory of those no longer living. And if the audience that leaves the theatre fails to act, Kyo Choi’s play will accept no apology.

Endnotes:

1. For more about how other literary genres, beyond drama—including dystopian futuristic fiction, poetry, and memoirs in graphic form—have been used as pedagogical tools to educate young readers in particular about the subject of “comfort women” and to encourage activism, see Margaret D. Stetz, “New Genres, New Audiences: Retelling the Story of Japan’s Military Sexual Slavery.” *New Ways of Solidarity with Korean Comfort Women*. Ed. Nusta Carranza Ko. Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan/Springer Nature, 2023. 113–131.
2. Information about the details of the “comfort system” and its various methods of implementation in different settings across the Asian Pacific may be found in a variety of texts, including the following: George Hicks. *The Comfort Women: Japan’s Brutal Regime of Enforced Prostitution in the Second World War*. New York: W. W. Norton, 1995; Yoshimi Yoshiaki. *Comfort Women: Sexual Slavery in the Japanese Military During World War II*. Trans. Suzanne O’Brien. New York: Columbia University Press, 1995; Dai Sil Kim-Gibson. *Silence Broken: Korean Comfort Women*. Parkersburg, Iowa: Mid-Prairie Books, 1999; Sangmie Choi Schellstede. *Comfort Women Speak: Testimony by Sex Slaves of the Japanese Military*. New York and London: Holmes & Meier, 2000; Caroline Norma. *The Japanese Comfort Women and Sexual Slavery During the China and Pacific Wars*. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016; M. Evelina Galang. *Lola’s House: Filipino Women Living with War*. Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2017; and Pyong Gap Min. *Korean ‘Comfort Women’: Military Brothels, Brutality, and the Redress Movement*. New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2021.

3. This commonly cited figure of 200,000 victims has been disputed by some historians, who point to evidence that it omits many thousands of Chinese girls and women forced into military sexual slavery after Japan's invasion of China. For more about this subject, see Peipei Qiu with Su Zhiliang and Chen Lifei. *Chinese Comfort Women: Testimonies from Imperial Japan's Sex Slaves*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2013.
4. Recent controversies over this new form of denialism have been addressed by Anna-Karin Eriksson in "Representing the 'Comfort Women': Omissions and Denials in Wartime Historiographies in Japan." *Representing Gender-Based Violence: Global Perspectives*. Ed. Caroline Williamson Sinalo and Nicoletta Mandolini. Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2023. 89–109. They are also the subject of a forthcoming edited volume: Pyong Gap Min. *Countering History Denialism: The Assault on Truth About 'Comfort Women.'* Singapore: World Scientific Publishing, 2024.
5. The original production of this musical in New York City received mixed reviews from theatre critics, including a harshly negative one by Joseph Pisano: (<https://www.theaterscene.net/musicals/offbway/comfort-women-a-new-musical/joseph-pisano>).
6. More about the Arcola Theatre's community-enhancing mission may be found on its website: (https://www.arcolatheatre.com/about/what-we-do/?gad_source=1&gclid=CjwKCAjwg-24BhB_EiwA1ZOx8v2nd7QynkmXbN70y5j3dSSjGwnIcrJ5RglqLE1M9Qq22n-mgLE7hRoC3ZEQA_vD_BwE).
7. See for example Maryam Philpott. "Cultural Capital." (<https://mytheatremates.com/apology-arcola-theatre-maryam>).
8. Details about Kim Hak-Sun (also called "Kim Hak-soon") and her testimony may be found, for instance, in Choe Sang-Hun, "Overlooked No More: Kim Hak-Soon, Who Broke the Silence for 'Comfort Women.'" *New York Times*. 21 October 2021. (<https://www.nytimes.com/2021/10/21/obituaries/kim-hak-soon-overlooked.html>).
9. In pointing out postwar guilt on the part of the U.S. military, when it came to the exploitation of girls and women, Choi echoes the findings of researchers such as Yuki Tanaka. See Yuki Tanaka. *Japan's Comfort Women: Sexual Slavery and Prostitution During World War II and the US Occupation*. London and New York: Routledge, 2002.

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Web resources:

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- <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/10/21/obituaries/kim-hak-soon-overlooked.html>.
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