Circles of Poetic Grief, Anger, and Hope: Landscapes of Mass Cooperation in Seoul after the Sewŏl Disaster

Abstract: Material expressions of emotion and ideology transformed downtown Seoul from 2014–2019 into an extended commemorative monument dedicated to those who died in the tragic sinking of the ferry Sewŏl on April 16, 2014. This unfortunate event stimulated diverse personal and political responses, in large part because there were 250 high school students on a fieldtrip among the 304 casualties. Analyzing the new shapes that the Sewŏl memorials have introduced into the urban landscape reveals the ways in which the city has maintained its fast flow of life while at the same time allowing city dwellers to poetically express grief, anger, and hope. The aggregated practices of various people with diverse agendas amounted to unique artistic, architectural, and emotion-soliciting structures that are delineated in this essay as landscapes of mass cooperation. These landscapes were crafted by thousands of individuals without a firm aesthetic or content related scheme, and they changed as emotions shifted from hope for survivors to grief over the immense death toll and rage toward those responsible for it.

On August 15, 2014, two hundred police troops appeared from nowhere and encircled twenty people walking with yellow signs near the Kwanghwamun Square in downtown Seoul. The signs demanded a government initiative to conduct thorough investigations into the recent sinking of the ferry Sewŏl. Some government officials came out of the Sejong Art Center from the Independence Day concert happening that day. The proximity of the performance hall to the protesters’ base resulted in an intense moment of face-to-face confrontation.
When the aforementioned protesters approached the officials, the police prevented bystanders and journalists from nearing the evolving scene of loud mutual insults. The officials finally walked toward the waiting black cars, while the protesters were blocked from following them by a mass of plastic shields. The entire dense human pack broke up within a few minutes, and the scene returned to the normal daily buzz of a busy metropolis. Yet the stairs leading to the art center, now empty, revealed the yellow color that had been applied to them, on which large letters in black read: *mian haeyo. itchī anūlgeyo* (We are sorry. We shall not forget.) (see Figure 1).

The Sewŏl protests were at their peak. Soon after the sinking in April 2014, masses gathered downtown to hope for survivors, commemorate the dead, and protest against what they perceived as governmental dysfunction. By August, they had been settled there for two months, numbering from a few dozen to many thousands, depending on the planned event. What drove so many to participate in these protests? Why was downtown Seoul chosen as their main site? How did the commemoration/protest norms form? What enabled the protests to last for more than three years? How did they change the cityscape?

Any visitor to downtown Seoul during the summer of 2014 and the following springs would have faced these kinds of clashes and
the engulfing aesthetic of mourning and protest that the ferry’s sinking initiated. Yellow signs, thousands of ribbons, and many booths for petition signing spread all over downtown in 2014. The death of 304 passengers, mostly high school students on a fieldtrip, produced intense manifestations of grief, anger, and hope, which demonstrated aesthetic considerations beyond sheer emotional expressiveness. The participation of so many passersby and dedicated activists in this spontaneous outburst has created a new landscape in the city. While downtown Seoul is mostly a hypermodern center with high rise glass-covered towers and commercially oriented landscaping, this mass mourning and its yellow symbols added a touch of object-mediated human sentiment. As will be discussed below, the yellow ribbons, signs, and notes were handwritten with blessings for the spirits of the dead and promises to discover the truth behind the ferry’s sinking.

So many people participated in this spontaneous mass urban commemoration that there was hardly any rail or pole devoid of yellow ribbons in the city center. These ribbons were tokens of collective memorialization that turned Seoul into a huge shrine, which maintained semiotics similar in many ways to smaller shrines constructed at key sites. At such altars and shrines, the photographs or names of the victims were displayed among other commemoration symbols, including yellow ribbons (see Figure 2). Harriet Senie (2006) discusses a similar manner of using objects to sacralize spaces of commemoration in the case of the September 11 attack and other tragedies. These sacralized spaces, mostly around the places where the deaths occurred, resonate with national unity through symbols like flags. However, in the Sewŏl commemoration there was no clear enshrining of the death zone, since it occurred at sea, nor a sense of national unity, because Korea’s government was the main target of the public’s anger. The mourners constructed a vast commemoration area that sprawled throughout the center of the city, effectively turning the entire downtown into a large shrine.

This aggregation of memorialization was in many ways a product of cooperation among individuals. Various neighborhood groups, religious congregations, and labor unions established a schedule of volunteer hours in order to be constantly present at petition-signing booths and ribbon distribution points. Many donated funds for preparing ribbons and other symbols. A larger circle of passersby and one-time visitors respected the newly established norms of what to write, where and how to tie ribbons, and what not to do. There were few
cases of objections to the commemorative process, and these focused mostly on supporting the government and denouncing the Sewŏl protesters as communists or antinationalists. This reaction reasserts the politicized nature of commemorating tragic deaths, as viewed in various other grassroots memorials (Margry and Sánchez-Carretero 2011). There were no attempts to destroy the yellow ribbon statues or to remove them, and even the municipality respected this mass mourning phenomenon and left the memorials untouched until volunteers collected and archived them. Similar care of commemorative objects has been documented at other memorials as well (Senie 2006, 43). In Seoul, this was the first time that such a scope of accumulated landscape change related to a large death toll was visible for such an extended period of time. Moreover, the Sewŏl movement changed Kwanghwamun into the epicenter of all major Korean protests thereafter, including the demonstration for the impeachment of the president in the winter of 2016–2017 (N. Kim 2017). Before the hunger strike by the bereaved Sewŏl families at Kwanghwamun in summer 2014, most protests were held at the City Hall Square and did not leave a lasting symbolic mark on the urban landscape.

This article analyzes the material manifestations of this commemoration/antigovernment protest movement, taking into consideration
both onsite and online discourses and creative choices. We assert that the strength and endurance of this social debate is tightly linked to the large numbers of participants, who cooperated along informal norms of aesthetic expressiveness to demonstrate their intentions and unity. Fierce objections from policy makers and their supporters intensified this debate and paradoxically kept it alive. In particular we discuss the impact of collective actions of multitudes of individuals on the city’s landscape by following the emotional process that this tragedy ignited. It started with hope for survivors, turned to anger at those perceived responsible for the disaster, evolved to eagerness to create social change, and has become increasingly marked by personal yearning for proper commemoration for the victims and hopes that social changes resulting from the protest might make the painful losses more tolerable. Issues pertaining to the protest, but which cannot be discussed in depth within the limited scope of this work, include the ongoing political debates around this tragedy, the involvement of large organizations such as labor unions, and the reflections of mourning and protest in sites outside Seoul.

Protest is not new to Seoul, and still, the Sewŏl movement is unique in that it has continued for so long in such a central location, despite fierce interventions by the police and the government during mass protests such as the first anniversary in April 2015. The protesters generally behaved in a law-abiding manner, the city’s mayor allowed the constant presence of protest tents in the Kwanghwamun Square until March 2019 and the public mostly viewed this movement as legitimate. The direct demands of the bereaved families and activists were to investigate the sinking and allow proper commemoration of the dead; the public has come to perceive this emotionally laden dissent as a wider quest for justice with an overlying anticorruption goal. The endurance of the Sewŏl spontaneous memorials and their symbolic transformation of focus from grief and mourning to future hopes strengthen Senie’s assertion that “all spontaneous memorials are democracy in action” (2006, 51). The democratic aspect of public memorials stems also from their accessibility to anyone interested, as discussed by Robert Dobler (2009, 177–78). Mass participation was the main reason for the new landscape that emerged in the city.

Urban landscape alteration through protest is not unique to the Sewŏl movement. In early twentieth-century Korea, anti-Japanese mass demonstrations persisted in the city for weeks; pro-democratization banners, performances, and rallies from the 1960s to the 1980s proved
deadly but effective (Bowman 2013, 218); and protest camps emerged in solidarity with the global twenty-first-century Occupy Movement and the 2014 Umbrella Protest in Hong Kong. All are recent examples of the effect prolonged protest has on city life and policy makers. Tim Ingold (1993, 160) compares the polyphonic quality of urban settings (of which protest movements are part) to an orchestra. Extending this metaphor, the producers, players, and conductors of post-Seoul Seoul, cooperated within a globalized context of trends and symbols that intertwined in the representation of localized concerns. This mass-orchestrated protest, led by hundreds of bereaved family members and loosely-organized volunteer groups, has produced new aesthetic norms that will be discussed using the term poetic to indicate an emotional appeal with intentional planning of form and content.

The idea that contemporary spatial formations can be viewed as poetic was articulated by Gaston Bachelard when commenting on the power of image arrangement and usage: “The poetic image . . . is not an echo of the past. On the contrary: through the brilliance of any image, the distant past resounds with echoes” ([1958] 1994, xvi). In his view, events that interrupt continuities in social systems are worth special research attention because they challenge norms and prompt the emergence of new poetic structures. Stuart Aitken (2014) connected the idea of social-order disruption to youth and children, who are in his view less predictable than grownups. Our case study is centered on the death of many children, but the protest and commemoration were held mainly by people in their twenties to fifties. Still, the protesters and mourners often stated that they were doing it “for the children,” that they wanted “the dead children’s voice to be heard,” and that they demanded “justice in the name of those who cannot do it themselves.” Among the protesters, many teenagers participated in commemorative activities. For example, a group from the same high school that lost students in the sinking performed a flash-mob dance as a tribute to their dead friends. The actions of adult protesters were also at times unpredictable and surprising, as if asserting the attitude of youth. For example, mourning parents often joined such flash-mob dances, or performed a theatrical rendering of imagined farewell words by their dead daughters in high school uniforms. In Korea, parents rarely engage in such “childish” behaviors.

While Aitken’s research focused mainly on youths, his view on the poetic dimension of space also fits other communities and locales. Within this scope, he broadens the application of Bachelard’s theory
from intimate spaces, like rooms, to public places that are constructed by accumulated individual actions, and exert agency through the poetics of space: “There is a poetics to space that is highlighted when we are willing to take notice of emotions and affect” (2014, 7). Poetic expressiveness that is induced by social injustice is central to our research because we discuss not only the feelings of the individuals who cooperated to create the commemorative constellations, but also their choices of form and genre. Our work, similar to Aitken’s projects, demonstrates that the visual dimension of protest landscapes articulates ideas beyond verbal iterations.¹

It is almost impossible to track every discussion and meeting held during the protest period because there were so many individuals and loosely organized groups that worked to keep the Sewŏl movement alive and visible. Yet, the overall aggregated product in Seoul’s landscape seemed consistent and aesthetically orchestrated. We argue that the broad acceptance of commemoration norms created visual and textual poetics that produced hope for social change within the expanding circles of Sewŏl-affected Koreans. This argument took shape as we analyzed the data of hundreds of documented participant observations in protest events, dozens of informal interviews on site, and twenty arranged and recorded interviews.

Tragic Sinking and Mass Mourning

On the morning of April 16, 2014, the Sewŏl, a 6,825-ton ferry, was carrying 476 passengers from Inchŏn to Cheju-Island. Three hundred twenty-five of them were students from Ansan’s Tanwŏn High School on a fieldtrip. Fifty-six miles from the destination, the ferry tilted and the cargo shifted, causing the ferry to sink (Yŏnhap 2014a). Most of the 174 people that were saved did not obey the order that sounded on the loudspeakers, “stay in your rooms.” Korea’s Coast Guard arrived much later and did not manage to save the passengers trapped in their rooms as the vessel slowly went underwater. Confused government statements and media reporting added to the agony of the missing passengers’ families (Chosŏn Ilbo 2014a). The school’s vice-principal, who had survived the sinking, committed suicide the next day (Mackay 2014). All this was widely covered in all media. People started traveling to the high school in Ansan, about forty kilometers away from the city, and to Jindo, the town closest to the sunken ferry, a six-hour drive from Seoul. Thousands of people, mostly not
acquaintances of the ferry’s passengers, flocked to downtown Seoul to light candles and pray for survivors. “I am a mother myself. I cannot just sit and watch children suffer,” a young woman holding her infant stated to the microphone on stage, during one of the first protests at Chŏnggye Square; “I want to make this country a better place so that my son will grow up safely.” While she was speaking, her baby continuously played with the microphone, interrupting the speech several times. His playfulness made the mother and the audience laugh and cry at the same time.

In these public demonstrations, emotions turned into material representations that affected the people of Seoul in ever-expanding circles. The bereaved families came to the gatherings and held candles and photographs of their children. Several parents became engaged in online commemoration that attracted much support, and various volunteer groups began to create related projects online and on site. Many simultaneous actions produced aesthetics that came to be associated with this unique event. The tributes to the Sewol victims have enabled people in Seoul to embrace a sense of community that is scarce in urban settings. The use of Korean folklore and symbols intensified the feeling of unity among the protesters.
Folk beliefs in the arduous path of a soul on its way to paradise or peaceful rest produced various displays of religion. A fifteen-foot-long altar decorated with flowers was set in front of City Hall for several months (see Figure 3). In Kwanghwamun Square, a small commemorative altar included candles, yellow paper boats, and flowers. Passersby often prostrated in front of it, whispering Buddhist chants and asking forgiveness from the victims’ spirits. Long lines of the passengers’ photographs above offering shelves lined a large hangar that became the main commemoration hall in Ansan. People came to these altars to bow and offer fresh chrysanthemums, paper boats, origami swallows, and food items, as customary in Korean vernacular religions. The materiality of these public religious manifestations was viewed even by passersby who chose not to participate in these activities. Many short interviews with such commuters around Kwanghwamun Square attest that they were touched by viewing others bow and offer prayers, and that they kept thinking of the tragedy later on. Buddhist monks visited the Kwanghwamun protest camp and led nightly processions around the square, chanting to appease the spirits. Buddhist laypeople performed long sequences of prostration on the sidewalk to the sound of recorded Buddhist chants. On May 6, 2014, during Buddha’s birthday festival, lanterns dedicated to the Sewŏl souls were marched around Seoul. Buddhist reincarnation symbols were used in various artworks discussed below. Christian denominations, both Catholic and Protestant, were also very active in commemorating the Sewŏl victims. Every week Christians held public prayers downtown and manned petition booths.

Incorporating folkloric practices and beliefs in the current protest continues a trend that was commonplace in the protests against the military regime in the 1980s (Tangherlini 1998). Other commonly known folk practices were harnessed by volunteers to encourage passersby to act. For example, boxes decorated with traditional wood-carved geese (sotdae) were filled with wish notes for the souls of the deceased (see Figure 4). Traditionally, tall sotdae poles would stand in village entrances to ward off evil spirits. However, the Sewŏl commemoration sotdae were small and not stuck in the ground. Still, their communal semiotic qualities were preserved in the case of the Sewŏl tragedy, and most Koreans who used the boxes knew that they symbolized connection between the living and the dead. Such altars were erected in many places and transformed Seoul’s downtown into a multifaith fenceless shrine.
Secular expressions of respect to the spirits were also widely used. In the City Hall and Kwanghwamun Squares, people could write their emotions and thoughts on memo notes that were arranged on large boards as collages of emotional responses. People passing there stopped to read the notes, add new ones, and take photographs of or with the notes (see Figure 5). The written words were an invitation for city dwellers to pause during their daily routines and contemplate what had happened, how they felt about it, and their commonalities with others. The aggregative effect of many actors broadened the circles of people who could not forget the tragedy. Yellow ribbons tied everywhere carried ideas, emotions, and appeals. Some were mass printed with typical slogans, “We shall not forget you,” and “We are sorry.” Others were handwritten with long prose or short expressions
such as, “We will fight until the truth is uncovered” and “That spring day became the saddest” (see Figures 6 and 7). These notes reflected both intuitive and instrumental expressions of grief (Dobler 2009). The intuitive ones included a kind of emotional discourse with the dead. The instrumental ones reflected on favorite pastimes of the deceased or promised to conduct commemorative activities such as protests.

Poetic Grief on Yellow Ribbons

These group and individual expressions following the Sewŏl tragedy fit Jack Santino’s observation that “public memorialization is generally located in a conceptual field that ranges between commemoration
and social activism” (2011, 97). Moreover, similar to Santino’s observation about the Irish context of Derry memorials, in the mass mourning for the victims of the Sewŏl, each individual contribution to the mass commemoration structures marked personal agency and freedom of choice. The civil unrest that followed the disaster changed Seoul’s “personality,” a notion discussed by Steve Pile (2005) who tries to assess the slippery individuality of cities. The uniqueness of Seoul was expressed when these mass gatherings were allowed to continue even when unsanctioned by legal procedures. Thousands lit candles and held yellow ribbons during night vigils at Kwanghwamun and City Hall Square in the days after the sinking while the rescue efforts continued, and the city did not remove the piles of ribbons for months. The symbol went viral online as many celebrities changed their social network photographs to yellow ribbons (Mullen 2014). Such participation expressed solidarity of Koreans wishing survivors hope. Ms. Min Kyŏng-nam recollected a chance encounter near Seoul Station with the uncle of one of the Sewŏl victims. He noticed the yellow ribbons Ms. Min was wearing, approached her, and thanked her for wearing them. She felt that her symbolic identification with the families really made a difference. Yet many protesters had no idea of the origins of this symbol.

The yellow ribbon entered global popular culture because of the 1949 film She Wore a Yellow Ribbon, starring John Wayne, and was used in 1981 to demonstrate hope for the survival of Americans hostages in Iran (Parsons 1991). Santino discusses how such symbols changed from individual representations of personal emotions toward missing people to community approved manifestations of nationalism. They were often combined in exterior decorations of residences with other symbols of supporting the US troops (1992). Yellow was used in this American context together with the national flag and the colors related to holidays in which these outdoor decorations occurred. In Korean tradition, yellow symbolizes the earth, and yellow Korean shamanic costumes symbolize ancestors (Grayson 2002). However, the people interviewed about the meaning of yellow in the protests recognized this color choice as a global trend and mostly related that they “just followed suit.” Converging choices of creativity were thus products of mass cooperation without one guiding group of leaders, and these coherent material constructs have been altered constantly according to unwritten rules of cultural comprehensiveness, aestheticism, and perceived visual harmony. Downtown statues, fences, and
billboards became yellow with ribbons tied to them. These yellow ribbons gradually gave way to origami boats and symbols of spirits and reincarnation, including butterflies and lotuses. Globalization and local belief were combined in the city’s landscape with altars for the
spirits and online commemorations. Similar material representations of grief and protest have been observed elsewhere in the world as expressions of mourning for unexpected deaths, where gravestones and websites relate symbolically to private and public concerns (Doss 2006; Fast 2003; Santino 2004).

Digital media is widespread in Seoul and protesters used websites, blogs, and social networks (almost solely in Korean) to broaden the circles of support. Several parents wrote daily about loneliness and despair, sharing photographs of the commemoration spaces for their departed children. Kim Yong-o, father of the deceased student Yu-min, became a leader in the protest after remaining the last parent on hunger strike. Even the Pope greeted him personally during his Seoul visit in August 2014. Kim keeps a Facebook page named “Yu-min’s Dad” (in Korean) where he shares photographs from the protest and his thoughts. In a post from April 24, 2015 he wrote:

Today is the day that Yu-min returned to Mom and Dad’s hearts. I planned to go to Hyowŏn [the cemetery where the ferry victims’ ashes are kept], but it seemed that I would be full of sad thoughts there, so instead I went to Kubongdo, the place I once visited with Yu-min and Yu-na, and your Mom on a family trip. Dad loves sea fishing, and perhaps this is why Yu-min also loved fishing very much. Every time that I threw the line and fish would come biting, Yu-min beside me would get so excited and laugh. Now that I am alone in the sea I remember how much we loved going to the beach together. Dear Yu-min . . . Are you doing well? Dad just needs to hang on so that his little daughter does not need to worry about him . . . Yu-min, please keep only good memories of Dad and continue smiling. Yu-min dear, when I finish the homework that you gave me [making sure that the ferry incident is investigated and any corruption that led to it is exposed] I will come to you and you can hug me tight. I love you Yu-min dear.

This post yielded more than two thousand likes, was shared forty-three times, and received about one hundred comments. Such poetic online texts have become dominant in the screen landscapes of many Koreans, enhancing the emotional effect of the mass-organized protests. Other creative proclamations were more tangible.

During the protests, commemorative paintings were displayed in Kwanghwamun and City Hall Squares. The most recurrent themes were sadness and anger. A painting signed Jong-Do, dated April 25, 2014, expressed Buddhist sentiments in black ink and watercolors. In the painting, a large pink lotus flower bloomed on the
sideward-leaning flank of a sunken boat. Inside, twelve boys and girls clad in traditional hanbok projected rays of light in all directions. Another work depicted the Sewol in black lying upside down on a black ocean bottom. The sky was made of thin curved stripes in yellow, pink, and purple. Above, many pink flowers flew like helium-filled balloons and a black eye peeked at the spectators. The pupil was a rooster, symbol of good omens and bravery. Another striking work depicted a yellow heart encircled with red flames. Hundreds of black nails were hammered onto the heart, symbolizing the artist’s pain. Alongside, a text described anguish and agony, signed Kim Un-sŏng (see Figure 8). These images were an open-air exhibition for all city dwellers to contemplate. Around them, thousands of yellow ribbons tied to specially erected poles in the grass-covered square marked the site as a Sewol commemorative shrine.

The power of yellow ribbons as objects of affective presence is confirmed by the government’s attempt to ban them from schools in September 2014. A group of students appealed to the National Human Rights Commission and won the case, which allowed them to use the ribbon as “symbolic expression to mourn and remember the victims of the tragedy” (Jhoo 2015). Gigantic yellow banners were
hung on various downtown buildings stating, “We apologize.” The Korean public expressed regret for not having protested against the lack of safety regulations in Korea. A live-feed video camera was set at Kwanghwamun Square under a large statue of a yellow ribbon and constantly transmitted the protest tents’ ambience for those watching online. The channel was called KwanghwamunTV (in Korean script).

Thousands of police officers stood and marched in the downtown area to control the protesters, ironically adding more yellow to the urban landscape with their bright aprons. Similar visuals of yellow symbols used by massive numbers of protesters and policemen were documented in Hong Kong’s Umbrella Protests of October 2014 (Lim 2015). This resemblance implies that new semiotics of protest design have been created. Many Sewŏl protesters followed the media on events in Hong Kong, feeling a shared fate with their regional neighbors protesting against oppression and corruption. Some even mailed several hundred yellow Sewŏl umbrellas to Hong Kong to show support. Such urban activism has shown that the city is not a cluster of alienated dwellers as some sociologists implied when research on city dynamics began. In the Sewŏl movement, the masses cooperated and joined forces for emotional support and in an effort to bring about societal changes.

Cityscape, Individual Activism, and the Sewŏl Social Movement

Cityscapes are often perceived as sites of sophistication and technological progress (Florida 2002). Seoul, in particular, is a trademark of South Korea and has been portrayed as a place with surreal qualities pertaining to its dense crowds and high-rise buildings, the kind of place that Pile (2005, 20) calls a *phantasmagoria*. Urban alienation, where one is engulfed by masses yet not necessarily communicating with anyone, produces reified social relationships and powerlessness (Cacioppo and Hawkley 2009; Coleman 2009; Simmel [1900] 2011). Urbanization is tightly related to monetary transactions, and this communicative structure is often extended to all kinds of human relations implementing the idea that interpersonal interactions are measurable exchanges. As a result, an individual becomes less inclined to engage in daily communications that have no clear purpose and practical implications, and becomes more alone and insecure. Technological advancements—which include mechanization of many routines that used to entail face-to-face encounters, including banking, shopping,
and commuting—add to the feeling of human void within the dense masses. Yet, the unique unexpected event of the Sewŏl tragedy offered common grounds for meaningful communication, activism, and participation that were expressed in material tokens throughout the city.

The effect of city life on its dwellers is tightly related to materiality. Oftentimes, city planners in Korea ignored certain inhabitants’ emotional wellbeing and needs (Križnik 2012; Lee 2012). In the case of the Sewŏl movement, the city has allowed the material changes created by the masses to persist and gain momentum. Denis Cosgrove emphasizes, “Landscapes have an unquestionably material presence, yet they come into being only at the moment of their apprehension by an external observer, and thus have a complex poetics and politics” (2006, 50). Urban daily life offers such various potential engagements with others (Hirsch and O’Hanlon 1995). The Sewŏl movement created an emotional stirring in the city’s masses through the visible accumulation of millions of individual acts. Individual protesters interviewed for this project held different opinions on the new cityscape. Some felt empowered, while others strained and frustrated. All were happy to have a legitimate space where they could congregate and perform their protest. According to Ingold (1993, 154), the same material experience must exist even if individuals express diverse reactions to it. Furthermore, navigating the city’s various paths can prove mentally exhausting (Jameson 1991; Lynch 1960). In this respect, the constant presence of the protest tents in the square added a unique, emotionally meaningful and moving element to the mundane cityscapes. Mr. Kim Hyŏng-jin, an engineer whose workplace was near Kwanghwamun Square, said that he never noticed Kwanghwamun Square before the Sewŏl protest camp emerged: “The Square was just a part of the crosswalk from the bus stop to my office.” After the disaster, however, he joined a volunteer group and manned the petition-signing booth at the protest camp every day during his lunch hour in the summer of 2014.

As Ingold remarks, “A place owes its character to the experiences it affords to those who spend time there—to the sights, sounds, and indeed smells that constitute its specific ambience. And these, in turn, depend on the kinds of activities in which its inhabitants engage” (1993, 156). Considering the changing aesthetics of spaces that city-dwellers move through is crucial to understanding the emotional impact of materiality in urban social protests (Bender 2002). The Sewŏl movement demonstrates that “spaces are active and powerful parts in the ways we as individuals, and we, as parts of families, communities, societies,
cultures, and politics, apprehend and change the world” (Aitken 2014, 7–8). Reshaping the landscape through mass cooperation is also visible on Korea’s mountains, where stone mounds have been created by aggregate actions of many pilgrims. Similarly, Buddhist sutras carved on boulders reflect work by generations of monks. Nourished by these aesthetic traditions, the Sewŏl protest was shaped into artifacts consisting of thousands of creative choices, all in poetic relation with local landmarks and other commemorative structures.

The monumental grief and commemoration have resulted in a situation where “the city is overdetermined spatially” (Pile 2005, 172). One could not walk in downtown Seoul in the summer of 2014 without thinking about the tragedy. Many people were moved to act while watching these commemorative spontaneous shrines. Passersby, including non-Koreans, would sometimes offer to volunteer in the petition campaign. A petition-booth volunteer remembers how “in 2016, a young couple from Russia signed the petition and gave me a 10-ruble coin from their hometown, Khabarovsk, to wish us victory.” The protest camp has an affective presence within the condensed cityscape. The design and operation of the protest camp has created a place that encourages people to express their feelings, communicate with others, and experience a sense of community with shared values, including respect for human life and democracy. A tourist-office slogan coined by the Korean government asserts that Seoul is the “Soul of Asia” (Seoul 2012). The Sewŏl protest provided an emotional, soulful connection between the material and the human landscape. In his work, Pile argues, “What is real about cities is the sheer expressiveness and passion of its life” (2005, 1–2). Seoul’s expressiveness has allowed its dwellers to create a mass materialization of emotions over a long period of time. This might be the city’s soul. The mass-organized landscape shaping in Seoul changed constantly with the passage of time in response to the emotional stirring of various practical and political events. The families of the deceased high-school students have been at the center of these ever-expanding circles of emotions. Several hundred volunteers who orchestrated the production of the downtown memorials broadened the circles of engagement and visibility of the protest, reaching out to millions of city dwellers.

Seoul is home to over ten million residents and more than twenty-five million dwellers in the larger metropolis. Kwanghwamun Square is between Chongno Road, a ten-lane major artery of Seoul and the Kyŏngbok Palace. The government complex, financial center,
business conglomerates’ headquarters, Sejong Art Center, museums, American embassy, and subway stations flank the elongated concrete square. The current design was inaugurated in 2009 as a “special site for strolling and public events,” with a large water fountain and two impressive metal statues of King Sejong and Admiral Yi Sun-shin (see Figure 9). The Seoul municipality placed these statues in front of the King’s palace to foster nationalistic sentiments and tourism.

These historic men are national heroes, one for inventing the Korean script and the other for fighting the Japanese in 1597. By locating their tents in front of these mythic figures, the Seýol protesters symbolically identified as supporters of the Korean nation, while protesting against the government. King Sejong worked to let commoners in fifteenth-century Korea participate more extensively in society and culture despite disapproval by elites. Admiral Yi Sun-shin was falsely prosecuted and later reinstated when his naval skills were needed. Both heroes represent patriotism, selflessness, pure intention, and courage to fight for their goals. The protesters often stated that their just, brave, and selfless goal was to prevent similar future disasters through forcing legal changes. Many of these volunteers feared that protesting endangered their livelihood. Some were sure that they were being photographed and followed by the secret police.
The looming brass statue of Admiral Yi may have inspired them to continue this seemingly lost battle. Standing in a major thoroughway of Seoul, the protest camp added a new pulse to the city. The protest circles grew wider with each person influenced by the condensed emotion-provoking materials. These newly engaged mourners spread the word through portable commemoration tokens that volunteers prepared and gave to passersby. Yellow-ribbon pins and bracelets, printed handkerchiefs, and yellow balloons could be seen far from the protest centers. Volunteers also engaged in conversation and explanation of the bereaved families’ quest. The protesters manifested idealistic political intentions by blaming cooperation between economic tycoons and corrupt government offices for the Sewŏl’s sinking and its aftermath.

Grief, Anger, and Visible Demands for Action

The grief over the Sewŏl victims became increasingly entangled with anger toward the elites. In 2014 South Korea’s government was perceived as a group of conservative and economically focused politicians, whose policies resulted in increasingly wider gaps between common people and owners of mass conglomerates since the 1960s (E. Kim and Park 2011; Shin 2012). The Sewŏl movement touched this social issue because the drowned students came from lower middle-class neighborhoods, while the boat owners, responsible for the vessel’s safety deficiencies, were members of economic elites. The families and their supporters have accused the government of not taking the investigation or compensation for the victims seriously because of the victims’ low status. However, among the protesters, university professors, artists, media celebrities, students, and manual laborers collaborated side by side for months in rare closeness. Furthermore, Buddhist monks joined commemorative rites inside churches, and Catholic nuns cooperated with Protestant university professors in preparing posters and banners, hoping together to change the world. In the summer of 2014, when the Sewŏl families’ hunger strike reached its height, all religious denominations were present and visible at Kwanghwamun Square. Catholic priests and nuns made yellow ribbons while on hunger strike; Protestant preachers manned petition booths and offered coffee and cold water to volunteers and passersby. This religious emphasis combined with the various notes and offerings for the spirits of the drowned sacralized the protest sites and
created a sense of meaningfulness for visitors. Most of the protesters that we interviewed felt hopeful that their actions were significant. On the micro level they knew that the bereaved families were grateful for the support they received; and on the macro level, they hoped to change the Korean social and political spheres.

Aitken’s conceptualization of space as event works well within this context. “If spaces are thought of as events and events encourage change, then complex relations bring spaces and people together to become other and, perhaps, create hope” (2014, ix, emphasis in original). In contrast, Karlyn Geis and Catherine Ross (1998) are pessimistic about city dwellers’ attitude toward hope. Similarly, Pile states that in the city “the spaces of hope are hard to find; for the most part Hope seems to have died” (2005, 177). Yet during the first days after the Sewŏl capsized, thousands gathered in order to hope together for the missing passengers’ return. When these hopes faded, many began to hope that the disaster might at least yield social improvement. Many interviewed activists mentioned historic demonstrations as their legacy and inspiration. The most tragic protest in South Korea was the 1980 Kwangju uprising where more than a hundred protesters were killed and became perceived as the martyrs who brought about democracy (Bowman 2013, 222). Recent well-attended demonstrations in downtown Seoul have included anti-beef-import campaigns in 2008, and a series of candlelight protests in 2016–17 that attracted several hundred thousand protesters each time and resulted in the impeachment of then-president Pak (N. Kim 2017). Massive police forces are still mobilized to control such events, fearing deadly results of public unrest in the urban sphere.

Choosing Seoul as the main protest and commemoration site in the Sewŏl movement demonstrates that it is not a narrow topical protest; rather, it hopes to alter complex problems of general appeal, which is why it has lasted in public discourse for over five years. Commemoration events held in Jindo, near the sinking point, and Ansan, the suburb where the high school was located, attracted smaller crowds. Most protests focused on the symbolic center of South Korea, near the Kings’ Palace and the Blue House (office and residence of the president). Geography and narrative embodiments in cityscapes have merged to shape personal ideologies, emotions, and behaviors. The commemorative project has seemed to gain a life of its own, stimulated by the cooperated actions of individuals beyond the stirring of organizations and political parties.
Several social and political events and issues were most often discussed and mentioned by the interviewed protesters. Many had hoped that then-president of South Korea, Pak Kŭn-hye, would visit the grieving families and offer support, but she did not. After several weeks had passed without the government launching significant investigation, members of the families and other protesters blamed the government for corruption that led to severe problems in shipping industry supervision. They sat in the square or at the National Assembly while others solicited petitions to change the law related to the investigation committee’s authority. Yang Ŭn-kyung et. al. (2014) have suggested that progovernment internet postings tended to criticize specific media outlets or persons related to the issue. Antigovernment postings, on the other hand, have tended to discuss the government’s responsibility. This matches the protesters’ expressed feeling that “progovernment conservative anti-
Sewŏl groups are intent on attacking us and supporting politicians and administrators rather than presenting logical arguments.” Some believe that government offices sponsored counterprotesters’ activities. Protesters have added that the police use excessive force during protest suppression. Mainstream media covered few of these incidents, but the protesters’ online venues elaborated on them. The shaking observers of confrontations with the police gathered afterward at Kwanghwamun Square and shared their stories with protesters and passersby.

When the trials of the captain and crewmembers concluded in November 2014 that the ferry’s staff had failed to properly facilitate the evacuation, many thought that they deserved death sentences. Furthermore, the common sentiment in the protest camp was that the owners of the boat and the politicians responsible for safety regulations should also be charged. Eventually, the captain and the chief engineer were sentenced to thirty-six and thirty years in prison, respectively, and thirteen other crewmembers were given jail sentences of up to twenty years (BBC 2014). Yu Pyŏng-ŏn, the chairman of the operating company, was allegedly found dead, though many conspiracy theories sprang up among the protesters who thought that the actual chairman was smuggled out of Korea. Moreover, it was promised that the wreck of the Sewŏl would be salvaged by July 2016 (Im M. 2015), but the salvaging process was postponed until late March 2017 (Smith 2017) and completed only on April 9, 2017 (Hangyŏre 2017). As of April 2019, five people are still missing. Newstapa, an internet investigative journalism channel, reported that salvaging was
postponed because of funding issues and not, as officially stated, for technical difficulties (Kim S. 2015).

The ferry’s sinking reminded many of other catastrophes that occurred in the past thirty years: The sinking of Sŏhæ Ferry in 1993 with 323 victims, the Sŏngsu Bridge’s collapse in 1994 that killed thirty-two, and the fatal collapse of Samp’ŭng Department Store in 1995, which left 502 dead and 937 injured. Unlike the Sewŏl case, in the Samp’ŭng disaster the owners were tried and imprisoned, the rescuers were hailed for bravery, the media seriously criticized the “Republic of Disasters,” and, as a result of public pressure, the government conducted safety inspections on all buildings in the country. Most Koreans felt that justice was done and did not take to the streets. One Sewŏl victim’s mother mentioned this in a news interview: “When Samp’ŭng collapsed, I was in my 30s. I cried a lot for the victims but didn’t do anything. Younger people should act, do something, otherwise when they reach my age they might have to cry for their lost babies like me” (Kim M. 2014). Parents of victims from past accidents supported the Sewŏl parents, saying that they regret not having protested back then. Acting for a better future has also been perceived as means to make the death toll somewhat more bearable in other mourning protests in other parts of the world (Pool 2012).

Delegitimized Politicians and Planning Long-Term Commemoration and Societal Changes

The social issues around which the discourse of the Sewŏl aftermath centered have been mainly socioeconomic gaps, government transparency, democracy, and individual corruption. These problems are enduring concerns of the Korean public and have resulted in an ongoing interest in the Sewŏl investigation. Being mostly lower middle-class or manual workers, the bereaved families feel ignored by the privileged. If the problem were merely political, we could expect the families to have worked closely with the then opposition. However, while then-opposition leaders showed support for this struggle, the protesters were ambivalent regarding the opposition’s intentions. For them, the opposition was part of the same elites who marginalized lower-income members of society.

The leaders of the then opposition party (minjudang) came to protest with the Sewŏl victims’ families at Kwanghwamun Square in July 2014. They also initiated bills for supporting the surviving students in
their recoveries. Many of the victims’ families objected to these bills, mainly the one requiring assistance for students who survived to enter prestigious universities. University entrance examinations in Korea are related to social divisions since proper preparation is expensive (Kim P. 2015). Many postings in online forums expressed discontent with this bill. For example:

What does the Sewol incident have to do with university exams? Will going to a good university heal their traumas? And those . . . are the kinds of high-ranking schools that students from such a low-ranking high school can’t even dream of, even if they’ve studied to death. (Todayhumor 2015)

Some supporters of the then-ruling party tried to divert the discourse over the investigation committee by portraying the grieving families as greedy people trying to profit from death rather than actually looking for justice (Pak Y. 2014). A few weeks after the ferry capsized, Mr. Shim Chae-ch’ol, a then-Saenuri party member who served as head of the National Assembly Investigation Committee, sent the following KakaoTalk message to his associates, and then it was widely shared:

The grief of losing a child—what would you compare it to? But to demand compensation by special law for an accident on a school trip by a private company is illogical. The special law is absurd when even veterans who protected this country during the Korean War are living the life of poverty and hardship without complaint. (Hwang 2014)

This message caused a scandal. Even Choson Ilbo, a conservative daily newspaper, criticized its dissemination (Choson Ilbo 2014b). Around the period of local elections in June 2014, mutual accusations in the media intensified. During the 2015 by-elections, the opposition was criticized for using the disaster for political gain (Choson Ilbo 2015a). As a result, the bereaved families and their supporters felt alienated and “used.” The downtown protest camp has become a place of community support for some, and an unwanted distraction from their private mourning for others.

At some point, media venues reported that the government was involved in the boat’s operation. They stated that while restoring data from a laptop that was found in the ferry, they uncovered documents confirming that despite being registered under Ch’ŏnghaejin Marine Company, the ship was owned by Korea’s National Intelligence Service
Various conspiracy theories circulated in the protest tents about the possible reason for the NIS involvement with the ferry and whether it intentionally caused the sinking. The Prosecutor’s Office categorically denied any involvement of the NIS (Yŏnhap 2014b). The protesters reported being harassed over their accusation of the government, and some progovernment activists made efforts to clear the protesters from downtown. Mr. Pak Wŏnsun, Seoul’s mayor, has been sympathetic and openly supportive of the families’ protest. The protesters say that when claims continued against their prolonged stay in central downtown sites, the municipality charged a nominal fee, as customary with festivals and flea markets, in order to formally legitimize their camp. Rumors about Seoul City officials being investigated by the police culminated when Mr. Pak declared in the news, “They should arrest me first” (Kim H. 2015), and, “The protest site will not be removed” (Im I. 2015).

Concern about individual corruption within the government and the company that ran the ferry increased when a serious investigation seemed to be postponed forever. In May 2014, then-president Pak promised, “If necessary, I will nominate a special prosecutor to investigate, so that the entire truth be revealed and the guilty party strictly punished” (YTN 2014). However, by August, the National Investigation Committee reported finishing its task, and no significant findings were published. The bereaved families’ hopes to participate indirectly by appointing committee members and being informed on the investigation’s findings also failed. The families and the opposition were reportedly pressured to give up the committee’s right to prosecute for the special law to pass (Dong-a 2014). In August, Mun Chae-in, who would become the new president of South Korea in 2017, joined the bereaved families in a protest hunger strike, but to no avail (Pak H. 2014).

In September 2014, President Pak appeared at the National Assembly declaring that the special committee would not investigate further (Pak C. 2015; Yŏnhap News TV2014). On that day, a ferry victim’s father, Mr. Yi Nam-sŏk, knelt in front of Kim Mu-sŏng of the then-ruling party to plead against this decision. The photo of him kneeling won the Photojournalism of the Month Award from the Korea Press Photographers Association (Pak So-hŭi 2014). Most protesters concluded that individual corruption caused the strong objection to the investigation. These issues were discussed on posters hung downtown, in live broadcasts on the large screen on the square, and online.
The 416 Special Law finally passed in November 2014, and a Presidential Decree was announced in March 2015, limiting the committee’s activity to “analysis of material provided by the government” (Pak C. 2015). This news was widely shared on the bereaved families’ websites (416 Families, n.d.). The head of the Special Committee, Mr. Yi Sŏk-tae, a lawyer heading the families’ legal representation, demanded that the Presidential Decree be cancelled (Pak Su-jin 2015). He sat on strike with other committee members in a tent at Kwanghwamun Square in the spring of 2015. The news showed how the mayor of Seoul visited the protest tent and listened to Mr. Yi’s plea (Joins 2015). Meanwhile, conservative news media wrote that the special investigation committee was given too much budget and resources, saying that the committee was “squandering tax money” (Chosŏn Ilbo 2015b). The two discourses were maintained simultaneously, creating a strong link between the Sewŏl protest and antigovernment sentiments.

All these concerns have become involved in planning the future commemoration of the ferry’s victims. Until March 2019 there were protest tents in Kwanghwamun Square. Among them there were petition signing booths, a commemoration altar with lines of the deceased passengers’ photographs, a changing art exhibition related to the protest, and a room for volunteers who kept preparing yellow ribbons and other protest symbols for mass distribution. The central space had room for lines of plastic chairs that were arranged several times every week for commemoration concerts, religious services, and political speeches. The dissent was still visibly alive and mass organized.

Conclusion

The public’s expression of emotions after the Sewŏl ferry sank in April 2014 was carried through various semiotic modalities that manifested in the cityscape. Some were forms of behavior, such as sitting at Kwanghwamun Square for days in support of the hunger-striking parents, praying, singing, signing petitions, and writing wishes for the victims’ spirits. Ideologies and symbols interplayed, assembling a huge commemoration event that lasted for many months. Material manifestations were placed throughout the downtown area, from hand-decorated yellow ribbons to enormous billboards and other signs of grief, remorse, anger, and hope. These landscapes of mass cooperation caused a unique sensory effect on visitors and residents of downtown Seoul. The authors of this essay are examples of people affected by the
disaster. Bora Chung, a lecturer and researcher of Polish and Russian literature at Yonsei University, decided to volunteer with the families of the deceased students and several teams that worked in the commemoration project. Liora Sarfati, a lecturer and researcher at Tel Aviv University, encountered the protest camp while conducting her ethnographic research on Korean shamanism, and while living close to Kyŏngbok Palace. We met at the protest camp, which we visited almost daily during the summer of 2014. The constant reminder of the disaster and the diligence and creativity of the protesters attracted us and shifted our research focus. We found ourselves talking to the protesters, documenting their work, and interviewing them and passersby into what turned into a thought-provoking research project.

The circles of emotion and action related to the disaster broadened as the city allowed its dwellers to change the landscapes in which they lived, commuted, and worked every day into a community-enhancing edifice. These expressive forms were orchestrated to some degree by institutions and political activists. However, their real power and emotional appeal rested on the masses who participated in crafting them. Poetic sensibilities have the capacities to disrupt the sensible and create hopeful communities (Aitken 2014, 169–70). The material representations of the Sewŏl protest offered a poetic rendering of personal and political sentiments, and instilled hope for individual agency in societal processes. From the core of the protest in Kwanghwamun Square, near the statues of national heroes, the protest echoed throughout the city and the nation. In a megalopolis such as Seoul, an opportunity to feel as part of a community was materialized by the many who took to the streets and produced a new poetic aesthetics of protest. Participation enabled personal expressiveness as well as meaningful intervention in contested fields of hoped-for democratic governance and proper crisis handling.

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Notes

1. We did not employ the writing method that Aitken developed, which includes cutting the informants’ spoken words to short stanzas similar to poems. We also preferred using the term poetic rather than ethnopoetic in order to avoid suggesting that the materiality of the Sewŏl protest is strictly related to the Korean culture alone.

2. This quote is from Bora Chung’s fieldnotes from the “We Will Not Stay Still” Protest in Chonggye Square, May 10, 2014.

3. This quote was recorded by Sarfati while conducting interviews at Kwangwamun Protest Camp on August 8, 2016.

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