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Queer Protest! Solidarity and the Formation of Minority Politics in South Korea

Yeong Ran KIM

Abstract

This paper offers an overview of the history of queer activism in South Korea, paying special attention to the formation of yeondae (solidarity) and sosuja jeongchi (minority politics) in queer politics since the 1990s. In particular, this paper engages in the ways in which queer activism has aligned and/or conflicted with broader social movements in postauthoritarian South Korea. This paper traces the radical kernel of queerness in practicing solidarity based on anti-capitalist and feminist critiques, bridging a range of forms of social marginality in South Korea. Queer activists have contested heteronormativity in mass protests and critically intervened in the democratic nation-building process of the liberal regimes of Kim Dae-jung (1998–2003), Roh Moo-hyun (2003–2008), and Moon Jae-in (2017–present) presidencies, as well as the Candlelight Protests (2016–2017) against Park Geun-hye. In curating and portraying six historical scenes of queer protests, this paper illuminates queer activist labor to imagine a new futurity based on minority politics.

Keywords: queer activism, solidarity, minority politics, protest, LGBTQ, feminism, social movement

Yeong Ran KIM is Andrew W. Mellon Digital Media Fellow and an affiliated faculty member in the Filmmaking and Moving Image Arts Program at Sarah Lawrence College. E-mail: ykim@sarahlawrence.edu.

Introduction

"I am a woman and a homosexual. How dare you divide my human rights in half?" Kwak Yi-kyung, a member of the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU) and Solidarity for LGBT Human Rights of Korea, stood up from her seat in the audience and directed her words to Moon Jae-in, who was the presidential nominee of the Democratic Party of Korea at the time. Just before this open forum, organized by Moon's think tank to discuss gender equality, Moon had met with the Christian Council of Korea, one of the largest and most influential alliances of churches, and promised them that he would not pursue the anti-discrimination bill in his presidency and that he did not support homosexuality. The Christian Council of Korea is a primary opponent of queer rights in South Korea, and many consider them to be actively spreading homophobia. In response to Kwak's interruption of his speech, Moon told her that he would hear her out later. As Moon said this, his supporters began chanting "Later, later, later!" to drown her out.[1] Instead of giving time and space for Kwak to have a discussion with Moon, his supporters overwhelmed her voice with their collective voice and applause. Moon paused for a bit and continued his speech, during which he claimed that he was going to be a feminist president.

This incident has become a symbolic moment for queer activism, as it is the latest manifestation of the constant delay, if not refusal, to locate queer rights in liberal politics in South Korea. Prior to Moon, the Roh Moo-hyun administration (2003–2008) failed to fulfill Roh's campaign pledge to legislate a comprehensive anti-discrimination bill, which would include a prohibition on discrimination based on one's sexual orientation and gender identity. The major backlash to this bill came from evangelical Christian groups, who found the protections for LGBTQ individuals to be most problematic. Roh's failure to enact the bill convinced other liberal politicians that pursuing queer rights could threaten their political careers. But instead of outright refusing to work on queer agendas, liberal politicians kept saying

1. The scene is available for viewing at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fV5jfZSE3OA (video created by dotface media).

it was too early to discuss queer rights in South Korean society. But for queer activists, now is already too late to pass a bill to protect LGBTQ citizens. The video recording of Kwak's speech and the *later* chant went viral on the Internet, as it illustrates how queer issues are always seen as afterthoughts in *progressive* politics. The soundscape of the scene further exemplifies how the queer voice is silenced in the political arena at large. Along with the video, the hashtags "najung-eun eopda" (there is no later) and "jigeum dangjang (RIGHT NOW)" were circulated widely on Twitter, conveying a sense of urgency around discussions of queer issues during the presidential election campaign.

Moreover, Kwak's remark drew critical attention to mainstream feminism's negligence of the queer agenda; in Kwak's case, she is both a woman and a "homosexual" at the same time.[2] And yet, not only did Moon meet with the Christian Council of Korea, he also left no room for queer activists at this forum on gender equality. Kwak's intervention is indicative of the accumulated frustration toward liberal feminists who work for, or are in support of, so-called progressive parties in South Korea. This brief moment of dissensus signifies the long-standing disappointment that the queer community has had not only with liberal politics but also with feminist politics. Kwak's disruption created a stage for critical engagement with a liberal politician's invocation of *not-yet* regarding the queer agenda and for queer subjects to express their sense of urgency regarding the place of queer rights in envisioning a democratic nation. In other words, the scene revealed a clash of different temporalities regarding South Korea's direction after the impeachment of Park Geun-hye. Kwak's action represents *yeondae jeongchi* (solidarity politics), which builds on the multiplicities of struggles on behalf of *sosuja* (minorities), which is a core of queer activism in postauthoritarian South Korea.

Throughout the paper, I explore the ways in which queerness has been articulated and performed in the upsurge of a new social movement

2. Kwak uses the expression "*dongseong aeja*," which translates to homosexual. In South Korea, the term *dongseong aeja* tends to be used in formal settings, such as public forums about human rights.

over the last three decades. It was the early 1990s when the concept of queer—a term that originated in Anglophone culture—was introduced to South Korea. If it was industrialization and urbanization that enabled gay and lesbian subjectivity in the United States, as John D'Emilio (1983) asserts, it was the expansion of global capitalism that mediated new sexual subjectivities in South Korea. The increased flow of ideas, discourses, people, and cultural products into South Korea offered a new language with which to organize communities based on the experiences of non-normative intimacies and sexualities. In 1993, the first gay and lesbian human rights group *Chodonghoe* was formed by Koreans and Korean Americans who met through *Sapho*, a group for lesbian expats living in South Korea, and many more LGBTQ activist groups and organizations were formed in the following years.[3] With the growth of activism, queer activists began to appear in public, formulating queer politics to contest heteronormativity.[4] From the location of South Korea, I examine the ways in which activists and artists elaborated on what it means to be critically queer. I focus on the activist labor of translating and transforming the concept of queerness as it is practiced in the South Korean context.

Since its formulative years, Korean queer activism has aligned and conflicted with the impulse to build a new democratic nation in postauthoritarian South Korea. Historically, one of the first queer assemblies in public was the general strike of 1997, which entailed a series of mass protests against neoliberal restructuring. Looking this scene as a point of departure for queer activism, I identify the radical kernel of queerness in coalitional practice based on anti-capitalist and feminist critiques, which served to bridge a range of forms of social marginality in South Korea. Korean queer activism has been about critiquing homophobia, transphobia, and misogyny in social movements. On the one hand, I explore queer intervention in mass protests, in which queer activists

3. Hanguk seongjeok sosuja munhwa ingwon senteo (Korean Sexual-Minority Culture & Rights Center), *Seongjeok sosuja sajeon* (Dictionary of Sexual Minorities), "Chodonghoe," accessed August 31, 2021, http://kscrc.org/xe/board_yXmx36/4753?ckattempt=1.
4. Heteronormativity is the belief that heterosexuality is the standard for defining normal sexual behavior, based on the gender binary. See Michael Warner (1991).

contested heteronormativity and misogyny within the democratic nation-building process of the liberal regimes of Kim Dae-jung (1998–2003), Roh Moo-hyun (2003–2008), and Moon Jae-in (2017–present) presidencies, as well as the Candlelight Protests (2016–2017) against Park Geun-hye. Drawing upon a queer sense of urgency, which was epitomized by political slogans of "najung-eun eopda" (there is no later) and "jigeum dangjang (RIGHT NOW)," I engage in queer activist labor to imagine a queer futurity, contesting the progressive movement's heteronormative imaginary of nation-building anew. On the other hand, I engage in the ways which Korean queer activism has built new alliances and coalitions across diverse sectors of civil society. Queer activists, many of whom are part of activist organizations, have engaged in forming new relationships based on shared struggle. I attend to protest scenes organized by queer activists, in which social minorities came together in solidarity. In short, by weaving together historical protest scenes, I attend to the ways in which queer organizers engage in a new politics of solidarity through which they critique patriarchal, heteronormative, and neoliberal nationhood and ultimately envision a new future.

Queer Politics as Solidary Work and Minority Politics

In discussing the history of queer activism in South Korea, queer feminist scholars and activists pay special attention to the ways in which the formation of affinities and coalitions has been a core element of queer politics since the 1990s. In setting up an affective genealogy of South Korean queer activism, Sunnam Kim (2018) attends to the ways in which these connections have emerged in the political arena of solidarity among queer, feminist, disability, and labor organizers. Drawing upon interviews with social movement actors, Kim argues that queer politics in South Korea is an inherently intersectional praxis that challenges social normativity, and which has been constantly transformed through contact and encounters with other social movements (S. Kim 2018, 3). She examines the ways in which the sense of *we* has been transformed in these moments of making connections

based on shared struggles. Tari Young-Jung Na explores the concept of "queer citizenship," in order grasp the subversive aspect of queer activism in South Korea. In her analysis, queer activism is not just about inclusion, nor about acquiring normative citizenship; if we consider citizenship to be the property of a rights-bearing subject under the legal protection of the state, Na argues, we will only continue to fail to recognize non-normative subjects at the margins (Na 2016). Finally, Na queers the notion of citizenship, redefining it as "an extended sense of identification [with the marginalized]" (Na 2016, 521). In other words, citizenship is a performative and affective terrain that constantly changes over recognitions of shared struggles among the marginalized; it is a shared ethical position among those unfit for normative subjecthood. Drawing upon Kim and Na's emphasis on the formation of we or "an extended sense of identification" in understanding queer activism in South Korea, I juxtapose the radical pasts and present, in which queerness functions as a critical sensibility with which to touch upon other kinds of political and social fantasies and imaginations.

Throughout this essay, my argument centers on the ways in which queerness has been formed and circulated as a practice, not only as a term to express non-normative modes of being, but also as a resistant politics. Queerness is, as Judith Butler (1993, 19) proposes, "a site of contestation" through which we find constant attempts to imagine otherwise, apart from a heteropatriarchal world order. In other words, queer activism in South Korea has much to do with the formation of an ethical and political positionality that gestures toward more connections with other marginalized groups of people than toward creating a new sexual subjectivity. In this light, I explore how queer activists have built solidarity across marginalized groups at protest sites. I focus on the sustained labor of queer activists who valued solidarity even in the face of homophobic, transphobic, and misogynistic behavior from fellow protesters. It is at such scenes of dissensus where a new sense of *we* emerges, which is essential to the formation of minority politics. In the following, I engage in six scenes of queer protest in chronological order in order to show how queerness, as a minoritarian subject position, emerges, disperses, and re-emerges in critical moments. Needless to say, queer activists have organized and participated in more than

these six protests, but I have curated these scenes to demonstrate historical threads of solidarity building in queer activism over the last two decades in South Korea.

Scene #1. The 1997 General Strike

> My heart skipped a beat whenever I saw a rainbow flag at a protest site back in the days, when I was involved in student activism. Now many people know what the rainbow flag means, but back then, it was like a secret sign for me. I wondered if there was anyone else having noticed the flag like I did. [Na Young, director of SHARE: Center for Sexual Rights and Reproductive Justice] (Na Young 2017)

One of the earliest instances of queer assembly in public space was during the 1997 general strike. The rainbow flag that Na Young saw at a protest may have been the one that queer activists brought to the mass protests at Marronnier Park in Seoul.[5] On the night of December 26, 1996, the ruling Liberty Korea Party passed a new Labor Standards Act and an amendment to the National Security Act, which would increase labor market flexibility and repress political freedoms.[6] In response, the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions called a general strike, which was joined by millions of workers and was the biggest mass protest since the June Democratic Uprising of 1987. The general strike took place only a few months before the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis, which resulted in the South Korean government requesting assistance through the International Monetary Fund's (IMF) grant program. Even before IMF intervention, South Korea had been facing international demands to restructure its economy along neoliberal

5. Marronnier Park is the former location of the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences, Seoul National University and was one of the most prominent sites of protest during the democratic movement against military dictator Park Chung-hee in the 1970s. Park relocated the campus to Gwanak Mountain in order to isolate student activists. Today, Marronnier Park is still a popular venue for mass protests in Seoul.
6. The Labor Standards Act in 1996 included easing restrictions on mass layoffs, allowing for the hiring of temporary workers during a strike, and not paying striking workers.

principles. The new Labor Standards Act was only a precursor to the massive neoliberal restructuring that the Korean people would soon experience.

In the midst of this political and economic upheaval, queer activists also joined the 1997 general strike. Members of the College Student Association for Gay and Lesbian Human Rights, which had just been established in 1996, headed to the mass protest with a rainbow flag. January 14, 1997 was the first day of their participation, and the first time a rainbow flag appeared in the public sphere.[7] They continued to show up at Marronnier Park in Seoul for a month and disseminated 10,000 flyers with the following political statement:

> For solidarity between workers and homosexuals!
>
> Workers are not responsible for the pain that capital has caused.
> Homosexuals and women are the worst victims of mass layoffs.
> […]
> We homosexuals will strengthen solidarity with workers. We all are oppressed by the capitalists, and we will confront the undemocratic and unfair structures of oppression. […]
> The only way that we can break through the crony capitalist framework is solidarity between progressive organizations and individuals. This struggle is to make a better world for future generations.

The statement emphasizes the shared struggle between workers, "homosexuals," and women under capitalism. It states that capitalist oppression in the midst of neoliberal restructuring is a common source of pain. The College Student Association for Gay and Lesbian Human Rights activists positioned themselves as allies with both striking workers and precarious workers. The 1997 general strike was one of the first times that queer activists engaged in an act of solidarity.

Members of Kirikiri, a lesbian organization, joined the protests from the beginning, both as workers and lesbians. Until that point, the group had

7. College Student Association for Gay and Lesbian Human Rights newsletter Dyke, no.1 (March 15, 1998), 9.

been focused on developing membership. Their participation in the protests prompted the members of Kirikiri to discuss what direction they wanted to take as an organization: should Kirikiri remain focused on community development or participate more deeply in social movements? In 1997, Kirikiri renamed itself the Korean Lesbian Human Rights Organization to fight for social justice.

On an archival video stored at the Korean Lesbian Counseling Center, a former Kirikiri member delivers a vivid description of the 1997 general strike. The video was shot by the College Student Association for Gay and Lesbian Human Rights, capturing scenes of protests and interviews with queer participants about what solidarity with workers meant to them. One participant, according to the report, argued that "without liberating lesbians, there is no liberation for women. And vice versa." She found building relationships with women's organizations to be an important part of her organizing work. She expressed her frustration with progressive social movements in general for the lack of discourse around gender and sexuality and she saw the nuclear family as the common source of oppression both for homosexuals and workers due to its critical role in enforcing normative structures in society. She wasn't there to just support workers; she was there to build solidarity:

> What oppresses homosexuals is the nuclear family. The state wants to maintain the nuclear family as a basic unit of society, because that way, the state doesn't have to pay for the cost of social welfare. Workers and their families are responsible for each individual's well-being. When we had conversations with workers [union members], we talked a lot about that. At first, they met with us out of curiosity, but after talking with us, they began to see common ground between workers and homosexuals. (Cheori 2014)

After their participation in the general strike, queer activists continued to build solidarity with labor union activists. By bringing the rainbow flag to protests, a symbol that wasn't popularly known back then, queer activists made queer existence visible to the public. The Kirikiri member in the video also testified that during the protests, some union members approached

the queer activists and told them that they were also queer, which helped to strengthen connections between the movements. During this extraordinary time of coming together, queer activists experienced a whole new realm of being and making connections with one another.

What is especially notable about this period is that the 1990s was a formative time for many queer organizations, and experiences during the general strike of 1997 became thresholds for queer activists to shape their vision for the movement. In 1998, the College Student Association for Gay and Lesbian Human Rights changed its name to Solidarity for Gay and Lesbian Human Rights and has been participating in social justice issues from a queer socialist perspective. Kirikiri, as demonstrated in the video interview during the general strike of 1997, considered feminism a key component of its political vision to critique neoliberal capitalism.

Scene #2. The Mujigae (Rainbow) Protest in 2004

The 2000s was another important time for social change, especially for the Korean feminist movement, epitomized by the abolishment of *hojuje* (family headship system) in 2008. Under *hojuje*, a woman could not enter the family registry if unattached to a male family member.[8] For example, a single mother was not allowed to register her child(ren) in the family registry, and so she was forced to find a male family member to adopt her child(ren). Without doing this, a child could not receive state benefits or rights, such as health insurance and the right to attend school. Under this system, a woman had to legally belong to her father, husband, brother, or even son, in order to be recognized as a citizen. Abolishing *hojuje* had been one of the biggest goals for Korean feminists for decades, as it treated women as second-class citizens and cast them as merely the property of male citizens. The movement to abolish *hojuje* accelerated alongside the growth of civil society in the 1990s; in 2000, women and feminist groups organized the

8. *Hojuje* originated from Japanese colonial law. While Japan abolished the system in 1947, the postwar South Korean state retained this system in its 1958 constitution.

coalition, Citizen's Solidarity to Abolish *Hojuje*, and brought the issue to the Constitutional Court. In 2005, the Constitutional Court judged *hojuje* unconstitutional and it was finally abolished in 2008.

While the abolishment of *hojuje* was a great achievement, its liberatory potential was constrained by what happened next; as Tari Young-Jung Na asserts, "the foundational logics remain largely unchanged as can be seen through the lives of LGBTI people" (Na 2014, 4). Most major feminist groups and organizations decided to support the implementation of a new family registration law—instead of advocating for an individual-based identity registration system—in order to avoid backlash. The Family Relations Register (Gajok gwangye deungnok jedo) compulsively reproduced the gendered categories of father, mother, son, and daughter. Na argues that the Family Relations Register still considers marriage to be the primary method by which to establish a new family and does not recognize other relationship formations as families. The heteronormative family centered around the gender binary was maintained as the basic unit of the nation. The support of major feminist organizations for this law thus epitomizes their lack of care toward minority women, including queer and transgender women, migrant women, and women with disabilities.

I chose to look at a 2004 rainbow protest organized by three feminist organizations, in order to grasp the early formation of solidarity politics amongst minority women, contesting the heteronormativity in the major feminist organizations' political vision, as expressed in the process of the abolishment of *hojuje*. Members of Kirikiri, Women Against War (WAW), and Women with Disabilities Empathy (WDE) gathered at Marronnier Park in Seoul to deliver a new political vision for feminism. In the previous year, *Kirikiri*, WAW, and WDE had formed a solidarity coalition, emphasizing the importance of minority politics in feminism. Having witnessed the failure of major feminist organizations to profoundly challenge the structure of the heteronormative family and gender binarism, these three feminist organizations collected stories of women's lives at the margins, critically revealing how some women are excluded from the category of women,

particularly in the state interpellation.[9] The *mujigae* protest was one of the earliest attempts to demonstrate the ways in which minority politics are located in the context of queer/feminism. Although the coalition itself did not last long, it was one of the first moments in which I observed the rise of queer feminism, exploring the ways in which minoritarian subjects are related and affiliated with each other based on a multilayered understanding of gender, sexuality, and disability.

Behind the Scenes: The Introduction of Anti-Discrimination Legislation in 2007

Queer activism in South Korea entered into a new phase of civil society during the Roh Moo-hyun administration (2003–2008). During his electoral campaign, Roh pledged to enact comprehensive anti-discrimination legislation, promoting his career as a human rights lawyer. In December 2007, the Roh administration proposed a comprehensive anti-discrimination bill to the Legislation and Judiciary Committee of the National Assembly, which prohibited discrimination in the areas of employment and education on the basis of sex, gender, religion, disability, age, social status, region of origin, state of origin, ethnic origin, physical conditions such as appearance, medical history, marital status, political opinion, and sexual orientation. The Korea Enterprises Federation immediately announced their opposition to the legislation, claiming that it was necessary for them to consider educational history and medical history in employment. Furthermore, evangelical Christian groups organized protests and call-ins to the offices of lawmakers who had added their names to the anti-discrimination bills, demanding the removal of sexual orientation from the bill.[10] In order to pass the legislation, the Roh administration modified the bill and removed seven categories: sexual orientation, medical history, family status, language,

9. As a member of Kirikiri, I was part of organizing this protest.
10. See Myung-Sahm Suh's article in this special issue for the development of evangelical Christian groups in national politics.

country of origin, and criminal record. Legislation that had been intended to protect the vulnerable would then ironically expose the vulnerable to greater vulnerability, as removing some categories from the anti-discrimination bill could be equated with authorization to discriminate against those groups of people. In the end, despite the modifications, the Roh administration failed to enact the bill.

The coalition-building for the anti-discrimination bill in 2007 was a historical threshold for queer activists. While it was not the first time that queer activists experienced state discrimination, it was the first time that queer issues grabbed national political attention.[11] Among others, evangelical Christian groups were quick to organize protests against the bill, acquiring support from the conservative opposition party. Certainly, it was disappointing and enraging to face the political power of hate groups and their success in thwarting the legislation. But more importantly, with this failure, queer activists realized the importance of political mobilization and solidarity. The introduction, and subsequent defeat, of the anti-discrimination legislation were led by liberal politicians who did not bother to consult the queer community. Thus, amidst the controversies, queer activists founded a coalition group Mujigae Haengdong: Rainbow Action Against Sexual Minority Discrimination, inviting to join not only the members of queer communities but also activists from various human rights organizations, including Human Rights Sarangbang, Network for Global Activists and School of Feminism (NGA/SF), and Christian Solidarity for a World Without Discrimination. The formation of this coalition was not only the result of the long-term solidarity work that queer activists had engaged in, interacting with activists in various organizations, but also of a renewed relationship that each queer organization built with one another to confront this political upheaval.[12]

11. For example, student activists and film festival organizers held a series of screening events in 1998 in resistance to state censorship under the Kim Dae-jung administration.
12. Until 2007, the major queer organizations had not collaborated much, due to disagreement on what kind of political movement they wanted to build. For instance, Kirikiri considered feminism to be the root of social change, whereas Solidarity for Gay and Lesbian Human Rights considered labor liberation to be at the core of their politics.

Scene #3. Queer Bus: Solidarity Action

Among the multiple tactics of mobilization that queer activists applied to solidarity building, I am particularly interested in the "queer bus" action of 2011. This happened in the context of organized trips to a shipyard where Kim Jin-Sook, a former Hanjin Heavy worker and a member of the Korea Confederation of Trade Unions, occupied crane #85. Kim had initiated a *gogong nongseong* (high-altitude sit-in) on January 6, 2011 to protest the mass layoffs of Hanjin shipyard workers in Busan.[13] Thirty-five meters (115ft) above a windy shipyard with a bucket for a toilet, Kim staged a sit-in for 309 days. In order to show their support, the KCTU organized a bus trip to the shipyard. Calling it the Bus for Hope, KCTU members as well as general participants went to support Kim's struggle. The first trip took place in June with sixteen buses.

After participating in the first Bus for Hope and meeting queer activists at the site, Na Young, a prominent queer feminist activist, decided to call for participation from the queer community. The second Bus for Hope was scheduled for July 9, a month after the first trip. Among the 10,000 participants, two buses were filled with queer participants who had responded to Na Young's call on Facebook. Calling it the Queer Bus, queer participants stood with Kim, expressing solidarity with the union's struggle. Na Young remembers the event in an essay:

> We have been at various protest sites holding rainbow flags, but this was the first time anyone officially expressed gratitude to sexual minorities for our solidarity. Thus, Kim Jin-Sook's acknowledgement of our presence gave us unforgettable feelings and emotions. Since that day, we have had numerous encounters with the Hanjin union members, which were at times awkward. But our efforts continued and finally, the union members

13. *Gogong nongseong* (high-altitude sit-in) is a unique form of protest in South Korea, an extreme measure that workers utilize when all other options have been exhausted. Kim Ju-ik, another Hanjin worker, staged a sit-in protest at the top of crane #85 for 129 days that same year. Kim's protest ended with his suicide at the scene. Since then, *gogong nongseong* has been considered an extreme measure for protesting workers.

> gave a solidarity speech at the Seoul City Council sit-in in 2011. (Na Young 2016)

In her essay, Na Young recollects awkward moments that she had with the workers. At times, they used homophobic slurs to verbally insult the CEO of Hanjin. After the Queer Bus and more visits to the site, union members paid more attention to the presence of queer activists and eventually they were able to build relationships. Na Young was finally able to ask the workers to stop using homophobic slurs. This solidarity act, as mentioned in Na Young's essay, continued into queer protests. Queer activists kept showing up at labor union's protests afterwards, such as another *gogong nongseong* site for Ssangyong Motor workers at a transmission tower (2012) and a factory chimney (2014), and continued efforts to build solidarity.

Scene #4. Mujigae Sit-in at Seoul City Hall in 2014

While the National Assembly did not engage with the anti-discrimination bill, some local governments, especially the ones dominated by the Democratic Party, tried enacting local anti-discrimination bills. Seoul Metropolitan City was one of them, and mayor Park Won-soon, who was considered a prospective presidential candidate, pledged to enact a human rights bill, which originally included protection for sexual minorities. However, Park, just like Moon, reneged on his promise shortly after a meeting with evangelical Christians in December 2014. During this meeting Park claimed that he did not support sexual minorities and that he would not try to push the bill through without consensus. Infuriated by his hypocrisy, queer activists gathered at Seoul's City Hall and occupied the lobby for six days to protest Park's decision. It was the first sit-in protest to be held in the lobby of Seoul City Hall.

This historical moment is well captured in the documentary film *Weekends* (*Wikenjeu*), which followed the gay choir group G_Voice of Chingusai, a Korean gay men's human rights group. The occupation began when a couple of queer activists attempted to hang a huge rainbow flag over

a skywalk in city hall that said, "Human rights are a matter of life and death for sexual minorities," only to be quickly blocked by police officers. Chanting with fists raised, queer activists stormed into the lobby and did not leave for six days. Holding banners stating, "homosexuality is not an object of 'support' and 'consensus'" and "Mayor Park, apologize to sexual minorities right now," queer activists expressed their accumulated frustrations with liberal politicians. G_Voice appeared at the sit-in five days out of six and sang songs to celebrate being together. One member attested, "At first I was mad about Park's decision but as I joined the sit-in, it was actually fun. I was able to feel that I was not alone."[14] Participants at the site created pickets with their own messages, drew pictures to decorate the venue, and gave speeches. It was like a culture festival where the participants staged a series of performances in the lobby of Seoul City Hall, celebrating a moment of coming together. This scene illuminates the ways in which coming together is a mode of political activism, forging connections and relationalities among those at the site, sharing queer feelings in a moment of failure; we may still not have legal protections, but we know that we have each other to come together to imagine otherwise, once again, and more again.

14. *Wikenjeu* (*Weekends*), directed by Lee Dong-ha (2016).

Scene #5. The Candlelight Protests of 2016 and 2017

In the following, I illuminate queer protests that I attended during the Candlelight Protests of 2016-2017 and after.[15] This section is driven mostly by ethnographic research that I conducted from June 2016 to August 2017. By fully immersing myself in protests between November 2016 and March 2017, I grasped the ways in which queerness emerges as a critical force to challenge heteronormativity in moments when people are engaging with the idea of building a new nation.

In October 2016, people gathered in the heart of Seoul to call for the impeachment of President Park Geun-hye, galvanized by the corruption scandal of Choi Soon-shil's political involvement in the Park administration. Although what sparked the mass protest was the Choi scandal, there had already been a series of protests against Park's regime, haunted by her father Park Chung-hee's dictatorship. In September 2016, prior to the candlelight protests, major activist organizations, such as the KCTU, Korean Peasants League, and National Alliance for the Poor formed the Committee for People's Uprising and organized a series of protests. On October 2, the Committee for People's Uprising led a protest, this time mobilized by

15. The root of candlelight protests goes back to November 2002. Two teenage girls were killed by a US military vehicle in June of that year, but no one took responsibility for the accident. In November, the United States Court of Appeals for the Armed Forces found the military personnel who drove the vehicle not guilty. Due to the Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) between South Korea and the United States, Korean criminal law is not applicable to US military personnel. Korean activists had long been critiquing this agreement, and people's sentiments intensified after the not guilty verdict. On November 29, people gathered in the Gwanghwamun neighborhood with candles and held a peaceful memorial. This gathering had been suggested on the online bulletin board of the Hankyoreh newspaper by Angma (username, available at http://www.ohmynews.com/NWS_Web/View/at_pg.aspx?CNTN_CD=A0000096428). The first gathering was more of a vigil, but it evolved into a series of protests demanding the repeal of SOFA. Candlelight protests have since become a popular form of protest and in 2008 another series of massive protests took place demanding a ban on the import of American beef in the midst of the outbreak of bovine spongiform encephalopathy in the United States. Eventually, the protesters demanded a refusal of the US-Korea Free Trade Agreement (FTA) and largely blamed the Lee Myung-bak administration. The format of the candlelight protest returned in 2016 against the Park Geun-hye administration.

news reports of strong evidence of Park and Choi's corruption. Initially, protesters congregated at Cheongye Plaza, but as more people gathered, people marched to Gwanghwamun Square and made attempts to continue the march to the Blue House, the presidential residence. Although the protest was blocked by the police and did not proceed to the Blue House, Gwanghwamun Square became a place of mass gatherings for the people. Even before these most recent protests, there were regular protests by the families of victims of the Sewol Ferry incident (2014), a tragic event that many saw as symbolizing the Park administration's failures.[16] The corruption scandal was only a tipping point for the candlelight protests; frustration and despair at the actions of the Park administration had been accumulating and thus, the candlelight protests became a venue to critique worsened labor conditions and living conditions at large for people at the margins.

As more people joined in the protests, more than 1,500 civic organizations formed a coalition called Emergency Citizen Action for the Resignation of Park Geun-hye and organized protests across the country for seventeen consecutive weeks between October 2016 and March 2017, with the participation of millions of people across various cities in the country. On December 9, 2016, the National Assembly voted in favor of the impeachment and suspension of Park's presidency, and on March 10, 2017 the Constitutional Court upheld the impeachment in a unanimous 8-0 decision. During this extraordinary time, the protest sites became venues to articulate what democracy meant to each individual, and eventually for imagining a new nation. For many who participated in this series of national events, the impeachment was only the beginning, rather than the end, of critiquing the present and envisioning a new nation.

The candlelight protests reminded people of the 1987 Democratic Uprising with its massive size and its rejection of the legacies of military

16. On April 16, 2014, the Sewol ferry sank with 299 deaths. There were almost no rescue attempts made while the ferry was sinking. Many of the dead were high school students who were on a field trip to Jeju Island. In contrast to people who were watching the incident live with deep concern, Park Geun-hye never appeared in the media until the evening. Nothing was done to rescue victims. The scene of the sinking ferry was repeatedly broadcast to become a scene of national trauma in contemporary South Korea.

dictatorship. The majority of the organizations and groups in the Emergency Citizen Action for the Resignation of Park Geun-hye coalition were formed in the post-1987 political climate of South Korea and these organizations played leadership roles during the candlelight protests, putting their efforts and resources into making the square accessible to participants. They set up a stage on which protesters gave speeches as well as a broadcast system so that protesters who were not close enough to hear the speeches or see the sign language accompanying the speeches could still participate. They installed multiple screens, amplifiers, and speakers on an unprecedented scale; having a stage, screen, and amplifiers was not a new infrastructure for protests in South Korea, but the scale during the candlelight protests was overwhelmingly large. Donations from protesters also helped to sustain these infrastructures, which offered an immersive experience for all participants.

Queers were part of this national event to demand a new democratic nation; Solidarity for LGBT Human Rights of Korea was one of the organizations participating in the Emergency Citizen Action for the Resignation of Park Geun-hye coalition and many more small groups and individuals joined the march. One of the most notable moments was feminist and queer participants demanding a ban on misogynistic song by K-pop group DJ DOC[17] at the protest, which epitomizes how queer and feminist participants challenged the culture of heteronormativity and misogynism deeply embedded within South Korea's protest culture. Just as the Hanjin workers used homophobic slurs to insult the Hanjin CEO, protesters used misogynistic slurs against Park Geun-hye. Social media, such as Facebook and Twitter, was flooded with messages complaining about mansplaining and sexual harassment. The demand to ban the song was raised and delivered to the coalition group, which decided to ban the song as well as any misogynistic chants. Furthermore, queer and feminist participants formed a safe space within the protest space, making an autonomous zone to gather together and stand against the male gaze upon

17. DJ DOC, "*Suchwiin bunmyeong* (Miss Park)" (2016). As the English portion of the title ('Miss Park') reveals, the song ridicules Park Geun-hye based on her gender.

female participants, as well as sharpening their critiques to imagine a new democracy.

In the evening of March 10, queer feminist activists called a gathering to celebrate this big moment of victory, removing Park from the presidency and putting her in jail. To reach the gathering, you had to walk past tents set up by various civil groups, including one by the families of victims of the Sewol Ferry incident. Queer activists set up a small stage in Gwanghwamun Square, right in front of the towering statue of Admiral Yi Sunshin, a historical figure celebrated for his successful defense of the Joseon Dynasty from the Japanese invasions (1592–1598). Behind the stage, there were paper dolls of Park Geun-hye and her accomplices in prison uniforms, which had been installed on that spot since the protest. In the midst of these national spectacles, several hundred people gathered together, some with rainbow flags and their organizations' flags, to savor the moment of victory.

Recalling the Park administration's political mobilization of hate, the activists emphasized what this political struggle meant to sexual minorities: "We, sexual minorities, have always come out to the square and been together. Thus, new changes will be brought by each one of us. […] We will make changes, right here, this moment in which we are together. We will continue our fight and create another moment of victory."[18] Queer protestors claimed the public sphere and critically intervened in the collective imagination of what should come after the candlelight protests and the impeachment of Park Geun-hye. In his speech, Lee Jong Geol, secretary general of Chingusai and member of Solidarity to Enact Anti-Discrimination Legislation, recalled the past two decades of queer protest:

> Whenever the state denied our existence or tried excluding us, we fought together. In 2000, when the Commission on Youth Protection banned a gay website X-Zone, we came together. Back then, we had only a few people with little experience, but we formed a solidarity coalition and successfully removed homosexuality from the censorship list. In December 2014, we occupied Seoul City Hall to demand our right to an

18. Na Young, March 10, 2017. Recorded by author.

> equality bill for the citizens of Seoul. We've been demanding for the last ten years the decriminalization of homosexuals in the military. We've been fighting to enact the Anti-Discrimination Bill. […] We are strong people. We survive today, because we have been voicing ourselves out loud. We are the people who ought to make the future. […] This is our momentum. We must show and tell what equality for all truly means![19]

Lee's speech located queer participation in the Candlelight Protests in the history of queer protest against the state for equality, emphasizing the power of making queer voices sensible during an extraordinary time of protest. Both Na Young and Lee, leading figures in queer activism, highlighted the importance of moments of coming together for sexual minorities. Staging a celebration in Gwanghwamun Square, queer activists declared their presence in imagining a new future, refusing to be relegated to the later of liberal politics in South Korea.

Scene #6. Rainbow Flag Against Nationalism

As captured in Kwak Yi-kyung's interruption of Moon Jae-in's speech, the victories of the Candlelight Protests did not last long for queers. In a TV debate on April 25, 2017, when asked about his opinion on homosexuality by the opposition party candidate, Moon Jae-in, the presidential nominee of the Democratic Party of Korea, first said he did not like homosexuality and continued, arguing that "even America, an advanced country that advocates human rights, legalized same-sex marriage only last year after having had a long debate. […] Our society has not yet reached a consensus on same-sex marriage."[20] This phrase *not-yet* has haunted queers for too long. As I demonstrated earlier, the rhetoric of not-yet had been used so prevalently by liberal politicians and activists when it came to the issue of queerness, and this time, queer and feminist activists began more actively confronting this

19. Lee Jong Geol, March 10, 2017. Recorded by author.
20. The US Supreme Court had recognized same-sex marriage two years before this debate, not the year before as Moon Jae-in stated.

problematic rhetoric. Enough was enough.

The following day, a group of queer activists gathered at a press conference organized by Moon's supporters, including people from the police, military, and the National Intelligence Service (NIS). A thousand supporters, all national security professionals and all in suits, stood in rows behind Moon to show their support. As Moon finished his speech, Chang Seo-yeon, an executive director at Rainbow Action and a human rights lawyer, stepped onto the stage, holding a rainbow flag to her chest. She asked Moon: "I am homosexual. Are you denying my existence?" She had no opportunity to hear Moon's response to her question; security guards immediately removed her from the area. Thirteen activists were arrested at the scene.

As this incident hit the news, queer activists at the scene, particularly Chang who had carried a rainbow flag and confronted Moon, were labeled "*mujigae* terrorists" by Moon supporters. Calling queer activists at the scene "terrorists" is somewhat revealing, especially considering the context of the scene in which national security experts gathered together to express their support for Moon. In this spectacular scene of nationalism, queer activists were treated as a threat to national security, by disrupting the support for Moon from the police, military, and the NIS. This rhetoric of *mujigae* terrorist weirdly resembles the term "*jongbuk gei*" (pro-North gay), which was circulated by evangelical right-wing groups; both sides, the so-called progressives and conservatives, attempt to silence queer activists for the sake of national security. Once again, the rhetoric of later dominated the web, cyberbullying Chang and queer activists for demanding *too much change* in one day.

Conclusion

As predicted at the queer gathering on the day of victory for the Candlelight Protests, replacing Moon with Park still did not guarantee a livable place for sexual minorities. In March 2021, we had to face the death of Byun Hee-soo, a transgender soldier who demanded acceptance in the military. Her

death, like many other known and unknown deaths among queer and trans folk, reveals the toxicity of homophobia, transphobia, and misogyny that still persists in society. *Later* just seems to mean *never*. In this dire situation, some may even argue that queer activism in South Korea has not achieved any success; the Anti-Discrimination Bill has not been enacted, no politician engages with the question of marriage equality, and gay and transgender soldiers are not allowed in the military. But as much as I am frustrated by the hypocrisy, if not betrayal, of progressives, I see the limitations of this type of rights-based discourse. The queer imagining of another world is not just about queer and trans folk achieving the same rights as cisgender, heterosexual, able-bodied, male citizens; it is a constant search for a new way of being-with.

In tracing the formation of queerness with a special attention to the historical context of South Korea, I have discussed how the sense of *we* has greatly expanded at the sites of protest. I put together the scenes in which queer activists worked hard to create queer counterpublics within social movements, in order to illuminate the ways in which a new sense of *we* emerges from concrete sites, such as workers' strike marches, *mujigae* protests, and candlelight protests. Because of those attempts accumulated over the last two decades, queer activism has gained alliances from labor unions, feminist organizations, and human rights organizations, more than ever. And these alliances are not simply about supporting queer rights, but about together carving out a new vision for justice that leaves no one behind. Queerness, after all, is a bold contestation with the world, dissenting the status quo and imagining a new way of living together.

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