

# Practicing Agency by Performing Vulnerability: Sexual Minorities at the Queer Culture Festival in Korea\*

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*This paper attempts to theorize the resistance of Korean sexual minorities at the Queer Culture Festival. In 2008, a pioneer in Korean LGBTQ studies concluded that “[sexual minorities in Korea are] so powerless that they cannot even prove that they are powerless.” By analyzing the three phases of the Seoul Queer Parade, the major event of the Queer Culture Festival, we explicate how the LGBTQ people of Korea, who were an unintelligible force of resistance, entered hegemony and are challenging hegemony by presenting themselves as simultaneously vulnerable yet agentic sexual minorities. Objecting to the simple binary of vulnerability and resistance, Judith Butler suggests that the mobilization of vulnerability through deliberate exposure to force can be an act of resistance, in other words, an agentic act. Butler’s concept allows us to identify the “extra-judicial modes of resistance” of so-called vulnerable populations who can be at once exposed and agentic.*

**Keywords:** *Seoul Queer Culture Festival, Seoul Queer Parade, LGBTQ, hegemony, resistance, vulnerability*

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\*This work was supported by *Brain Korea 21: Solution-seeking for Political Problems in the Age of Innovative Science and Technology* in the Department of Political Science at Yonsei University Graduate School.

## Introduction

The week of the Seoul Queer Culture Festival (SQCF) is known as the *kwieo daemyeongjeol*<sup>1</sup> (major queer holiday) in South Korea. Much as people travel home during the holidays (*myeongjeol*), sexual minorities travel to Seoul Plaza in June to attend Seoul's Pride parade, the Seoul Queer Parade (SQP), a major component of the SQCF. On June 1, 2019, for its twentieth annual celebration, an estimated 150,000 people marched from Seoul Plaza at the city center through some of the largest streets of the capital. Queers (*kwieo*)<sup>2</sup> and their allies perform non-normative genders and sexualities, dancing, shouting, shaking hands, and hugging each other amid the fluttering rainbow flags. A police line protects the marching queers and traffic is restricted for them. Thousands of conservative Christian counter-protestors are now opposite the queer parade. Equipped with drums and huge crosses, they surround the plaza while wearing military uniforms and t-shirts that read "Homosexuality Is a Sin," and urge SQP participants to put an end to the perverse festival, to repent, and to come back to God's hands. Many queers walking through this crowd simply shrug but some laugh and shout back, "You go home!" or "You repent!"

In becoming a modern nation-state, Korea marginalized and categorized non-normative genders and sexualities as "unruly subjects" that must be controlled (Ruin 2012; Henry 2020, p. 10). Korean sexual minorities continue to live in "precarious conditions" (Butler 2016, p. 12). Until 2008, according to a pioneer in Korean LGBTQ studies, sexual minorities of Korea were "too powerless to even prove that they are powerless" (Bong 2008, p. 99). However, recent observation of the SQP suggests a new phase opening for Korean LGBTQ. As will be explained in the sections to come, the SQP has become not only one of the biggest queer gatherings in Korea, but also the public

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<sup>1</sup> *Myeongjeol* is a Korean word for festival that has a connotation of traditionalism and pre-modernity. But Koreans use the word *myeongjeol* very often. The implication is that hyper-modern Koreans temporarily return to a traditional society in which family value and norms are paramount. The usage of *myeongjeol* by sexual minorities might have an implication that not-being-accepted by traditional family system, they regard the Queer Culture Festival as the place where they can find their home. Holidays celebrated nationwide such as Lunar New Year holidays or Chuseok, often referred to Korean Thanksgiving, are called *daemyeongjeol* which means major holiday.

<sup>2</sup> We use the terms "LGBTQ," "queer (*kwieo*)," and "sexual minority" interchangeably to refer to people who "perform non-normative gender and sexual practices in Korea" (Han 2018, p. 30). The SQCF organizer and participant interviewed interpellated LGBTQ people using all three terms interchangeably. For further discussion, see Han (2018, p. 30).

sphere for solidarity among social minorities. How, then, did queers who were too weak to even prove that they were weak emerge as a visible force of resistance so festively?

This article attempts to theorize queer resistance at the Seoul Pride parade as a process of moving from the outside to the inside of hegemony. Hegemony is a process that determines the lines of contentions between domination and resistance. To be defined as resistance, resistance needs to be intelligible by hegemony's grammar. Resistance, then, is also a process that can move from being external to hegemony to being internal to hegemony. But how do we read resistance happening outside of hegemony when the grammar of hegemony has not yet made it intelligible? While the liberal understanding of resistance and vulnerability as opposing concepts prevents the reading of this resistance, rethinking vulnerability as a condition of resistance, as Butler (2016) suggests, helps us understand resistance that moves from being unintelligible to intelligible by hegemony.

To understand how queer resistance at the SQP, which started as an obscure parade of the vulnerable LGBTQ of Korea, became a force of resistance, one needs to trace its relationship with hegemony. In doing so, we borrow Butler's concept of vulnerability as a condition of resistance that challenges the binary understanding of vulnerability and resistance that fails to grasp resistance happening off hegemony (Butler 2016, p. 25). We argue that by performing vulnerability, queer resistance at Korea's Queer Parade that used to exist outside of hegemony, entered hegemony and is now transforming hegemony.

## Politics of Pride

Finding its roots in the 1969 Stonewall riot in New York that was "interpreted by activists as a major turning point in the history of the lesbian and gay movement," and led to "the first Pride demonstrations in 1970 in New York, Los Angeles, and Chicago," (Peterson, Wahlstrom, and Wennerhag 2018a, p. 2) the Pride parade has been studied as a crucial part of the queer movement in the United States (Bruce 2016; Peterson et al. 2018a). At the foundation and heart of Pride parades is "the idea of coming out" to make an open and unapologetic claim to their rights of citizenship, that is, the public performance of pride (Peterson et al. 2018a, p. 6). Though originating in the US, the tradition of Pride parades has spread internationally to be translated, implanted, and adapted to the local contexts of different regions (Peterson et

al. 2018a, p. 2). While Pride parades worldwide share the common purpose of [promoting] the visibility and [validating] the existence” of LGBTQ people (Bruce 2016, p. 5) and the feature of “a party with politics” that challenges heterosexual norms through the presentation of non-normative sexualities and gender (Browne 2007), there have also been studies on the local contexts that produce the pluralities and specificities of Pride parades (Browne 2007; Nyanzi 2014; Eleftheriadis 2015; Ammaturo 2016; Han 2018; Peterson et al. 2018a, 2018b; Phillips and Yi 2020).

In Korea, LGBTQ people first identified themselves as sexual minorities and organized local queer movements in the 1990s to advance their minority identity, rights, and citizenship, consistent with the discourses of human rights that spread following democratization in 1987 (Seo 2005, pp. 76-78). The queer movements of the 1990s were movements within institutions led by a few professional activists rather than radical sexual politics that challenged the heteronormative order (Seo 2005, p. 79). Indeed, the most important achievement of the queer movements during this period was community building among sexual minorities (Seo 2005, p. 79). The history of Korea’s Pride parades, where sexual minorities collectively perform pride, is relatively short, the oldest being the SQP with its twenty-year history. Studies on Korea’s Pride parades have been scarce but are gaining more attention across disciplines (Kim 2015; Lee 2015; Ruin 2015; Han 2018; Jung 2018; Cho 2019; Heo 2019; Hong 2019). Studies on Pride parades can be categorized into three analytical patterns: analyses of Pride parades as opposing heteronormativity, critiques of the depoliticization and hyper-commercialization of Pride parades, and attempts to avoid Eurocentrism and to clarify how Pride parades are constituted in a “non-Western, colonized, developing, or post-socialist” context (Han 2018, pp. 32-33). Most studies on Korea’s Pride parades fall under the first category and explain how sexual minorities queer urban space through the Pride parade (Kim 2015; Lee 2015), the showcasing of their bodies (Kim 2015; Cho 2019), the paradoxical construction of the space of Pride parade through contentions (Jung 2018), the limitations and possibilities of queer politics at SQP (Heo 2019), the festivity of the Pride parade and its political effects (Cho 2019), and contemplations on homophobia at Pride parade (Ruin 2015).

Drawing from the first and second categories but locating her research on the SQP in the third frame of analysis, Han (2018) challenges the binaries of oppression versus resistance and of resistance versus assimilation by discussing homonationalism and developmental queer citizenship as the mutual construction of oppression and resistance. Borrowing from Foucault,

Han (2018, p. 33) argues that such binary opposition obscures the productive operation of power since “where there is power, there is resistance, and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power” (Foucault [1978] 1990, p. 95). A binary understanding of oppression and resistance, according to Abu-Lughod (1990, p. 42), romanticizes resistance by reading “all forms of resistance as signs of the ineffectiveness of systems of power and of the resilience and creativity of the human spirit in its refusal to be dominated,” and overlooks the multiple forms of resistance and possible interpretations of the operation of power. Han (2018) provides insight on the complexities that construct the Pride parade in Korea but does not fully theorize the intricate power relations found amid resistance through the Pride parade.

While agreeing with Han, we take the prism of power and bring our attention to why resistance and assimilation cannot be reduced to a simple binary. How did sexual minorities in Korea come to occupy this position that troubles the binary between resistance and assimilation? In the following section, we provide that this can be explained through an inquiry into the work of hegemony and its relationship with domination and resistance. We then look at queer resistance at the Pride parade in light of the power relations between hegemony, domination, and resistance, and those at work in and through the Pride parade, in light of Butler’s (2016) concept of vulnerability redefined as a condition of resistance.

## Reading Hegemony and Resistance Through Vulnerability

### *Hegemony and Resistance*

The concept of hegemony is used with numerous definitions to capture the aspects of a variety of power relations, from state-to-state relations to class interests, and even broader operations of power. Comaroff and Comaroff’s (1992) definition of hegemony illuminates the multi-layered and intersectional power relations that are present and at play in everyday practices at different levels from the center to the margin. According to the Comaroffs, hegemony is:

that order of signs and material practices, drawn from a specific cultural field, that come to be taken for granted as the natural, universal, and true shape of social being . . . Hegemony, then, is that part of a dominant

ideology that has been naturalized and, having contrived a tangible world in its image, does not appear to be ideological at all. (Comaroff and Comaroff 1992, pp. 28-29)

Whereas hegemony is “not normally subject to explication or argument” and “at its most effective, is mute,” at the same time, no hegemony is ever complete (Williams 1977, p. 109). Open to contestation, “it constantly has to be made and, by the same token, may be unmade” (Comaroff and Comaroff 1992, p. 29). Hegemony, then, is a process (Comaroff and Comaroff 1992, p. 29) of power struggle that constructs non-negotiability, universality, the taken-for-granted, thus a field of contention. The Comaroffs (Comaroff and Comaroff 1992, p. 29) state that once there is negotiation, it means that hegemony is threatened. It is resistance that produces such negotiations.

However, resistance is never outside of hegemony (Gordillo 2002, p. 264). Hegemony decides the line of contention between domination and resistance. It shapes the “*forms of struggle*: the ways in which the images and symbols used by subordinate groups to understand or resist their domination are shaped by the process of domination itself” (Roseberry 1994, p. 361 quoted by Gordillo 2002, p. 264; italics in original). Thus, “hegemony does not mean the absence of resistance but the formation of certain modes of resistance” (Seo 2005, p. 147). Then, resistance located outside of hegemony is unintelligible as resistance. But as much as hegemony is a process, resistance, then, is also. It can move from its position of being external to hegemony to being internal to hegemony, challenging and expanding hegemony, also leading to the re-creation of the forms and contents of struggle. Simultaneously, hegemony can also bring resistance that used to be unintelligible into its realm of intelligibility to recreate lines of contention between domination and resistance.

It is true that in discussing queer resistance, patriarchy or culture could be useful concepts that have broader connotations than domination. However, we choose to explain queer resistance at the SQP with the concept of hegemony for the following reason. Hegemony is a non-agentive power that operates impalpably. Therefore, it is by looking at the contours of what is rejected from hegemony that one gets a sense of what is hegemonic. What we would like to reveal by using the concept of hegemony is the vagueness of power—a field where different aspects intersect, from patriarchy to heteronormativity, from state to class, or culture—that always threatens to exclude but that insidiously includes, while always maintaining the possibility of excluding. Those who resist also form a complex relationship with

hegemonic power through negotiation and appropriation, and are not simply oppressed. For instance, heteronormativity, patriarchy, and nationalism are not necessarily the archenemies of the LGBTQ community. As will be explained further, queer resistance at SQP has been a complex process of negotiation and deployment, one that can be clarified with the concept of hegemony.

### *Vulnerability as a Condition of Resistance*

How, then, does resistance move from the outside to the inner structure of hegemony? Put another way, how does resistance occur? We argue that Butler's (2016) concept of vulnerability as a condition of resistance rather than its antithesis provides a frame for capturing the fluidity of resistance in relation to hegemony. Rethinking vulnerability as per Butler's definition helps understand resistance happening outside of hegemony, that is, resistance that goes unrecognized as resistance. Vulnerability as the condition of resistance can enable an unintelligible resistance situated outside of hegemony to enter hegemony.

The definition of vulnerability in the liberal discourse has been a binary one that situates vulnerability at the opposite of resistance. As a highly gendered concept, vulnerability is associated with "discourses of dependence, victimhood, and pathology, all viewed in negative terms" and "certain subjects such as women, children, the elderly, and the infirm" that are "stigmatized subjects" "designated as 'populations' (Fineman 2008)" (Wilcox 2015, p. 31). Vulnerability in "liberal discourses is the opposite of freedom" (Wilcox 2015, p. 31). Such an understanding provides us with a limited view of the resistance of so-called vulnerable populations. Following the liberal logic, if vulnerable, one cannot resist but ought to be dependent and protected. If vulnerable, one is the subject of a governmentality that stigmatizes one as weak and unable to be free. Based on this assumption, one cannot resist if she is vulnerable because being vulnerable equals being powerless and devoid of agency, thus being too weak to resist. Vulnerability as the binary opposition to resistance is regarded as situated outside of hegemony. Thereby the resistance of vulnerable populations often goes unrecognized.

Butler (2016) introduces a new definition of vulnerability that can be the condition of resistance within and without hegemony. Objecting to the simple binary of vulnerability and resistance, she suggests that the mobilization of vulnerability through a deliberate exposure to force can be an

act of resistance (Butler 2016, pp. 13-14). A binary approach to vulnerability and resistance reinforces the paternalistic and masculinist idea of power by juxtaposing the almighty state and international institutions with vulnerable and agency-less social groups (Butler 2016, pp. 24-25). The vulnerable social group cannot resist as it is vulnerable, and because it has neither power nor agency. Butler's concept that redefines the relationship between vulnerability and resistance allows us to identify "extrajudicial modes of resistance" of "the so-called vulnerable populations" (Butler 2016, p. 25) who can be at once exposed and agentic.

The exposure of vulnerability or weakness as the weapons of the weak has been one strategy of resistance for social minorities. (Butler's point is that though there was such practice of agency and resistance among vulnerable populations, they went unrecognized due to the limited understanding of vulnerability and resistance.) In September 2019, as Korean female toll collectors protesting against precarious working conditions faced the police who were attempting to forcefully disperse their sit-in protest, one woman shouted: "Neither the police nor any man can touch a naked woman. Let's all get naked!" Five hundred police officers stood around the protestors as the female workers sat topless (*Joongang Daily* September 10, 2019). Going back to the history of the women's labor movement, in 1976, the female workers of Dong-il textile factory protested naked as the police and management violently suppressed their strike (see Kim and Lim 2008; Hong 2015). Similarly, disabled people protesting against disability discrimination and demanding rights to safe mobility in public, appear in public spaces, resisting the discriminatory norms and institutions that keep them closeted, exposing their physical vulnerabilities.

These images already contrast those of the demonstrations by the Korean Federation of Trade Unions that appear forceful in front of the police. The position of the federation as an organized, powerful interest group also contrasts with the status of female workers and disabled people. The so-called vulnerable populations do indeed resist by displaying that very vulnerability as a condition of their resistance. Vulnerability as the condition of resistance not only makes intelligible the resistance that exists outside of hegemony as an unintelligible and unrecognized resistance, but also becomes a driving force for the resisting population that leads such resistance to move into the realm of hegemony, that is, the realm of the intelligible. By exposing their vulnerability, the vulnerable population is exposed not only to violence but also to contentions where physical as well as discursive sites of power struggle are created. The continuous exposure to force and the continuous growth of

the assemblies where vulnerable bodies that are exposed to force gather generate further complicated discourses where negotiations happen. That is, as the vulnerable population exposes and mobilizes its vulnerability, the newly emerging sites of power struggle create new challenges to hegemony. Hegemony engages in this novel negotiation of power while remaking and expanding itself. It devises a new grammar to read the new lines of contentions that appear in the realm of hegemony. The resistance of the vulnerable that used to be unintelligible becomes intelligible as hegemony tries to understand it. As a result, the resistance that was not regarded as resistance by the grammar of hegemony becomes a visible force that challenges hegemony, a force that hegemony cannot ignore.

Sexual minorities are one of such populations and the queer parade is one instance in which they expose and mobilize their bodily vulnerability in public, under the name of a festival but with the risk of being exposed to physical and normative violence. We argue that the three phases through which the SQP evolved demonstrate how, by way of exposing vulnerability as a condition of resistance, queers moved inside of hegemony as a resisting force—as an intelligible resistance that transforms hegemony—while negotiating their political agency.

## Hegemony in Korea

In the 1960s and the 1970s, during the period of military dictatorship, the Korean modern nation-state accelerated establishing modes of governmentality over the bodies of its population (Cho 2018, p. 33) by categorizing and exercising control over male, female, and non-normative subjects. Measures that institutionalized heteronormativity and the binary division of gender were taken under the discourses of nationalism, militarism, and the developmental state (Moon 2005). “Normal” male and female bodies were actively integrated as *minjok* (the people) and as *gungmin* (national subjects) while non-normative bodies were excluded from the public sphere (Heo 2017; Kim 2017; Cho 2018).

The implementation of the Resident Registration Act as a means of population surveillance assigned and administrated the male population with the designation number one and the female population with the number two (Cho 2018, p. 33). Men were disciplined as the “normal” and privileged citizens of the masculinist, anti-communist, militarist state through the amendment of the Military Service Act, making it into a coercive institution

in 1962 (Kim 2017, pp. 140-141). Disciplinary normalization (Foucault [2007] 2009, p. 57) of the heterosexual, able-bodied men capable of serving the nation categorized non-normative genders and sexualities as inadequate and abnormal. “Militaries have needed men to act ‘like men,’ but they also need women to behave as the gender ‘woman’ as well” (Enloe 1983, p. 212 cited by Wilcox 2015, p. 37). The state assigned female citizens to the private sphere of the normal family and integrated them as “virtuous women” that could be mobilized for reproduction through the family planning project (Cho 2018, p. 251). Outside the family, the state exploited female sexuality for “sex among allies” (Moon 1997), that is, military prostitution on US military bases.

The state’s control over prostitution also aimed to discipline transgender people, drag queens, homosexuals, and other non-normative bodies and sexualities. The prostitution site clearing movement that began in 1971 to “maintain social order” controlled and policed the non-normative bodies and sexualities in the Itaewon *yanggongjuchon* (Itaewon military prostitution site) (Ruin 2012). Media representations of non-normative sexual practices that were frequent in the 1950s and 1960s, disappeared during the 1960s and 1970s (Ruin 2012). The distinction between the normal and the perverse became clear (Foucault [1978] 1990).

State institutions such as the family system, law, and mandatory military conscription continue to reproduce and to solidify heteronormativity and the gender binary in Korea (Na, Han, and Koo 2014). Article 92(6) of the Military Criminal Act, known as the military sodomy law, criminalizes and systematically discriminates against the queer population by punishing same-sex conduct among soldiers. There is no anti-discrimination law that protects LGBTQ rights. In 2016, the Supreme Court ruled against same sex marriage (Han 2016, p. 6). Politicians from both the ruling and majority opposing parties refer to homosexuality as “an outrage against humanity” and queer rights as “against nature and against God” (Han 2016, p. 6). Public space is reserved for patriarchy, heteronormativity, and the normal family (Kim 2015, p. 15). “The normative body is an adult, young, healthy, male, cis-gendered and non-racially marked body” (Wilcox 2015, p. 51). Queer bodies that are privatized and thus considered to exist outside the “realm of cognition” (Arendt [1958] 1998) are still largely marginalized in public discourse as they are excluded from naturalized space politics (Kim 2015, p. 15).

There is a bodily vulnerability inherent to Korean queer bodies appearing in public. They are exposed not merely to material constraints such as physical violence, but also to normative violence (Butler 2004) as the

target of sovereign power and biopolitical interventions (Wilcox 2015, p. 47). Simultaneously, these bodies that “do not conform to the normative standard, or which defy the model of the singular sovereign individual living in a singular body—bodies which are marked by excess, lack, or disfigurement—challenge and threaten the normative model of the body” (Wilcox 2015, p. 51). The performance of non-conforming gender and sexuality by queers at Pride parades is then a performance of vulnerability that is, in turn, the practice of agency that resists hegemony. At the same time, the Pride parade is a bodily politics that resists the bodily oppressions which classify non-normative bodies and their practices as perverse, by making visible the actual bodies and sexualities that are under normative and physical threat on the streets. In Pride parades, queers become visible, not as a disembodied, abstract LGBTQ population, but as concrete subjects that deliberately expose substantive vulnerability.

## Resistance at Seoul Pride Parade

The Seoul Queer Parade (SQP) (or *Seoul kwipeo* as the participants refer to it in abbreviation) started in 2000 by chance. Organizers of the first Queer Culture Festival (QCF) were supposed to join a parade planned by an art festival. Nobody except the organizers of the QCF showed up due to heavy rainfall. Seventy people marched through the streets of Hyejwa in the rain, holding a placard that read “Queer Culture Festival (Rainbow 2000)” (*Ohmynews* February 21, 2020). Since then, the queer parade has become a major element of the festival. The number of participants has grown every year, with an estimated 150,000 in 2019 on its twentieth anniversary.<sup>3</sup> Though the QCF started in Seoul as the Queer Culture Festival (QCF), as other regions also began to organize their own QCFs, it changed its name to the Seoul Queer Culture Festival (SQCF). There are now seven more QCFs in different cities across Korea that consist mainly of queer parades, the most recent one having started in 2019. This study focuses on the SQCF, but we see

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<sup>3</sup> According to the SQCF Organization Committee, the number of QCF participants changed as follows: 70 in 2000; 200 in 2001; 400 in 2002; 600 in 2003; 500 in 2004; 800 in 2005; 600 in 2006; 1,000 in 2007; 1,300 in 2008; 1,500 in 2009; 1,000 in 2010; 2,000 in 2011; 3,000 in 2012; 7,000 in 2013; 15,000 in 2014; 30,000 in 2015; 50,000 in 2016; 80,000 in 2017; 120,000 in 2018; and 150,000 in 2019 (*Ohmynews* February 21, 2020). In 2020, the SQP was suspended due to COVID-19 prevention measures. The media startup Dotface created an online queer parade campaign (<https://pride.dotface.kr>) in June, attracting more than 80,000 participants. The 21st SQP was live-streamed on YouTube in September.

the birth of queer parades in different regions, including one of the most conservative bastions in Korea, Daegu, as a significant move in queer resistance.

The evolution of the SQP and what followed in four out of six metropolitan cities and three more provinces of Korea, demonstrate queer resistance at Pride parades moving from being unintelligible and off hegemony to within the hegemonic realm. The process shows how power that is considered to be operating in the margins do not simply stay in the margins, but actively come to negotiate in and with the fields of power struggles that are produced within hegemony. It also reveals how the LGBTQ community, a population marked as vulnerable, can resist by means of exposure of the very vulnerability that seems to constrain them in the margins as devoid of agency and unintelligible.

#### *Resistance Outside Hegemony: 2000-2012*

Since the first SQP that began by coincidence with seventy people, the number of participants in the parade grew gradually, from seventy up to 3,000 in 2012. Kang Myeongjin,<sup>4</sup> the former chief organizer of the SQCF Organizing Committee has been involved in the organization of the festival since 2001. In 2000, he “did not even know about the event.” As Kang recalls, in the early years of SQP, anxiety about being exposed was prevalent among the participants who had almost never experienced an event held in the name of sexual minorities:

. . . there were people with very defensive . . . costumes, attires, and accessories. . . It was hard to find flamboyant clothes like . . . nowadays. . . Since there was the danger of being exposed and identified, it was dangerous, so many wore masks and hats.

. . . there are many cafes around Cheongyecheon Stream. People who thought it was too much pressure to participate sat in cafes and watched. These people started to participate since we moved to Hongdae. . . then, the number of participants doubled.

Some newspapers covered SQCF, but the parade did not receive much attention from the public. Since many people in the LGBTQ community

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<sup>4</sup> Interview, March 9, 2020, Seoul, South Korea.

thought they had to stay hidden, organizers held the festival in areas frequented by queers<sup>5</sup> “so that they could step out” and focused on reaching out to the community.<sup>6</sup> Although participants had their concerns, in its first dozen years, the SQP was a parade and a political assembly that had barely entered the public discourse as a negotiating force. According to Kang, it was unfamiliar to both by-passers and institutions:

There were no actual offense or interruption. . . . What was difficult in the process of organizing the event was to explain what this was because we were using unfamiliar words . . . There was no problem with the actual organization and getting on with plans. . . . we did get vetoed sometimes by institutional facilities saying . . . “not for us, yet” . . . “Oh it’s a meaningful event but not really for us.”

Originally, there was no police protection. . . . they didn’t even accept our notice of assembly. . . . saying, “It’s a cultural event, why do you bother giving notice of assembly?” . . . “Why do you even need traffic control when you only need to cross the street on Car-Free Streets?”<sup>7</sup>

Despite being an assembly, there were no police on site. Neither were there counter-protests as we see today. Han Chae Yoon, the head of planning for the SQCF stated in a newspaper interview that until 2012, the conservative Protestant churches that now systematically interfere with the SQP “did not really care about the Queer Festival.” There were a few dozen protests against LGBTQ issues with anti-gay advertisements, complaints to local lawmakers, distribution of leaflets, or signature seeking campaigns, but the queer parade was out of their sight (*Ohmynews* February 21, 2020).

As much as there was no contention, there was no recognition or negotiation of power over the occupation of public space by sexual minorities. Although the performative bodies marching in the SQP were making gestures of resistance, the resistance went rather unnoticed or was downplayed as temporary eccentricity that posed no threat to Korean society and its norms. Nevertheless, the scale of the event continued to grow. Meanwhile, Korean society was starting to formulate a political response to

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<sup>5</sup> According to Kang, SQPs from 2000 to 2012 was held in Hyehwa, Hongdae, Itaewon, Jongro, Cheongyecheon Stream, and then again in Hongdae, Hongdae, Itaewon, and Jongro are known as the “queer areas” of Seoul. Cheongyecheon Stream is located in the borough (*gu*) of Jongro.

<sup>6</sup> Interview, March 9, 2020, Seoul, South Korea.

<sup>7</sup> The city of Seoul opens designated streets called Car-Free Streets to pedestrians on weekends.

the demands for LGBTQ rights. In 2007, the Ministry of Justice dropped the provision on sexual orientation from its preannounced anti-discrimination legislation due to fierce opposition from conservative Christian groups (*Korea Herald* June 30, 2020). Kang thinks that, for some, the incident could have been a reason to “take heart” and join the parade.<sup>8</sup> The SQP was becoming the biggest Pride parade in Korea with an increasing number of non-normative bodies collectively displaying their queerness and asserting their existence in a public space.

#### *Entering Hegemony: 2013-2014*

The years 2013 and 2014 can be considered the tipping point of queer resistance at the SQP. According to Han, it was in 2013, when the numbers of participants doubled from the previous year and around 7,000 joined the parade held in the trendy neighborhood of Hongdae, that conservative Christian groups turned their attention to the queer parade. In 2014, they began to systematically obstruct the SQP that was held in Sinchon, another young and popular neighborhood (*Ohmynews* February 21, 2020). Those trying to stop the parade lay down on the ground in front of the participants and under the wheels of the trucks ready to parade. The clash between queers and conservative Christians lasted more than four hours and the parade re-started late in the evening with the participants who had waited to march.

The violent clash in 2014 raised awareness about sexual minorities and their rights among the LGBTQ population and in the Korean state. While the police had mostly ignored the queer assembly that had been taking place for more than ten years at that point, Han claims that 2013 was the first time that the SQP served a notice of assembly and also the first time that she saw the police come protect the queer (*Ohmynews* February 21, 2020). According to Kang, detectives from the traffic management department were dispatched because of the traffic congestion in the Hongdae area. In those years, the relationship between the LGBTQ people at the parade and the police was double-sided. While SQP participants were exposed to the police force as an assembled force that resists the authorities, seeing how the police had become subject to serious internal reprimand in 2014, queers had simultaneously become citizens who deserved state protection.

Kang: . . . in 2014, it is said that the police were severely reprimanded

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<sup>8</sup> Interview, March 9, 2020, Seoul, South Korea.

internally because there was a big clash at the event . . . since then, it changed. They actively take actions, do their internal research, and make efforts. . . . citizens and the police were always . . . enemies clashing directly against each other. But now, the police have to prevent this, arbitrate, and protect. . . . As they experience cases where a lot of participants are exposed to violence, the police now seem to care about safety obsessively . . . we keep discussing solutions.

Another significant move was that the strategy of queer resistance, body exposure as a political act at the queer parade, entered the public discourse and became the object of controversy. As the trans/queer researcher Ruin stated in an article directly following the 2014 queer parade, even though there had always been participants exposing their bodies, some wearing underwear only, for the first time in the history of the parade, a number of Protestant churches made it into a controversy calling the queer parade a “*Ppanseu* Car Parade” (*Hankyoreh* 21 August 15, 2014). As the resisting acts were interpellated by a pejorative expression, they were at the same time made visible. Non-normative bodies were becoming visible, physically, but even more so by way of a discourse that acknowledged the presence of bodies that could create a sense of uneasiness in society, that is, that were challenging existing norms. The continuous efforts of sexual minorities to convey a political message by exposing their queerness through their bodies was bringing change, and the hostile discourse that ridiculed and condemned the queer parade as a “perverted” *ppanseu* festival which was generated as a result of such constant resistance, magnified the effect of the bodily exposure at the parade.

#### *Resistance Inside Hegemony: 2015-2019*

Since 2015, Seoul Plaza, the square in front of Seoul City Hall, has become the annual rendezvous for SQP participants. The parade then marches through the largest central streets of Seoul. In 2015, clashes with Christian conservatives prior to the parade brought about unexpected, but powerful circumstances. Kang explained that in 2015, the SQP was going to be held in Hyehwa and the organizing committee was waiting to serve a notice of assembly within 30 days prior to the event, as regulated. To thwart the parade, conservative Christians cut in and served notices of assembly to

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<sup>9</sup> *Ppanseu* is the loanword orthography of pants, or underwear.

police stations in districts where assemblies could be held, including Hyehwa police station:

. . . they said that they had to stop this event. . . . they were waiting in front of several police stations. . . . It became uncertain whether we'd be able to hold the event or not. . . . then we found out by coincidence, that Seoul Plaza was completely empty . . . about two weeks later. . . . It was not intended.

. . . we had thought about Seoul Plaza. "One day, we will use that space." . . . the symbolic meaning of Seoul Plaza is so big . . . the symbolic significance of changing the society through the power of the civil society . . . raising the voice of sexual minorities, participating in movements, and coming into existence in the society in that space, is an important part of being there. . . . This space is a space where everybody is in harmony . . . we can bring in that symbolic meaning of harmony.

Recently, queer resistance at queer parades entered the formal political discourse. In October 2018, the national broadcasting station KBS invited Keum Taeseop from the ruling party and Lee Eonju from the majority opposing party to a debate titled "Sexual Minorities and the Anti-discrimination Law." The discussion revolved around the democratic values behind pros and cons to the queer parade (*KBS* October 28, 2018). At a policy debate in May 2018, the gubernatorial candidates of Jeju Province were asked their positions on the Jeju QCF that first began in 2017 (*JIBS* May 18, 2018). In Daegu, where queer parades have been held since 2009, the municipal broadcasting station TBC also aired a debate on the pros and cons of the parade in August 2018 (*TBC* August 2, 2018).

The queer parade itself has grown into a site of solidarity for social minorities. Kang used the word "civil society" frequently throughout his interview.<sup>10</sup> Not only LGBTQ organizations but also NGOs, political parties, governmental and international organizations that advocate for the rights of different social minorities join the parade and open booths at Seoul Plaza before the parade to support queers and advance their causes in public. Progressive parties such as the Green Party and the Justice Party are regular participants. Keum Taeseop, the first politician from the ruling Democratic Party to have officially participated in the queer parade called on his party to host a booth at the Plaza. The Korean Confederation of Trade Unions,

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<sup>10</sup> Interview, March 9, 2020, Seoul, South Korea.

feminist groups, disability and refugees rights NGOs all fly their flags. The National Human Rights Commission of Korea, foreign embassies, and Amnesty International Korea are annual participants.

As the parade grows, so does the backlash from conservative Christians. Their protests have become part of the queer parade and amid these contentions, the parade has evolved. In her study on movement intersectionality, Kim states that queers in the queer movement “transform as they mingle” with other social minorities through the experience of solidarity and of “recognizing the mutual existence in discord with the mainstream” (Kim 2018, p. 19). She states the contacts of disparate “queer moments” are a political performance that creates links between female, disabled, and queer populations and that let these populations engage in the process of becoming each other (Kim 2018, p. 21). Whereas this certainly applies to the queer bodies present at the queer parade, what these bodies experience is also transformation through mingling with the mainstream itself. That is, through the constant power struggles and negotiations with dominance. Queers make and remake their agency, perform their agency and reshape that performance as they engage in the process of becoming a resisting force that challenges and at the same time transforms hegemony. Such a process involves the power struggles and negotiations with conservative Christian groups that construct queers as an enemy in their political empowerment<sup>11</sup> and state power, most directly, the police. Like Han (*Ohmynews* February 21, 2020), Kang<sup>12</sup> criticizes the violence of conservative Christians but is partly “thankful” for their “contribution” in growing the festival. Because of their presence, “sexual minorities could stand out in the society a little more, human rights could be discussed more actively,” and “more people were able to reflect on their own human rights.”

The police who used to not engage with the SQP at all during its first twelve years are now the partner that cooperates and negotiates with the Parade organizers to assure safety on the day of the parade. In 2019, the police formed a compact guard line all along the march to protect the participants from external threats. While some find the police protection an adequate gesture that integrates the queer population as citizens, others are skeptical. For example, Han (Han 2015, p. 81) questions whether this is more about confining the LGBTQ community and its allies and regulating the

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<sup>11</sup> For further debate, see Kim 2012; Kim 2016; Yi, Phillips, and Sung 2014; Yi, Jung, and Phillips 2017.

<sup>12</sup> Interview, March 9, 2020, Seoul, South Korea.

borders of queer politics. Min<sup>13</sup> (pseudonym), a queer parade participant since 2014, had similar doubts and used to think that it would be safer to remove the distinction created by the police line between sexual minorities and others and “make it [so] that nobody knows who is who.” Following his experience at the first Incheon Queer Parade where severe homophobic violence occurred,<sup>14</sup> Min changed his mind.

In the end, if the police are the state power, or the state, then it's . . . for sexual minority rights movements, the object of criticism and transformation. . . . I used to think that it was paradoxical to have to borrow the power of the state in order to make that claim. But after I experienced the circumstances at Incheon, I got to think that that's not what's important . . . what's more important is safety and a sustainable *kwipeo*.

. . . there is something I felt as I participated in several queer parades. It's that the police are not one [a single entity] . . . in some regions they are very cooperative, communicative and flexible. In other regions . . . the police are more homophobic than the homophobes . . . if the police fence has become part of *kwipeo* . . . how to change the police is also very important. . . . I saw how the chief of the Daegu Queer Parade Organizing Committee . . . visits police stations in Daegu to educate police chiefs . . . we should not run down the police as a lump but constantly find points of intervention.

Min's statement reveals how queer resistance is not situated as the opposite of assimilation. Even upon being recognized by the hegemony, resistance actively occurs through negotiations with state power. The changes in the attitude of the police reflect a transformation of hegemony rather than a mere assimilation of queer politics. The police line, under the Assembly and Demonstration Act, protects lawful assemblies.<sup>15</sup> Until 2014, the police did not regard the queer parade as an object of protection, let alone as an assembly that needs a police line. Since 2014, the police line guarding SQP

<sup>13</sup> Interview, March 3, 2020, Seoul, South Korea.

<sup>14</sup> About a thousand counter-protesters surrounded the square where Incheon Queer Parade was held and inflicted verbal and physical violence on the parade participants. The executive staff of an LGBTQ organization called the incident as the “the first time in the history of Korea's sexual minority movement that the violence against [queers] amounted to near lynching” and NGOs criticized the police for their passive reaction to the hate crimes committed (*Hankyoreh* September 11, 2018).

<sup>15</sup> Article 2(5) of the Assembly and Demonstration Act, Act No. 13834, 27 January 2016., Partial Amendment.

has grown thicker. Nevertheless, queers are not simply provided with police protection but are an active partner that negotiates the ways of protection with the police.

*Practicing Agency by Performing Vulnerability: Individuals at the Seoul Queer Parade*

While the liberal understanding of vulnerability and agency assumes that vulnerability means a lack of agency, Butler's (2016) concept of vulnerability challenges the binary of vulnerability and agency. One can be vulnerable and still be agentic by means of that vulnerability. The sexual minorities marching and chanting in the queer parades practice agency by the performing vulnerability, that is, by exposing their non-normative identities that are discriminated against and suppressed by the hegemonic order. Agency, according to Ortner (1995, p. 186), exists not as a whole but as modes of agency that are constructed time and again through engagement with the self and the world. Thereby, the queer parade constructs itself and its mode of agency over the years through the numerous power struggles and negotiations. Concurrently, the agency practiced by sexual minorities at the queer parade is constructed throughout the process(es) of the queer parade(s) reflecting the interactions at the parade and the performance of vulnerability that again changes as a result of such interactions. Participants, as they participate in the parade one year after another, are in the process of becoming queer. They learn how to perform vulnerability through interactions with numerous actors and discourses at the parade.

One way the performance of vulnerability is promoted is by experiencing *kwipeo ppong*<sup>16</sup> (queer parade high). It is a state of liminality (Turner 1969) in which by exposing vulnerability through the performance of an identity that challenges the norms, one becomes a driving force of queer resistance. Getting *kwipeo ppong*, according to Min, is a transformative experience that comes with political efficacy as queers face the violence that makes them vulnerable, and as paraders build solidarity when they collectively march and chant slogans like "Love Conquers Hate" or "We Are Everywhere."

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<sup>16</sup> "To get *kwipeo ppong*" is an expression used to refer to how driven one gets after participating in a queer parade. To "take/get *ppong*" in Korean is slang for doing drugs, specifically, using methamphetamine.

There are some who react with hatred. . . . there are also people who come with a huge cross, kneeling and making their prayers in tongues. When I see these things, unlike when reading about them, I experience with my body what the position of the identity I have is.

You don't just walk there but you chant slogans. . . . And what's interesting is that . . . when you can't hear [leading] chants because the equipment is broken or the distance between the trucks is too far . . . some people start leading the chant with a really loud voice. And people follow . . . if you walk . . . for one to two hours . . . I get to think that they are like my companions. . . . back to Seoul Plaza you all shout out and cheer each other up . . . there's something in these people that changes while doing a certain act for one to two hours. . . . by participating in the parade, you get to have these issues related to sexual minorities imprinted on your mind, as your own problems.

After *kwipeo*, . . . people say that they got *kwieo ppong*. I think that's exactly what it is . . . after participating in the parade, you get some sort of strength. When you see the news, it's only about discrimination, homophobia, struggles, depression. But going there and seeing that there are that many people who are like me and having this experience of openly shouting out loud, I really feel like it gives me the strength to live on . . . when you participate in *kwipeo* there are some people who really get to feel that this is their own problem and become devoted . . . you get *kwieo ppong*. . . . It's not a majority but . . . I think that's one of the effects of *kwipeo* as a movement.

## Conclusion: The Future of Queer Resistance at Pride Parades

The SQP and other regional queer parades have shown significant transitions with a host of non-normative bodies that expose themselves to physical and normative violence. However, as Han says, despite the growth of the festival, the society has yet to catch up with this growth (*Ohmynews* February 21, 2020). Min appreciates the political efficacy of queer parades but thinks that despite their enormous growth, their impact does not transfer to other queer issues: "The queer movement is moving slowly" and "*kwipeo* suffers from deficits every year."

Significant changes have occurred since the time when sexual minorities were so powerless to even prove that they are powerless (Bong 2008), but it would be a mistake to "romanticize resistance" and construe it as a mani-

festation of impotence of power (Abu-Lughod 1990, p. 42). Queer resistance at queer parades shows the complexities of power relations at work. While queer resistance challenges state power, the state has a lot to offer, from citizenship to legal status and protection. Moreover, there is an ambivalence in resisting to those offers as shown through Han's (2018) observation of homonationalism and developmental queer citizenship produced in the fields of the SQP. The negotiations that queer resistance will face as the sexual minorities of Korea practice their political agency in the transforming hegemonic realm is yet to be seen.

Meanwhile, resistance at queer parades by means of exposure of vulnerability should not be regarded as representative of queer resistance. Nor are experiences presented in this article generalizable as "the" queer experience at queer parades. Shin (2020, pp. 310-314), in her study of young Korean queer women who deploy "invisibility as a survival strategy" by choosing to "look straight," argues that visibility should not be the "primary standard of measuring development of LGBT progressiveness" as such criteria rooted in the Western context would "privilege some queer identities over others." While familial values can lead Korean queers to choose to "defer" or hide their non-heterosexual identity out of respect for their parents (Shin 2020, p. 310), "government policies on Internet regulation and surveillance, increased online bullying and scamming using personal information" also make young queer women increasingly self-protective (Shin 2020, p. 303). Some young queer women refuse to attend the QCF out of fear of being perceived as lesbian (Shin 2020, p. 305). To these women, performing pride is less of a practice of agency.

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