

Queer Archives, Performance, and Historiography in South Korea

siren eun young jung's *Yeosung Gukgeuk Project*

Yeong Ran Kim



On a hot and humid August evening in Seoul, my friend Sunnam and I went to the National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art for the opening of the Korean Artist Prize 2018 show, with works by the nominees for one of the most prestigious awards in South Korea. We celebrated siren eun young jung, a mutual friend nominated for the award. jung was showcasing the culmination of 10 years of work on *Yeosung Gukgeuk Project*.¹ Since its launch in 2008, I have been a fan of the *Yeosung Gukgeuk Project*, which excavates queer pasts from yeosung gukgeuk, a genre of all-female Korean

1. *Yeosung Gukgeuk Project* is an award-winning work that has been exhibited in major art venues in South Korea, including the National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art, Ilmin Museum of Art, and Seoul Museum of Art, to name a few. It has also been featured at various international venues, including Gallery MC in New York City (2019); Serendipity Arts Festival in Goa, India (2018); Shanghai Biennial (2018); Haus der Kulturen der Welt in Berlin, Germany (2018); Centre Pompidou in Paris, France (2017); Taipei Biennial (2016); and Hiroshima City Museum of Contemporary Art (2015).

opera extremely popular in the 1950s and 1960s. Not only as friends of jung but also as queer feminists, Sunnam and I were excited to see Korean queer art exhibited in a state-funded museum space: a very rare occasion. Upon entering the exhibition, we went through a corridor with installations on both walls, entitled *Deferral Archive* (2018). On the left were archival materials such as newspaper articles about yeosung gukgeuk and framed autographs, and on the right was a blue curtain resembling a stage curtain. Behind the curtain, I saw a familiar image: *The Wedding* (2010), a photograph of a mock wedding marrying Cho Geum-Ang, a famous yeosung gukgeuk male-role actor, to a fan. In the photo, Cho is wearing a man's suit and their fan is wearing a white wedding dress (see fig. 2).² Some members of their troupe are wearing women's *hanbok*, traditional Korean clothing, while others are wearing men's suits. The photo points to nonnormative intimacies and gender-crossing practices that existed in the past but were not claimed as queer history. A dim queer past flickered behind the curtain.

As seen in the *Deferral Archive* installation, *Yeosung Gukgeuk Project*—consisting of over 40 pieces in a variety of formats including media installations, performance artworks, and stage plays—illuminates unknown queer pasts in South Korea. jung treats yeosung gukgeuk as one of the rare reservoirs of Korea's queer pasts to imagine queerness anew as a sense of togetherness for social minorities. Due to a scarcity of records and documentation, encountering queer pasts is not easy, especially from before 1990, the pre-identitarian era in South Korea.³ Korean historian Park-cha Min-jeong demonstrates how newspapers and magazines from that era depicted queerness in solely sensational terms, using the language of crime or perversion, and how these representations were the main mode through which she could trace the remains of queer lives in Korea (Park-cha 2018). Aside from those newspapers and magazines, there are unofficial stories that point to Korea's queer past, such as rumors about the 1980s cruising spots for men who have sex with men, or anecdotes on how a female taxi driver group in the 1960s functioned as a community for women dating women.⁴ *Yeosung Gukgeuk Project* is one of the rare, performed queer historiographies on same-sex relationships and gender nonconformity of the 1950s and 1960s.

I am particularly interested in how *Yeosung Gukgeuk Project* exposes the pressure points and tensions within contemporary South Korean queer identity politics vis-à-vis the past. The English term “queer” was first introduced in South Korea in the 1990s, via newspapers and film magazines covering either foreign movements, such as Queer Nation in the US; or New Queer Cinema, a cutting-edge global trend. Queerness was either an exotic phenomenon in a distant place, or

Figure 1. (previous page) Cho Young-Sook in (Off)Stage. Festival Bo:m, Seoul, 6 April, 2013. (Photo courtesy of Cheonjin Keem and siren eun young jung)

Yeong Ran Kim (Sarah Lawrence College) is the Andrew W. Mellon Digital Media Fellow and an affiliated faculty member in the Filmmaking and Moving Image Arts program. They are currently completing a book manuscript entitled “Queer Unmastery: Performance, Artmaking, and Social Movements in Transnational Korea,” which examines the intersection of queer aesthetic practices and minority politics. ykim@sarahlawrence.edu

2. In the Korean language, gender pronouns are rarely used. When referring the yeosung gukgeuk actors, I use the gender pronouns they/them/their, unless requested to use she/her or he/him pronouns, in order to respect their experiences of being men onstage and being both men and women offstage, as articulated by Cho Young-Sook in *(Off)Stage* (2013).
3. Not until the early 1990s were terms like lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer used as descriptions for non-normative gender orientations and sexuality. It was during this time that identity-based groups and organizations were established for the first time in South Korea.
4. In the pre-identitarian period, vernacular terms such as *gilnyeo* (street woman) and *bogal* (slut) were used to refer to men who have sex with men, and *bajissi* (mr. pants) and *chimassi* (ms. skirt) to indicate a masculine woman and a feminine woman in an intimate relationship. See Chun Won-geun (2015) for a historical analysis on the 1990s experience of men having sex with men. For the history of *bajissi* and *chimassi*, see Lee Hye-sol (1999).



Figure 2. *Cho Geum-Ang marrying a fan in a mock wedding*. Deferral Archive, 2018, *Installation, mixed-media*. National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art, Seoul, 10 August–25 November. (Photo courtesy of Chulki Hong and siren eun young jung)

an aesthetic category. It seemed to be something that was part of the “developed nations” that South Korea was aspiring to join. As Anna Tsing observes, “aspirations for global connection [...] come to life in ‘friction,’” which is no exception in the formation of queer politics in South Korea (2005:1). On the one hand, the aspiration to catch up with the timeline of global LGBTQ politics has contributed to the early formation of LGBTQ activism in South Korea.⁵ On the other hand, working with the Western categories—such as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer—has created inevitable frictions in articulating nonnormative gender and sexual practices in South Korea.⁶ jung depicts the world of yeosung gukgeuk as an alternative space to articulate queer bodies, gestures, and intimacies beyond the identity-based approach. She does not categorize her project as a lesbian history nor a transgender history; actors do not identify themselves as lesbian or transgender. Instead of looking at queerness in South Korea as an “expression of a frightening new force of global coercion” (Tsing 2005:4) or “belated copies of the liberal West” (Liu 2015:4), I have found a different rendition of Korean queerness in *Yeosung Gukgeuk Project*. jung excavates Korean queer pasts via yeosung gukgeuk, envisioning queerness not as a sexual or gender identification, but a new sense of togetherness emerging from interdependency and shared vulnerabilities. As a mode of performance that plays upon and exposes “the pull of the past on the present,” jung’s practice is a “temporal drag,” in Elizabeth Freeman’s words (2007:62). Capturing and recreating yeosung gukgeuk through video installations, performance artworks, and theatre productions, jung explores the transformative potential of bringing forgotten queer pasts into the present, in order to create new encounters across time and across differences. This critical intervention relieves the pressure on queer Koreans to adopt the globalized queer liberalism, which flattens queerness into a rights-based discourse, and facilitates a space to imagine queer socialities and alliances outside the interlocking structures of normativity and kinship.⁷

Searching for Yeosung Gukgeuk

The birth of yeosung gukgeuk was a result of colonial-era pressure to catch up with the colonial world order of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. In 1902, Gojong (1897–1907), who took the

5. For more specifics about the formation of queer politics in relation to the global LGBTQ politics in South Korea, see Yeong Ran Kim (2021).
6. In promoting and circulating terms such as gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender in the human rights discourse in South Korea, the vernacular terms were dropped, if not deemed taboo, to eradicate the nuances of sexual deviancy embedded in those terms. See Sooyoung Kim (2023) on the omission of transgender sex workers from the feminist discourse on US Camptown sex workers who provided sexual labor to US soldiers during and after the Korean War, and were vital to the formation of transgender community in South Korea.
7. Queer liberalism is an assimilatory politics that promotes consumerism and state protections for the right to privacy and intimacy, which emerged in the United States in the 1990s (see Duggan [2003] and Eng [2010]).

name Emperor Gwangmu, was the last King of Joseon (the dynasty that lasted from 1392 to 1897) and the first Emperor of Korea (1897–1910). Emperor Gwangmu constructed Hyeopryulsa, Korea's first proscenium theatre, as part of a national modernization project. For Hyeopryulsa's stage, Korean cultural elites invented "changgeuk" in a conscious effort to develop a modern Korean genre. The new genre combined pansori, a traditional form of Korean musical storytelling, with traditional Korean dancing and certain aspects of Western theatre (Baek 1997). Yeosung gukgeuk—which literally means female (*yeosung*) national theatre (*gukgeuk*)—is a subgenre of changgeuk.

In 1948, a group of famous female pansori singers founded the Women's Korean Traditional Music Association. They staged *Okjungbwa* with an all-female cast for the first time in the history of changgeuk at Shigonggwang theatre in Seoul, from 24–31 October 1948.⁸ Performance scholar Kim Ji-hye argues that the founding of the association was an attempt by female pansori singers to create an alternative space to defend themselves against economic and sexual exploitation by male performers and managers. Although the group itself survived for only about a year and was not commercially successful, the experiment was a starting point for the development of yeosung gukgeuk (Kim 2011). Thanks to the stardom of Yim Chun Aeng, who was the male protagonist in *Okjungbwa* and continued to be a prominent male-role actor with numerous followers, yeosung gukgeuk became enormously popular with Korean audiences in the late 1940s, remaining so until the rise of Korean cinema in the 1960s (2011:6). Actors specializing in male roles were top stars during this period.

Despite its huge success in the 1950s and early 1960s, yeosung gukgeuk is not well remembered today (Joo 2008:158). Kim Ji-hye argues that the decline of yeosung gukgeuk's popularity was the result of postwar South Korean society's drive to recover a lost patriarchal order; the dominant voices of male changgeuk performers and male theatre critics promoted changgeuk as a legitimate traditional art while condemning and ridiculing yeosung gukgeuk as "a poor mockery," or "a deformity of tradition" (2011:20). As such, yeosung gukgeuk has not received much attention from critics or theatre historians as an important part of Korean theatre history. Yet recently, feminist scholars and artists in Korea, including Kim and Jung, have begun to point to the cultural and political significance of yeosung gukgeuk. They have investigated the genre's distinctive aesthetics and female fandom culture as well as the life histories of the professional female artists who were its practitioners.⁹ *Yeosung Gukgeuk Project* is a well-known and celebrated work in the contemporary art scene in South Korea and various international locations including Japan, Taiwan, India, Germany, and the US.

The Gesture as Found Object

Queer Archives, Affects, and History

Yeosung gukgeuk requires extensive physical training. The actors master pansori singing as well as the physical skills required to embody masculinity.¹⁰ Although yeosung gukgeuk has been almost forgotten in theatre history, the male-role actors' bodies and gestures have gained new attention and respect through *Yeosung Gukgeuk Project*, connecting today's South Koreans to a derided queer past. How does the project pull the yeosung gukgeuk body from the past? Or more precisely, how does it excavate the physical gestures and affects of a forgotten genre and reanimate them to further explore queerness? The project's actors' attempts to materialize the yeosung gukgeuk world have been especially concentrated on presenting ideal versions of men, which was the source of the genre's popularity in the 1950s and 1960s, and is now once again the source of its popularity via new queer interpretations.

8. Although there is little research yet to clarify the historical relations, there are female-only theatre troupes in East Asia combining traditional singing, dancing, and narrative with Western theatre elements, such as takarazuka in Japan (a genre named for the Takarazuka company founded in 1913) and yue opera in China (originated in 1906).

9. See Baek Hyun-mee (2000), Joo Sung-hye (2008), and Kim Hye-jung (2013).

10. Pansori is known for a notoriously long training period, if not a lifetime, to reach a mastery. Aspiring pansori artists must find a master who will pass down techniques to them.

Across various iterations of the project, jung choreographs movements and affects derived from yeosung gukgeuk in a new way: she completely disregards the heteronormative narratives that prevail in the genre. Drawing upon archival research and oral history with yeosung gukgeuk actors in their 60s and 70s, jung rediscovers queer potentialities in the form, especially in the ways that the male role actors embody masculinity, through physical gestures, voice, props, and costumes. Her work also draws attention to these performers' experiences of queer intimacy showing their struggle to survive as actors.

In *Directing for Gender* (2010), a single-channel video installation that was part of *Yeosung Gukgeuk Project*, jung isolates gestures and mixes and matches them in the video edits, focusing on gestures that inscribe masculinity (see figs. 3 & 4). She casts yeosung gukgeuk actors in their 70s who remember the yeosung gukgeuk gestures, and has them manifest the bodily movements differently than they would have on the yeosung gukgeuk stage: the gestures are detached from the drama and thereby given more prominence. Thus, jung is not just documenting a disappearing art form. Her new choreography offers a contemporary insight into the gender-crossing acting of the past by showing how yeosung gukgeuk performers "became men." By presenting a particular set of masculine gestures and affects via camerawork and editing, jung creates a new cinematic stage. A red curtain is draped behind the actors indicating that the cinematic frame does not belong to the world of yeosung gukgeuk anymore. The new choreographic video work magnifies how yeosung gukgeuk itself made use of the performative construction of masculinity with a careful articulation and repetitive bodily practices that would undo the embodied femininity in yeosung gukgeuk actors. By isolating the gestures of masculinity, jung demonstrates that gender is a meticulous set of constructions that formulates a male body through repetitions over time. In yeosung gukgeuk, performing male roles is not a one-time thing, but more of a permanent designation. Actors were required to be trained for a long period of time to fully embody men onstage—learning the expression of gender through repetition over time.

In the cinematic stage of *Directing for Gender*, Kim Hye Rhee, a yeosung gukgeuk actor and director in her 70s, demonstrates how she built the male protagonist in a yeosung gukgeuk play entitled *Muyeongtap*. The play was originally staged in 1955 by the company called Yim Chun Aeng and the Troupe, but the script was subsequently lost. Kim had rewritten the script in 1987 based on her memory of the original show and wrote it again to perform for *Directing for Gender*. jung asked Kim to tell what kinds of directions were given to the yeosung gukgeuk actor who played the male protagonist, Asadal, to help the actor embody an ideal version of a man on a yeosung gukgeuk stage. "It is *mut* that completes everything," says Kim in the performance (jung 2010). The actor must possess *mut*, which can be translated as dandiness or coolness, in order to mesmerize the audience. *Mut* is both a physical and emotional force that completes the male character. What attracts the female audience so intensely, according to Kim, is this affect: "the actor should be able to express how their eyes, heart, and their whole body is possessed by *mut*" (jung 2010). *Mut* comes before gesture. The charm derived from *mut*, according to Kim, is what completes the male character of yeosung gukgeuk. Kim continues showing how ideal masculinity is constructed in yeosung gukgeuk with other characters, such as Joomong and King Dongmyung. These characters are constructed using bigger, if not exaggerated gestures, "like roaring toward the sky" in Kim's words:

When they shoot a bow, they do it in a full strength. They don't just shoot the arrow; they show how they maintain the strength even at the tip of the finger and shoot it with spirit. But if one puts too much strength, that won't generate the *mut* of the male protagonist. They should look soft and delicate, and yet, they must carry a flame inside. (jung 2010)

Combining male gestures with affect, or *mut*, yeosung gukgeuk directors and actors build an ideal version of a man onstage.

jung continued to explore the queer potentiality of gestures in yeosung gukgeuk through *Masterclass* (2012, 2013), one of her first theatrical iterations to shed light on how yeosung gukgeuk



Figures 3 & 4. Kim Hye Rhee, a yeosung gukgeuk actor and director. Stills from Directing for Gender, a single-channel video installation that was part of Yeosung Gukgeuk Project. Platform SlowRush, Songdo International City, Incheon, 4–24 December 2010. (Photo courtesy of siren eun young jung)

masculinity is embodied.¹¹ jung set up a master class onstage, with Lee Deung Woo, a male-role yeosung gukgeuk actor in their 60s; Kim Young-sook, a yeosung gukgeuk trainee who was previously trained in pansori singing and had recently been introduced to yeosung gukgeuk; and a female role actor who rehearsed with Kim. The audience was invited to observe the entire process of the masterclass in which Lee transfers their knowledge and skills to Kim. Onstage, Lee has already transformed into the male figure Lee Mong-ryong from *Chunbyangeon*, a long-time classic

11. *Masterclass* was first staged for *Playtime*, a group exhibition at Cultural Station Seoul 284, 16 November 2012 and then later, with some modifications, at the Festival Bo:m: Interdisciplinary Arts Festival Seoul, 6 April 2013. My analysis is of the 2013 iteration.

pansori performance that was also revised as a popular yeosung gukgeuk play. Lee is displaying appropriate attire, makeup, posture, and gestures. They are wearing a blue and white *durumagi* (Korean outer robe for men) and *gat* (Korean traditional hat for men), and holding a fan. In contrast, Kim is in casual black clothes with no makeup, depicting her status as a trainee.

In opening up the stage, Kim Young-sook introduced herself and the stage. She remarks: “I will be taught how to sing, act, move, and vocalize. This will be repeated again and again. And through this repetition, my body will take on the appearance of a real man.” After this short introduction, the three actors begin their masterclass with one of the most popular scenes from *Chunhyangjeon*, in which Lee Mong-ryong and Chunhyang flirt with each other. Lee explains various “masculine” gestures, from basic body posture to tone of voice.

Kim, the trainee, initiates the infamous “Love Song” scene in *Chunhyangjeon* in the role of Lee Mong-ryong. Kim in her soft voice tries initiating a conversation with the girl: “Hey Chunhyang.” Lee Deung Woo intervenes: “You have to show your determination for love in this scene. Call her name with great confidence. Do it again” (jung 2013a). Kim tries the scene again, but Lee is not satisfied. Lee instructs Kim by demonstrating the scene, emphasizing how they drop the tone at the end of the sentence and how they pronounce each word to deliver the confidence. They repeat the scene multiple times, to equip Kim with the right tone, nuance, and enunciation.

Once Lee is somewhat satisfied with Kim’s performance of the male role, they move on to the next scene. Lee comments on Kim’s gestures: “A man doesn’t walk like you. When you walk, you walk. When you don’t, you stand still” (jung 2013a). Lee asks Kim to walk one step at a time, and firmly, with no movement in transition between steps, such as shaking arms or heads. In the following scene, Lee details even more meticulously with gesture and affect, citing one line:

“So you wanna hear some love words from me?” Here, you need to be a little gross. [*Laughter from the audience.*] The girl nodded, right? You have this “I can do whatever you want me to do” kind of attitude. Don’t hold her hand abruptly. Touch her hand gently. Right. Once she gets it, she comes to you as you pull, she moves away as you push. She’s now in your power. All movements get natural. Do it like a man. Like a man! Do it again! (jung 2013a)

Lee details how the male protagonist should be masterful in flirting with the female protagonist with sets of gestures, combining gentle touches with an aggressive approach. When walking, the male role actor must walk confidently, if not arrogantly, one step at a time. Lee’s direction is so precise that the trainee keeps failing to follow it exactly.

Frustrated by their student’s failure to perform masculine gestures, Lee eventually invites an audience member to participate in the session. Although, as jung told me, “There were a bunch of lesbians who were raising their hands so eagerly, wanting to be picked by Lee, with great confidence in their ability to perform masculinity” (jung 2016b), Lee selects a male-presenting audience member, with the expectation that he will be able to easily perform the masculine gestures that they teach.¹² However, he completely fails to replicate Lee’s gestures, which elicits loud laughter from the audience. No matter what he does, his gestures are too effeminate and not satisfactory for Lee. His failure to act “masculine” completes the piece in an unanticipated way: a male body does not naturally embody masculinity; masculinity is acquired through repetitive practice and some male-bodied persons do not comply with the norm. The audience member’s mint blue, American Apparel T-shirt with “Legalize Gay” printed on the chest adds another layer to his failure to perform masculinity.¹³ In my interview with her, jung described this scene as one of the most memorable moments of the piece (jung 2016b). Through this piece, jung provides a

12. The audience member was Hyuk-sang Lee, a well-known gay documentary filmmaker in the queer Korean community. I wondered if jung had set up the scene.

13. Homosexuality has never been illegal in South Korea aside from within the military context. While “legalize gay” may seem like a political slogan, in the South Korean context it functions more as an indicator of one’s sexual orientation.

space for Lee to showcase a set of skills, techniques, and rules for performing yeosung gukgeuk masculinity and at the same time reveals the shortcomings of gender norms on- and offstage through the failure of a young woman actor and a gay male audience member. The young actor failed at performing masculinity because she had not spent enough time practicing, repeating the techniques over and over to embody a set of masculine gestures; the male audience member failed, even though he was male-presenting, because he had not been trained as a yeosung gukgeuk actor. In *Masterclass*, gender norms on- and offstage pressure each participating body differently, revealing a complex entanglement of affects in performing and constructing gender and sexuality.

Theatre and Interdependency

Transformations in Queerness in South Korea

Before *Yeosung Gukgeuk Project*, jung had never worked in theatre; in order to share the subversive power of yeosung gukgeuk with an audience, she transformed herself from a visual artist who worked alone to an interdisciplinary artist who must collaborate with actors, set designers, musicians, and theatre producers. This interdependent relationship reveals an essential dimension of queer historiography as a collective gesture. By utilizing theatre as her artistic medium, jung allows spectators to encounter alternative socialities and collectivities, depicting the time and space of yeosung gukgeuk as a site of queer temporality.¹⁴

In addition to *Masterclass*, jung developed *(Off)Stage* (2012, 2013; see fig. 1).¹⁵ Through *(Off)Stage*, jung explores and expresses the ways in which the space of yeosung gukgeuk fascinated both the actors and their audience with its unique environment, which was *separate* from the heteropatriarchal world outside theatre. jung wrote the script for *(Off)Stage* based on an oral history interview with Cho Young-Sook, a yeosung gukgeuk actor in their 80s whose expertise is in the *sammai* (comedic supporting male character) role.

An actor sits in the middle of the stage. As they begin to talk, a screen shows pictures from their youth. Their name is Cho Young-Sook. They were born in the Japanese colonial period and lived through hard times, including the Korean War and its aftermath. The many ups and downs in their life are circumscribed by their love of the stage: “I had no idea about ideology, society, or whatever. All I knew was the stage. Having been immersed in the excitement of the audience, I practiced, practiced, and practiced. My only hope was to become a real man.” A black-and-white picture of them dressing up as a man onstage is projected onto the screen behind them. Many emotions flicker across their face: happiness, sorrow, regret, and nostalgia. They sigh and say: “I just can’t fully describe what I experienced” (jung 2013b).

In an interview, jung told me about the difficulties that she experienced in staging the piece, as she had to give up some of the decision-making and let her collaborator, Cho Young-Sook, direct the staging (jung 2016b). She said that the show did not go as she had intended; Cho improvised some parts and in other moments simply did not follow jung’s stage directions. As an artist used to working alone and controlling everything, the theatre process put her in a new and vulnerable position (jung 2016b). One way to view the process is to see it as a necessary compromise that yielded unexpected results for both artists and the audience. Staging themselves in *(Off)Stage* rather than performing a supporting male role in a yeosung gukgeuk play might have been a compromise for Cho in order to have an opportunity to work onstage again, but it was not the stage to which they had dedicated their life. However, it was a chance for Cho to share and celebrate with a contemporary audience their lifelong experience as a yeosung gukgeuk actor. Their face shone brightly as they described the popularity of the genre in the 1950s with pride; their body shivered with joy when they received loud applause from the audience for their signature *sammai* performance.

14. See J. Jack Halberstam (2005) and José Esteban Muñoz (2009) for more discussions on queer temporalities.

15. *(Off)Stage* was also first staged for *Playtime*, a group exhibition at Cultural Station Seoul 284, 16 November 2012 and then later, with some modifications, at the Festival Bo:m: Interdisciplinary Arts Festival Seoul, 6 April 2013. My analysis is of the 2013 iteration.

In *(Off)Stage*, through their life stories and performance demonstrations, Cho evoked a historical imaginary of queer lives from a past in which identitarian terms like *lesbian* or *transgender* did not yet exist. And yet, Cho's stories about the actors' lives as (trans) men as well as about same-sex intimate relationships in the group provoked a special kind of response: the audience laughed, screamed, sighed, and cried in their encounter with this queer past. In the metropolitan city of Seoul, yeosung gukgeuk found a new audience that appreciates and enjoys queerness and its forgotten history. The *Yeosung Gukgeuk Project* is not just about finding traces of queer lives in the past, but also about the desire on the part of the audience to touch upon the political and social fantasies and imaginations that may have existed in a distant past. Through a staged encounter with yeosung gukgeuk octogenarian actors, the contemporary audience gets to hear directly from members of communities that fostered intimate relationships between women and gender-nonconforming people before the 1990s when "queer" became part of the vocabulary. It is a rare experience. In providing this opportunity, jung avoids framing yeosung gukgeuk actors as LGBTQ+ subjects, despite the fact that some actors in the troupe were in relationships with one another, and despite the fact that some of them lived as (trans) men. As Cho Young-Sook describes in *(Off)Stage*:

Back in the day, I spent half of each month as a man, while I spent the other half as a woman. No. I think I lived 20 days a month as a man. Not only onstage, but also in everyday space offstage I lived as a man. We, the actors, lived together as a group. Some became couples. Because of the war, we were all separated from our families. For us, it was a totally natural thing to have crushes on each other. [*Loud laughter is heard from the audience.*] Why laugh? There's nothing to laugh about. After all, actors playing male roles were still men offstage. (jung 2013b)

Cho sees intimate relationships between the actors as a "natural thing" that substituted for familial kinship bonds that had been destroyed in the Korean War. At the same time, in the extraordinary environment of a yeosung gukgeuk troupe, male-role actors were conceived of as men at least while they were wearing the male persona, both on- and offstage. Should we consider this past to be a lesbian history or a transgender history? jung does not offer an answer at all. Instead, she lets the story live onstage. While it may be the present that has pressured the queer past to appear onstage, it is the past that exerts a pull upon the present, as the past of South Korean queerness does not fit in so easily with how we know what we know about gender and sexuality.

Anomalous Fantasy_Korea Version (2016) explores queer potentialities vis-à-vis the challenges of making a highly collaborative work and explores connections between yeosung gukgeuk artists of the past and contemporary artists (see fig. 4).¹⁶ jung invited Nam Eun-jin, a yeosung gukgeuk actor, and G-Voice, an amateur gay choir, to devise scenes of encounter across time, across differences. The legacies of yeosung gukgeuk resonate differently with each artist. Yet by appearing together on the stage and acknowledging each other's life stories, they build a new relationship. Here, interdependency becomes a driving force, which I understand to be a core element of queer historiography. The stage of *Anomalous Fantasy* becomes a space to share "a fantasy we will be creating together," as Nam recites at the beginning of the piece (jung 2016a). Through their collaborative art project, they draw attention to lives that have been neglected and oppressed.

None of the participating artists are fully masterful of what they do onstage at Namsan Arts Center: jung has never trained in theatre production; Nam is a yeosung gukgeuk trainee with few stage opportunities; G-Voice meets on weekends to practice, using singing as a way of organizing a politically active gay community. Instead of attempting to conceal the actors' lack of mastery, jung chose to address it explicitly in the performance. Before G-Voice appears onstage, a house manager announces, "Please turn off your cell phones, as the actors are not equipped with strong voices" (jung 2016a). Clearly, the performers are not professionals, at least not in the conventional understanding of the term.

16. After the production of *Anomalous Fantasy* in 2016, jung created Japanese, Taiwanese, and Indian versions of *Anomalous Fantasy*, working with local gay choirs from each country.



Figure 5. *Anomalous Fantasy_Korea Version*, Namsan Arts Center, Seoul, 7 October, 2016. (Photo courtesy of siren eun young jung and Namsan Arts Center)

In the show, Nam reflects upon their attempts to professionalize their yeosung gukgeuk male-role acting. If their life is incomplete and not to be remembered, as Nam laments in *Anomalous Fantasy*, it is because their acting career of more than 10 years does not look like it will provide economic success or fame. But they still “decided to dive into a diminishing, unpopular genre,” no matter the consequences (jung 2018b). Because yeosung gukgeuk has declined in popularity, Nam does not have a teacher to guide and train them in the particular set of skills needed to perform male characters, nor do they have any opportunities to perform. Disregarding this precarity, Nam continues to work to master the technical skills needed to perform male characters.

If failure, as J. Jack Halberstam argues, is “a connotation of a certain dignity in the pursuit of greatness,” Nam’s failure is rooted in their ultimate goal of mastering yeosung gukgeuk techniques (2011:94). Nam is pursuing the perfection of their posture, manner of walking, gestures, foot work, and shoulder movements that will turn them into a male character. According to Nam, this is “the art of mastery” (jung 2018a). What makes Nam’s acting special is not just the reflexive nature of their performance but also their commitment to this particular art form, despite its and their seemingly unpromising future. What is it that drives Nam to continue in their efforts, even when failure seems inevitable? No matter how much they suffer in their pursuit of mastery, they continue because they are deeply enchanted by the experience of becoming a man onstage. As if that desire could be universally understood, Nam recounts: “Fascinating, isn’t it? You could become a man just by mimicking and practicing repeatedly” (jung 2018a). It is their immense pleasure of performing a male character onstage that Nam shares with the audience.

In *Anomalous Fantasy*, Nam directly refers to their failure to master the skills of the male-role actor. Reading aloud from an autobiography of Cho Young-Sook (2013), the first-generation actor

who appeared in *(Off)Stage*, Nam proclaims: “To be remembered is an amazing thing” (jung 2016a). They read the part of the autobiography that discusses how popular yeosung gukgeuk actors were in the 1950s and 1960s; fans would wait in front of the actors’ houses to see them. They tell the audience resentfully: “But I don’t think I will be remembered. Who would remember this incomplete life, anyway?” (jung 2016a). At that moment, members of G-Voice enter and read from Nam’s personal diary. It is a collective act of remembering and celebrating their life, even if Nam’s diary entries do not match the glitz of Cho’s biography. And yet, while their life may not be as successful, the audience learns about Nam’s persistent efforts to perfect their skills, regardless of the status of the craft itself in today’s world.

In *Anomalous Fantasy*, G-Voice is essential for understanding what queer historiography is and does. Though they may be amateurish as a choir, G-Voice appears onstage unapologetically, masterful in their solidarity. G-Voice has long sung at protests and the group is nicknamed the “idols of protest sites.” With this history of political participation, G-Voice adds an important layer to the piece, showing what it means to come together, particularly for people at the margins.

In relating Nam’s struggle to their own experiences as gay men, G-Voice sings “On the Way to Bugayeon-dong” (2017b), the song written to commemorate Choi Young-soo, nicknamed Spaghettina, a member who died from complications related to AIDS. With this song, G-Voice creates affinities by juxtaposing Nam’s life and their struggles to become an actor without much recognition, with their friend and others who died of AIDS without the attention their plight deserved. While the tone of the music is solemn, the lyrics convey a willingness to remember those whom they have lost and to survive in the world regardless of the social pressures they face as gay men.

Ending with G-Voice’s original song “Congratulations” (2017a), *Anomalous Fantasy* remembers and celebrates queer pasts and presents and depicts a future with hope. Wearing a sparkly jacket, Nam dances to the music of G-Voice, as altogether the performers celebrate a world they want to share—and inviting the audience to share in the joyful music. It is a queer attempt to share the “anomalous fantasy” together.

The pressures of collaboration led jung, Nam Eun Jin, and G-Voice to achieve a whole new sort of mastery: not of the skills needed for directing, acting, singing, and dancing, but of being able to connect with each other while being vulnerable. The queerness that drives *Anomalous Fantasy* is not about gender or sexual identities, but a sensibility to form affinities across differences.

“History Has Failed Us, but No Matter”

While finishing this article, I started to think about how many more queer Korean artists have created and exhibited queer-themed works of art and performance since I began writing on this topic in the mid-2010s. jung is one of the pioneers who has created a new aesthetic for articulating queerness. Following after jung, a group of drag king artists based in Seoul threw a yeosung gukgeuk-themed party in May 2019. In December, they staged a yeosung gukgeuk-inspired show, performing their interpretation of a classic pansori story, *Song of Chunhyang*, through a queer and feminist lens. A year after jung’s 2018 exhibition at the National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art, the museum commissioned another group of queer artists who call themselves the Seoul Queer Collective to create artworks to remember historical queer spaces, such as Jongno 3-ga, a gay neighborhood in Seoul.¹⁷ In 2020, the museum commissioned visual artist Kang Seung Lee and cultural critic Oh Hyejin to create a queer archive for the museum that would be open to the public. This move was part of what I see as a recent queer historical turn in South Korea, as queer activists, writers, and artists exert pressure upon the past in order to encounter alternative forms of sociality and collectivity that may not exist in heteronormative South Korean culture, but are also absent from the cultural forms and histories of the West. jung’s intervention

17. Their work has also been published as a book entitled *Taja Jongno 3-ga/ Jongno 3-ga Taja (Other Jongno 3-ga/ Jongno 3-ga Other)* (Seoul Queer Collective 2020).

in queer historiography epitomizes a collective effort to transform queerness in the South Korean context—queerness as a driving force to bridge across differences, through which we can build minority politics.

After having completed the *Yeosung Gukgeuk Project*, jung further expanded her work by collaborating with more artists. In 2019, she created a multichannel audiovisual installation *A Performing by Flash, Afterimage, Velocity, and Noise*. It was for the 58th Venice Biennale as part of the Korean Pavilion exhibition entitled “History Has Failed Us, but No Matter.”¹⁸ Installed in a black box–like space, the piece features yeosung gukgeuk actor Lee Deung Woo, transgender musician KIRARA, drag king performer Azangman, Seo Ji Won, a director and a member of the Disabled Women’s Theater Group Dancing Waist, and queer feminist actor Yii Lee to create a spectacle of queer performance with massive sound and image projections. It was jung’s attempt to broaden the horizon of minoritarian aesthetics, exploring the intersections between queer, trans, feminist, and disability artists. Most recently, in March 2021, jung directed the play *To Die as a Fish* written by Kim Bi, one of the most influential transgender writers in South Korea. Around the time the show was produced, three well-known gender-queer and transgender individuals committed suicide: playwright Lee Eun Young, activist Kim Ki-hong, and Sergeant Byun Hee-soo. During the show, the production team requested that the Korea Performing Arts Center where the play was being staged put a sign stating “TRANS RIGHTS ARE HUMAN RIGHTS” in the front window to draw public attention to the tragic loss of community members.

In all of these recent works, as in the *Yeosung Gukgeuk Project*, jung charts a genealogy of queer art in South Korea, remembering forgotten pasts, unrecognized artists, and unmourned deaths. As Korean American writer Min Jin Lee said in the opening line of her 2017 novel, “History has failed us, but no matter.” Even when the pressure of ongoing and intensifying political emergencies in the present fractures queer and trans lives, we gather together to do something together: to survive. jung’s work situates queer aesthetics in queer politics and helps us to see queerness as a force that calls up unknown pasts, rescues them from oblivion, and uses them to exert pressure on an unjust present.

References

- Baek Hyun-mee. 1997. *Hankuk Changgeuk-sa Yeongu* [The History of Changgeuk]. Taehaksa.
- Baek Hyun-mee. 2000. “1950nyundae Yeosunggukgeuk-eui Sungjeongchisung [Gender Politics of Yeosung Gukgeuk in the 1950s].” *Hankuk Guekyesul Yeongu* [The Journal of Korean Drama and Theatre] 12:153–82.
- Cho Young-Sook. 2013. *Kkeuji Aneun Bulssi: Jungyo Mubyeong Numbwajae ‘Baltal’ Boyuja Cho Young Sook Jaseojeon: Yeosung Gukgeuk 70yeonyeoneul Jikyeon Mudaewuiui Myeongin* [Unquenchable Fire: A Stage Master Who Has Sustained the 70 Years of Yeosung Gukgeuk: The Autography of Cho Young Sook, ‘Baltal’ Living National Treasure]. Supilgwa Bipeongsa.
- Chun Won-geun. 2015. “1980nyeondae Seondeiseoure Natanan Dongseongae Damnongwa Namseong Donseongaejadeurui Gyeongheom [The Discourse on Homosexuality and Gay Male Experiences in the 1980s through the magazine Sunday Seoul].” *Jendeowa Mumbwa* [Gender and Culture] 8, 2:139–70.
- Duggan, Lisa. 2003. *The Twilight of Equality?: Neoliberalism, Cultural Politics, and the Attack on Democracy*. Beacon Press.
- Eng, David L. 2010. *The Feeling of Kinship: Queer Liberalism and the Racialization of Intimacy*. Duke University Press.
- Freeman, Elizabeth. 2007. “Introduction.” In “Queer Temporalities,” special issue, *GLQ* 13, 2–3:159–76. doi.org/10.1215/10642684-2006-029
- G-Voice. 2017a. “Congratulations,” featuring Kirara. Track 1 on *Weekends*. Chingusai & Pison Contents, compact disc.

18. Hyunjin Kim, the curator of the Korean Pavilion at the Venice Biennale, pulled the title of the exhibition from the novel *Pachinko* (2017), written by Korean American writer Min Jin Lee.

- G-Voice. 2017b. "On the Way to Bugayeon-dong." Track 4 on *Weekends*. Chingusai & Pison Contents, compact disc.
- Halberstam, J. Jack. 2005. *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives*. New York University Press.
- Halberstam, J. Jack. 2011. *The Queer Art of Failure*. Duke University Press.
- Joo Sung-hye. 2008. "Jeontongyesulloseoui Yeosung Gukgeuk: Jubyenjeok Janneureul Tonghan Junsimjeok Gachigwan Ikgi [Yeosung Gukgeuk as a Korean Traditional Art Form: Reflection on the Dominant Aesthetics through a Marginalized Genre]." *Nangmaneumak* [Nangman Quarterly] 79:157–77.
- jung, siren eun young. 2010. *Directing for Gender*. Single-channel video. Platform slowrush, Incheon, 4–24 December.
- jung, siren eun young, dir. 2013a. *Masterclass*. Festival Bo:M, Mary Hall, Sogang University, Seoul, 6 April. www.sirenjung.com/index.php/yeosung-gukgeuk-project/offstagemasterclass-2013/
- jung, siren eun young, dir. 2013b. *(Off)Stage*. Festival Bo:M, Mary Hall, Sogang University, Seoul, 6 April. www.sirenjung.com/index.php/yeosung-gukgeuk-project/offstagemasterclass-2013/
- jung, siren eun young. 2016a. *Anomalous Fantasy_Korea Version*. Namsan Arts Center, Seoul, 7 October. Artist's video recording.
- jung, siren eun young. 2016b. Personal interview with the author. Seoul, 8 August.
- jung, siren eun young. 2018a. *Sorry, the Performance Will be Delayed*. Single-channel video. National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art, Korea, Seoul, 10 August–25 November. Artist's video recording.
- jung, siren eun young. 2018b. *Deferral Theatre*. Single-channel video. National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art, Korea, Seoul, 10 August–25 November. Artist's video recording.
- Kim Hye-jung, dir. 2013. *The Girl Princes*. Play Girls Play. South Korea.
- Kim Ji-hye. 2011. "1950nyundae Yeosung Gukgeukui Danchehwaldonggwa Soetogwajeonge Daehan Yeongu [A Study on the Troupe Activity and the Declining Process of 1950s Yeongsung Gukgeuk]." *Hankuk Yeosungbak* [Journal of Korean Women's Studies] 27, 2:1–33.
- Kim, Sooyoung. 2023. "Staying Backward with the History of Camptown Trans Sex Worker." *TSQ* 10, 1:23–27.
- Kim, Yeong Ran. 2021. "Queer Protest! Solidarity and the Formation of Minority Politics in South Korea." *Korea Journal* 61, 4:20–43. doi.org/10.25024/kj.2021.61.4.20
- Lee Hye-sol. 1999. "Hanguk Rejeubieon Ingwon Undongsa [The History of Korean Lesbian Human Rights Activism]." In *Hanguk Yeoseong Ingwon Undongsa* [The History of Korean Women's Human Rights Activism], ed. Korea Women's Hot-line, 359–403. Hanul Academy.
- Lee, Min Jin. 2017. *Pachinko*. Grand Central Publishing.
- Liu, Petrus. 2015. *Queer Marxism in Two Chinas*. Duke University Press.
- Muñoz, José Esteban. 2009. *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*. New York University Press.
- Park-cha, Min-jeong. 2018. *Joseonui Kwieo: Geundaewi Teumsae Sumeun Byeontaedeurui Chosang* [Chosun Queer: The Portrait of Perverts, Hidden in the Cracks of Modernity]. Hyeonsilmunhwayeongu.
- Seoul Queer Collective. 2020. *Taja Jongno 3-ga/ Jongno 3-ga Taja* [Other Jongno 3-ga/ Jongno 3-ga Other]. SeoQuiCol Press.
- Tsing, Anna Lowenhaupt. 2005. *Friction: An Ethnography of Global Connection*. Princeton University Press.

TDRReading

- Chang, Ivy I-chu. 2014. "Queer Politics, Sexual Anarchism, and Nationalism: The Chinese Male Mother and the Queer Family in *He Is My Wife, He Is My Mother*." *TDR* 58, 1 (T221):89–107. doi.org/10.1162/DRAM_a_00329

Chronology of Works

siren eun young jung

- 2010 *Directing for Gender*. Single-channel video. Platform slowrush, Incheon, 4-24 December.
- 2012 *(Off)Stage*. Stage performance. Culture Station Seoul 284, Seoul, 16 November.
- 2012 *Masterclass*. Stage performance. Culture Station Seoul 284, Seoul, 16 November.
- 2016 *Anomalous Fantasy_Korea Version*. Stage performance, Namsan Arts Center, Seoul, 7 October.
- 2018 *Deferral Archive*. Installation, mixed-media. National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art, Seoul, 10 August–25 November.
- 2018 *Deferral Theatre*. Single-channel video. National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art, Seoul, 10 August–25 November.
- 2018 *Sorry, the Performance Will be Delayed*. Single-channel video. National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art, Seoul, 10 August–25 November.
- 2019 *A Performing by Flash, Afterimage, Velocity, and Noise*. Multi-channel video. The Korean Pavilion–58th International Art Exhibition, La Biennale di Venezia, 11 May–24 November.
- 2020 *To Die as a Fish*. Stage performance, The Korea Performing Arts Center, Seoul, 4–10 March.