

# The Color of Dissent and a Vital Politics of Fragility in South Korea

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*Inspired by the life and work of the late anthropologist Nancy Abelmann (1959–2016), this essay reflects upon public evocations of human vulnerability as central to understanding recent cultural phenomena and political transformations leading up to and during the Candlelight Revolution in South Korea. In this regard, how did the color vivid yellow come to define both spaces of protest and markers of dissident identity? Considering the prevalence of yellow ribbons, yellow balloons, yellow butterflies, and yellow paper lifeboats, what does it mean for such objects to have been circulated and recirculated in layered metaphorical assemblages that constituted new forms of public memory and new practices of political mobilization? This article addresses both the massive, peaceful Candlelight protests of 2016–17 that took place in downtown Seoul and the decade-long peace movement centered on Jeju Island's Gangeong Village in order to theorize a vital politics of fragility that has imbued influential narratives, activist coalitions, and the material culture of protest in South Korea.*

**Keywords:** democratization, Korea, material culture, memory activism, moral politics, Nancy Abelmann, object-oriented democracy, peace movements, protest, trauma

*Nancy Abelmann had a remarkable gift for mentoring, which extended to matters of both work and life. I still have the copy of an early draft of my book proposal that we once discussed after she had marked it up extensively in her familiar handwriting, flowing in its expressiveness and famously hard to decipher. I keep it as a memento of not only the intellectual guidance she shared but also her extraordinary graciousness as a friend. Her penmanship was familiar because every year she would send out holiday letters, which included a current photograph of her kids with a handwritten message underneath. A great number of people filled Nancy's overlapping circles of friends, and surely many were closer to her than I was. To know that Nancy would make the personal effort to include our family in her annual ritual of holiday correspondence, I could hardly imagine how much time she must have devoted every winter to this caring practice of staying in touch with the extensive community that surrounded her, which she kept close in spirit by reaching out regularly in her own hand.*

*Nancy and I initially met through mutual friends several months before I began grad school, and we stayed in contact in the ensuing years, when she became an informal mentor and later a friend and colleague. I got to know her better while visiting Urbana*

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to take part in a panel discussion Nancy had organized in connection with the Krannert Art Museum's 2002 exhibition of work by Korean American author and artist Theresa Hak Kyung Cha. I returned years later for the Korea Workshop, a highly active program in Korean studies that Nancy ran for several years as an academic forum for discussing works-in-progress from disciplines across the humanities and social sciences. Despite how busy she was, Nancy had a way of giving you her full attention in conversation, even when you were unsure of what you were saying. It was something about her focused demeanor, genial sense of presence, and thoughtful questions that made you feel as if your tentative, half-formed ideas were a lot more interesting than they had sounded the day before.

While open to entertaining all kinds of possibilities when hashing out ideas, Nancy could arrive at a point where she would be both emphatically direct and generously reassuring in conveying what she believed to be clearly the way to go. Her knack for reassurance was disarming, as was her candor and compassion regarding the uncertainties of life. This included not least the process of tackling a first book project. In my case, I was in the process of revising a manuscript after having previously put it aside for several years, and I had doubts about the possibility of salvaging the project at all. In 2011, during one of the summers when our paths crossed in Korea, Nancy shared advice that any first-time author should hear: "Writing your first book is so hard because you don't know what you're doing." She added that one should "remember that it all becomes much easier after the first book." I was touched by her implicit confidence that I would one day go on to grapple with other book-length projects, at a time when I was deeply unsure whether I would ever see the other side of the first one. Somehow, acknowledging that disorientation made a difference. What had previously seemed to be daunting, uncharted territory became less intimidating when seen instead as a difficult but well-traveled path. The inevitable setbacks and obstacles of an unwieldy process steadily became more manageable as I remembered to regard them as being par for the course, and Nancy's words of reassurance stayed with me through many rounds of drafting and revisions.

I turn now to the framing endeavor of this essay, which seeks to consider commitments arising from Nancy's first book and to connect them with concerns reflected in a more recent long-term research project, which I must describe with sorrow as her last. *Echoes of the Past, Epics of Dissent*, Nancy's debut monograph based on her doctoral dissertation, was published in the autumn of 1996. In the book, she explores how "dissent is always an engagement with the past,"<sup>1</sup> as evidenced by 1980s-era subaltern *minjung* narratives that drew upon the memory of the 1894 Tonghak Peasant Revolution as a cultural repository of historic identification. While the monograph brought Nancy's analytical acumen and storytelling craft to bear upon questions of historical consciousness in the idiom of a rural South Korean protest movement in the 1980s, it also raised meta-historical issues regarding the temporality of dissent, which continue to have striking contemporary resonance. Regarding drives to mobilize action either by agents of the state or forces of dissent, Nancy observed how, in the complex interplay "between state institutions and anti-state activisms, the decade's shifts and turns are also narrated in terms

<sup>1</sup>Nancy Abelmann, *Echoes of the Past, Epics of Dissent: A South Korean Social Movement* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 248.

of the appearance and retreat of memory.”<sup>2</sup> At the same time, she argued that 1980s activism itself could be understood “as the crossroads between competing narratives or models of mobilization and of competing memories.”<sup>3</sup> Nancy was interested in how South Korean dissent communities regarded memory as both “a personal resource and a collective repository.”<sup>4</sup> Such memory called forth by dissent narratives challenged official histories and gave rise to the counter-narratives that would be told, refigured, and retold, mobilizing others to political action in a process that unfolded over time. The latent and iterative power of such historical counter-narratives helps to inform Nancy’s framing of that momentous decade as alternating intervals characterized by what she called “silences and outbursts.”<sup>5</sup> In other words, in the oscillation between periods defined by repression and by resistance, it was through the building momentum generated by *sub rosa* circulations of dissident memory that the seeming stasis of silence would eventually be broken in sudden, inexorable outpourings of protest.

In the final years before her passing, Nancy gave a series of talks related to an extended project whose title she cited in a successful grant narrative as “Fragile Cosmopolitans: Sketches of South Korean Youth.” In various papers and articles drawn from that research, she explored and analyzed the effects of the crushing demands placed on young people in contemporary South Korea. Such expectations stemmed from the extreme competitiveness driven by neoliberal governmentalities, compounded by the aspirational pressures to fulfill parental and nationalistic desires to accrue the cosmopolitan markers of world-class achievement.<sup>6</sup> As her research collaborations considered the on-the-ground experiences of students and families navigating the intensive atmosphere surrounding South Korean educational reform and experiments, her ethnographic work, as well as her advising more broadly, challenged many of us in Korean studies to reconsider multiple dimensions of the condition of fragility when thinking about subjectivity in the current neoliberal conjuncture.

*I recall a breakfast meeting about four years ago when Nancy kindly offered to give feedback on a draft of my book manuscript; among other comments, she suggested that I reframe one of my chapter titles to include a reference to “fragility.” (“Titles are really, really important,” was another word of advice Nancy passed along during that conversation.) I remember that moment vividly and think of the way Nancy paused—with a delighted smile and a slight shrug of her shoulders—to say, “I love the word ‘fragility.’” It clearly captivated her imagination in the way that she was drawn to certain words. Nancy had a keen ear for poetic language, and I surmise that she was drawn to not only the concept but also its kinesthetic qualities that approached onomatopoeia.*

<sup>2</sup>*Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>4</sup>*Ibid.*, 20.

<sup>5</sup>*Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>6</sup>Nancy Abelman, So Jin Park, and Hyunhee Kim, “College Rank and Neo-Liberal Subjectivity in South Korea: The Burden of Self-Development,” *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 10, no. 2 (2009): 229–47; Nancy Abelman, Jung-Ah Choi, and So Jin Park, eds., *No Alternative?: Experiments in South Korean Education* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012); Adrienne Lo, Nancy Abelman, Soo Ah Kwon, and Sumie Okazaki, eds., *South Korea’s Education Exodus: The Life and Times of Study Abroad* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2015).

*Fra-gi-li-ty. By simply reciting or listening to this fleeting succession of phonemes, the delicate texture of sounds evokes a feeling of lightness and vulnerability, as if the word itself were something to be handled with care, lest it be broken.*

*Sadly, in American political discourse, this lovely, evocative noun has lately been reduced to a harsh political insult. Along with its once-innocuous counterpart “snowflake,” both words would have seemed in another era to be among the most unlikely candidates for becoming ideologically charged terms of derisive revilement.<sup>7</sup> When I was asked to present in March 2017 on a tribute panel in Nancy’s honor at the Association for Asian Studies conference in Toronto, I felt compelled to use the invitation to think about more recent events in Korea in light of Nancy’s timely insights into how our present age has generated new and unprecedented forms of human vulnerability. Then, after a few false starts, I started getting cold feet. I confess that I became worried and self-conscious about how to address Nancy’s line of inquiry into the concept of “fragility,” now that the word had been appropriated in our politically divisive contemporary vernacular as a toxic epithet.*

*I realized then that I was getting ahead of myself. What I really wanted to do was to convey something that I wish I could have shared with Nancy. It was a story that had taken the shape of a story only after some time had passed, as can happen when a small episode carries an unexpectedly long resonance.*

At the store, to our disappointment, it seemed as if no vivid yellow ribbons were to be found. It was midsummer of 2016, and a friend and I were out running errands one afternoon at a craft-supply store in an urban commercial district on Jeju Island’s southeastern coast.<sup>8</sup> We had come across nearly every other color in solids and patterns: blue, red, green, paisley, polka dots, and ribbons dyed in shades that were not quite the right yellow, either too dark or too light. Yet, they were apparently out of the ribbons in primary yellow, which should not have been surprising given how sought-after that particular color would be among progressive South Korean activists. The store was located about ten minutes away by car from the small coastal village of Gangjeong, where I had been working among a community of peace activists who reside there. Though some activists were from the village, most had come from elsewhere on Jeju or from the mainland to take part in Gangjeong Village’s Movement of Peace for Life (*saengmyŏng pyŏnghwa undong*), now ten years on, in opposition to the construction of a South Korean naval base in Gangjeong. The base finally opened earlier that year amid

<sup>7</sup>Amanda Hess, “How ‘Snowflake’ Became America’s Inescapable Tough-Guy Taunt,” *New York Times Magazine*, June 13, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/06/13/magazine/how-snowflake-became-americas-inescapable-tough-guy-taunt.html> (accessed August 26, 2018).

<sup>8</sup>All Korean terms are Romanized according to the McCune-Reischauer system of Korean Romanization with the exception of place names where it is consistent with established institutional references in the article to use the Revised Romanization of Korean, e.g., Jeju Peace March, Gangjeong Peace School, Gwangju Prize for Human Rights. In those cases, the spelling is maintained in Revised Romanization of Korean where the place names appear elsewhere in the article. Also, personal names are cited using the Romanization found in the original publications, and where a name is more frequently written with an alternative spelling, that spelling is used rather than the McCune-Reischauer version. Korean name order is reflected in the placement of family name first, followed by given name(s). Where relevant, I have followed the pattern of capitalization and hyphenation in two-character given names based on the individual’s own preference.

continuing controversy, and the anti-base movement also protested the anti-democratic and at times violent means through which the base construction had been undertaken. While policymakers have framed the base's rationale in terms of maritime security, the activists argue that the construction of the naval base has actually increased the risk of war in the region because bilateral military-alliance agreements allow the US military to dock its own warships at the base, dangerously raising military tensions with China.<sup>9</sup> Peace education has therefore been a central endeavor for the local activist community, which includes artists, musicians, religious clergy and lay leaders, and both fledgling and veteran social-justice activists mostly from Korea but also from abroad.<sup>10</sup>

I returned that summer to participate as one of the facilitators for a week-long session of the Gangjeong Peace School, organized by the Korean peace organization called The Frontiers (*Kaech'ŏkchadŭl*). To prepare for our workshops, we needed more craft materials. One of the young Korean peace activists, who went by the nickname Baram Mal, offered to help out and was the group's designated driver anyhow. For the program's final project, the students were putting together a modest, temporary installation in the village's peace center, and, along with other supplies, they requested yellow ribbon.

At the store, we searched through several shelves of ribbon to no avail. After going through other sections of the craft department and turning up empty-handed, we nearly gave up in frustration. Then I reached to the back of one shelf, where a set of spools had been hidden from view, and I finally pulled out the color we had been looking for. The joy of the find was sweet but short-lived. A moment later I was chagrined to discover that the vivid yellow ribbon was *twice* as expensive as any of the other colors. Rather than 15,000 *won*, it was marked up to an exorbitant 30,000 *won*, the equivalent of nearly 30 USD. I gasped at the price gouging. Turning to Baram Mal, I held up two different shades of ribbon to show him the discrepancy on their price tags, saying in disgust, "Can you believe this? This is ridiculous!" Unfazed, Baram Mal took a more philosophical view. He was still relatively new to full-time peace activism. Originally from Ansan, he had recently moved from a small community on the mainland to work at the nonprofit organization that ran the peace school in Gangjeong. Baram Mal was on the quiet side. Though we usually spoke in Korean, he would on occasion try out his English with me or other transnational peace activists, who were among the visitors who regularly came to Gangjeong from abroad. In this case, he took the expensive ribbon and held it up for a moment, showing a look of confirmation as if it were something familiar. He then switched over to English to say slowly and deliberately in words cadenced as if they had line-breaks: "Yellow / Is the color / Of the resistance."

Given that it was the first time I had heard Baram Mal make that kind of declarative pronouncement, his reply struck me as both aphoristic slogan and personal pledge of commitment. I, in contrast, was feeling less high-minded, still miffed by the outsized

<sup>9</sup>Andrew I. Yeo, "Realism, Critical Theory, and the Politics of Peace and Security: Lessons from Anti-Base Protests on Jeju Island," *European Journal of International Security* 3, no. 2 (2018): 235–55.

<sup>10</sup>Keun-Joo Christine Pae, "Faith-Based Popular Resistance to the Naval Base in Gangjeong of Jeju: Transforming Militarized US-Korea Relations for Peace and Justice," in *Critical Theology against US Militarism in Asia: Decolonization and Deimperialization*, eds. Nami Kim and Wonhee Anne Joh (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 199–226.

price hike. Even so, I appreciated the circumstances of that episode for revealing how the material irreducibility of dissent culture could be literally quantifiable in its effects. Later, while checking out, I asked the store's proprietor why that particular roll of ribbon was so expensive. Rather than answer my question, she offered to sell it by the meter. Without waiting for a reply, she pulled out a length of ribbon to measure along the numbered hash-marks on the counter and asked me how much I wanted.

That visit to the craft store would come to mind as I encountered yellow ribbons again and again at sites of protest in South Korea. I might otherwise have taken for granted the prevalence of yellow ribbons, yellow t-shirts, yellow bracelets, and other items colored yellow—sometimes including depictions of balloons or butterflies—that would be present at collective protests large and small. It was the summer prior to the start of the Candlelight Movement that would eventually oust the former South Korean president Park Geun-hye, but no one at the time could have predicted the politically transformative events that lay ahead. Earlier that same day, when we went to the supply store, the peace-school students had held a planning meeting, where they debated over what to include among the various elements of the installation, such as which photographs to display and which text to include. Yet, there was no discussion needed to decide upon an overall color-theme. That went without saying. Of course it would be yellow, the same hue as the *noran ribbon* of the Yellow Ribbon Campaign in solidarity with the families of victims of the *Sewol* tragedy. It would be the vivid yellow that effectively served as a color code among progressive South Korean movements. At the time, it did not occur to me to question why the choice seemed obvious. But soon afterwards, following the visit to the craft store, I was left to wonder about how to understand yellow ribbons: their circulations and recirculations, both actual and virtual; their attendant mutability; their affective investments; and their material cognates in the form of other solidarity symbols that share a common color.

## DEMOCRATIZING OBJECTS

This essay seeks to explore what it meant for the presence of yellow ribbons—and related things colored vivid yellow—to have come to define key spaces of protest and resistance in contemporary South Korea during the last three years of Park's presidency. At that time, above all, yellow ribbons were associated with remembering the victims of the *Sewol* ferry disaster of April 16, 2014. That tragedy resulted in the deaths of 304 people, mostly high school students on a field trip. During the weeks following the disaster, an expanse of yellow ribbons was at the center of the tribute to the *Sewol* victims in Seoul Plaza in front of City Hall. In Ansan, yellow ribbons appeared for months and then years afterwards throughout the “memory classrooms” at Tanwŏn (Danwon) High School, where mementos were laden upon the desk of each of the 250 deceased *Sewol* ferry victims who had been students there. Another key site of *Sewol* memory activism is one of the large tents flanking Kwanghwamun (Gwanghwamun) Plaza in central Seoul, where volunteers help out every day by handcrafting yellow-ribbon solidarity charms. These objects are intended for distribution among supporters to hang on their purses and backpacks, a strategy for maintaining visibility regarding the cause of seeking the truth behind the *Sewol* disaster.

While there is a significant and growing literature on *Sewol* memory activism,<sup>11</sup> what has been less explored is how circulations of the yellow ribbon can help to trace interconnected networks of solidarity and identification among other kinds of social activists in long-term dissent movements prior to the 2016–17 anti-Park protests in South Korea. During the periods of conservative rule that preceded the Candlelight Revolution, these interconnected movements sustained a broad spectrum of resistance in the years when such activism was targeted for repression and therefore difficult to sustain.<sup>12</sup> Among significant sites of long-term protest where yellow ribbons have been prevalent, Gangjeong Village is particularly notable as the place where members of a resident peace-activist community have continued a decade-long anti-base struggle, holding a public daily protest every morning without interruption in front of the site of the base's construction.<sup>13</sup> In 2016, the movement entered its tenth year since opposition to the naval base had begun. Through holding its daily public protest as an ongoing activist ritual and organizing the annual Jeju Peace March every summer, Gangjeong has come to represent a crossroads where progressive activists create and deepen connections across various South Korean social movements, including advocacy for anti-militarism, human rights, labor rights, nuclear abolition, and ecological democracy.<sup>14</sup>

On many of my visits to Gangjeong in 2015 and 2016, I would encounter *Sewol* activists and sometimes members of bereaved *Sewol* families. One of the *Sewol* activists told me that what had brought them there was friendship and a sense of solidarity, but also a desire to learn. She said, "We have been doing this for a little more than two years, and we're exhausted. How have they been able to continue their struggle for ten years?" Gangjeong peace activists and *Sewol* families were also central to a coalition of seven major social movements that organized a solidarity meeting and "Jeju peace tour" in August 2015, when roughly 150 people gathered in Gangjeong Village for a long weekend in the first event of its kind during the years under Park. The gathering reflected

<sup>11</sup>For example, see Haeran Shin, "Kiök üi Yöngt'ohwa Sewölho Kiök Konggan Hyöngsöngkwachöng üi Sarye Ro" [The Territorialization of Memory: The Making of Place of Memory for the *Sewol* Ferry Accident], *Konggan kwa Sahoe* 26, no. 3 (2016): 115–54; Hyeon Jung Lee, "From Passive Citizens to Resistant Subjects: The *Sewol* Families Stand Up to the State," in *Challenges of Modernization and Governance in South Korea: The Sinking of the Sewol and Its Causes*, eds. Jae-Jung Suh and Mikiyoung Kim (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 187–207.

<sup>12</sup>Minkyu Sung, "Surveillance and Anti-Communist Authoritarianism in South Korea," *Surveillance & Society* 15, no. 3/4 (2017): 486–90; Soobin Kim, "Vilifying the Victims: The Politics of Failing Sewol in Korea," master's thesis, State University of New York at Binghamton, 2016.

<sup>13</sup>Lina Koleilat, "Transforming Spaces of Dissent: Catholic Rituals of Protest in Contemporary South Korea," Association for Asian Studies Annual Conference, Washington, DC, March 22–25, 2018. For an excellent documentary reflecting on the past decade of anti-base activism at Gangjeong, see *The Memory of the 25th Hour*, directed by Sungeun Kim (2016; Seogwipo, Jeju-do, South Korea: KaMaGwi), HD.

<sup>14</sup>Hans Schattle, "Testing the Possibilities and Limits of Global and National Public Spheres: Lessons Learned from the Campaign to Stop a Military Base in South Korea," *Globalizations* 12, no. 2 (2015): 169–83; Gwisook Gwon, "Remembering 4/3 and Resisting the Remilitarisation of Jeju: Building an International Peace Movement," in *Under Occupation: Resistance and Struggle in a Militarised Asia-Pacific*, eds. Daniel Broudy, Peter Simpson, and Makoto Arakai (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars, 2013), 238–70.

a network connected through the well-known social-justice activist and octogenarian Korean Catholic priest Mun Jeong Hyeon as well as through other prominent activists who are connected to Gangjeong. In addition to members of the peace movement and the *Sewol* families, the loose coalition included (1) those who had fought since 2009 for the reinstatement of workers affected by massive layoffs after a violent crackdown on labor protests at Ssangyong Motors; (2) tenant-rights advocates who opposed forced evictions symbolized by the “Yongsan tragedy,” when six people were killed in 2009 while protesting against an urban redevelopment project in Seoul; and (3) the decade-long protest in and around Miryang, where activists resisted the construction of ultra-high-voltage towers built by the state to transmit electricity from controversial nuclear-power reactors on Korea’s southeastern coast.<sup>15</sup> A Gangjeong activist explained the gathering to me as bringing together those who had been among the most victimized under the Park Geun-hye government, people who had been disenfranchised and then targeted for repression.

The coalition emerged in the wake of a speaking tour by Father Mun Jeong Hyeon that Gangjeong-based activists launched after he had been awarded the Gwangju Prize for Human Rights in 2012. Using the prize’s honorarium to cover expenses,<sup>16</sup> Mun and other Gangjeong activists traveled to Ansan, Yongsan, and Miryang, among several sites associated with social movements subject to violent repression by the state under the conservative Lee and Park governments. In personal, symbolic, and material ways, Mun’s speaking tour and the resulting coalition among multiple long-term protest movements were therefore tied directly and indirectly to the memorialization of the May 18 Democratic Uprising and the Gwangju Massacre in 1980. That coalition of contemporary dissent movements could thereby trace a lineage to historical events of the 1980s that were arguably the most important catalysts for the wider pro-democratization struggles in South Korea during the two decades at the end of the twentieth century.<sup>17</sup>

On the morning that the 2015 solidarity gathering began, a group of activist friends drove from Gangjeong to the airport in Jeju City to greet the arriving visitors. I had been staying with them in the village at the time, so I joined as well. As people gathered to meet each other and pose for group photographs, those belonging to the different movements could be distinguished by virtue of colorful buttons or t-shirts advocating for their respective causes. Yet, it later occurred to me that, regardless of affiliation, nearly everyone among that gathering also wore or displayed some iteration of the yellow ribbon. Mostly it took the form of a small enamel pin, a cellphone sticker, a yellow bracelet, or a hanging charm in the shape of a yellow ribbon. Having such things in common had not been a result of any effort of prior coordination, but rather suggests how the

<sup>15</sup>Miran O, “Kangjŏng. Ssangyong. Yongsan. Miryang. Sewŏrho, ‘Chejup’yŏngwagihaeng’ŭro Mungch’ŏtta” [Gangjeong, Ssangyong, Yongsan, Miryang, Sewol-ho Unite through a “Jeju Peace Tour”], *Headline Jeju*, August 23, 2015, <http://m.headlinejeju.co.kr/news/articleView.html?idxno=250300> (accessed August 26, 2018).

<sup>16</sup>Author’s interview with Oh Doo-hee, one of the activists centrally involved with the speaking tour; July 31, 2017, and Mun Jeong Hyeon, interview with the author, August 1, 2017, Gangjeong Village, South Korea.

<sup>17</sup>Gi-Wook Shin, “Introduction,” in *Contentious Kwangju: The May 18 Uprising in Korea’s Past and Present*, eds. Gi-Wook Shin and Kyung Moon Hwang (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003), xi–xxxi.



yellow ribbon had become by then a de facto emblem of shared solidarity across a range of social-justice movements. Despite the prevalence of yellow-ribbon imagery, the group did not coalesce in support of the *Sewol* families *per se*. Rather, their public statements underscored how the common ground for all these movements was a collective opposition to state violence (*kukka p'ongnyŏk*), which furthermore marked their activism as a legacy of South Korea's 1980s-era democratization movement.

To consider this pervasive but informal presence of yellow ribbons and similar objects at the Jeju solidarity gathering, a provocative insight comes from Bruno Latour's engagement with alternative politics, which he explores in part through a theoretical concern with the networks of relationships between human and non-human. With co-curator Peter Weibel, Latour organized *Making Things Public: Atmospheres of Democracy*, a collaborative project that yielded a 2005 exhibition and an edited volume published the same year. Opening in Karlsruhe, Germany, the exhibition included the work of over 100 people—artists, scientists, philosophers, historians, anthropologists, and sociologists—who had been asked to engage in a reconsideration of the term “politics.” The project's central concern was the challenge of renewing politics so as to pursue genuinely democratic alternatives that would go beyond conventional political arrangements to address pressing matters of public concern.

In an essay that introduced both the exhibition catalog and the edited volume, Latour frames his motivating question as a thought experiment: “What would an *object-oriented* democracy look like?”

It's clear that each object—each issue—generates a different pattern of emotions and disruptions, of disagreements and agreements. There might be no continuity, no coherence in our opinions, but there is a hidden continuity and a hidden coherence in what we are attached to. Each object gathers around itself a different assembly of relevant parties. Each object triggers new occasions to passionately differ and dispute. Each object may also offer new ways of achieving closure without having to agree on much else. In other words, objects—taken as so many issues—bind all of us in ways that map out a public space profoundly different from what is usually recognized under the label of “the political.”<sup>18</sup>

Here, Latour seeks to redress a bias in political philosophy that has privileged the metaphorical meaning of representation nearly to the exclusion of its literal meaning. In other words, in the study of law and politics, faithful political representation is presumed to result from following the right procedures to gather a legitimate group around a particular issue. Latour critiques this tendency by exposing its blind-spot, which he analyzes as an avoidance of theorizing *things*. Rather, he argues for recognizing a prior definition of representation, to acknowledge that which represents in a sensory, tactile way the object of concern to those assembled around it. Following Latour, what if one therefore uses the

<sup>18</sup>Bruno Latour, “From Realpolitik to *Dingpolitik*, or How to Make Things Public,” in *Making Things Public: Atmospheres of Democracy*, eds. Bruno Latour and Peter Weibel (Cambridge, Mass., and Karlsruhe, Germany: MIT Press and ZKM/Center for Art and Media in Karlsruhe, 2005), 4–31, 5.

yellow ribbon to map out the public space of an object-oriented democracy in millennial Korea? If the yellow ribbon is the thing that served to bind various coalitions that would later coalesce to help galvanize the recent Candlelight Movement, what was the object of concern that it would represent in the eyes and ears of those assembled?<sup>19</sup>

Within days of the *Sewol* ferry sinking, the Yellow Ribbon Campaign in Korea originally started with the efforts by a coalition of thirty students from various South Korean universities who came up with the idea of the campaign as a way to express compassion and support for the *Sewol* disaster victims. The campaign's theme was reportedly inspired by an offhand remark by the mother of one of the coalition members, who recalled that yellow ribbons express the hope for someone's safe return. Seven members took up the task of buying materials from Dongdaemun Market to make 500 yellow ribbons, which they handed out on the street to passersby in Shinch'on, a neighborhood of Seoul filled with progressive university students. As the campaign quickly expanded through personal networks and social media, the yellow ribbons spread to an extent beyond anything the students could have imagined.<sup>20</sup>

What had initially begun as a token of hope soon became a symbol of mourning and remembrance, as it became clear that none of those who were trapped inside the ferry would return alive. This was despite the fact that there was an interval of several hours when passengers could have been saved. As the political significance of the disaster shifted, the meaning of the yellow ribbon further evolved. After the initial shock of the tragedy, evidence soon mounted to indicate that these deaths had been preventable and resulted from the gross negligence and deliberate obstruction on the part of the government. Yoonkyung Lee observes how the aftermath of the *Sewol* ferry sinking brought into public awareness as never before the connections between large-scale disasters, neoliberal reforms, and incompetence largely stemming from corruption. She writes, "the *Sewol* was caught in the deadly force of the seemingly new wave of neoliberal deregulation in recent decades and the continuity of public-private collusion originating from the developmental past."<sup>21</sup> Regarding the sinking of the *Sewol* and the resulting loss of life, Gooyong Kim succinctly explains the reasons why this was a preventable disaster, rather than an accident:

In addition to numerous mechanical and crew mistakes, the fundamental reasons were the government's ... heavy interests in neoliberal capitalist profiteering by deregulating safety standards ever since the administration of President Lee Myung-Bak (2008–2013). The [Park] administration mishandled the rescue efforts in order to prioritize privatized rescue operations, rejected help offered from independent divers and the US Navy, withheld crucial information, had irregular and poorly trained labor attending the scene of the sinking, and frequently interfered and manipulated mass media's reporting on the tragedy

<sup>19</sup>For more theorization on the connections between things and action in the context of contemporary Korea, see Robert Oppenheim, *Kyōngju Things: Assembling Place* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2018).

<sup>20</sup>Heo Seung, "Yellow Sewol Ribbons Have Become a Symbol of Rebellion," *Hankyoreh*, April 22, 2015.

<sup>21</sup>Yoonkyung Lee, "The Sewol Disaster: Predictable Consequences of Neoliberal Deregulation," in *Challenges of Modernization and Governance in South Korea: The Sinking of the Sewol and Its Causes*, eds. Jae-Jung Suh and Mikyoung Kim (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 33–48, 35.

and rescue efforts. Moreover, the government has yet to launch a full-scale investigation into the disaster. Rather, the government has obstructed the efforts of civil society, including the surviving victims and the bereaved, to unearth the truth behind the accident.<sup>22</sup>

In the days and weeks following the disaster, the sinking of the *Sewol* brought up numerous unanswered questions, including speculation over the surfacing of evidence that suggested the actual owner of the ferry was the National Intelligence Service.<sup>23</sup> As the yellow ribbon gradually came to represent the call for political and regulatory reforms to avoid such a tragedy from recurring, it also signified the demand for a full investigation into the truth behind the inexplicable chain of events that had led to the loss of so many lives. The yellow ribbon thus took on an increasingly loaded political meaning in South Korea during the last years under Park Geun-hye. Those wearing the ribbon were targeted for harassment by police in the areas near any commemoration event for the *Sewol* victims. Whether worn by students, activists, or other concerned individuals, it came to be regarded as an outward sign of anti-government resistance or rebellion.<sup>24</sup> It should be noted that by 2015, yellow ribbons were less likely to be given out to random members of the general public on the street, as they had been in the immediate aftermath of the disaster. Instead, the yellow ribbons circulated most widely as gifts and mementos in gestures of friendship and solidarity among students and activists working on various causes. Whereas buttons and similar items are used for fundraising by activists working for other social movements, advocacy items for solidarity with the *Sewol* families would most often be given away. For example, I recall a typical moment of exchanging such gifts of protest emblems following the “people’s mass rally” (*minjungch’onggwölgitaehoe*) in Seoul, when tens of thousands of demonstrators gathered in the city’s central plaza on November 14, 2015. After the rally and march concluded, I went out for dinner afterwards with activist friends who had come up by bus from Miryang. Once we got settled at the back of the restaurant, another large group arrived and sat at the table next to ours. We had exchanged greetings upon seeing each other initially, and they introduced themselves as *Sewol* activists from Seoul, as well as from Ansan and other locations in in Kyönggi Province. Toward the end of the meal, they came over to chat and started to pass out handcrafted *Sewol* solidarity symbols that had been made and donated by volunteers. As they did this, they said, “Please remember” (*kiökhaseyo*) and “Please do not forget” (*itchimaseyo*), which we understood as a request to keep the *Sewol* issue visible in public. Again, the gifts were items familiar to us by now—yellow ribbon charms, enamel pins of different sizes, and yellow bracelets—and we received them gladly. Though my friends also gave them small solidarity pins and buttons, the *Sewol* activists

<sup>22</sup>Gooyong Kim, “Eros Effect as Emergency Politics: Affective and Networked Politics of Agonistic Humanism in South Korea’s Sewol Ferry Disaster,” *New Political Science* 38, no. 2 (2016): 160–77, 162.

<sup>23</sup>For a detailed analysis and explanation of the disaster’s timeline, see Jae-Jung Suh, “Introduction: Sinking the Sewol, Drowning Korea? Compressed Modernization and Compounded Risks,” in *Challenges of Modernization and Governance in South Korea: The Sinking of the Sewol and Its Causes*, eds. Jae-Jung Suh and Mikyoung Kim (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 1–31.

<sup>24</sup>Heo, “Yellow Sewol Ribbons,” *op. cit.* note 20.

were prepared with far more things to give away. Some of us traded our new items among ourselves; as we exchanged well-wishes, we wore or pinned on our gifts right away.

Notably, the mass demonstration that had taken place in Seoul that day could be understood as a precursor to the sustained and larger Candlelight protests that began a year later, when anti-Park demonstrations at their height in December 2016 drew over two million demonstrators.<sup>25</sup> While the 2016–17 Candlelight protests are largely known for their focus on corruption and cronyism, the November 2015 mass rally foregrounded other reasons for popular discontent over increasing inequality. These included neoliberal labor-market reforms and agricultural policies that had heavily favored the interests of large corporations over those of workers and small-scale farmers while threatening to impose harsh austerity measures on public-sector workers.<sup>26</sup> At the rally, Yoon Geunsoon, representing the Korean Women Peasants Association, called out the Park government for failing to show compassion for the circumstances of ordinary people and remarked that Park had failed to live up to her own campaign promise that she would be a “motherly” leader or govern “with a mother’s heart.”<sup>27</sup>

Several hours into the peaceful protest, riot police attempted to disperse those assembled at the protest site by using high-powered water cannons loaded with an opaque white mixture of water and tear gas. Baek Nam-gi, a sixty-eight-year-old farmer and rural rights advocate from South Jeolla Province, was knocked unconscious by one of the water cannons, which continued to target his body with a powerful liquid stream even after he lay unresponsive on the ground. Baek eventually died from injuries sustained from that excessive use of force, never regaining consciousness after several months in a coma. After the 2015 rally, portraits of Baek were integrated into signs, posters, and other elements of the visual culture of subsequent dissent actions. He became a symbol of what opponents of the Park administration identified as a rise in brutality of the police and by extension violence by the state, which was also criticized for eroding citizens’ right to freedom of assembly.<sup>28</sup> During Baek’s hospitalization and after his passing, anti-Park protesters showed their support by holding a banner trimmed in yellow, which bore the slogan “We are Baek Namgi!” To represent the common cause between supporters of Baek Namgi’s family and the bereaved families of *Seoul* victims, publicity materials for a commemorative event organized by People’s Solidarity for Participatory Democracy featured a logo that juxtaposed two ribbons: one black and the other yellow.<sup>29</sup> The black

<sup>25</sup>For an analysis framing the early months of the 2016–17 Candlelight movement, see Yoonkyung Lee, “Roads Untraveled: Redefining ‘Democracy’ through the 2016 Protest Movement in Korea,” *Analyses & Alternatives* 1, no. 1 (2017): 17–30.

<sup>26</sup>Hyun Lee, “South Korean Labor Strikes Back,” *Foreign Policy in Focus*, November 12, 2015, <https://fpif.org/south-korean-labor-strikes-back/> (accessed March 20, 2018).

<sup>27</sup>For a discussion of Park’s political deployment of gender, see Mun Soo-Hyun, “Femininity without Feminism: Korea’s First Woman President and Her Political Leadership,” *Asian Journal of Social Science* 43, no. 3 (2015): 249–72, 255.

<sup>28</sup>See Choe Sang-hun, “Activist in South Korea Dies of Injuries from Police Water Cannon,” *New York Times*, September 26, 2016.

<sup>29</sup>People’s Solidarity for Participatory Democracy, “Baek Namgi Nongmin Ch’umodaehoe-sewöl-ho Ch’amsa 900il Pömgungmin Munhwaje” [National Memorial Rally for Farmer Baek Namgi and Commemoration of 900 Days since the *Seoul* Ferry Tragedy], September 27, 2016, <http://www.peoplepower21.org/Solidarity/1450127> (accessed October 10, 2016).

ribbon suggested what is customarily worn in present-day South Korea during a family member's funeral and for 100 days thereafter. Next to it was what had become another symbol of public mourning and personal relationship, the yellow ribbon.

### FRAGILE POLITICS

Unlike the Yellow Ribbon Campaign in the Philippines or the Yellow Umbrella Campaign in Hong Kong, the Yellow Ribbon Campaign following the *Seoul* disaster did not start out as a political movement. Rather, it reflected an apolitical and spontaneous collective action to express hope and compassion for disaster victims. Yet, even before the yellow ribbon later became a sign of protest and anti-government resistance, there was already a visual parallel between the yellow ribbons and the bright yellow that had been representative of leftist opposition politics since the turn of the millennium and earlier. In Korea, as in other countries, political alliances and realignments are commonly signaled by the adoption of signature campaign colors. The progressive center-left South Korean leader Kim Dae-jung used vivid yellow for his presidential campaign in 1997. The move clearly signaled an attempt to distance the candidate from the ideological polarity generally signified in stereotyped color schemes of red (far left) and blue (far right), while it also suggested more indirectly a historic identification with the People Power Revolution in the Philippines.<sup>30</sup>

Regarding the use of yellow as a campaign color by pro-democratization activists in both the Philippines and South Korea, that practice can be traced back to the 1980s authoritarian era in both countries. In the Philippines, supporters of Benigno "Ninoy" Aquino, Jr., a former senator and one of the staunchest opponents of President Ferdinand Marcos, festooned the streets with yellow ribbons, anticipating his return to Manila in 1983 after three years of self-imposed exile. To celebrate his homecoming, supporters were inspired by the lyrics of the then-popular Tony Orlando song, *Tie a Yellow Ribbon (Round the Old Oak Tree)*. Yet, minutes after he exited the plane, Aquino was gunned down on the airport tarmac. Outrage over the assassination would spark a protest movement that gathered widespread momentum against the corrupt Marcos dictatorship. Taking up the mantle of her slain husband's political legacy and using yellow ribbons as her primary symbol, Cory Aquino rose to power three years later through the People Power Revolution of 1986.<sup>31</sup> Inspired by the events in the Philippines, South Korean activists during that same year distributed yellow ribbons, and those who wore them on their lapels identified themselves as signatories of the petition for direct elections,<sup>32</sup> a modest gesture that foreshadowed the wider protests that culminated in South Korea's own breakthrough in achieving procedural democratization in 1987. After Kim Dae-jung revived the use of vivid yellow for his 1996 presidential campaign, that color choice was then continued by Kim's successor Roh Moo-hyun, a human-rights lawyer and fellow progressive who identified yellow as a symbol of hope.

<sup>30</sup>Key-Sook Geum and Hyun Jung, "Color Continuity and Change in Korean Culture," in *Color and Design*, eds. Marilyn DeLong and Barbara Martinson (London: Berg, 2012), 125–40.

<sup>31</sup>Mark R. Thompson, *The Anti-Marcos Struggle: Personalistic Rule and Democratic Transition in the Philippines* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1995).

<sup>32</sup>John Burgess, "Thousands Protest Rule in South Korea," *Washington Post*, March 16, 1986.

While this genealogy of origins concerning the color yellow's identification with progressive politics remains rather obscure in contemporary South Korea, circulations of the yellow ribbon also gathered momentum in more prominent ways from recent transformations in activism and the material culture of protest. In her comprehensive study of activism in post-authoritarian South Korea during the era following the economic crisis, Jiyeon Kang has demonstrated how Internet-born, youth-driven mass protests became established as highly effective and central to the activist repertoire in Korea.<sup>33</sup> Regarding the 2002 candlelight vigils and the later "candlelight festivals" of 2008, Kang argues that such activism marked a departure from the militant protests of the authoritarian era, reflecting the creation of an alternative political space marked by new democratic sensibilities and an eschewal of earlier ideological frames. In a review essay about the material culture of South Korean movements, Eun-Sung Kim cites the perception that candlelight has evoked a sense of reverence, mourning, and sentimental nostalgia, compared to the fist-shaking and confrontational tactics characteristic of the protests of the 1980s and 1990s. Despite the symbolic association of candlelight as indicative of peaceful civic protest, the meaning of candlelight—in a fate that would be later repeated with the yellow ribbon—would nonetheless become politicized in South Korean discourses since 2008 to be framed as anti-government, anti-American, or pro-North.<sup>34</sup> For candlelight and yellow ribbons to overcome the repetitions of such ideological stigmatization would therefore require the invocation of a wider and richer story.

To adapt a term from the study of rhetoric, perhaps one can then think of candlelight or yellow ribbons or similar protest emblems as the things that acted as visual and material *synecdoche* for interrelated dissenting historical narratives. In a sense, they were the part that stood for the whole, the thing that stood for the larger story. For example, during the Candlelight protests, a recurring visual element of the demonstrations was the presence of yellow balloons. That is, hovering above some parts of the vast crowds were clusters of plain yellow, helium-filled balloons, with each balloon held aloft by an individual protester. Unlike the use of balloons as incorporated into political rallies in the West, such balloons were neither intended to serve merely as a decorative display of campaign colors, nor did they comprise a celebrative flourish through the ritual of a closing balloon-drop. Instead, a South Korean audience would immediately recognize the yellow balloons in this context as metaphorical, a visual reference to the tribute artwork by dissident artists. Whether simple or stylized, these compositions depicted the wreck of the *Sewol* being lifted from the sea by delicate strings attached to scores of yellow balloons, or alternatively yellow butterflies. Rather than illustrating something more realistic, such as depictions of cranes with heavy cables, the artistic rendering of balloons or butterflies with fantastical hoisting power served as a reminder of the young age of the great majority of the *Sewol* victims. Far from the conventional impression of balloons as objects of whimsy, such use of yellow balloons implied a more biting and defiant criticism of the Park administration. If only sincere individual efforts could have gotten past the

<sup>33</sup>Jiyeon Kang, *Igniting the Internet: Youth and Activism in Postauthoritarian South Korea* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2016).

<sup>34</sup>Eun-Sung Kim, "The Material Culture of Korean Social Movements," *Journal of Material Culture* 22, no. 2 (2017): 194–215.

government's refusal to accept help from civilian rescue teams, independent divers could possibly have saved some of those unable to escape the sunken ferry.

Another common trope in *Sewol* memorials was an origami-style replica of a small lifeboat, made of folded yellow paper. These miniature lifeboats had a childlike simplicity that again emphasized the victims' young age, underlining the collective tragedy that so many high school students died before reaching adulthood. Such paper-crafts in the shape of lifeboats would figure into mixed-media compositions or appear as a visual meme in paintings, graphic art, and other artistic tributes that were displayed in City Hall Plaza in the weeks after the tragedy. Again, similar to the balloons, the paper lifeboats seemed to convey a wistful projection of the rescue efforts that could have been. Yet, this gesture was only naïve on its face and actually conveyed an incisive political commentary of disdainful outrage. Namely, in the course of the investigation into the ferry disaster, it was determined that out of the *Sewol's* forty-six lifeboats, all but one had remained folded. The rest of them were never put to use.<sup>35</sup>

These paper lifeboats incorporated into *Sewol* memorials also created an indirect visual reference to the earlier use of paper-crafts as both gestures of consolation and markers of political affinities. At the funeral of the late President Roh Moo-hyun, crowds of mourners expressed their grief and solidarity by wearing yellow scarves or yellow hats, but they also threw small, yellow, folded-paper airplanes.<sup>36</sup> More than a decade earlier, as a presidential candidate, Roh Moo-hyun had used yellow paper airplanes as a sign of both hope and aspirations for uplift and the country's future renewal. Roh's suicide in 2014 made him a different kind of tragic figure among South Korean progressives. Prior to his death, Roh had been hounded by investigations launched by his conservative political opponents into accusations of alleged corruption, which served to further consolidate the sharp political turn to the right with the return to conservative rule in 2008 following the election of Lee Myung-bak.

Whether as folded paper-crafts or as visual depictions, butterflies are also commonly used in *Sewol* tribute art as a figure of hope and transformation, but also one that suggests the departure of human souls. Meanwhile, among South Korean dissent movements, butterflies are most widely associated with the movement to seek justice for former "comfort women"—i.e., those who were brutally victimized under the World War II-era system of sexual slavery, including an estimated 200,000 women and girls from territories under Japanese colonial rule at the time. The "comfort women" issue became another cause for grievance and outrage against the Park Geun-hye government and its right-wing defenders after South Korean officials had negotiated a deal with Japan in December 2015, ostensibly to resolve the issue, except that representatives of the Park government did not bother to consult with the survivors until after the deal had been signed.

In this contemporary historical context, the Candlelight protests would thereby draw upon overlapping referents: invoking hope and transcendence, while at the same time signifying a stance of public outrage and a self-consciously progressive political identity

<sup>35</sup>Kang Su-Dol, "Institutionalized Irresponsibility: Understanding the Sewol Disaster from the Perspective of the Addictive Organization Theory," in *Challenges of Modernization and Governance in South Korea: The Sinking of the Sewol and Its Causes*, eds. Jae-Jung Suh and Mikiyoung Kim (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 49–73, 62.

<sup>36</sup>Jenny Choi, "The Color Yellow," *Harvard Political Review*, May 7, 2014, <http://harvardpolitics.com/world/color-yellow/> (accessed May 22, 2017).

in coalition with other dissident causes. Among this range of signifiers evoking fragile hope, youthful vulnerability, defiant moral politics, and inescapable mortal fragility, the yellow ribbon has arguably remained the most prevalent and durable material metaphor of progressive dissent within the South Korean political sphere of recent years.

In 2016, the elision between the yellow ribbon and opposition politics became even more apparent following the April parliamentary elections, when the liberal Minjoo Party won an upset victory and gained a plurality of seats over the conservative Saenuri Party. This was widely interpreted as a rebuke of the Park administration's unresponsiveness to the public, shadowed by anger and frustration over the government's handling of the *Sewol* ferry disaster. The election was held on April 13, just three days before the second anniversary of the ferry sinking. As the election results came in, Korean progressives saw trending on their social-media feeds various renderings of the yellow ribbon. That is, one after another, people changed their profile pictures so that the yellow ribbon both celebrated the electoral victory and commemorated the somber anniversary. That political upset would ultimately prove to vindicate the disruptive power of the yellow ribbon as a "dialectical image," what Benjamin theorized as the new constellation where past and present come together in a moment to render that convergence both legible and emergent.<sup>37</sup> Although Park Geun-hye's immediate response to midterm electoral defeat was effectively to double down on rolling back democratic institutions, the progressive victory at the polls in April 2016 proved to be decisive for consolidating a political shift that eventually made possible the National Assembly's impeachment vote in December of that year, a turn of events that would have been unimaginable just months earlier.

### THE COLOR OF THE TEXTURE OF HISTORY

By way of concluding this essay, I propose reconsidering the widespread phenomenon of how vivid yellow was embraced as the color of dissent in contemporary South Korea. What does it mean for reminders of human fragility rendered in this same color—in the form of yellow paper lifeboats, yellow balloons, yellow butterflies, and yellow ribbons—to have been circulated and recirculated in layered metaphorical assemblages that constituted new forms of public memory and new practices of political mobilization? In *What Color Is the Sacred?* Michael Taussig engages in a book-length meditation that opens with a reference to Goethe's *Theory of Colors*, as Taussig critically analyzes the racialized and colonialist attitudes embedded in passages of Goethe's book on the psychology of color and emotion.<sup>38</sup> However, Taussig's project is not primarily motivated by an interest in exploring color as a code-word for race.<sup>39</sup> Rather, he engages in a different kind of visceral theorizing of color, considering for example the physiological responses to the visual perception of color itself. He goes on to explore

<sup>37</sup>Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2002), 462.

<sup>38</sup>Michael Taussig, *What Color Is the Sacred?* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009).

<sup>39</sup>The current essay also sets aside such discussion, which has received extensive analysis elsewhere. See Michael Keevak, *Becoming Yellow: A Short History of Racial Thinking* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2011).



how color has historically suffused human endeavors with powerful evocations, such as the polarized color politics intensified by colonial exploitation, the monochromatic expressions of solidarity that characterize color revolutions, and the hue-saturated material culture of religious devotion. In the end, Taussig sums up his book by characterizing it as a self-conscious attempt to write “not so much a history of color as the other way around, what longingly and defiantly Nietzsche once referred to as an inquiry into the color of history.”<sup>40</sup> If one bears in mind this line of inquiry into an understanding of history as having color, as being steeped in color—“the color of history”—is it so great an imaginative leap to inquire further into contemporary history’s discernible texture? What can be grasped from perceiving the *texture* of history? The salience of such haptic qualities to historical change would be amply evidenced by the tactility of objects and things that were of a piece with South Korea’s recent social and political transformations. One often hears references to the “forces of history” and to the “weight of history,” but what of its lightness and delicacy, its fragility?

Truly, the notion of fragility offers a conceptual means to articulate the contingent relations and connections among the things and practices that have interwoven *Sewol* memory activism with other forms of progressive collective political action.<sup>41</sup> I have elsewhere argued that such interweaving of memory activism in South Korea contributed significantly toward galvanizing the popular will behind the 2016–17 Candlelight Movement, whereby peaceful civic protests sustained on a massive scale would successfully bring about revolutionary political change.<sup>42</sup> In the wake of last year’s ouster of Park Geun-hye, this analysis argues against the logic of that aspect of the South Korean Constitutional Court’s ruling that excluded from the grounds for impeachment Park’s culpability in the government’s disastrous response to the aftermath of the ferry sinking. Furthermore, there was something sorely lacking in the mainstream interpretation of the mass protests in South Korea; that is, media analyses did not go nearly far enough when they described the protests as primarily the collective expression of public anger and embarrassment over the corruption scandal of a disgraced president. It was indeed that, but what was truly at stake involved so much more.<sup>43</sup>

Namely, in conversation with Nancy Abelmann’s scholarship, I would argue that—in the Candlelight demonstrations that mobilized peaceful protests on a massive scale in

<sup>40</sup>Taussig, *op. cit.* note 38, 246–47.

<sup>41</sup>William E. Connolly has speculated that fragility remains under-theorized among critics of neoliberalism in part because of a perceived imperative to foreground militancy in addressing the need for wholesale change. For a wide-ranging theorization of the fragility of the late modern order and its relationship to democratic activism, see William E. Connolly, *The Fragility of Things: Self-Organizing Processes, Neoliberal Fantasies, and Democratic Activism* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2013).

<sup>42</sup>Nan Kim, “Candlelight and the Yellow Ribbon: Catalyzing Re-Democratization in South Korea,” *Asia Pacific Journal: Japan Focus* 15(14), no. 5 (2017), <https://apjif.org/2017/14/Kim.html> (accessed June 15, 2017).

<sup>43</sup>See Hyejin Kim, “‘Spoon Theory’ and the Fall of a Populist Princess in Seoul,” *Journal of Asian Studies* 76, no. 4 (2017): 839–49; Jamie Doucette, “The Occult of Personality: Korea’s Candlelight Protests and the Impeachment of Park Geun-hye,” *Journal of Asian Studies* 76, no. 4 (2017): 851–60; Alexis Dudden, “Revolution by Candlelight: How South Koreans Toppled a Government,” *Dissent* 64, no. 4 (2017): 86–92.

South Korea during the winter of 2016–17—what was more consequentially at work over a longer period of time could be called *a vital politics of fragility*. While its immediate points of reference may be particular to South Korea, such a vital politics of fragility also engages with the larger ongoing transnational dynamics surrounding the politics of refusal, drawing upon Audra Simpson’s observation that “resistance” already gives too much legitimacy to the actions of dispossession by a dominant power.<sup>44</sup> Indeed, among the anti-Park opposition, it was refusal and not merely resistance that lay at the heart of the Candlelight Movement. Binding together those who identified with the yellow ribbon was a determination to change South Korean society for the sake of the country’s future and its youth, who like the *Sewol* victims had been forced to the point of despair and hopelessness wrought by endemic corruption. In 2014, an ROK government study found that South Korean young people were the least happy with their lives compared to those of similar age in other developed countries around the world.<sup>45</sup> Tragically, suicide has been the leading cause of death among South Koreans aged fifteen to twenty-four since 2011, and the country has the highest suicide rate overall among developed countries.<sup>46</sup> These bleak superlatives serve to measure the human toll of hypercompetitiveness stemming from the current neoliberal conjuncture, whose intense psychological burdens weigh heavily upon young people. As the massive, peaceful demonstrations in Seoul and other South Korean cities were rooted in the refusal to abide egregious corruption and government incompetence, more broadly they stood for refusal of the way that such a government continued through a callous disregard of fragility. It was the refusal of an administration whose moral bankruptcy became plain in the way that state authorities had obstructed the protection of fragile subjects and had targeted those who mourned over fragile bodies. The movement was simultaneously a refusal of the corruption that fed off of the exploitation of systemic fragility insofar as South Korea’s fragile social order had been rooted in worsening economic, social, and gender inequalities.

Such a politics of the fragile and vital furthermore offers an alternative framing that contrasts with post-*Sewol* South Korean discourses of “public safety,” which lack the rhetorical power to evoke what was more fundamentally at stake. While the recurring calls for building “*anjŏn sahoe*” (“a safety society” or “a safe and secure society”) in South Korea have been urgent and necessary, it was perhaps unavoidable that they would echo some aspects of the tradition of collective mobilization, historically associated with the country’s military authoritarian era. Moreover, the redoubled campaigns for public safety—couched in dispassionate bureaucratic lingo—would inevitably fail to capture the anguished dimensions of the disaster’s implications and risk obscuring more profound anxiety over a body politic in crisis.<sup>47</sup>

<sup>44</sup>Audra Simpson, *Mohawk Interruptus: Political Life Across the Borders of Settler States* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2014).

<sup>45</sup>Ju-min Park, “South Korean Children Finish Last in Happiness Survey,” *Reuters*, November 4, 2014, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-southkorea-children/south-korean-children-finish-last-in-happiness-survey-idUSKBN0IO00A20141104> (accessed September 2, 2018).

<sup>46</sup>B. C. Ben Park, Jeong Soo Im, and Kathryn Strother Ratcliff, “Rising Youth Suicide and the Changing Cultural Context in South Korea,” *Crisis: The Journal of Crisis Intervention and Suicide Prevention* 35, no. 2 (2014): 102.

Among those who bore the yellow ribbon in Korea over the last three years of Park's presidency, there coalesced a broad-based movement that both enabled and anchored what ultimately prevailed as the Candlelight Revolution. Above all, it was a movement that resonated with an earlier pluralist aspiration for a "world where human beings live."<sup>48</sup> Providing a material and virtual medium for a wider politics of refusal, circulations of the yellow ribbon have helped to sustain the memory of what was most fraught within the anti-Park protests. That occurred through a continuing solidarity with the victims of the *Sewol* disaster and their families and advocates, despite the many harsh setbacks they faced during the preceding years when their demands for truth-seeking about the disaster had been met with harsh repression.<sup>49</sup> In the 2014–17 post-*Sewol* period amid South Korea's movement for redemocratization, the yellow ribbon kept before one's eyes what was at stake throughout those many protests. Indeed, a thing as small as the yellow ribbon could be understood to represent to those assembled—and to many beyond—a defiant and vigorous refusal to abide the corruption that entails the sacrifice of all that is fragile. Indeed, this turning point in contemporary South Korean history saw a vital politics of fragility imbue recent narratives, alliances, and material culture crafted among progressive South Korean activists.

*The circumstances of the Candlelight Revolution recall Nancy Abelmann's lyrical maxim regarding earlier iterations of such activism; as she wrote with prescience and wisdom in the closing lines of her first book more than thirty years ago, "The past echoes in the epics of dissent; and from these epics new epochs emerge."<sup>50</sup> Nancy's impact in helping to foster a wider intellectual and ethical commitment to understanding human fragility as central to the contemporary moment is a testament to her compassion as a person, which many of us experienced personally through her profound generosity of spirit as a colleague, teacher, advisor, confidante, and friend. As an informal advisee, I was one of many people indebted to Nancy for her gifts as a mentor, but above all I am grateful to her for connecting me to other people in her life who later became my close friends. We celebrate Nancy's remarkable legacy together, even as it is still hard to believe she is no longer among us. Nancy has been and will continue to be greatly missed. Yet, when gathering among those who hold her memory dear—including her former students, her many long-time friends, and her network of actual and fictive kin—she continues to remain close in spirit.*

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<sup>47</sup>John Lie, "The Wreck of the *Sewol*: The Sinking South Korean Body Politic," *Georgetown Journal of International Affairs* 16, no. 2 (2015): 111–21.

<sup>48</sup>A translation of "*saramsanün sesang*," a slogan identified with Roh Moo-hyun. See Seungsook Moon, "Living Memory of Roh Moo Hyun: Group Cohesion, Cultural Politics, and the Process of Symbolic Interaction," *Memory Studies* 6, no. 2 (2013): 173–190, 178.

<sup>49</sup>Kim, "Vilifying the Victims," *op. cit.* note 12.

<sup>50</sup>Abelmann, *Echoes of the Past*, *op. cit.* note 1, 248.

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