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Areum Jeong

Representing the Unrepresentable in South Korean Activist Performances

On 16 April 2014, the Sewol Ferry capsized in the southern region of South Korea: 304 passengers died, including 250 high school students. Despite an international outcry, there has not yet been a comprehensive investigation into what caused the *Sewol* to sink and why the passengers were not rescued promptly. This article discusses how performance can represent something that defies explanation because we do not know how or why it happened. Yellow Ribbon's *Talent Show*, Namsan Arts Centre's *From Pluto*, and *Camino de Ansan* performed the role of the students who died. Taking these three case studies, this article analyzes the ways in which they strive to represent the unrepresentable as they attempt to document the sinking and achieve justice, while memorializing the victims and arguing for the necessity of a more safety-conscious society. Areum Jeong is Assistant Professor in Humanities at Sichuan University-Pittsburgh Institute. Jeong's research takes a transnational approach to Korean and Korean-American film, literature, theatre, and performance. Her current book project explores how performance documents death, loss, and memory in South Korean and diasporic communities.

Key terms: Sewol Ferry tragedy, trauma, memory, mourning, blacklist, censorship.

ON THE EVENING of 15 April 2014, the Sewol Ferry set sail on its overnight journey from Incheon in the northwestern region of South Korea to Jeju Island, 240 miles to the south.[1] There were 476 people on board – 443 passengers, including 325 students and their teachers from Danwon High School. On the morning of 16 April, the ferry made a sharp turn near Jindo Island. According to the Automatic Identification System data, the ferry veered, lost control, started drifting sideways, and then capsized. The captain and crew were the first to abandon the ferry, after repeatedly ordering the passengers to stay where they were. Over the next two hours, 172 passengers and crew were rescued, but many more were trapped inside as the ferry sank. In total, 304 passengers died, including 250 of the high school students.

Despite an international outcry, there has not yet been a comprehensive investigation of what caused the *Sewol* to sink and why the passengers were not rescued promptly. The tragedy traumatized Koreans, who helplessly watched live news coverage of the capsized ferry. It became a turning point in South Korean history because the public began to question issues of community, education, government, law, and violence. Koreans took to the streets and impeached South Korean President Park Geun-hye in 2017. Even with the support of Korean citizens, the truth about the disaster and why Park's government failed to rescue the students remains unknown.

Such cultural and political conditions have made it urgent for artists in South Korea and the diaspora to mourn the victims and express their thoughts through film, literature, music, theatre, and visual art. We might view these works as types of living memorials because they commemorate the victims (or rather their absence), the search for their bodies, and the families and friends who remember them. These actions help to form a communal consciousness bound to art practices, community formation, and critical perception developed around memory and mourning. They indicate too how performance can represent something that defies explanation because reasons for what happened are not available.

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The three performances seen in 2019 – Yellow Ribbon's *Talent Show*, Namsan Arts Centre's *From Pluto*, and *Camino de Ansan* – focus on the students who died. Although many performances have memorialized and mourned the people who died on the *Sewol*, nearly all of them mentioned the victims only indirectly. Perhaps the artists thought that it would be too exploitative or traumatizing to depict them. Or perhaps they questioned their right to do so when the families' grief was still fresh. *Talent Show*, *From Pluto*, and *Camino de Ansan* stage the students directly, when not metaphorically. In this study, I act as a participant-observer examining both primary sources and my own experiences. Since the tragedy, I have been active in online and offline events organized by families and supporters of the victims; and have joined protests and attended classes and seminars that discuss the incident and future actions, viewing, also, works that depict the tragedy. Additionally, this article relies on news stories and audio and video recordings that include audience response.[2]

South Korea has a strong culture of activism and protest, and the country's sociopolitical conditions have motivated artists to create works that challenge the status quo. Under Japanese colonial rule (1910–1945), when the Korean independence movement was widespread, numerous forms of cultural resistance and struggle opposed the Japanese colonial regime. These manifestations have inspired varied research, not least this author's study of how narrators of Korean silent films conveyed anti-imperial or anti-Japanese sentiments through their narrations as forms of resistance to Japanese imperialism.[3] In the 1960s, Koreans protested the authoritarianism of the Syngman Rhee administration. Koreans also struggled for democracy against Chun Doo-hwan's imposition of martial law in the 1970s and 1980s. Joan Kee, for instance, has shown how the people's movement inspired Korean performance artists to allegorize the forces of political oppression.[4]

At the grassroots level, Chungmoo Choi and Nam-hee Lee have examined how *madanggeuk*, which is a Korean theatre genre that involves mask-dance and satire, played a significant role in engaging audiences in political issues and popular protest.[5] More recently, Jiyeon Kang has analyzed the ways in which Koreans organized nationwide protests in 2002 and 2008 via online communities,[6] and Elizabeth Son has traced the history of 'comfort women' in activist performances in Korea and diasporic communities.[7] Son shows that activists, survivors, and supporters used performative strategies to promote 'collective participation and involvement in the process [to] bring about possibilities for redress'.[8] From the Japanese colonial rule to the present, Korean activists have constructed and performed in spaces that create collective consciousness and solidarity in the face of obstacles, aiming to move spectators to action.

Despite renewed academic interest in Korean activist performances, there has been little scholarly work on performances devoted to the Sewol Ferry tragedy. Nan Kim examines the daily practice of Koreans adorning their bags, clothes, and possessions with yellow ribbons, and sharing photos of yellow ribbons on their social media accounts as a sign of collective mourning and remembering.[9] *Korean Theatre After the Sewol*, edited by the Korean Theatre Critics Association, provides a detailed account of what happened when Park Geun-hye's government blacklisted dissident artists, and how those artists resisted censorship and oppression by staging works that insisted on expressing their opinions about the government.[10] My article 'Beyond the Sewol: Performing Acts of Activism in South Korea' examines how Yellow Ribbon's *Living and Dying Next Door* and Jayoung Chung's *Empathy* create spaces for memory and mourning for the Sewol Ferry tragedy.[11] Yet the literature on how performances directly represent the Sewol victims remains to be written.

The Sewol performances discussed here are at the intersections of performance studies and trauma studies. Diana Taylor describes performance as a way to produce knowledge, while the repertoire is a way to preserve it; and performance, which privileges bodily knowledge, is a 'vital act of

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transfer' that transmits social knowledge, cultural memory, and identities.[12] It is the object of enquiry in performance studies and allows for the analysis of a social event as performance. Taylor's theories are useful in examining Sewol performances not as finished products but as sites that transfer 'social knowledge, cultural memory, and identities'.[13]

Dori Laub's work has also been particularly useful in framing my own research on how the Sewol performances represent the Sewol victims and how the audience receives them. Laub discusses how the listener may 'partially experience trauma' when listening to testimonies of traumatic events.[14] Sewol performances are not first-hand testimonies from the survivors or victims. The mothers of the Sewol victims wearing their children's school uniforms perform Yellow Ribbon's *Talent Show*, while Namsan Arts Centre's *From Pluto* is the first play to re-enact the testimonies of Sewol survivors as well as those of the families of the victims and local volunteers and other supporters who assisted the families. In other words, audience members bear witness to the tragedy. They are able reflect on the tragedy and the families' struggles in these moments and try to make sense of that tragedy.

Caroline Wake has argued that there are two concepts of witnessing at work within theatre and performance studies. One is associated with performance art, which positions the spectator at the scene of trauma; the other, associated with documentary and verbatim theatre practices, positions the spectator at the scene of the testimony or the account.[15] Each person attending the Sewol performances belongs to the latter as 'a witness to an account of the accident rather than to the accident itself; a witness to testimony'.[16] Building on the scholarship available in performance studies and trauma studies, this article explores how performance represents the unrepresentable and turns viewers into witnesses to the traumatic past. It also shows how the three named performances archive and document the tragedy as well as raise awareness of injustice and the need for social change.

The Struggle for Truth and the Park Administration's Blacklist Scandal

Korean artists who create works that mourn the Sewol tragedy can be viewed as activists because they were blacklisted for criticizing the Park administration's response to the sinking. In the immediate aftermath of the disaster, the South Korean government's futile rescue operation generated criticism and debate. The Korean Coast Guard, Ministry of Oceans and Fisheries, and Ministry of Security and Public Administration failed to coordinate an effective rescue mission, which could have saved the lives of the passengers waiting in their cabins. The head of the Coast Guard also lied, saying that 160 divers were recovering bodies when there were only eight.[17] The divers were retrieving the bodies one at a time and placing them in body bags.

After the sinking of the *Sewol*, Park promised that she and her government would conduct a thorough investigation. The South Korean National Assembly passed the Special Act on Investigating the Truth of the April 16 Sewol Ferry Disaster and Building a Safe Society ('Special Act') on 7 November 2014. It was promulgated on 19 November 2014 and went into effect on 1 January 2015. The Korean people's nationwide petition had been essential for bringing the Special Act into effect.[18]

However, instead of trying to identify the cause of the incident and why the students had not been rescued, Park's administration refused to cooperate with the survivors and victims' families and thwarted the efforts of the Sewol Ferry Tragedy Special Investigation Committee (SIC). In addition, Park's administration blamed the victims' families for polarizing public opinion, and accused the SIC of being composed of leftists.[19] Right after the tragedy occurred, South Korea's Defence Security Command (DSC) characterized the victims' families as *jongbuk* (someone who sympathizes with North Korean ideology).[20]

On 21 April 2014, six days after the accident, the DSC wrote a report titled 'Espionage Prevention Plan'. The report stated that the DSC would confirm whether there were *jongbuk* movements promoting anti-government activities among the victims' families, and

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vowed to block them. According to the DSC's 29 May 2014 report, the Committee for the Sewol Victims, an organization that supported the Sewol families, was listed as *jongbuk* forces. Thus, from the outset, the DSC had viewed the Sewol families and their supporters as North Korean sympathizers. The reason is unclear but it can be assumed that Park's administration feared the effectiveness of castigation of the government's ineffectual handling of the tragedy articulated by the Sewol families and their supporters.

During the eleven-month investigation period, Park's government and the ruling conservative party made it as difficult as possible for the SIC to do its job.[21] First, the government curtailed the SIC's authority via the Special Act Enforcement Decree. On 27 March 2015, the Ministry of Oceans and Fisheries announced the Special Act Enforcement Decree without any explanation.[22] If the Enforcement Decree was put into effect, the dispatched government officials would take full control of the SIC and reduce the authority of committee members.[23] The SIC demanded that the Ministry rescind the Enforcement Decree, arguing that it violated the purpose of the Special Act's legislation, interfered with the SIC's investigation, and even undermined the SIC's independence.[24] However, on 11 May 2015, the government took up a slightly revised version of the Enforcement Decree.[25]

The SIC's budget also limited what the SIC could do. On 4 August 2015, the Ministry of Economy and Finance allocated 8.9 billion won instead of the 16 billion won initially requested. The budget was for the SIC investigation activities such as digital forensics and scientific research; with such a reduced budget, it would be difficult to conduct a comprehensive scientific investigation into the Sewol Ferry tragedy.[26]

Even after the SIC was established, the investigation stalled because the government did not cooperate with the SIC's information gathering. The Blue House and the National Intelligence Service did not submit any data on Park's activities on the day of the incident. Nor did the court, prosecution, or the Board of Audit and Inspection send any data to the SIC.[27] And although the SIC discovered one million Coast Guard frequency communication recordings, only 7,100 were handed over to the SIC.[28] The Ministry of Oceans and Fisheries was very reluctant to provide data on the salvage of the ferry, and eventually provided less than half of the data that the SIC had requested.[29]

Thus, although the SIC was created by law and had the legal authority to investigate, it was unable to exercise that authority because the government interfered with its activities. Under the pretence of passing the Special Act to help the families of victims, Park's government tried to use the Special Act and other institutional and legal systems to hinder the SIC's efforts to uncover the truth.

When the Korean people marched in protest, Park's administration had the police suppress the crowd, even arrest the grieving families. When Korean artists created works to commemorate the tragedy and hold the government accountable, Park's administration denied them grants and funding. In October 2014, when the Busan International Film Festival screened the documentary *The Truth Shall Not Sink with Sewol* (2014), festival director Lee Yong-gwan was asked to resign. Cho Yun-seon, former Minister of the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism, asked the ruling conservative party to denounce the documentary.[30] Cho also ordered that all the tickets be bought up before the screening and negative reviews of the documentary be posted on the internet.

Suspicions about government surveillance and censoring of the arts and culture came to the fore when theatre critic Kim Mi-do reported that Park Geun-hyeong's play *All Soldiers Are Unfortunate* was initially selected for funding by Arts Council Korea, but that members of the Council reconvened the jury members and demanded that the funds be rescinded.[31] In addition, in October 2015, Arts Council Korea interrupted a performance at the Seoul Performing Arts Festival because references to a school trip and to the popular clothing brand North Face evoked the Sewol Ferry tragedy. In October 2016, it was revealed that Park's administration had censored prominent artists and blacklisted 9,473

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artists, including those who had signed petitions to reveal the truth about the Sewol Ferry tragedy. According to the list, 594 artists who signed the petition to abolish the Sewol Special Act Enforcement Decree and 754 who participated in the Declaration of the Korean State of Affairs were blacklisted.[32]

Due to the socio-political conditions surrounding the Sewol Ferry tragedy, the very act of staging the tragedy highlights the artists' use of performative strategies against the regime. Thus, works that remember and mourn the victims, and stand in solidarity with the victims' families can be viewed as activist performances.

Staging the Children of Ansan in Yellow Ribbon's *Talent Show*

Seven women whose children had perished on the Sewol (Lee Mi-gyeong, Kim Myeong-im, Kim Chun-ja, Park Yu-sin, Kim Sun-deok, Kim Seong-sil, Kim Jeong-hae, and Oh Sun-yi) founded Yellow Ribbon in March 2016. The bereaved mothers had been treated for post-traumatic stress disorder in therapeutic workshops that included play readings.[33] Yellow Ribbon works collaboratively and aims to create work that addresses both Sewol and community issues. But it was not an easy journey. In October 2015, when director Kim Tae-hyeon first met the mothers, they were not ready to perform. Their eyes were full of sorrow and they seemed intimidated. Some, who felt too pressured to perform, even quit.

> When I first met the mothers, I could see that they felt guilty whenever they smiled. Because the public viewed them as victims, they expected the mothers to be sad all the time. The mothers needed to heal. You need to heal to move forward and uncover the truth. I decided to create a space where they can smile and laugh through theatre.[34]

Kim started workshops in which the mothers read humorous scripts. They especially enjoyed Oh Se-hyeok's *His and Her Closet* because they saw themselves in the characters who were mother, wife, and fixed-term employee. Kim and the mothers turned the play into their first production, which premiered in October 2016 in Ansan, Korea. The play, which depicts the struggles of fixed-term employees, can also be viewed as a Sewol story that takes another form. According to Kim:

> The play does not directly represent the Sewol Ferry tragedy, but the audience may be reminded of it. [The mothers] could voice their opinions via hunger strikes, head-shavings, and protests, but I wanted them to deliver their stories via theatre, where they could create intimacy, and bond with the audience.[35]

His and Her Closet received much media attention not only because of the plot, but also because of the cast. Because the actors were the Sewol mothers who were fighting for justice for their children, the audience could view a performance about people who were not protected by the law. The precarious position of fixed-term employees becomes a metaphor for the Sewol families. The performance's message of the need to reveal the truth about the Sewol was transmitted to the audience by telling stories of other vulnerable social minorities. In an interview, audience member Lee Ji-hye said that she enjoyed the performance and in contrast to the sorrow and anger she had felt, she found the courage to fight after seeing it.[36]

In their second play, *Living and Dying Next Door*, the troupe asks the audience to think about the kind of neighbours they wanted to be and the kind of community they wanted to live in. Kim adapted Ryu Seong's original script by adding the Sewol mothers' conversations and testimonies. Approximately 40–50 per cent of the original script changed:

> I constantly put questions to the mothers and added their ideas into the script. For example, the scene in the workplace [where the Sewol mother is shunned by her co-workers] was adapted from one of the mothers' experiences. The mothers also provided ideas during rehearsals and those were added to the performance as well.[37]

While the play was inspired by the Sewol Ferry tragedy and features a family member of a Sewol victim, it does not depict the tragedy itself. Rather, it stages what happened afterwards. The performance creates a space for audience members to hear what happened

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to the families in their own words and creates an alternative space for mourning and remembrance.[38]

Their third production, *Talent Show*, premiered in April 2019 and is currently performing across Korea (Figure 1). The play is a fictionalized account of five high school girls preparing a talent show in anticipation of their upcoming class trip. Inspired by Kim Sun-deok (mother of student survivor Jang Ae-jin), who wrote about her daughter's talent show during a free-writing session, the troupe decided to stage the children's stories for their third production.[39] While the troupe's previous plays had been adaptations, *Talent Show* is the troupe's first original production. Playwright Byeon Hyo-jin incorporated stories about the children's lives into the script.[40] To assume the role of high school students, the mothers wore Danwon High School uniforms.

The school bells chime, signalling the start of the play. A-yeong (played by Kim Myeong-im, mother of student victim Gwak Su-in) is a high school student living in Ansan, a city in Gyeonggi Province, just southwest of Seoul. She views Luffy, the character from the Japanese manga, *One Piece*, as her oldest imaginary friend. In several scenes, Luffy (played by Kim Do-hyeon, mother of student victim Jeong Dong-su) comes to life and even offers advice to the lonely A-yeong. A-yeong observes her classmates and decides that they do not have anything in common; Ha-neul (played by Lee Mi-gyeong, mother of student victim Lee Yeong-man) is interested in music, Ji-suk (played by Kim Sun-deok) cares about her appearance, and Baek-hee (played by Jo Ok-hyeong) likes to swear. One day, Ga-yeon (played by Park Yu-sin, mother of student victim Jeong Ye-jin), the class president, announces a class trip to Jeju Island the next month and tries to recruit students for the talent show. After much hesitation, A-yeong agrees to participate. The girls rehearse a cover dance to 'Catallena', by the K-pop girl group Orange Caramel. For the first time, A-yeong feels a sense of belonging. However, her parents cannot afford to send her on the trip. Her new friends take part-time jobs to help to earn the money that A-yeong needs. The play ends with the girls eagerly leaving on their trip. While the scene is cheerful, the audience may be reminded of the victims. It was a poignant scene, especially when one of the students yells out, 'Mom and Dad, I'll be back in three days.' The audience knows that this is not necessarily true.

Although the characters are fictional, they are based on real children. It is extremely difficult for the mothers to don Danwon High School uniforms and represent their children. In an interview with *Korean Theatre*, Kim Myeong-im said: 'It breaks my heart, but I think of my son every moment on stage.'[41] Laub reminds us that the 'act of telling might itself become severely traumatizing, if the price of speaking is *re-living*: not relief, but further re-traumatization':[42]

> Trauma survivors live not with the memories of the past, but with an event that could not and did not proceed through to its completion, has no ending, attained no closure, and therefore, as far as its survivors are concerned, continues into the present and is current in every respect.[43]

In relation to Laub's idea of trauma's timelessness, the Sewol survivors and families have not found closure; their trauma is ongoing. The petitions demanding a thorough investigation, the protests at the city square, and the fight for justice likewise continue. While the mothers are not professional actors, and the plot of *Talent Show* does not mention the sociocultural circumstances surrounding the Sewol Ferry tragedy, the play reminds the audience of the Sewol families fighting for justice.

Choe Ji-yeong (mother of student victim Kwon Sun-beom) discussed the troupe's purpose, commenting that that the mothers continued the troupe's work so they could shed light on the tragedy: 'We want to meet people and deliver stories about our children through theatre.'[44] In addition to raising awareness about their activism, the troupe's work helped the mothers confront their trauma and go on with their lives. Kim Do-hyeon claims that she was able to smile again and fight for truth after joining the troupe.[45] By staging something that seems impossibly traumatic, *Talent Show* asks the viewer to remember the victims.

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Figure 1. *Talent Show*. Sewol mothers singing. Photo: Areum Jeong.

Staging the Tragedy Chronologically in *From Pluto*

Like *Talent Show*, Namsan Art Centre's *From Pluto* memorializes the Sewol victims by depicting the students who died. *From Pluto*, written and directed by Park Sang-hyeon, premiered in May 2019. Park is a director, playwright, and professor at the Korea National University of Arts. His previous plays *Saikopaesu* (2012) and *Chijeong* (2015) were also staged at the Namsan Arts Centre. Initially called the Drama Centre, the Namsan Arts Centre, built in 1962, is Korea's oldest modern theatre.[46] Yu Chi-jin, a renowned Korean director and playwright, established the Centre with a $65,000 grant from the Rockefeller Foundation. In 2009, the venue was renovated and renamed the Namsan Arts Centre. In 2016, the Centre, which staged mostly American and British plays, expanded its programming to include local experimental productions.

Park was inspired to create *From Pluto* after meeting five Sewol families on 22 December 2014. Although partly fictional, the plot is largely based on information on the Sewol Ferry tragedy and the testimonies from victims' families and supporters. Park consulted the Sewol archives, visited the commemorative classrooms, and studied several Korean publications such as Oh Jun-ho's *Documenting the Sewol Ferry*. While many productions represented the Sewol metaphorically, this is the first play that depicted it chronologically. The play, a reenactment of the tragedy and its aftermath, also documented the event. However, Park had not intended to create documentary theatre.[47] His purpose was to confront the Sewol tragedy, but could not do so because he did not have complete information as to what had happened. When writing the students' lines, Park wondered what they would have said, and if he could really speak for them. During rehearsals, Park ordered

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controlled, restrained acting. They had rehearsed for two and half months and the actors spent much time contemplating the tragedy. Park commented that the play was his way of remembering the victims and an expression of the prayers and wishes of the families and friends left behind.

The play begins on 14 April 2014, the day before the class trip. It stages the incident chronologically with testimonies from the victims' families, survivors, and supporters, and portrays the aftermath of the incident based on public opinion and true events. In addition, it also directly portrays the victims in several fictional scenes. In one scene, the students have a party in the ferry's steering house. The members of the broadcasting club introduce each student, for example: 'She is our class president, but after the ferry's captain took off, she is our captain!' When introduced, each student comes forward and delivers such short statements as: 'I want to breathe fresh air'; 'Do you think my last text message was delivered to my parents? If only I could see them one more time'; 'Mom, please remember to take your medicine. Dad, don't drink too much. Be well'; 'Mom, I'm sorry I complained about your cooking'; 'Mom and Dad, don't worry. I was actually really scared, but it was not that painful'; 'Why didn't we go out when the ferry started to sink? Why didn't we?'

Between these statements, members of the broadcasting club repeatedly instruct some students to 'Stay where you are. Don't move', while other students dance and have fun. This evokes the instructions given to the students as the ferry sank. The students' playfulness is in sharp contrast to their wistful words. Suddenly the venue becomes completely dark except for some lights that float in the background. The students stand still. A male adult's voice is heard. 'Here you all are. Let's go home. I'll take you all home.' The voice belongs to one of the divers who retrieved their bodies.

This fictional scene was a heartbreaking reminder that the students whom the actors represented were no more. It represents the unrepresentable. Instead of depicting the trapped and frightened students awaiting help, this scene portrays them as students happy and full of life. This is how their families and friends wish to remember them. Perhaps it was represented this way because we do not know what really happened. We do not know why the ferry made a sharp turn and what caused it to sink. We do not know why the students were not rescued sooner, and we do not know why Park's government had demonized the victims' families and supporters and had hindered the investigation.

The play also portrays the aftermath of the incident. In a scene set in a church, parents react to Captain Lee Jun-seok's 36-year prison sentence. The priest asks them to pray and ask God to please take away their hatred towards the captain and the crew. One bereaved parent described seeing his child's corpse. He asks, 'How do we accept this, God? What is God's will?' The parents discuss the Bible, and then begin arguing. 'If there really is a God, God would have saved the children,' says one mother. I was reminded of the many Korean pastors who stated, 'God gave Korea an opportunity by drowning the young students,' or, 'The poor students should just have gone to Kyoungju. I don't know why they took a ferry to Jeju Island and created this commotion.'[48]

These pastors were not the only ones who made cruel and insensitive remarks about the Sewol victims and families. Although the bereaved families received assistance from their communities and NGOs, they were the subjects of gossip, hate speech, rumours and surveillance by the Park Geun-hye administration. Right-wing media and parties that aligned with the Park administration's policies tapped into identity politics to produce hate speech. They blamed the Sewol Ferry victims and their families for the tragedy. Because most of the Danwon High School students came from the working-class suburb of Ansan, their families were assumed to be from the political left.

In addition, by citing the words of the supporters, the play reminds the viewer of the many unresolved issues. In another scene, several divers attend a funeral, perhaps that of the diver Kim Gwan-hong, who was diagnosed with PTSD and took his own life. The

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divers talk about their trauma and what it was like to search for the students' bodies. 'Back then, I thought, Thank God I can do this [i.e. dive and search for the students],' one diver says. 'I still have nightmares about that,' says another. For three months after the sinking, twenty-five civilian divers spent more than twelve hours a day searching for the bodies, eventually recovering nearly three hundred bodies from the sunken ferry.[49] During that time, they did not receive any direction that oversaw their safety, and worked exhaustively to recover the bodies.

While many divers are still living with physical pain and PTSD, the South Korean government has not compensated them. Two divers have committed suicide.[50] Han Jae-myeong was diagnosed with osteonecrosis, a bone tissue disease caused by interruption of the blood supply. Eight divers are unable to work due to physical injuries that they had sustained during the search. When Kim Sang-woo was inside the submerged ferry, luggage fell on his head and Kim had to undergo surgery on his neck. He is still unable to work as a diver. However, these civilian divers, who volunteered to recover the bodies, are not eligible for workers' compensation. Some divers are currently receiving only partial reimbursement for their medical treatment. Furthermore, those with osteonecrosis cannot receive any kind of compensation or disability assistance. After diver Kim Gwan-hong's death, seventy members of the National Assembly proposed the Kim Gwan-hong Act to compensate divers, but the Judiciary Committee has still not passed it. This scene again reminds the viewer that numerous Sewol supporters who have been diagnosed with health issues have been denied government care. Recovery from the Sewol is still ongoing.

In her review, critic Kim Bang-ok wrote that the play not only questions whether the Sewol could be represented or not, but also shows how it has become unavoidable *not* to question the political issues represented in Korean theatre today.[51] Although it might not have been Park's initial focus when writing and directing *From Pluto*, the play also became a political commentary on the Sewol families' struggles, the supporters' troubles, the unanswered questions, and problems that need to be solved by the South Korean government. While the sinking of the Sewol Ferry was an exceptional incident, the emotional wreckage is something that the Sewol survivors, families, and supporters still contend with every day.

Performing a Pilgrimage of Memory and Mourning in *Camino de Ansan*

Camino de Ansan stages the victims in a more circumspect manner, inviting the viewers to walk the streets where they had lived. Victor Turner describes pilgrimage as a ritualized performance and 'liminal phenomenon' where participants are united by 'communitas':[52]

> we can envisage the social process involving a particular group of pilgrims during their preparations for departure, their collective experiences on the journey, their arrival at the pilgrim centre, their behaviour and impressions at the centre, and their return journey, as a sequence of social dramas and social enterprises and other processual units to be isolated by induction from an appropriate number of cases in which there is a development in the nature and intensity of relationships between the members of the pilgrimage group and its subgroups.[53]

Turner suggests that pilgrimage enables the participant to perform in alternative positions and help construct communal consciousness. Pilgrimage can also be examined in the light of Diana Taylor's idea of the repertoire – ephemeral forms of embodied knowledge and practice that extend beyond the archive. *Camino de Ansan* can be viewed as a pilgrimage that transmits knowledge through embodied practice, using the repertoire's bodily ways of knowing.

Camino de Ansan is an annual pilgrimage project that began in 2015 as a means of reflecting upon the Sewol Ferry tragedy. Go Ju-yeong, the producer, and Yun Han-sol, the director, discussed the purpose of the project, commenting that the pilgrimage 'is another form of remembering' and shows that 'you shouldn't stop grieving'.[54] The project's committee is comprised of a collective of local

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artists from design, sound art, and theatre (Green Pig, JAT Project, Shim Bo-Seon, and Unmake Lab). Each group is in charge of selecting and leading a particular area in Ansan. Before the event, the committee announced the pilgrimage on social media:

> In 2015, we were angry. In 2016, we were powerless. In 2017, we were hopeful. In 2018, we were fearful again. In 2019, we ask ourselves what the Sewol Ferry disaster means and how we experience and walk Ansan.
>
> In a rapidly changing city, memories are fading and promises are broken. It's time to take a step forward again.
>
> It's been five years since the Sewol Ferry disaster occurred. Please participate in Camino de Ansan to gather our small steps, reinforce our memories, and move forward.[55]

Camino de Ansan participants walk approximately ten kilometres of Ansan City. There are two short breaks. Drinks, snacks, and emergency medication are available to the participants. The event memorializes the tragedy by walking through Ansan, a city of industrial complexes and small businesses. From the 1990s, migrant workers from China, Indonesia, Sri Lanka, and Vietnam flocked there to find work. Ansan, now known for the Sewol Ferry tragedy, has been through difficult times. The victims' families faced many dilemmas. One was whether or not to preserve the victims' classrooms at Danwon High School. After disputes between the families of the deceased and surviving students, the commemorative classrooms were moved to the Ansan Office of Education. Jeong writes that the classrooms are memorials that 'stand in for the wreckage of the ferry itself through objects that perform affect'.[56]

Another disagreement centred on the construction of a memorial park.[57] The 416 Families for Truth and a Safer Society and NGOs argued that the memorial park should be built within the Hwarang Amusement Park in Ansan City where the victims had grown up. However, when some construction associations denounced the memorial park and remarked that an ossuary would cause land prices to drop, conflicts between the Sewol families and Ansan City residents arose. Ansan City plans to build a 23,000-square-metre memorial park within the 618,000-square-metre Hwarang Amusement Park. The controversial altar would take up only 660 square metres. Victims' families tried to persuade residents who opposed the project. However, right-wing politicians denounced the victims' families and the memorial park, especially during local elections. For example, the campaign poster of Lee Hye-kyeong, the mayoral candidate of the Bareunmirae Party, reads, 'When a dog dies, do we keep it in the house?' The campaign poster of Lee Min-keun, the mayoral candidate of the Liberty Korea Party, reads, 'Building a shrine in the Hwarang Amusement Park is a way to make Ansan a gloomy city forever'. This shows how political parties use hate politics based on discrimination and exclusion against underprivileged groups. Although the South Korean government has approved the budget for the memorial park, there is still some local resentment.

On 5 May 2019, I arrived at the No. 2 Exit of Ansan Station (Figure 2). There was a small booth outside the exit. I received a pair of gloves, a mission card, a pamphlet, a black



Figure 2. *Camino de Ansan.* The pilgrimage performance begins at Ansan Station. Photo: Areum Jeong.

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umbrella, and a bottle of water. My mission card read, 'Hiccup when you walk by flowers.' At 1.00 p.m., the organizers gathered and encouraged the participants to prepare for the walk by doing some stretching exercises. The organizers then silently raised two fingers, signalling to the participants to form two lines. No one gave verbal instructions or asked the participants to turn off their electronic devices. The participants were free to walk and chat as much or as little as they wished. Most people walked in silence. From time to time, I would have a quiet conversation with one of the Sewol mothers behind me.

For approximately six hours, we walked through markets, parks, mountain trails, apartments and schools (Figure 3). We walked through neighbourhoods that were home to migrant workers. We walked through both abandoned neighbourhoods and newly built apartments. We walked in twos and fours, or sometimes in a single file. The organizers would communicate with their umbrellas and gestures. They rarely spoke. Sometimes we would hold the umbrella of the person in front of us, creating a human centipede. This might have been done to avoid traffic. At these times, and when we followed narrow paths, I had to take small steps to prevent stepping on the heels of the person in front of me. Often, the pilgrimage line would curve into the shape of a question mark. While marching along those lines, I would ask how we could remember Ansan.

The pilgrimage also visited the commemorative classrooms and the site of the memorial park. The commemorative classrooms seemed to confirm the victims' absence. The land where the memorial park would be built was empty except for the grass. The victims' families and NGOs are building the 4.16 Life and Security Park whose mission is to build a safer society, reveal the truth, and memorialize



Figure 3. *Camino de Ansan.* Participants march during the pilgrimage. Photo: Areum Jeong.

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the victims. Although the South Korean government has approved the construction budget, the park will not be completed until 2022 or 2023.

From time to time, we saw high school students in their uniforms. They rarely engaged with the participants. Sometimes we would see them close by; sometimes they



Figure 4. *Camino de Ansan.* A performer writing 'Time does not make anything disappear' on a wall. Photo: Areum Jeong.

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would perform from afar. They reminded us of the students who had died. These were streets that the victims might have walked with their family and friends. Now, the people who walk those streets remember the victims.

Sometimes, I would forget to hiccup when passing by flowers unless I heard someone else do it. The hiccups were like an effort to remember the Sewol. Each step I took was one of memory and mourning, and an effort to remember the victims and their families. I was reminded that the Sewol is not in the past. It is so much more than a disaster that happened on a class trip; it prompted the Korean people to question community, education, government, law, and violence in South Korea. *Camino de Ansan* invites the participants to remember the victims while choreographing and documenting the space of Ansan through embodied performance (Figure 4).

Beyond the Sewol

Although the Sewol Ferry tragedy occurred more than six years ago, many Koreans have not recovered from the shock of watching the ferry sink on live news. The survivors, families, and supporters of the Sewol are still demanding a full investigation. In this sense, the tragedy continues, and also in the sense that performances evoking it represent death, loss, and memory in contemporary South Korea. By staging characters based on the student victims, *Talent Show* reminds the audience of the Sewol families who are fighting for justice. *From Pluto*, which is a re-enactment of the tragedy and its aftermath, depicts the student victims directly and raises the question of whether the Sewol can be represented or not. And *Camino de Ansan* invites the audience to remember the victims and their families through embodied performance. By representing the victims of the Sewol Ferry tragedy, *Talent Show*, *From Pluto*, and *Camino de Ansan* convey the families' struggles to achieve justice, the supporters' ongoing difficulties in recovering, the questions that remain to be answered, and problems that the South Korean government needs to solve.

Notes and References

1. This research was supported by the 4.16 Foundation. Established in September 2016, the Foundation is a non-profit organization based in Ansan. Its mission, among other aspects, is to reveal the cause of the Sewol Ferry tragedy, support the survivors and victims' families, and create a safer society.

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