Tiffany Hsiung’s *The Apology*:
Solitary Versus Collective Witnessing

“Will the wound go away if you apologize? No. The scars will remain, but my heart can heal,” Gil Won-Ok remarks midway through *The Apology*, a 2016 documentary by Tiffany Hsiung about the Imperial Japanese Army’s sexual enslavement of more than 200,000 “comfort women” during World War II. The film examines the modern-day movement urging the Japanese government to recognize its human rights abuses, focusing specifically on the stories of three survivors of “comfort stations,” Grandma Gil in South Korea, Grandma Cao in China, and Grandma Adela in the Philippines.

The Lowenstein Human Rights Project co-sponsored a screening and discussion of the film on April 17th at the Law School. Watching and later reflecting on the film, I was struck by the distinct approach Hsiung took to framing the relationships between these three women and their children (especially daughters)—relationships that clearly exposed the tension around how the older generation of survivors wished to be recognized by the younger generation, youth at-risk of forgetting.

On the one hand, I interpreted *The Apology* to suggest that the survivors’ healing was inseparable from their relationships with their children. One of the women, Grandma Adela, admits to Hsiung that she has never told her children that she was a “comfort woman,” as she fears that they would be ashamed of her. She first dismisses the idea that she might tell them before she dies, but she later admits that it would bring her some relief: “If I could tell my children all about it, I would be very happy. If they will accept what I was and what happened to me.”

This devastating moment in the film underlined for me the importance of intergenerational acknowledgment of human rights abuses. Specifically, Grandma Adela’s story and her silencing/lack of recognition can in many ways be understood as a prolongation of the trauma she experienced during World War II. Though her children know what “comfort women” were and what they endured, she is not freed from the longing for her children to recognize her individually. *The Apology* raises a central question: what is the appropriate response when witnessing at an impersonal level is not enough?

Hsiung’s film has an accompanying interactive website called “*The Space We Hold*,” which proposes an alternative, “collective witnessing.” I had never thought to distinguish collective witnessing from isolated witnessing, but “The Space We Hold” stresses the difference between these responses. In fact, the entire website is designed to encourage collective witnessing, routinely asking users to demonstrate their presence through keyboard prompts. The designers explain: “This active engagement demands users’ attention as they are guided from a solitary act of witnessing to become part of a collective, networked response to the grandmothers.”

Yet despite this emphasis on collective engagement, *The Apology* implicitly suggests that collective witnessing can never wholly resolve the intergenerational chasm. Grandma Adela seeks healing through her children’s recognition of her abuses, but Grandma Gil still draws a sharp line between the violated and everyone else. “If we all die, who are they going to apologize to?” she asks at one point in the documentary. I found this moment particularly key, as it reveals an important notion that may be applicable to other past human rights violations: at least in Grandma
Gil’s mind, future generations and descendants may bear collective witness, but it is vital to remember that they can never fully access the original trauma. And even if future generations bear collective witness, *The Apology* suggests that nothing can replace a deserved apology to a disappearing generation of survivors.