

“LGBT, We are Living Here Now”: Sexual Minorities and Space in Contemporary South Korea^{*,**}

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(In lieu of an abstract) This research begins with a critique of the “tolerant” attitude towards sexual minorities created by the politics of recognition. In the space of media, sexual minorities are represented as possessing distinctive tastes, such as in the stereotype “sophisticated gays.” Based on these ideas, media often represents sexual minorities as creators of new products, or as people whose individual preferences we must be “considerate” of. This kind of consideration and tolerance regards sexual minorities as consumers who have chosen a particular lifestyle and who belong to private space. Such images may further isolate sexual minorities. Public space, despite being fixed in heterosexual norms, has been constructed as a value-neutral space. The predominance of heterosexuality along with the exclusion of non-heterosexuality and the power of selection are quietly excused. Further, when the tastes of some gay men come to represent sexual minorities as a whole, the existence of women sexual minorities grows even fainter. That is, the lives of the majority of sexual minorities—lived in everyday spaces and not coinciding with the images produced in media—are excluded from the boundaries of “recognition.”

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1. Framing the Problem

Twenty years have passed since the discourse on sexual minorities, including homosexuals, in South Korea (hereafter, Korea) first grew active. During those years, Korean society's perception of sexual minorities appears to have transformed rapidly. Compared to the past, a time when people referred to sexual minorities with expressions such as "homo" or "same-sex-lovers" (*dongseongyeonaeja*) and perceived them as the main culprits behind the spread of AIDS, in this day and age, images of transgender women who are "prettier than women" or gay men with refined and sophisticated tastes appear often in television programs, films, and other forms of media; they are at times accepted positively. The idea that we must acknowledge the lives of sexual minorities appears to have become "politically correct" common knowledge.

This research begins with a critique of the "tolerant" attitude towards sexual minorities created by the politics of recognition.¹ In the space of media, sexual minorities are represented as having distinctive tastes, as being "sophisticated gays." Due to their tastes, they are represented as creators of new products or as people whose individual preferences we must be careful to consider. This consideration and tolerance regards them as consumers who have chosen a particular lifestyle and who belong to a private space. This regard can be a strategy of isolating sexual minorities (Seo Dongjin 2006). Public space, despite being fixed in heterosexual norms, is considered to be a value-neutral space. The predominance of heterosexuality along with the exclusion of non-heterosexuality and the power of selection are quietly excused. Further, when images of certain gay men come to represent sexual minorities as a whole, the existence of

¹ I use the notion of the politics of recognition in the spirit of Charles Taylor's criticism of liberalist multiculturalism. Taylor argues that when the hierarchy of class toppled in the West in the eighteenth century, "individualized identity" came to the fore, but the politics of difference that formed the basis of this went largely unnoticed. Thus, he calls for the recognition of the differences held by individuals and collectives (Taylor 1994). However, in this manifestation of identity, dialogue with others, that is, the role of the other as a reifying force of mainstream society, is especially important (O Seungeun 2012: 7). Taylor overlooked that in this dialogue, power relations can arise between the recognizing agent and the subject being recognized. Just as "there will be proper ways of being black and gay: there will be expectations to be met; demands will be made"—the criticism that these dialogues not only form stereotypes about a particular culture but can also force a fixed script in the process of "recognition" of a culture arises from this context (Appiah 1994: 162-163).

women sexual minorities grows even fainter. That is, the lives of the majority of sexual minorities—lived in everyday spaces and not coinciding with the images produced in media—are excluded from the boundaries of “recognition.”

From this perspective, when attempting to broach the topic of sexual minorities, I focus on the meaning of the sexual minority identity in the context of society as a whole as well as the practices of sexual minorities themselves, rather than their identities as constructed via the media or in private, closed-off spaces. Accessing public space can be a method for this type of inquiry. The spatial dimension is a familiar analytical concept to anthropologists, and analyses of spatial aspects such as natural landscapes and the material conditions of everyday life bolster theoretical arguments. Anthropologists no longer regard space merely as background. As they move towards a perspective that looks more broadly at the spatial dimension of culture, the idea that all actions are located and formed within space takes on new meaning (Lawrence-Zúñiga and Low 2003). Moreover, by utilizing specific spaces, people form categories regarding their identities and the identities of others, and so the identities of sexual minorities, which depend on particular spaces for their formation, are fundamentally spatial (Mitchell 2000; Valentine 2009: 15). Through the performance of lesbian and gay identities, spaces presupposed as heterosexual are (re) produced as lesbian and gay spaces, providing an environment in which minority sexual identities can be established. Therefore, to understand the position of Korea’s sexual minorities today, it is necessary to begin the discussion with the notion of space—space as both the site where sexual minorities perform their identities and exhibit their existence, and the site in which, through this performance, their identities are produced. This research focuses on the spaces of sexual minority women, in particular. The issue of occupying space starkly exposes sexual minority gender-based differences. Popular stereotypes of sexual minority women as unethical and deviant beings, and gendered perceptions of women as dependent, fragile beings requiring protection, exclude these women from public space (McDowell 2010). As such, investigating the active space-occupying practices of sexual minority women, who are subjected to dual limitations, can facilitate an understanding of Korea’s receptiveness to gender and sexuality.

Through a case study of sexual minority activities in Seoul’s Mapo-gu

district,² this research examines the relationship between sexual minorities and space as well as the role of sexual minorities as political agents. Unlike in Jongno and Itaewon, where larger-scale gay commercial areas exist, Mapo businesses that cater to lesbian women are not a visible part of the scenery, but serve to support both residential areas where sexual minorities live and the space of everyday life. This is a dominant factor in the construction of Mapo as a political site of sexual minorities. In order to trace the process of sexual minority identity formation through space, this research will first trace the history of the relationship between sexual minorities and spaces before the sexual minority community in Mapo was formed. Second, it will analyze the attraction of the particular locale of Mapo to sexual minorities. Finally, the research delineates how, as actors, sexual minorities are conveying queer identity in the Mapo area.

2. Theoretical Background

By problematizing the category of “sex” and assumptions surrounding it as natural and indispensable, Michel Foucault developed a groundbreaking approach. In *The History of Sexuality* (2004) Foucault asserts that the categories of sex have been produced through the regulation of sexual life. Though a variety of sexual acts such as sodomy have long existed, the psychological, psychiatric, and pathological categories of modernity have established homosexuality as a characteristic of sexual sensibility rather than as a type of sexual intercourse. Sex, therefore, is not something essential or true but rather an invention encompassing diverse sexualities that produce coherent sexual identities. Through this historical construction, sex is established as the natural root determining gender, and the fact that sex itself is a manufactured concept becomes obscured. According to this construct of sex, only two biologically determined sexes, male and female, exist, and people in these two categories are expected to desire one another heterosexually. Thus, those who do not fit within this regulated sexuality, such as hermaphrodites and those who do not desire the opposing sex, are regarded as sexual deviants, monsters, and atypical. Foucault revealed that sex based on heterosexuality is not, in fact, the natural order, but that the

² (Translator’s note) Mapo-gu is one of 25 districts (*gu*) of Seoul and is located north of the Han River on the western edge of the city.

classifications of sex were formed by the micropolitics of power, knowledge, and desire.

However, we must recall that for Foucault, power has a fundamentally relational character. This does not originate in an individual agent's choice or decision but is formed through the operation of diverse and discriminatory forces. Thus, within an act of power, the possibility of resistance is implicit, and even as the network of power relationships permeates apparatuses and systems, forming a dense organization not limited to those institutions, the movement of points of resistance pierce through social strata and individual unity. To Foucault, the strategic codification of these points of resistance enables revolution (Ibid.: 104-106). The spread of the term "homosexual" in the late nineteenth century then was, in one sense, an operation of power in which the possibility of resistance was implicit. Similarly, the advent and spread of "gay" as a term of self-description in the US in the 1960s came at the peak of politicized sexual identity (Weeks 1994: 110-112). Through the process of classification or self-labeling, that is, the creation of social identities, the rise of these individual sexual subcultures or communities since the twentieth century engendered regulations, restrictions, and prohibitions. But they simultaneously planted seeds of "comfort, security, and confidence" (Plummer 1980: 29). In the late 1960s, "gay liberationists" became politically empowered, and in the 1970s and 80s in New York and San Francisco, communities that propelled the popular gay and lesbian movement in the US were born. Following this, in places where the local conditions allowed, diverse gay liberation movements sprang up across the globe (Weeks 1994: 113).

If this is true, then how do people form the local conditions of a community based on a particular identity? Bourdieu focuses on an interdependent method through which practices inject and strengthen space with cultural knowledge and action. When separated from practices, space loses all meaning. Habitus, a system's productive and structuring tendency, constructs space and, at the same time, is constructed by the movement of actors within a space (Bourdieu 1977: 214 quoted in Lawrence-Zúñiga and Low 2003: 10). In Bourdieu's theory, because social practice activates spatial meaning, actors invoke discursive knowledge and strategic intentions when they are brought into the interpretation of spatial significance rather than having a particular identity fixed in space. That is, space is "a physical environment which is transformed into a place with symbolic significance by the actions of people utilizing it routinely" (Bak

Jihwan 2005).

In order to explain the performance of sexual identity within space, Valentine's research, drawing on Butler's analyses, shows that space is constructed by the movements of actors. Butler theorizes gender, and tacitly different identities, as performative. She argues that performativity is a collective repetition of acts formed within a tightly controlled system, and, as time goes on, the performance becomes an essence, that is to say, it consolidates the appearance of natural beings (Butler 2008). To Valentine this perspective allows us to think of social identity as the subject of perpetual struggle and an unstable classification. With this perspective we can investigate how performance and struggle arise in the spaces of everyday life (Valentine 2009: 14-15). Applying this type of research to sexual minorities, questions of how streets are produced into "natural and normal" heterosexual spaces are exposed by how lesbians and gays consciously perform their sexual identity in public spaces (Ibid.: 16).

The "queer³ neighborhood" of Mapo discussed here is an example of how sexual minorities, specifically lesbian women, achieve harmony without consciously pursuing a logical coherence in their practices. This perspective is based on the reality of Mapo as a meeting space for lesbians. Even without the intervention of their conscious practices, Mapo became a place that accommodated the lifestyles and social positions of lesbian women. A distinct habitus is being constructed within the space of Mapo by the movements of actors. As such, unconsciously produced outcomes, that is, Mapo's queer network, are the driving force that allows for everyday life to be practiced and for "the strategic codification of points of resistance."

3. Research Methods

Through a chance opportunity in July of 2011, I discovered the relationship between sexual minorities and Mapo-gu anew. Later, in November, I joined a Mapo-gu sexual minority residents' gathering called the Union of

3 "Queer" (originally meaning strange or weird), was a term used to disparage sexual minorities, but as a new trend emerged in the 1980s gay movements, it took on a meaning of pride. Sexual minorities rejected the heterosexual-centrism of mainstream society, which produced sexism and oppression, and began to actively call themselves "queer." Those who participated in this research also generally used the term "queer" to refer to themselves.

Mapo Rainbow Residents (*mapo reinbou jum-in yeon-dae*, hereafter UMRR), also known as *mareiyeon*, and while visiting it for the first time in December, I came to see the Mapo area as a research subject. This all came about because in July of 2011, I had gone to a meeting at the People’s House (*minjungui jib*), a community organization located in Seongsan-dong, Mapo-gu.⁴ After boarding the Mapo 09 village bus in front of Hongik University, I learned of the UMRR through an ad inside the bus. It read, “Hello. We met yesterday at Mangwon market! Be sure to say hello the next time we see each other.” I became interested in how the ad covertly informed its readers of a gathering for sexual minorities in the Mapo area. I sought out the Mapo Rainbow internet café, the address of which had been written in a corner of the ad. I joined the group, and later became a member who participated in monthly meetings.

After attending meetings every month, I became interested in Mapo as a “queer neighborhood.” Though I knew that lesbian bars had opened early on in the vicinity of Hongdae and Sinchon, it was difficult to determine if the area would be a meaningful subject for research merely on the basis of the existence of related establishments. As a temporary site for meetings, it did not seem easy to capture meaningful phenomena. Moreover, since it was much smaller than the gay men’s areas of Itaewon and Jongno, I predicted that the clubs and bars would not be that important within the overall lesbian community. However, as the home base of the everyday lives of those with queer identities, and home to the place where networks were formed between people in this community, the Mapo area had the characteristics of a “queer neighborhood.”

When I became a “rotation leader” between September 2012 and August 2013, with the role of leading gatherings, I was able to participate in the activities of the UMRR on a fuller scale. I was living quite far from Mapo-gu, and at first it was difficult to meet with queer residents routinely. But after assuming the role of rotation leader, I could more closely observe various functions and affairs related to the UMRR through communication with other members of the organization, including other rotation leaders.⁵ I participated in the UMRR’s regular gathering, the “Queer Table,” as well as the preceding rotation leaders’ meetings, during which we discussed the

⁴ (Editor’s note) *Dong*, or neighborhood, is an administrative unit smaller than *gu* (district).

⁵ Events discussed in this article date up until April 2013.

menu for the shared meal and the coming day's events. Additionally, I participated in gatherings in the Mapo area, including meetings convened when conflicts arose with the Mapo District Office. In particular, during a feud that came up unexpectedly between the UMRR and the Mapo District Office in late 2012, I posted minute-by-minute updates of the events to social media and visited the district office to protest with other members and activists, really putting the "participant" in participant observation. During these activities, I opted to pay deep attention to the events transpiring around me, remembering them and recording them later. I made an effort to dictate conversations between people as often as possible in my spare time.

For information I was unable to gain through listening to informal conversations while participating, I conducted formal interviews. Between February and March of 2013, I met with 9 informants and conducted in-depth interviews. Interview lengths ranged from 40 to 90 minutes, and each of them was recorded and transcribed. All of the informants were lesbian or bisexual women active in the UMRR.⁶ Ages ranged between early 30s and early 40s, and careers included community organization activist, office worker, realtor, and graduate student. Informants in their early to mid-30s were chosen from among those most active in the organization, including rotation leaders. That the most active members were in their 30s was considered as well. In the case of those in their 40s, they were selected because they had been in their 20s during the era in which discourses on homosexuality were first emerging in Korea, and because they felt the general changes that had occurred personally, within their own lives. I have used pseudonyms when referencing those who participated in formal interviews and those with whom I spoke during participant observation.

Additionally, for documents regarding communities of sexual minorities in the past, I requested access to resources held in the queer archive and received help from QueerArch, run by the Korean Sexual-Minority Culture & Rights Center. QueerArch's materials, such as the LGBTQ magazine, *Buddy*, familiarized me with the history, culture, and internal discourses of the queer community of the past that I was unable to experience firsthand.

⁶ My informants were limited to women despite the fact that there were active male members, too. This is because women have been the primary movers in the majority of activities and in the initial organization of the UMRR.

They were also useful for understanding the atmosphere when public discourse on homosexuality first emerged in Korea. Through these materials I was able to review examples of the relationship between space within Korea and minority sexual orientations from the past as they continue until today.

4. Space and Queer Culture

1) Formation of Gay Ghettos within Seoul Before the 1990s

Though interest in homosexuality in Korea and the opening of queer discourse only began in the early 1990s, an intimate relationship between the LGBTQ community and the space of the city existed for many years prior to this.⁷ The theaters of Seoul’s Myeong-dong in the 1950s are remembered as the first places gay men utilized as meeting places after liberation.⁸ As a downtown area, Myeong-dong was a place where “by chance many people of that disposition stopped by.”⁹ The gay theaters of the era sprang up around Myeong-dong’s department store, presumably because in the process of supplying foreign goods to Korea, foreign merchants and especially homosexuals who visited Korea frequented the department store. Following the 1960s, theaters and the first gay bars began to pop up in Sindang-dong, a neighborhood now remembered as the early gay ghetto. For a time the Euljiro printer alley had some twenty-odd gay bars; but after the 1970s, the whole area surrounding Nagwon market became a place of spatial significance for gay men, which continues to this day, as numerous gay bars have opened in Jongno, with the Pagoda Theater at their center. The city provided a hideout—with curtains of buildings and alleyways, ceaseless flows of diverse people, and anonymity afforded by the

⁷ Queer identity formation depends on a particular space. It is essentially spatial (Valentine 2009: 15), and urban spaces have been considered the spaces of social and sexual freedom (Johnston and Longhurst 2010: 80). The historian Aldrich argues that from ancient to contemporary times it was easiest to express homosexual identity in the city environment. Queer identities and cities are tightly bound because the pool of potential partners is much larger in cities than in small towns, and in cities, crowds provide anonymity (Aldrich 2004).

⁸ (Translator’s note) Korea was a colony of Japan between 1910 and 1945.

⁹ (Editor’s note) No source for the quote is provided in the Korean-language original.

masses. Sexual minorities could meet people like themselves more easily, and it became a safe place for them.¹⁰

Gay men, though inconspicuous, kept these spaces alive for themselves, but but it was difficult for lesbian women to develop any particular area as a place just for them. Though lesbians claim that they did indeed create a community of their own, this “remains a legend.”¹¹ Taxi drivers comprised 90 percent of the members of the YeoUnHoi, formed in 1965, and so they went by the above name, which stood for the Female Drivers’ Association (*yeoja unjeonja moim*). As word spread that it was a lesbian group, people gathered quietly across the nation, and it was said that even if everyone could not make it to a meeting, at least 1,200 to 1,300 people would gather at a time. Though the group attempted to gain approval as a civic organization, this attempt failed. The group dissolved in the mid-eighties without closure over disputes between members over the election of the president, the wealth disparity between members, and differences in social consciousness. It is said that small groups remain as acquaintances, though they are nothing like the once-large group. Additionally, in the 1970s there was a female-only tea room in Myeong-dong named “Chanel” which is said to have been a gathering place for many lesbians. It was forced to close after only two years due to the consumption of marijuana on its premises, but those who met there came up with new hideouts or opened bars of their own. The community, which formed in secret, is said to have dissolved with the re-development of Myeong-dong in the 1980s (Yi Haesol 1999; Han Chaeyun 2011).

These differences arise from the fact that the power to occupy space has operated differently for gays and lesbians from the beginning. They share status as minorities due to their sexual orientation, but they are men and women first, and because of this, the social realities they endure are vastly different. Due to the “masculinization of public space” (Rose 2011), that is, when public space is considered men’s domain and private space women’s, the rights of women in urban space are limited (An Sugyeong 2012: 158).¹² When men realize that their sexual orientation deviates from the

¹⁰ *Buddy*, May 1998.

¹¹ (Editor’s note) No source for the quote is provided in the Korean-language original.

¹² It is said of the female-only tea rooms in Myeong-dong in the 1970s, including Chanel, that there were businesses run by gangsters who wielded power at the time. These people considered women dressed like and acting like men to be offensive and

ordinary, they can seek out those like themselves and broaden their boundaries. But it is much more difficult for women to break free from the roles placed on them from birth and to construct or participate in such a community because of the social expectations that women perform care work in the home. Moreover, when a woman’s sexuality only serves a reproductive function within the family, she is respected only as a “mother” (Yi Hyeonjae 2008: 7). Women who are outside the framework of the heterosexual marriage-based family that is deemed legitimate by the state have generally been considered non-sexual beings, so they are shut off from opportunities to escape the private realm to explore their sexuality and related identity. Furthermore, this social preconception regarding women’s sexuality thoroughly shrouds the existence of queer women. It assumes that queer women do not even exist, and thus hinders the formation of a discourse on queer women, further isolating them.

2) *Development of Communication Media and Expansion of the Community Following the 1990s*

The new information media of PC communication in the 1990s influenced the topography of the queer community considerably. Young gay men who enjoyed online communication held offline club meetings in Itaewon, which was more suited to their younger tastes than Jongno. Itaewon gradually became known as the new gay ghetto (Jo Seongbae 2003: 69). As for the areas including and surrounding Nagwon-dong, a “refortification of location formation” took place in Jongno—despite the closure of the Pagoda Theater—fueled by continued visits from people who learned about it online (Yi Seojin 2006: 85).

However, one of the most important impacts of PC communication on the queer community was that it generated a genuine lesbian community. As mentioned earlier, though gay men and lesbian women share the common point of being sexual minorities, they are different, not only because it is a greater taboo for women to explore their sexuality and related identity, but also because it is difficult for them to form a community in physical space. “At the time, there was no PC communication and no internet.... Back then, that feeling of ‘what’s going to happen if it doesn’t go well,’ was much stronger, and ‘is there anyone out there like this besides

would resort to violence to chase them out (Yun-Kim Myeongu 2009).

me?’ Because that type of information wasn’t shared at all... ‘Are you an L (lesbian)?’ I didn’t even know the word at that time” (Choe Dongmi, female, 43).

During this era, PC communication was an escape for lesbians. In particular, discussions of lesbianism, the politics of sex, and queer theory produced in feminist circles was forwarded to the lesbian community where it was shared and studied. Discussions of the politics of sex and feminism were active mainly within academia, and though they were not easily accessible to job-seekers or those with careers, people affiliated with clubs and/or associations could access this type of theory and these debates through PC communication (Han Chaeyun 2011: 108). Women had even more topics to discuss regarding identity beyond personal matters than queer men. Though online encounters also lead to courtship, they did not end with fragmentary encounters but played an important role in the production of various queer cultures and in the formation of the community as a cornerstone of the political movements that followed. Those who met via PC communication “naturally took part in the human rights movement, and when there was a queer culture festival, or things like that, groups that were on each communication service came together, and we would go to protests together as well” (Seo Yugyeong, female, 36). In the process, they built solidarity on the foundation of their shared queer identity and even became active in offline movements as well. In fact, some, having “been quite active” in these online clubs, began to participate in human rights organization meetings and today are fairly well-known activists within the human rights movement (Yang Seungyeon, female, 43).

Out of the burgeoning sexuality discourse in communication media emerged the beginnings of the homosexual human rights movement and an awareness of the existence of queer women. By the mid to late 90s, physical spaces for these women to gather appeared as well. On May 10, 1996, in Mapo-gu, “Lesbos” opened, claiming to be the first lesbian-only bar in Korea. In commemoration of this, three lesbian PC groups initiated the first regular lesbian collective get-together. Because it was home to the first lesbian bar, Mapo-gu took on symbolism as a lesbian space. Following this, in July of the same year, “Lapel,” a second lesbian bar, opened in Itaewon. In 1997, “Schooner” and “Labris” opened in Sinchon, bringing the total number of lesbian bars to four. These bars would sometimes specify on their menus that a portion of their drink prices would be donated to human rights organizations. They were sometimes used for various queer

events or performances, even weddings, making them important spots within the current of lesbian culture and human rights.¹³

The penetration rate of internet cables and computers grew in the new millennium. Large portal sites began to provide forum services, and it became even easier to gather in cyber-space. Many people gravitated to the internet, which was inexpensive and ensured anonymity. This contributed to a quantitative growth in the queer community. Additionally, a few scattered bars catering to queer people opened in areas other than the so-called foothold areas of Jongno, Itaewon, Sinchon, and Hongdae. With more people active in the community due to the development of the internet and the increase in private social meetings, members of the queer community reached a stage in which they desired to meet people comfortably in neighborhoods near their homes.

One critical perspective notes that “even if those encounters became a persistent thing and utilized community spaces, because they took place privately and secretly, [they hinted at] a retreat from the community which provided the possibility of forming communion, and a retreat from public life” (Yi-Song Huiil 1999 quoted in Jo Mina 2001: 36). The rise of these small gatherings also made it difficult to maintain visibility for queer culture within Korean society. When you heard “there are people in that whole area, they say there’s a lesbian bar there” on the internet, what you learned wasn’t that queers gathered in a certain region, but that “in fact, we are living everywhere” (Yang Seungyeon, female, 43). Thus by concentrating in a particular local area, the possibility that queer identity would manifest or progress there, or that a particular area would naturally arise and become a queer space of everyday life, seemed to shrink even more. By the mid-2000s, however, sincere concerns began to emerge about a “local area” that would be connected to the everyday lives of queers beyond the gay ghetto, a temporarily utilized space of consumption.

3) *Thinking about Local Areas*

“If you watch them you see, in America too, there is an LGBT street in every city. Just naturally. And you sort of start to wonder about it” (Jo Yunju, female, 36). The lives of queers that appear in American TV programs such as *Queer as Folk* and *The L Word* made Korea’s queers envision a city where

¹³ *Buddy*, April 1998.

queers would gather and live in Korea as well. But in order to realize this indefinite vision, there would need to be points connecting the sexual minorities human rights movement to the local community movements that had developed in the Korean context. This began as terms like “local movements” and “local units” gradually started to circulate within the general public, and the question of “well, don’t you think we could link together with a local area?” arose among sexual minority human rights activists.

Movements based in local areas, particularly those set in cities, began in Korea at the end of the 1960s, when many social activists, religious people, and artists took the poor areas of town (*daldongne*¹⁴) as the base of operations for the urban community movement and attempted many communal experiments. The resistance movement of the urban poor, which fought redevelopment projects and forced eviction and demolition, joined the current of the democratization movement in the 1980s (Jeong Gyuho 2012: 13-15). Following the democratization movement, the self-supporting community movement endeavored to generate a community in which members shared their economic activities and lives with one another. It came to the fore on the outskirts of Seoul during the 1990s. Although this movement failed for reasons having to do with the dissolution of the local area and poor management, a number of regions built on its momentum and developed their own local community movements. As local community movements became vitalized and the municipality system was put into effect, there were cases of local autonomous movements being actively involved in their local area’s environment, education, political issues, and development (Bak Ingwon, Yi Seonyeong 2012: 24-25). But the state lived up to the neoliberal requirements of reduced state intervention in the market and cut social services in response to civil society. It was difficult for civil society to form an intimate cooperative relationship with the state under such conditions. To protest the growing difficulty of securing the socio-economic safety net, urban communities were utilized to solve life’s problems such as employment and welfare. These types of community movements created an alternative model that operated on different values than the state’s bureaucracy or market neoliberalism (Jeong Gyuho 2012:

¹⁴ (Translator’s note) *Daldongne* translates literally as “moon neighborhood” and is called such because poor areas of town are generally located in the higher hills of the city, where access to transportation is often limited.

16). Gradually, the realization that they could not count on cooperation from the government struck human rights activists as well, and they attempted to lead change on an everyday level in these local areas.

A number of important events in the history of Korea’s sexual minority human rights movement occurred between 2007 and 2008. In 2007, in response to the announcement of forthcoming legislation related to the establishment of the Ministry of Justice’s anti-discrimination act, the conservative Christian faction argued that sexual orientation should not be included in the same category as gender or disability. Ultimately 7 clauses, including those related to sexual orientation, were eliminated. The act was sent into deliberation by the Office of Legislation, prompting backlash that called it not an anti-discrimination law but a “pro-discrimination law” and called for the restoration of the 7 clauses. Thirty-three LGBTQ organizations banded together to form the “Urgent Collective Action for the Anti-Discrimination Law and Putting a Stop to Homophobia and Discrimination.” In the process, each organization recognized that discrimination faced by minorities was a problem for all of them. They realized they must act together and so radically confirmed their solidarity with one another. Preceding consultative groups had difficulty overcoming differences in gender, identity, and methods of organizing and were unable to last longer than two years. But the “Rainbow Action Against Sexual Minority Discrimination,” which succeeded the “Urgent Collective Action,” was voted on in January of 2008 and formally launched in May of the same year, and it continues to be active to this day.¹⁵

During the 18th general election of April 9, 2008, the political empowerment of sexual minorities that had blossomed during the urgent action surrounding the anti-discrimination law began to display measurable movement in the National Assembly campaign of Choe Hyeonsuk, an activist for the Urgent Collective Action. Choe, who came out as a “divorced lesbian woman,” ran as a “candidate with symbolism” for the New Progressive Party, which spoke for the marginalized in an area considered the “heart of politics”: Jongno-gu. The fact that Jongno was a homosexual community neighborhood lent power to the lesbian candidate’s symbolism. Although Choe Hyeonsuk’s election campaign was the first to focus on a sexual minority running for office and was meant to nurture the political

¹⁵ (Translator’s note) This article was published in Korean in December of 2014 and was translated in August of 2018. Rainbow Action was still active as of this translation.

empowerment of sexual minorities, it intensified the struggles of gay communities. “For us, Jongno may be the gay ghetto, but that’s really our own thought, and other people in Jongno don’t think that way... of course there are a lot of gays in Jongno. The problem, I realized, is the fact that the gays all come out here to meet, so they don’t have voting rights here, and participation as voters isn’t happening at all” (Yang Seungyeon, female, 43). They recognized that in order to occupy space, what they needed most of all was status as voters in a particular area.

The Yongsan 4th Zone Namildang building fire incident in January of 2009 again reminded those in the LGBTQ human rights community that “we really need to think seriously about local areas.” “Watching what happened in Yongsan... Watching the logic of urban development completely shake the lives of those who had settled their roots in that area [made me think], well, there is no collective with local color as strong as ours.... Among gays [we thought] what kind of effect will it have on gay people when Jongno is redeveloped, when Nagwon market is redeveloped” (Yang Seungyeon, female, 43). The idea of being helplessly uprooted from your home by the hand of governmental authority hit sexual minorities especially hard. In the past, the sexual minority communities formed around particular regions through rumors that “they say those kind of people meet there.” With the development of the internet, there was a multi-nuclearization of meeting sites. But because of the symbolism inherent in the areas themselves, the areas of Hongdae, Itaewon, and Jongno were still the places where most people gathered and where human rights organization activities took place. The disappearance of sexual minorities’ physical spaces, that is, the dissolving of the community, means individuals are deprived of chances to display their identities. It is the equivalent of having their existence itself denied.

As such, “local area” grew as an important keyword within the Korean LGBTQ human rights movement. “There were people, those who had been doing local movements. And I started to see their accomplishments.... The sexual minority movement was somewhat late at catching those types of local movements” (Han Chaeyun, female, 43). Han Chaeyun, an activist and leader of the civic organization Korean Sexual Minority Culture and Rights Center, watched movements based in local areas. She said that she moved to Mapo hoping that “maybe we could broaden the scope of the sexual minority movement” (Han Chaeyun, female, 43). As this happened, another event drew interest: the September 2006 establishment of

MaYongSeo, a local community for lesbians in the Mapo, Yongsan, and Seodaemun-gu districts. Borrowing the first syllable of each of the districts for their name, this group was unlike previous one-time meet-ups in that it was established with the purpose of meeting and socializing with lesbian friends who shared similar lives in the neighborhood. If previous social gatherings had been built on romantic relationships, MaYongSeo was mainly focused on strengthening the bonds of relationships more akin to “casual high school friends” or “sisters.” MaYongSeo’s “orientation towards a family atmosphere” was well illustrated by their meetings called *jibbeonggae*.¹⁶ They gathered in comfortable clothing and spent “time becoming family for one another.” Though MaYongSeo’s members lacked blood ties with one another (they were generally living on their own, independent from their biological families), they attempted to construct a new “family” that shared a sense of solidarity based on their shared identity. By spending time together in their homes, this type of family attempted to relieve the sense of isolation people who live alone often feel. Becoming one another’s family provided not only a sense of emotional security but functioned to prevent the risks women who live alone experience. Beyond this, they shared information about the area, such as amenities and realtors, and created small, evolving gatherings according to their preferences. MaYongSeo maintained these types of gatherings for the long term and imagined lesbian women gathering and “building a building,” “wanting to grow old in a single neighborhood and maintain friendships,” that is, constructing a “MaYongSeo Silvertown.”¹⁷ Though in many cases the queer identity had been described as a rejection of “family,” or distancing oneself from relatives, the intimate relationships that began with this type of friendship within the queer community can be considered an example of “fictive kinship” (Weston 1991).

Although the activities of MaYongSeo never appeared to reach a level of aggressive, large-scale social action, they signify change in that each member saw themselves as a queer person living in a particular local area and that, based on this, they conceived a sustainable community in which

¹⁶ (Translator’s note) The term *jibbeonggae* combines *jip* (household or home) and *beonggae* (lightning). In the context of gathering or meeting, the latter is used to colloquially refer to impromptu gathering of people. In this case, *jibbeonggae* means an impromptu gathering in someone’s house.

¹⁷ Rainbow Action Network, 2009.

they shared their daily lives. Furthermore, the fact that MaYongSeo's area of activity overlapped with the areas of Hongdae and Sinchon (called "home base" by lesbians), is worthy of attention. For this reason, in the next section I assess which aspects of the Mapo area attract queers.

5. Background of the Emergence of Mapo-gu as a Queer Space

1) *Mapo' as an Imagined Territory*

The administrative district of Mapo-gu is located in the mid-west region of Seoul on the northern bank of the Han River. Southern Jung-gu and western Yongsan-gu neighbor it to the east. The city of Goyang borders it to the west. Mapo-gu is adjacent to Seodaemun-gu and Eunpyeong-gu along the northern borders traced by the roads Sinchon-ro and Susaek-ro.¹⁸ The Han River separates Mapo-gu from Yeongdeungpo-gu and Gangseo-gu on the southern side.

Though queer residents generally use the name "Mapo" to refer to their home, their Mapo does not exactly correspond with Mapo-gu as an administrative unit of Seoul. Within Mapo-gu itself, the area that queers prefer is the "pan Hongdae area" or the Hongik University and the neighboring Hapjeong-dong and Mangwon-dong (Choe Dongmi, female, 43). Some even see Mapo's boundaries as "the Hongdae vicinity, maybe including Mangwon, Hapjeong, Sinchon? The space between Sinchon and Idae."¹⁹ Choe included Sinchon and Idae within the boundaries of "Mapo," the neighborhoods which, although encompassing an area with a rich connection to queers, are in fact located in Seodaemun-gu, not Mapo-gu. To her, Mapo excluded Gongdeok-dong, even though it is a part of the administrative district of Mapo-gu. "I just think I like living in our neighborhood, Mangwon-dong. If you told me go live in Gongdeok, I'd say no. There are so many buildings. People whose offices are nearby must go and live there" (Yi Minjeong, female, 31). The Mapo that queer residents generally consider "our neighborhood" does not include areas with high-rise buildings and apartment complexes. Gongdeok's apartments are

¹⁸ (Translator's note) The suffix 'ro' refers to streets.

¹⁹ (Editor's note) Idae is an abbreviation of Ihwa yeoja daehakkyo (Ewha Women's University).

equipped with advanced security systems. The people who live in those apartments, unlike the queer residents, are wealthy above a certain level. They can be classified as people who connect their place of residency to their assets, so they are not necessarily oriented to the communal values of the areas in which they reside. “Gongdeok is a place with Samsung Raemians and Lotte Castles.²⁰ Do we really need it? They’re the type of people that would worry about their property prices dropping if they learned that sexual minorities were living in Mapo.” A member of the UMRR gave that potent rebuttal to the suggestion to move a one-person protest they were planning against the homophobic attitude of the Mapo District Office to a subway station with a lot of foot traffic.

In other words, more than the “Mapo-gu, Seoul” whose borders are traceable on maps, queer residents imagine “Mapo” amongst themselves as a territory. To borrow a phrase from Benedict Anderson (2007), as an imagined community, Mapo’s queer residents possess their own autonomous place based on an image of communion between them. At the same time, though the queer neighborhood of “Mapo” is a product of the imagination, it is not merely conceptual. The practice of imagining arises from particular social, economic, and political environments (Rose 1990 quoted in Valentine 2009: 164). For this reason, it is necessary to look at the background of how Mapo became its own particular queer place.

2) Inexpensive Land Prices and Convenient Transportation

The Mapo area, where port culture historically flourished, maintains a convenient transportation network to this day. Subway lines 2, 5, and 6 as well as the Gyeongui Line pass through it, and recently an airport line opened, expanding access to the Incheon area and Incheon International Airport. With access to the Naebu Expressway, Jayu-ro, Gangbyeonbuk-ro as well as the Mapo Bridge, Sogang Bridge, Yanghwa Bridge, and Gayang Bridge, its roads are convenient as well. In addition, it is close to the downtown area, but land prices are lower than they are downtown, so people of lower incomes have resided there (Yi Jihye 2010: 85). As a region with a long history of being residential, there are many decrepit and substandard homes nestled into the area. The areas of Mangwon-dong, Hapjeong-dong, Sangam-dong, and Seongsan-dong in particular are prone

²⁰ (Translator’s note) These are both brands of luxury apartments.

to flooding and have suffered frequent damage (Ibid). Undervalued areas like Mangwon-dong, Hapjeong-dong, Donggyo-dong, and Yeonnam-dong have also faced comparatively high increases in rent, as the rents in the area surrounding Hongik University have soared. But those who have lived in the area for a long time still perceive it as “quite a poor neighborhood” (Choe Dongmi, female, 43). Along with the convenient transportation system, the lower rents were an important factor for queer residents in making the decision to live there. These conditions also attracted those who were “connected to the so-called feminism or that type of thing” at universities in the vicinity, as well as those who could not afford those places’ rents (Yang Seungyeon, female, 43).

The people I interviewed, who had moved to the area before rent prices rose significantly, tended to choose their residence location according to rent and the commute to work or school. Rent in particular was a big consideration for them. Though today the problem of affordable housing is felt almost universally, for unmarried women it is an even more pressing issue. This is because the clear disparity in wages between men and women makes it hard for a woman to scrape together a large sum of money on her own. Furthermore, unlike married heterosexual couples who can secure homes relatively easily through loans or their parents’ support, perhaps as a wedding gift, same-sex couples outside the marriage system must raise the money for a home on their own accord. Because of this, housing costs are a crucial factor in choosing a place of residence for queers living independently. “If they get married, the seed money is all arranged. The parents front the *jeonse*²¹ money, but there are hardly any cases like that for same-sex couples.... There are a lot of cases where two people will pool their money and pay monthly rent or something, rather than combining their money and getting a *jeonse* house. Because even the rent’s terribly high these days” (Jo Yunju, female, 36).

Incidentally, these conditions were also a factor in the emergence of a new harbor of civic organizations. In recent years, organizations that were previously scattered across Seoul have been relocating to Mapo. With over 50 organizations active there, the number of civic organizations located in Mapo-gu is over twice that of Jongno-gu, where weighty organizations

²¹ (Translator’s note) *Jeonse* refers to the key money or deposit one pays when moving into an apartment. In Korea, these deposits are often prohibitively expensive for many people.

such as the People’s Solidary for Participatory Democracy and the Citizens’ Coalition of Economic Justice are housed among 20 or so other active civic organizations. Organizations are driven to Mapo for reasons not very different from those given by queer residents. Civic organization that, due to the nature of their work, must frequently visit the National Assembly enjoy the advantages of Mapo’s access to Yeouido, and though rents have increased recently in places like Mangwon-dong, when compared to other districts the area is still inexpensive.

Included in the organizations that relocated to Mapo-gu are those related to queer and women’s issues. Following 2006, the Korean WomenLink, Eonni Network, Korea Sexual Violence Relief Center, Lesbian Counseling Center in South Korea, and the Korean Sexual-Minority Culture and Rights Center, among others, settled in Mapo; and in 2013, the Solidarity for LGBT Human Rights of Korea, which had originally been located in Chungjeongro, made the move there as well. These organizations are in the areas of Mapo-gu around Hongik University as well as Hapjeong-dong and Seongsan-deong, among others, which coincides with the boundaries recognized as “our neighborhood” by queer residents. In truth, when an organization is formed, its office location and work are decided in part by the nature of the organization and by factors such as convenience of public transportation and rent costs. Organizations that rally around the human rights of sexual minorities came to assemble even more closely, and this meant that Mapo came to be considered “the site of a newly flowing current” (Han Chaeyun, female, 43).

3) *“Yearning for Hongdae” and the Formation of a New Current*

“Conditions I had when I first wanted to find a house, I had a bit of that... yearning for Hongdae” (Jo Yunju, female, 36). “By chance, the house that was best for me ended up being in Seongsan-dong, and it just felt like it worked out well. I liked [the area] already. ‘Hey, so are we Hongtizens now?’ We said stuff like that” (Seo Yugyeong, female, 36). One couple confessed that while looking for a house together in 2006, even though they claimed to have chosen Seongsan-dong for its rent and ease of commuting, a certain secret “yearning for Hongdae” also influenced them. Another interviewee who had moved to Hapjeong-dong in Mapo-gu stated that she intentionally looked for homes in that area despite rising prices. “It was at the height of when it was getting expensive, but I couldn’t

help it. And yearning, well, on top of that yearning—that's where most of the people are living, so I thought, why bother looking in other areas..." (Kim Seonyeong, female, 36).

As a place with lesbian bars and clubs, where events related to queer culture take place, the Hongdae area holds the status of a so-called Mecca among queer women. But the presence of lesbian bars is not a direct factor in queer women's preferences for Mapo, including Hongdae. "I'd say more than there being a lot of L bars or clubs, [it's] other cultural things" (Seo Yugyeong, female, 36). "To be honest [they] say there are lesbian bars, but really there are only a few of them.... I used to go all the time in the past, but lesbian bars aren't particularly more fun or varied. To be honest, they're so loud I don't go [anymore]" (Yang Seungyeon, female, 43). Lesbian bars, unlike gay bars, are fewer in number and variety, and for women in their 30s and 40s are places they avoid because they are "loud." More than this type of entertainment, there were many responses indicating feeling enchanted by Hongdae itself. So how did the yearning that these women feel towards the location of Hongdae arise?

Until the 1970s, the Hongdae area's landscape resembled a typical farming area's residential section, and until the early 1990s it never exceeded the scenery of an average university area. In fact, it was overshadowed by the likes of neighboring Sinchon and Idae. But Hongik University developed into a characteristic arts university in the late 1980s, and this impacted the formation of the area adjacent to the university we know today. In order to take advantage of this specialization, preparatory art academies began to open in front of the university, and university students opened studios in the vicinity and continued to work from there. Thus, a new place was born as the art academies, studios, art-related bookstores, and paint shops began to fill out the landscape surrounding the university. In addition, the commercial area, consisting of studios remodeled into bars or cafes by young artists, became known as a space centered on art. Following the increase in rent prices in Sinchon in the late 1980s, live music cafes began moving into the Hongdae area; and by the mid-90s, live music clubs and indie bands in front of Hongdae began receiving attention. As a result, commercial space for performances and concerts, exhibitions, and other artistic activities took shape in the Hongdae area. Following this, as the culture of dance clubs extended, the floating population of Hongdae grew exponentially, and the expansion of commercial facilities accelerated, contributing to the Hongdae landscape visible today (Ok Eunsil 2009;

Kim Nai 2011).

The movement of lesbian bars from where they were concentrated in Sinchon in the late 1990s into Hongdae was intertwined with this change as well. What is thought to have been the first lesbian bar, Lesbos, opened in Mapo. But lesbian bars settled into the commercial area of Sinchon in connection to the lively discussions on feminism and homosexuality taking place at Yonsei University and Ewha Women’s University. However, as the business district of the Hongdae area burgeoned, business in Sinchon more or less stagnated. A few of the lesbian bars in Sinchon closed around the turn of the millennium as a result. The owner of Labris, which had been the core lesbian bar in Sinchon, closed temporarily and later reopened in Hongdae, making it the first lesbian bar in the Hongdae area.²² Despite feeling at the time “like a special area for people who did music and art,” the owner of Labris, as if by some clairvoyance foreseeing the movement of the commercial area to Hongdae, stated that even if it meant wearing themselves thin, they were looking into the Hongdae area for reopening. They thought that lesbian culture had to join in with the “Hongdae culture,” which was overflowing with vitality and full of diverse people and clubs (Kim Huiyeon 2004: 43). The presence of Labris played a crucial role in generating the density of lesbian bars in the Hongdae area. As large numbers of people came and went from the larger-scale Labris, many smaller bars began to open in its vicinity.

But the “Hongdae culture” mentioned by the owner of Labris was not merely about the growth of the commercial area within Hongdae. Rather, the artistic, free, non-mainstream atmosphere that had long existed in the area pulled in many people. This atmosphere can be enthralling to queers who exist as a minority in society. In fact, if you were to walk in the area in front of the university, you would easily see people in unique attire, unlike in many other places. Hair dyed in daring colors, tattoos, piercings, and the like would earn you glares anywhere else, but in Hongdae they are part of the atmosphere and in fact are considered expressions of individual personality. The fact that diverse attire is acceptable is directly related to

²² (Translator’s note) On June 6, 2018, Labris, known commonly in the community as Lari, announced on their official Instagram page that they would be closing: “Though I hope there will be a day where we can meet again, for the time being I have no plans of reopening, and if I do reopen, I will post a notice on our official Instagram. Please be aware that places that open with the name Lari without there being a notice posted to this Instagram are not the official Lari, but imitators.”

queer people being able to freely walk down the streets. Butch women²³ or FTM (female to male) transgender men, who feel resistance to societally regulated gender roles, typically get strange looks because the clothes they wear do not match their physical sex. But in Hongdae, in an atmosphere where distinctive people are not ostracized and attire is in fact respected as a part of individuality, they are freer from those looks. “There’s a sense that whatever you do, you’ll be accepted in Hongdae. Even if a grandpa wore hot pink clothes, you’d have the feeling that ‘ah, this is possible because we’re in Hongdae,’ and there’s a sense that if I took that and were to say something about it, I would be the weird one” (Choe Dongmi, female, 43). One of my informants who, unlike typical women in their 40s, wore her hair short and wore somewhat masculine clothes, said that she does not fret that much over her clothing when she works in the Hongdae area. She said that even if she were to wear eccentric clothes, she would only receive positive reactions such as, “Oh, Hongdae’s on a different level.” Generally, when one wears clothes outside the social norm in a working environment, one could easily be considered a deviant, but in the Hongdae area it is accepted as individuality “because it’s Hongdae.” That is, what incubated this “yearning” for Hongdae was not so much the existence of lesbian bars itself, but Hongdae’s atmosphere of accepting diversity.

Hearing rumors that a lot of them live there, queer women who wished to express their minority identity in everyday life and share connected values beyond temporary gatherings, moved to the Mapo area. Many civic organizations related to feminism and sexual minorities had moved there, but beyond this, news that funds were being raised to construct a People’s House alluded to a new current. A couple that had watched the construction of the People’s House and joined as members said, “this neighborhood could really do anything.”

From the start, Mapo has been home to diverse, collective local activities, such as the “Mapo Solidarity for Participation and Self Administration” (formed out of the communal childcare cooperative started in 1994 and the living cooperative association started in 1999) as well as the Seongmisan Destruction Task Force. Additionally, they established the low-power community radio broadcast “Mapo FM,” with the aim of vitalizing the local information network, sharing local culture, and improving media

²³ “Butch” refers to a lesbian whose appearance, manner of speaking, and behavior are masculine. “Femme” refers to the opposite.

accessibility to alienated people. Examples of successful local community movements such as Seongmisan Village used strategies similar to those of other civic organizations. Among Mapo FM’s programs was a lesbian community broadcast called the “L Dressmakers” and an unmarried feminist women’s community broadcast, “The Wild Flower Shop.” The “L Dressmakers” production team, Lezpa, started their broadcast with the purpose of hosting a program for lesbian women who had been alienated from media. The name “L Dressmakers” came from the idea that their programming was tailored to lesbians. “The Wild Flower Shop” emerged from the critique that existing media did not include the voices of unmarried women and, guided by the notion that “the most personal is the most political,” features the hosts telling their own stories. Though perhaps these types of broadcasts are not of the same stature as those of other civic organizations, they have an important community function within the local area.

The concentration of civic organizations and small-scale local communities made it easier to share and discuss what they were oriented towards. Additionally, activists from certain organizations formed networks, and people who supported their goals met and interacted with one another routinely, and this was a great advantage. They got to know one another at gatherings hosted by organizations or at small meetings they learned about from these organizations, and attendees who already lived in Mapo sometimes suggested moving there. Becoming neighborhood friends and sharing their everyday lives with one another, visiting one another’s homes or eating together, and sharing hobbies not only maintained an affinity or intimacy between them but was a series of tests based on their shared values. For example, at the swing dance club Swing Sisters, unlike the traditional method of having men as leaders and women as followers, women freely choose their own positions when dancing. Another is the basketball club Confident Sisters, which formed out of an exercise program where feminist organizations shared perspectives about sexual violence, discussed women’s bodies, and taught self-defense. In such a way, Mapo was a space where alternative communities were formed thanks to the presence of organizations that united over common concerns. Because people gathered there aboard those new currents, Mapo was able to act as the backdrop for a new, radical political endeavor.

6. The Making of a Queer Village

1) *Queers as Constituents*

Castells writes that when it comes to the creation of LGBTQ residential neighborhoods in cities, there are contrasts between gay men and lesbian women. Men seek to dominate spaces, but women accord more importance to networks and relationships. Lesbians “are more concerned with the revolution of values than with the control of institutional power” (Castells 1983: 140). Regarding this gendered difference in understanding, desire, and values that Castells describes, Adler and Brenner (1992) rebut that this is not only because lesbian women (like heterosexual women) have lesser access to capital than men, but because they are reluctant to display themselves territorially for fear of male violence. That is, rather than being a matter of differing values, the occupation of space—or the lack thereof—originates in gendered differences of power and is difficult to label as simply the lack of determination to occupy physical space on the part of women.

As both women and sexual minorities, many lesbians feel acutely the difficulty of occupying space for themselves outside the boundaries of a “typical family.” For example, an unmarried woman with no dependents who is under the age of 35 does not qualify for a state supported *jeonse* loan. This illustrates that welfare continues to be implemented via a male-earner-centric typical family model. Further, this typical family ideology also operates in the form of reciprocity at the family level. “Not long ago my older brother got married, and my parents bought him a house.” “Marriage? Now that’s worth doing.” Though it offered affordable living in the past, as rent prices in Mapo rise, these types of jokes are told among queer residents when they talk about pressure to move and anxiety over having nowhere to land. This is because, though the housing shortage is becoming a pressing issue today for many, straight couples who undergo the rite of independence we call marriage at least receive large sums of financial support from parents. There are cases in which one member of a same-sex couple receives support from their parents and is able to acquire a house for both of them. But in this case, parents quietly decided that their daughter was of marriageable age and bequeathed to her her wedding fund in the form of *jeonse* money.

In a society that considers marriage the gateway to becoming a full-

fledged citizen, unmarried women can be perceived as “incomplete beings” compared to married or unmarried men. And when one considers the reality of the wage gap between men and women, and the many constraints on the promotion of women to high-ranking positions, the practical problems facing men and women, even when both are unmarried, are much different. Choe, a realtor in the Mapo area, said, “I’m not worried about gays. The prices they’re looking for are clearly different” (Choe Dongmi, female, 43). Queer clients occasionally seek out Choe after hearing stories of her. According to her, besides the queer women who work in professional careers, most queer women’s economic positions are not stable. For example, as a friend of hers who works at a large corporation began to age, she became anxious about lay-offs, and she would joke to her about “if [she] didn’t get kickbacks” from her subcontractors “and set it aside, [she] wouldn’t be able to live.” “Because for women, things aren’t solvable by a single drink” (Choe Dongmi, female, 43). Queer women who do not have families with male breadwinners find themselves in a far less stable economic position. Women’s heightened interest in the politics of everyday life stem from women’s position as more marginalized than men, even within the queer community.

With these concerns in hand, Mapo’s queer residents endeavored to share their political voices as sexual minorities based in their local area. In March of 2010, 6 queer residents of Mapo—each of whom either worked in the women’s rights or LGBTQ human rights movements, or who were supporters of such work—gathered at the home of one of the couples to discuss the local elections. During this gathering, the phrase “you know, a lot of us really live in Mapo” started as a joke but ended up morphing into the sentiment, “then let’s try this for real” (Yi Minjeong, female, 31). With the June 2nd election ahead of them, they planned to deliver to candidates a questionnaire containing the sexual minority positions on certain issues, highlighting their status as both sexual minorities and voters. Some people who had worked at the campaign headquarters for Choe Hyeonsuk during the 2008 general election contributed to the effort and continued fighting for what sexual minorities were concerned about in politics. But in order for the phrase circulating among queer residents—“you know, a lot of us really live in Mapo”—to gain power, they had to confirm how large the population of queer residents in Mapo actually was. Right away these 6 queer residents made a list of all the queer people within their personal networks, and when the number of names vastly surpassed 100 people, they

confirmed that “Mapo was indeed the neighborhood of perverts (*byeontae*)” (Yu Jiwon, female, 31). With this list, they established the Union of Mapo Rainbow Voters, the predecessor to the Union of Mapo Rainbow Residents.

The founders of UMRV became “rotation leaders” (*dangbeon*) and led their meetings. UMRV members discussed the idea of a village that was good for queers to live in, organized these thoughts, and distributed them in the form of a questionnaire to each candidate. Of the candidates that received the questionnaire, some said they would reflect the ideas of the LGBTQ voters, and some even held question-and-answer sessions with the members of UMRV. After the election, they felt that doing away with this organized queer network, with its membership of over 100, would be regrettable. So they gathered opinions and transformed the Union of Mapo Rainbow Voters into the Union of Mapo Rainbow Residents, which continued as a social group for the area and for LGBTQ politics in everyday life.

Later, leading up to the 19th National Assembly election on April 11, 2012, the UMRR revealed their “Voters Union” side again and hosted a “[Boat/Vote] People Politics Talk Show & Voters Party.” The term “[Boat/Vote] people” had a dual meaning. It was a metaphor that likened their circumstances—being thrust into the storm of redevelopment and high housing prices, floating in Seoul and unable to settle anywhere—to the situation of “boat people,” refugees floating in boats on the ocean. On the other hand, it referred to them as “vote people,” that is, it conveyed the message that these people were voters and were determined to actively participate in the upcoming election. The [Boat/Vote] People (members of the UMRR) gathered sexual minorities, those living independently, and unmarried women to look review over each candidate’s campaign promises, invite candidates to town-hall style question-and-answer events, and convey their position as voters.

The activities of the UMRR affirmed the idea that “a lot of queers live in Mapo” and resulted in an organized network that could mobilize power. In addition, these activities confirmed that queer identity was not merely a private condition, but it generated a community willing to influence institutional politics through the positions of local voters.

2) *Queers as Mapo Residents*

More than anything else, the love for their neighborhood drove the queer

Mapo residents to pioneer the Union of Mapo Rainbow Residents. Mapo was a place where “residents can have their own space” (Yu Jiwon, female, 31) and where “our neighborhood friends” were (Seo Yugyeong, female, 36), so it was the foundation from which queer residents could build a community among their friends. After transitioning into a residents’ union, the UMRR assembled queers from the area through various events. Additionally, people from outside the area learned of the UMRR through different channels and came to these events too. As the UMRR’s role in bringing together queers from different parts of the metropolitan area grew, the symbolism of Mapo as a “queer neighborhood” was further bolstered.

The Queer Table (*kwieo babsang*), where members gathered once a month to make and share a meal together, became the most essential regular gathering of the UMRR. It began with the intent of gathering to eat together because people living alone tend to skip meals, especially on weekends. The UMRR rented a meeting space in Mapo for the monthly event. People made and shared a meal together in a comfortable environment, and it played a central role in initiating new members into the community. Members would generally introduce themselves by saying “Hello, I am _____, and I live in Mangwon-dong,” revealing in some way whether they were residents of Mapo or if they were people who visited Mapo frequently. This self-introduction segment reaffirmed that Mapo was an area where many queer people lived. Occasionally members who lived outside Mapo would express that “I want to live in Mapo too.” People shared information about monthly rent and *jeonse* prices within Mapo, announcements that someone was looking for a roommate, and other information about homes. These conversational attempts to bring new queer residents to the area refortified Mapo’s sense of place as a queer neighborhood.

Outside of regular gatherings, when suggestions of sharing hobbies arose, small groups formed around different subjects. Gatherings for riding bicycles, sharing one another’s kitchens and making small side dishes (*mitbanchan*), as well as gatherings to prepare for upcoming events promoted fellowship among members and provided opportunities to share news about the neighborhood. In addition, conversations about queers they had seen in the neighborhood ceaselessly constructed a correlation between the local area and queer identity. When the first members formed the UMRR and established a queer network, they saw the validity of the idea

that “many queers live in Mapo.” But discovering queers who were not a part of this organization in the local area gave even more strength to the thesis. When they saw someone who they felt was queer, based on their attire or general vibe, for example, while looking through the windows of a neighborhood chicken restaurant, they would say, “that person who just passed is on this side (queer),”²⁴ or “there really are a lot of queers in this neighborhood.” When sharing information about stores and restaurants in the neighborhood, they might comment, “X who works there is a butch, isn’t she?” and “Yeah, I heard that, too, and went myself, and when I saw her (nodding head), mm-hmm.” Through such conversations, members confirmed even further that Mapo was a queer neighborhood, and their attachment to the local area grew.

In particular, the Mapo 09 and Mapo 16 buses that ran through both the areas of lesbian nightlife, Hongdae, and their residential areas in Mangwon-dong and Hapjeong-dong, were places popularly known as “where the gaydar²⁵ never shuts off” (Yu Jiwon, female, 31). Because these buses passed through the areas queers frequented, they were sometimes called by the nickname “queer buses.” Using somewhat allusive phrasing and a small rainbow (the symbol for sexual minorities), the UMRR ran an ad on these village buses, hoping that the queers who were quietly living in hiding in the local area would learn of the UMRR, and their network would grow. The ad ran in 7 village buses for three months following June 15, 2011. Though it had little effect on people who are unaware of sexual minorities, it was enough to inspire a secret sense of solidarity in the queers who were reached by it. Furthermore, by exposing “queerness” in an everyday space that was presumed to be heterosexual, it was an attempt to create a covert rupture.

The Union of Mapo Rainbow Residents’ participation in the struggle to block the opening of the Homeplus Hapjeong branch, an issue within the local community, further solidified this visibility. UMRR members tended to buy their groceries from the Mangwon Market for their Queer Dinner Tables rather than from a corporate supermarket. They participated in the cultural festival opposing the opening of a Hapjeong Homeplus in

²⁴ (Translator’s note) Queers in Korea use ‘this side’ or *ijjak* to refer to people who are queer.

²⁵ This combination of the words “gay” and “radar” refers to the ability of LGBTQ people to recognize one another.

2012 and contributed to this shared local concern by hanging a banner—in the name of the Union of Mapo Rainbow Residents—stating their support for the withdrawal of the Homeplus from the area. In the process, they met and talked with merchants from the market who were at the sit-in site. It was a chance to confirm that these merchants recognized the existence of queers in the area. A merchant who met with members of the UMRR said, “I know there is a place like that where only women go,” and, “it seems like many women go about together with other women” (Kim Seonyeong, female, 36).

In reality, the fact that queer residents were living in Mapo was already somewhat known amongst the non-queer residents of Mapo. In January of 2013, at a New Year’s event held annually by a local organization, a straight couple saw some of the printed material UMRR had brought and reacted by saying, “Isn’t there a broadcast on Mapo FM that these kind of *eonnis*²⁶ do?” (Kim Seonyeong, female, 36).

But attempts to make queers’ presence known in the area were also an opportunity to expose the heterosexism that had gone overlooked during this time. The so-called “Operation Banner,” a project to hang a banner on a local ad board publicizing the UMRR on a larger scale than what had been done on the village buses, ran into opposition from the Mapo District Office. Banners that read “LGBT, we are living here now” and “1 in 10 people who pass this banner is a sexual minority” were deemed as “making the elders uncomfortable” and “unsuitable for teenagers” by the Mapo District Office, who denied their approval. Further, the district office took issue with the picture of a finger pointing at the word “here,” calling it “detestable.” Queer residents understood this to mean that the office took issue with the fact that they were living “here,” in Mapo-gu, and that they could not accept that regular people were residing in the same space as sexual minorities. Queer residents, despite being adults themselves, were told that they were “making the elders uncomfortable.” This illustrated that they were excluded from being “adults,” that is, “those who gained their civil rights through marriage.”

This was the context of queer residents being alienated from the local

²⁶ (Translator’s Note) *Eonni* is a common Korean term used by women to refer to both women who are their older sisters in the familial sense as well as unrelated women who are slightly older than them. A counterpart to this term is ‘*oppa*,’ which women use to refer to older brothers or familiar yet slightly older men.

Mapo community. One lesbian woman in her 40s felt discomfort after hearing at a local community gathering something along the lines of “if you’re married, tell your husbands to come. If the community is to grow, we need more men.” Having first been established through communal childcare, the community had a strong familial character, an environment not inherently sympathetic to the lifestyles of unmarried or queer residents. Furthermore, the patriarchal way of thinking—that they needed men to perform the roles of husbands—meant that women were excluded from equitable access to rights in the community.

However, “the impulse for the justified procurement of their space breeds ideas and movements of radical struggles” (Munt 1998: 3, quoted in Bell and Valentine 2009: 391). Queer residents of Mapo developed a movement for social belonging in response to this type of social exclusion and invisibility. Even queers who did not reside in Mapo joined in this movement as they made their thoughts heard in a variety of ways, including sending complaints to the Mapo District Office, sending in written protests on an organizational level, and performing one-person-relay protests in front of the district office building. Additionally, a movement spread in which different communities—Eunpyeong-gu and Seongbuk-gu—and LGBT clubs on university campuses hung banners revealing the presence of queers in support of the UMRR. This movement, whereby they openly declared their sexual identity in a direct challenge to heterosexual hegemony, created queer spaces. Moreover, as a site of sexual minority visibility, it strengthened the symbolism of Mapo as a “queer neighborhood.”

The Mapo community, which had lacked awareness of sexual minorities, transformed in response. An openly lesbian activist was elected head of the People’s House, an event that symbolized sexual minorities as included in “people” that the People’s House strived to embrace. Additionally, residents of Seongmisan Village became more aware of the presence of queers due to the banner issues, and they were accepted as constituting part of the community, as noted earlier. Queer residents previously had been unable to communicate with the existing residents because of their social position and differences in their values, but the movement for queer visibility made known the active praxis of queers in the local area. Now, even those within the family-centric community recognize their limitations and feel the necessity for sensitivity to sexual minority human rights. This change shows that the image of Mapo as queer territory is not held only within the queer community. This is a sign that the establishment of political

power by queers is advancing, with a foundation in the Mapo area.

7. Conclusion

The 14th annual Queer Culture Festival was held on the “Hongdae walking street” located in Seogyo-dong, Mapo-gu, under the theme “The Queer: We Exist.” Queer festivals in years past had generally been held in Jongno. This geographic move occurred with the strengthening of Mapo’s symbolism as the space of queers’ lives and as the heart of their political empowerment. With this slogan, queers declared that their issue was not the right to privacy but the freedom to be public (Berlant and Freeman 1993: 198 quoted in Valentine 2009: 392). By focusing on space, this article has attempted to explore the meaning of LGBTQ identities within the context of Korean society as well as the routine yet political practices of those with such identities. I have focused in particular on the active practices to occupy space created by lesbian women, a group that has been relatively alienated from the predominant perceptions of sexual minorities.

Historically, queer culture has had a tight-knit relationship to space, as can be seen by its formation in particular places. However, when concerns surfaced about going beyond the commercial areas meant only for temporary use and the need to newly occupy space arose, lesbian activists rediscovered the Mapo area. Mapo had been favored early on as a residential area among queer women for its inexpensive rent, convenient transportation, and an atmosphere accepting of diversity. When civic organizations supportive of the LGBTQ human rights movement settled in as well, it became a place where the local community movement found continuity. Although power had acted to make these queers and their supporters settle in Mapo, a space on the margins of Seoul, the settlement of these women in the local area as well as their social practices rooted in the local area were an attempt to propel the everyday visibility and political empowerment of queers. That is, where there is power in action, there is the possibility of resistance (Foucault 2004).

Through their networks, queer and unmarried women in Mapo “created a rich interior world of their own” within their routine lives.²⁷ When they acted as voters, they attempted to gain “control of institutional

²⁷ (Editor’s note) No source for the quote is provided in the Korean-language original.

power” as well. Additionally, attempts to broadcast the existence of sexual minorities in public places within the community exposed the preexisting social hegemony of heterosexuality, and they imbued the Mapo area with the symbolic designation of “queer territory.” People who had been invisible as sexual minorities for so long gained visibility by constructing their physical space anew.

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