

# Symbols and Rituals on the Grounds of Queer Culture Festivals

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**(Abstract)** The Queer Culture Festivals (QCF) in South Korea have been rapidly growing as a social movement that promotes visibility and pride of the LGBTQ population. This study explores rituals and symbols at QCFs: territorialization of the festivals' grounds; booth activities; staged speeches and slogans; queer-themed artefacts; and participants' bodily expressions. These various activities question and mock the hegemonic notions of heteronormativity and gender binaries, the ideology of the normal family, Confucian puritanism, and the anti-queer rhetoric of Evangelical Christians. QCFs also deploy playful symbols to subvert the stereotypes of LGBTQ people as abnormal, amoral, and sinful; instead they depict LGBTQ as proud and worthy. The article argues that, in comparison with secularized, individualized, and commercialized festivals of contemporary South Korea, QCFs have retained the ritualism, communality, and subversiveness of traditional festivals—and this difference is due to queer participants realizing their yearning for a utopian world via their participation in QCFs.

## 1. Preface

South Korea's Queer Culture Festivals (QCFs) have continued to grow at astounding rates in recent years. Fifty people attended the first Seoul QCF held at Daehak-ro in 2000; in 2019, over 80,000 participants joined in the main event at Seoul Plaza for the 20<sup>th</sup> QCF, and approximately 70,000<sup>1</sup>

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people marched in the parade that snaked through the heart of the city and passed in front of Gwanghwamun, alongside 12 decorated parade trucks. Outside of Seoul, QCFs have sprung up across the country: Daegu held its first in 2009; Busan and Jeju in 2017; Jeonju, Incheon, and Gwangju in 2018; and Changwon, Gyeongnam Province in 2019. At the same time, the homophobic lobby, with the conservative Protestant church as its fulcrum, has displayed active and sometimes illegal and violent shows of force, such as placing pressure on administrative agencies to block QCFs from being held or holding counter rallies. Growing in scale and spreading across the nation while accompanied by the outspoken anti-QCF movement and media attention, QCFs are representative of both the cultural events as well as social movement of the Korean queer community.<sup>2</sup>

Drawing on ethnographic observations and analysis of the ritualistic and symbolic components of South Korea's QCFs, this article examines the festivity of QCFs and the political efficacy of this festive nature. QCFs consist of an event held in a plaza (booths and stage performances) and a parade that follows after. For the purposes of this article, I analyze the dynamics of the event held in the plaza, which takes place in a fixed location. Between 2016 and 2019, I carried out participant observation of QCFs in different regions as well as events and other protests, such as those for Transgender Day of Remembrance and other social events hosted by LGBTQ+ groups. I also attended planning meetings for the Incheon QCF and the Seoul QCF.

## 2. The Queer Culture Festival as a Social Movement

### *1) The Status of LGBTQ+ People in Korean Society*

There continues to be no institutional mechanism for preventing discrimination against LGBTQ+ people in South Korea. In a nation that mandates compulsory military service for those assigned male at birth, the military criminal code criminalizes homosexuality in the South Korean military (Amnesty International 2019). Although proposals have been tabled in each session of the National Assembly since 2007, a comprehensive

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<sup>2</sup> In keeping with the spirit of the term "Queer Culture Festival" this article uses the terms LGBTQ+ and queer interchangeably.

antidiscrimination law has yet to be established since there is vehement opposition from the conservative Christian lobby, which objects to the inclusion of the terms “sexual orientation” and “gender identity” in the provisions for antidiscrimination.

In recent years, general public opinion of LGBTQ+ people has steadily become more amicable (Gallup Report 2019). However, the primary bodies of the Protestant church have characterized homosexuality as the greatest crisis facing both the church and South Korean society at large, and they have put their entire weight behind blocking the establishment of antidiscrimination legislation, disrupting QCFs, and placing pressure on seminary students, ministers, and Christian media who support LGBTQ+ people by reporting, punishing, or cutting off financial support. In addition, they have antagonized the LGBTQ+ community by presenting litmus tests for politicians at election debates or National Assembly hearings (Choi Seunghyeon 2019; Yi Yongpil 2019). Moreover, a newly emerging wave of transphobia can be seen in South Korea, epitomized by cases such as the Sookmyung Women’s University incident, when a portion of the student body fiercely opposed the enrollment of a transgender student in 2020, ultimately ending with the unnamed student forgoing her enrollment at the school. In sum, though the perceptions of LGBTQ+ people in society at large have continued to change for the better, some very powerful and hostile collective movements still overpower general public opinion. The government and local administrations as well as public institutions and politicians are cognizant of public opposition and have thus been consistent in their noninvolvement and bystandership.

Without an institutional apparatus to protect LGBTQ+ people, they undergo varied forms of violence within their schools, homes, and workplaces, ranging from bullying to wrongful termination, sexual assault, physical assault, and verbal assault. Such discrimination and homophobia/transphobia have contributed to high rates of depression, high rates of attempted and completed suicide, and overall poor mental and physical health among members of the LGBTQ+ community, leading to untimely deaths (Yi Horim et al. 2017).

## *2) Aspects of the Queer Culture Festivals as a Queer Movement: Expressions of Pride and Visibility*

South Korea’s QCFs can be seen as belonging to the Pride movements

that began in the United States in the 1970s and have now spread across the globe. Bruce (2016: 12–20) has asserted that while social movements were aimed at the state in the past, Pride parades are a new type of social movement, with the main objective of transforming the culture of mainstream society. What Pride aims to change in various societies are the ideologies of heteronormativity and gender binary that oppress queer people in their everyday lives (Bruce 2016; Peterson et al. 2018). In South Korea, pressure from the fundamentalist Christian church—which vilifies homosexuality as perversion and considers it to be a threat to families and to society (Siu 2018)—the ideology surrounding families steeped in Confucian notions (of passing down lineage and the hierarchy between generations), and the norms related to inappropriate behavior best typified by the expressions “indecent” and “vulgar,” all add to that oppression.

The typical characteristics of Pride include displaying difference and expressing pride. One of the planners of the Incheon QCF explained the significance of such QCFs in the following way:

[QCFs] become a place wherein queer people, who are invisible to society, can pick any color that they choose from the vast spectrum of the rainbow. The existence of a day that I can be myself, a day that I don't have to be invisible, makes it a meaningful day on which I can find my own value and find the meaning of my own existence. Moreover, it doesn't just end with finding myself, but it is a day on which I can verify the relationships around me. (Yi Hyecheon 2019: 29–30)

Up until 2013, QCFs in Korea existed as small-scale events held solely for the LGBTQ+ community, and they received little outsider attention. However, in 2014, when the 15<sup>th</sup> annual Seoul QCF, held in Sinchon, was delayed for more than four hours due to disruption by homophobic groups (Kim Hyeoncheol 2015; Jeong Hwiseong 2018; Heo Seongwon 2019), the homophobic organizations' violent interference was picked up on and reported by the media. With that, realization began to spread that this is not only an issue for the LGBTQ+ community but is also connected to the overall human rights situation in South Korea and can be considered the starting point for the development of a solidarity movement connected to a civil rights movement. In 2017, following homophobic remarks by certain candidates at a presidential debate and the exposure of human rights violations against gay servicemembers, the enactment of a comprehensive antidiscrimination law began to be picked up as the core agenda item for

QCFs nationwide. At the “Pink Dot” event held on the eve of the 20<sup>th</sup> Seoul QCF in 2019, 6 activists from the South Korean Coalition for Anti-discrimination Legislation, representing disabled people, women, immigrants, and LGBTQ+ people, took the stage and delivered a message aimed at an equal society. Such actions indicate that QCFs clearly position themselves as part of a coalition of movements advocating for the rights of marginalized communities.

### 3. Symbols and Rituals of Queer Culture Festivals

QCFs in Korea are, as their name suggests, a festival, as much as they are a social movement. Studies on global Pride movements and LGBTQ+ politics point out that “performances of party and politics”—namely, a combination of resistance and play—is what sets them apart from other types of minority politics (Shepard 2010; Bruce 2016; Peterson et al. 2018). To quote a Pride participant who met homophobic provocation with humor and wit, “At Prides, ‘being fabulous’ is protest” (Bruce 2016: 2). As we can see in anthropological research on rituals and play in social movements and political rallies in the twenty-first century (Jo Ildong 2009; Kim Seungyeon 2011; Bak Jihwan 2012; Jo Sumi 2016), the political nature of festivals and the rituals of political rallies are both embedded in the same context.

The diverse ritual practices at QCFs deliver messages regarding queer existence to festival participants in recurring and varied ways. Messages like “LGBTQ+ people are everywhere” (visibility), and “Queer people are deserving of recognition and love just for existing” (pride) are most typical. At the same time, these messages are also counterspeech that resists the ideologies, stereotypes, and homophobic rhetoric that are oppressive to the queer community, such as characterizations of the LGBTQ+ community as obscene, immoral, sinful, different, a “disease,” and “a menace to families and our traditional country.” In the following sections, I go over the main components of the festivals to look at how the above messages are communicated both linguistically and non-linguistically through the festivals’ space, symbols, rituals, and bodily and verbal expressions. In practice, these parts are not separate but blend together, and they are expressed and experienced simultaneously by the body’s multiple senses, amplifying the polyvocality of the festival.

### 1) *Space*

QCFs attempt to expose the gender binary and heteronormativity entrenched in public spaces that are usually considered neutral and common, temporarily upending that order by having “sexual dissidents” occupy a public space in the city, displaying their non-normative sexualities and genders (Kim Hyeoncheol 2015). Those who oppose QCFs see such an attempt to be a moral transgression, defining QCFs as “festivals of obscenity” that threaten the “national order” and family values and are harmful to youths, thus they attempt to shut them down. Their typical logic can be summed up in a remark from National Assembly member Yi Eonju during a 2018 current affairs debate held by KBS: “Whatever they may do in their homes, where no one can see them, they shouldn’t hold an obscene festival in a public place.” The rivalry between these parties comes to the fore in the conflict that emerges each year, post 2015, surrounding the Seoul QCF’s use of the Seoul City Hall Plaza (Jeong Hwiseong 2018). In the sections below, I will elucidate the contestations surrounding the historicity and symbolism of the locations at which Korean QCFs are held as well as the methods by which QCFs territorialize the space of the festival into a space for the LGBTQ+ community.

#### **Historic Nature and Symbolism of Queer Culture Festival Locations**

QCFs take place in locations that have special significance to the LGBTQ+ community or in public spaces that are easily recognized by members. In the beginning, the Seoul QCF was held in locales where the gay and lesbian subcultures flourished: Jongno or Cheonggyecheon, Hongdae, and Sinchon. From 2015 onward, the Seoul QCF, and other regions’ QCFs as well, began to be held in locations that have a strong public significance.

However, administrative agencies with jurisdiction over event spaces have repeatedly been at odds with QCFs’ organizers, making their use of the space difficult or impossible through various means: exclusively denying a QCF’s access to space that is always used for community events; granting access to a space and then later cancelling it; or turning a blind eye to counterrallies’ attempts to disrupt the festival (*Yonhap News*, October 17, 2017; *Yonhap News*, August 19, 2019; Seoul Metropolitan Human Rights Commission, September 26, 2019). In 2019, out of all the civic events registered to be held in the Gunam-ro Square, the Haeundae-gu Office denied only the Busan QCF’s application; their reasoning being that the

Busan QCF lacked the “public nature” required of events that are to be held in a public space. Such actions illustrate that the central government and local administrative agencies do not recognize LGBTQ+ people as having equal rights to occupy public spaces as other citizens.

These conflicts are exacerbated in cases where the location holds historic significance, such as in the case of the Gwangju QCF. At the first Gwangju QCF, held in 2018 at the May 18 Democratic Plaza in front of the former South Jeolla Provincial Office building, organizers distributed handheld placards that depicted the Provincial Office during the time of the May 18 Democratic Uprising as well as placards with the lyrics to “March for the Beloved” written on them, and choruses of “March for the Beloved” were sung multiple times throughout the event. The booth of the Federation of Gwangju Jeonnam Women’s Associations made and handed out rice balls, a snack that is known to have been prepared by women and given out to citizens at the time of the uprising in 1980. Yet some Christian organizations and veterans of the May 18 Democratic Uprising declared their opposition to the event, saying that “holding a queer festival on the sacred grounds of democracy is a blasphemous event that sullies the Gwangju Spirit” (*Sisa Journal*, October 22, 2018). On the day of the QCF, those opposed to the event surrounded the plaza, carrying signs that read, “Why is there a panty festival being held on the May 18 Democratic Plaza?” They blocked the QCF’s parade, even resorting to violence, such as throwing water bottles and flagstaves at participants. Upon hearing “March for the Beloved” being sung by participants of the QCF, protesters screamed in rage. They then began to sing “March for the Beloved” amongst themselves, culminating in a peculiar spectacle in which the song resounded loudly from both the QCF and protesters surrounding them.

The second Gwangju QCF was held along Geumnam-ro, another key location of the May 18 Democratic Uprising. During his celebratory address, the chairperson of the Gwangju Justice Party recalled that in 1933, people with leprosy, pastors, and nurses from Gwangju’s Chejungwon (an early hospital that practiced Western medicine) marched from Gwangju to Seoul in a “March of the Lepers” (*gura haengjin*)—in protest of the Japanese Government-General’s policy of sterilizing leprosy patients—relating it to the QCF as an expression of the pride of marginalized people who fight state authority and social oppression. One participant in the QCF regularly took part in “May 18 Spirit and Will” volunteer work as guide, taking people to and informing them about the history of Uprising locations. This

participant told me that she was shocked to hear the chants of opposition from the Association of Families Bereaved by May 18 during the initial festival. Because she was unwilling to let them write history that way, she told me she had firmly resolved to actively participate in the second festival by tabling at a booth for her bookstore. Meanwhile, to commemorate the second Gwangju QCF, the *Jeonnam Ilbo* made the header title on both its internet and paper editions rainbow colored, and on the eve of the festival, it changed the electronic display on its office building to a rainbow as well. This was the first instance of traditional press, rather than internet media, openly displaying its support for the LGBTQ+ community and QCFs in Korea, irrespective of region.

Controversies surrounding the Gwangju QCF can be tied back to the question of LGBTQ+ people's civil rights in Korean society. This is a question of whether the LGBTQ+ subject can occupy a public space in the country as part of the "Korean nation" (*gungmin*) or as a "Korean citizen" while proclaiming their sexual/gender non-conformity, and whether the history of the queer subject can be included in the "history of the Korean democratization movement" written in the plaza in front of the Provincial Office. Those opposed to this not only fail to recognize LGBTQ+ people as legitimate civil subjects but now see them as an entity that adulterated the historical significance of the May 18 Democratic Uprising officially included in the "nation's history" or the "history of democratization." At the same time, organizers, participants, and supporters of the festival not only interpret holding the QCF for the sake of LGBTQ+ human rights at the place in the city where the oppressed citizens of Gwangju began to resist their oppressors as contributing to the continuum of Korea's history of democracy, but as a meaningful occurrence that reaffirms Gwangju's identity as the city of democratization and human rights. The meanings of the "Gwangju Spirit" and the QCF are ever changing amidst contentions between individuals and groups.

### **Borders and Territories of Festivals**

During a QCF, the streets and plazas are temporarily transformed into queer territory. It has been called "a space where [a queer person] can totally be themselves," "a space where the minority becomes the majority," and "a space where LGBTQ+ people can mingle with regular people" (Seoul Queer Culture Festival Survey 2018). But the project of creating a territory while surrounded on all sides by the active and systematic opposi-



tion of homophobic groups is no easy task. While holding counterrallies in the vicinity of the festival, these groups disrupt the festival with noise and intimidate festival attendees and passersby while picketing at the entrance. Some even enter the space of the festival and start fights with participants or secretly take pictures and circulate them on anti-LGBTQ+ media. The festival exists within a precarious balance between the various methods of preventing such organizations' interference by festival organizers and the police, who attempt to separate the two parties in order to prevent violent confrontations. Here, I briefly summarize the apparatuses that form the zone of the festival amidst such tensions as well as the effects that this has on the behavior and emotions of festival participants.

The borders of the festival grounds are visible and substantially established. The event space is enclosed by a fence, and inside the space, tents for booths are set up with their backs to the fence, meaning that one cannot see into the space from the outside. Police are stationed in places where conflicts are most expected to arise, and sometimes police buses are used as walls or blockades as well. At the entrance there is a so-called "queer checkpoint" (Siu 2018: 235) at which festival personnel, with the assistance of police, block protestors from entering the festival grounds. Persons with symbols (e.g. t-shirts, flags, handouts) of the homophobic lobby, well-known figures in the anti-LGBTQ+ movement, and press from media outlets with a history of publishing malicious articles about LGBTQ+ people and QCFs are restricted from entering. Furthermore, there is a press center inside the event space. Those who wish to take photos must first provide an ID or business card and sign a written document with photography/filming guidelines enumerated on it in order to be granted a press card. These large press cards, which are either stuck to the person's clothing or worn around the neck on a lanyard, ensure that attendees are able to discern who is taking photo/video with permission; volunteers wearing official uniforms patrol the event space, surveying it for nonauthorized photography. Such mechanisms affirm that the space of the festival is a place that is monitored for the protection of LGBTQ+ people.

But the measures for creating a safe festival space are far from perfect and have flaws. The fences and walls that block sight of the festival and the restrictions on press coverage clash with the festival's goal of making the LGBTQ+ community visible. Furthermore, protestors cannot be completely prevented from entering. So long as a person does not have clear indicators of belonging to the homophobic bloc (homophobic flags, pamphlets, etc.),

they cannot be kept from entering; and relying on stereotypes (age, attire, effects) has sometimes led to rightful participants being blocked from entering. In Seoul, the counterrally uses enormous speakers and drumlines to produce thundering noise, and in order to drown out this noise, the festival uses large speakers of its own to play music or make announcements, making the event space so loud that it is hard to have a conversation within it. The fences and booths also hinder the movement of participants. At the 2018 Seoul QCF, attended by tens of thousands of people in sweltering heat, attendees were both physically and mentally overwhelmed by the space being so jam-packed and cacophonous that it was difficult to even do a lap of the booths.

Though festival organizers are cognizant of such dilemmas, for now they have no choice but to prioritize the safety of QCF participants. Between active and sometimes violent disruption of opposing organizations and the lukewarm attitude of law enforcement, the territorialization of QCFs is realized within a perilous equilibrium. In instances where the number of protesters vastly outnumbers QCF attendees, such as in Daegu and Incheon in 2018, or cases wherein the police fail to effectively restrict the access of malicious parties, this equilibrium is shattered, and there have even been times when the protesters physically occupied the festival grounds or blocked the parade and became violent, grinding the event to a halt (Jo Sumi 2019).

But to many attendees, as much as the homophobic protesters are a source of unpleasantness and fear, the space of the festival provides a substantial sense of liberation and freedom. This contrast of emotions is amplified by the layer upon layer of apparatuses that one passes by before arriving at the QCF grounds. In order to arrive at the festival grounds, a participant must pass through the counterrally, and expressions of homophobia and transphobia, which are visible and audible from all sides, are more daunting than usual. The presence of police can also feel intimidating and unfamiliar. As one draws closer to the festival grounds, the number of people walking about carrying symbols of the LGBTQ+ community gradually increases, and the entrance, surrounded by a police line, appears. In Seoul, one passes through a large, clear entrance decorated with all the colors of the rainbow; in locations outside of Seoul, one must pass through narrow entrances, which are surrounded by multiple layers of volunteers and police, one person at a time. But once a person clears the gate, colorful LGBTQ+ symbols enter their field of vision from all around, and a space

opens up before them in which people with diverse and unimpeded bodily expressions are walking around freely. Because this contrast is so stark, one gets the feeling of stepping into an entirely new world. One attendee told me that when she went to the festival for the first time in 2017, the path coming into the festival was daunting, and the police scared her too; but the moment she entered the festival, the feeling that this was a “space just for us” was pleasant, “like a secret fort we used to make by going under blankets and turning on a lantern.” This “space just for us” is not created only by securing a territory but is completed by the practices of individuals, participating organizations, and the festival organizers that “fill the space with difference and plurality” (Kim Hyeoncheol 2015: 34).

### Booths

In contrast to overseas Pride events that center around a parade, the booth event that takes place all day in the plaza is a typical component that illustrates the distinctive characteristic of South Korean QCFs. A stage is placed either in the plaza or on one corner of a blocked road, and all along the circumference of the plaza or down the sides of the road are booths—around 100 of them at Seoul’s QCF and anywhere between 30 and 40 at non-Seoul QCFs. While these booths remain in the plaza throughout the festival hours, they carry out the crucial functions of territorializing the festival, providing cultural content related to the LGBTQ+ community, education intended to mollify prejudices about members of the LGBTQ+ community, and activities raising awareness. Figure 1 is a map of the booth layout at the 2019 Jeonju QCF, and though its scale is on the smaller side, it shows the typical way that booths are arranged in a plaza at a QCF.

Booths can be roughly divided into the following categories: festival organizers/managers; organizing committees of QCFs in other regions and outside of Korea; organizations concerned with the LGBTQ+ movement and small social and hobby groups; queer artists, queer media, and alternative media (YouTube or podcast) creators; allied organizations with other agendas (human rights, women’s rights, labor rights, environmental protection, migrant rights, education, local civic organizations, etc.); progressive minor political parties, foreign embassies, religious organizations; other.

LGBTQ+-specific organizations promote their activities as well as the reality and culture of queer people in South Korea, while embassies, minor political parties, activist organizations, and all other allied organizations simultaneously express support for and solidarity with the LGBTQ+



**Figure 1.** Map of the booth layout at the 2019 Jeonju QCF. (A. Jeonju Queer Culture Festival Organizing Committee; B. Jeonju Queer Culture Festival Medical Team; C. Jeonju Queer Culture Festival Human Rights Violation Surveillance Team; D. Jeonju Queer Culture Festival Reward; E. Jeonju Queer Culture Festival Solidarity Pride Passport; 1. Northern Jeolla Province Queer Group Open Door; 2. ThanQ; 3. Misreading; 4. Solidarity of University & Youth Queer Societies in Korea; QUV; 5. Gwangju Queer Group Poralis; 6. Queer in Pusan (QIP); 7. YouthQueerUnioN (YQUN) 8. I Remember: Naneun Geokanda; 9. VaginaVictory; 10. Jeonbuk Women's Association United; 11. Femi Party Founding Organization; 12. Labor Party Jeonbuk; 13. Jeonbuk Green Party & TodakTodak Bookstore; 14. The Korean Teachers & Educational Workers' Union, Jeonbuk Branch; 15. MISFITS; 16. Rainbow Jesus; 17. K-Pop Queer Fan Union; 18. Wonderland; 19. FINANCE.Q & Nonmono Planet; 20. 트랜스젠더 인권단체 조각보; 21. 레인보우스토어; 22. 성소수자 에이즈 예방센터 iSHAP; 23. 비온뒤무지개재단; 24. 서울퀴어문화축제 조직위원회; 25. 대구퀴어문화축제; 26. 부산퀴어문화축제; 27. 제주퀴어문화축제 조직위원회 & 제주대학교 퀴어 커뮤니티 퀴어옴QUTE; 28. 퀴어연극제; 29. 스튜디오 달큰쌈살.)

community and promote their own activities and agendas. Queer artists display their artwork, and small social groups or alternative media recruit new members. A vast majority of the booths fundraise, and it is a chance for smaller queer-focused organizations to procure a year's worth of funding for their activities. At the entrance to each booth, the name of the

organization is displayed, and on the inner walls or tent pillars are flags, making it clear who is running each booth. Simply by physically taking up space all day long during the festival, these booths communicate important messages about who is participating in the festival; that is, “who is among us” and “who is on our side.” Though the booth layout is shared on maps or online through social networking sites, a QCF participant can see what organizations are present by the names on the tents or the flags out front while walking around the festival grounds, and because one can directly interact with the people at the tents, their connections are even more direct and lasting.

When QCF participants see booths that advocate for an identity that they identify with—not only sexual orientation or gender identity but groups for identities such as office workers, college students, teenagers, religions, local gatherings, etc.—they can overcome the sense of isolation that they generally suffer and instead experience a sense of belonging. An informant who ran a booth for Catholic queers recalled that a visitor teared up upon seeing that there were other Catholic queers besides herself. On the other hand, experiencing the diversity within the LGBTQ+ community can expand a person’s identity. For example, one gay attendee who had been only familiar with the gay subculture in Jongno and Itaewon met all types of other queer people for the first time at the festival, such as lesbians, transgender people, and asexuals, among others, and told me that as the years went on and they continued to have such encounters, they felt a bond of solidarity. At booths for queer K-pop fan clubs and queer YouTubers, attendees who have primarily been active online are able to meet each other at the festival and experience connections from their networks in and outside the festival, on and offline, coming together.

The participation of organizations with non-queer agendas, such as organizations dealing with religion, women’s rights, labor rights, disability rights, and the environment, express their solidarity, but by affirming the existence of LGBTQ+ workers or students, they also illustrate that a queer identity is not a separate, single, isolated thing but is part of a person’s intersecting and multilayered identity. Furthermore, they have the effect of generating solidarity by relating how different identities, such as a disabled woman and a queer person, share similar experiences within society.

Booth events actively induce the participation of general attendees. Rather than simply displaying or handing out educational or promotional materials, they arrange quizzes or games and give prizes to participants.

Some take commemorative photos of participants holding a photo frame that has the organization's name and slogan on it. Some provide bodily decoration, such as face painting, temporary tattoos, or ribbons. There are painting and crafting activities as well. All day long at the 2019 Incheon QCF, there was an activity in which participants used yarn, ribbons, fabric, and pompoms of all colors to stitch the words "rainbow Incheon" into a large piece of fabric, which was then carried by a group of people in the parade. Additionally, booths conducted open surveys; they asked attendees to write out their opinions and answers to questions regarding jobs, hometowns, gender identity and sexual orientation, as well as questions like "What would you like to say to those people to whom you want to come out [of the closet]?" or "What's it like living as queer person outside of the city?" and post them on a board. In particular, while attendees have the chance to express their thoughts and feelings in such surveys or by holding placards, this is also a chance for people to read what others have written and feel a sense of kinship or get new ideas. Through the booths, diverse political messages, knowledge, and educational information is experienced by participants while it is mixed with play. The chaotic manner in which attendees are participating at all times can be disorienting, but it is simultaneously overflowing with vitality.

## *2) Symbolic Objects and Symbolic Behaviors*

The festival space is replete with symbolic objects of diverse sizes and forms, such as enormous flags, sculptures, photo walls, and various props, starting with the entrance. Many of the attendees also decorate their own bodies, almost appearing to be ambulating symbols in and of themselves. The festival grounds complete their transformation into a zone for queer people by territorialization through the establishment of borders and decoration as well as the physical expressions of attendees.

### **Symbolic Colors and Flags**

The moment one enters the festival grounds, the variegated symbolic colors of the LGBTQ+ community imbue the festival space and the bodies of participants in technicolor. Besides the 6-color rainbow symbolizing the queer community at large, there are symbolic colors representing individual queer identities, such as transgender (pink, white, sky blue), bisexual (pink, purple, blue), pansexual (pink, yellow, blue), asexual (black, grey, white,



purple), and intersex (purple circle on yellow background) among others. Symbolic colors are ubiquitous and can be found everywhere: on the festival plaza's stage, photo walls, booths, the ground of the plaza, sculptures, banners, flags, placards, logos, merchandise, and attendees' bodily decorations, such as their clothes, hair, wigs, makeup, accessories, and costumes. In contrast to the negative image of the LGBTQ+ community put forth by the homophobic protesters and a society that defines queers as abnormal, these bright, clear, and variegated colors visually communicate messages of freedom, liberation, joy, and diversity. The upending of normative binaries, uniformity, and puritanism begins with these visuals.

Symbolic colors are typically utilized on one important apparatus that ritualizes protest: the flag (Kim Seungyeon 2011: 15–16). And the material property particular to flags elicits an intense emotional response. Nearly without exception, LGBTQ+ organizations' flags use symbolic LGBTQ+ colors for their background, design, or letters; allied organizations, such as the Korean Teachers and Educational Workers Union and the Green Party, communicate a message of enthusiastic solidarity by placing their organization's logo on a rainbow background. As can be seen in Figure 2, the flags of individual organizations adorning the fronts of booths indicates the organization's identity while also serving to collectively territorialize the festival grounds, and they play a role in tying the crowd gathered at the festival into an imagined community. The sight of these flags—emblazoned with the assorted colors, designs, and names of organizations—fluttering



Figure 2. Second Busan QCF (Photo by Kim Minsu. Reproduced with permission.)

together in the wind makes an onlooker's heart swell. At the Seoul QCF, organizers perform a ceremony in which they unfurl an enormous 50-meter rainbow flag, and 20 or so people cross the center of the Seoul Plaza to the flag, to the uproarious cheers of attendees when it is unfurled.

### Merchandise and Mascots

The merchandise and placards (t-shirts, fans, toys, towels, stickers, and pin-on buttons) given out by various organizations at booths are symbolic objects that attendees can carry or decorate themselves with. Among these, there are symbolic objects that bluntly challenge normative notions of gender or sexuality as well as objects that twist them humorously. At the 2018 Busan festival, a booth hosted by queer feminists called "Project Inn" sold "clitoris stickers" and "free the nipple" prints; they also had a "color a vagina mandala" activity as well. Though these symbolic objects do indeed have images of genitals on them, they are highly stylized and designed as well as made colorful. One can detect a message of provocation and challenge aimed at the existing oppressive sexual norms rather than at arousing sexual desire or shame that one could call "obscene."

Sometimes allied organizations combine their own agendas with that of the LGBTQ+ community when creating symbolic objects. The Green Party, for example, made stickers with cute pictures of animals on them, with text reading "Heat up the bedroom, not the Earth," "Melt your lovers, not glaciers," "Cut nails, not trees,"<sup>3</sup> humorously combining their environmental agenda with sexuality. The symbolic objects seen in Figure 3 combine visual and linguistic signs to effectively communicate both messages and, to some degree, identify the personality (young and bubbly) of a festival attendee-supporter who would enjoy such a thing. Instead of such expressions being obscene or shady, they are proud and unapologetic. The cuteness and humor add to this effect, creating an expression of playful subversion. This characteristic extends to the bodily and linguistic expressions that I examine in the following sections.

What we should focus on in these multiple symbolic objects is that when symbolic colors are combined with other symbols or linguistic signs, they create a new meaning. In a study of cosmetic brands, Go Gyeongnan (2016) found that when a non-linguistic sign, such as a color, was com-

<sup>3</sup> Cutting fingernails is an act that alludes to lesbian, bisexual, pansexual, or queer sexualities.





Figure 3. The Green Party stickers (Noksaekdang (@GreenPartyK), Twitter, June 25, 2015).

bined with a linguistic sign, such as a goofy color name or product name, the color pink took on the personality of being a “cute” girlish consumer’s thing. Such a combination of multisensory signs can be seen in the symbolic objects of QCFs as well. When the bright, cheery, free, and vibrant sense of the clear and variegated symbolic colors of the LGBTQ+ community—the cute and bubbly designs as well—meet the plucky and witty linguistic expressions, they combine in a multisensory way to create a positive meaning tied to “being queer.”

Unsurprisingly, mascots excel at characterizing signs and typifying consumers through visual signs (Go Gyeongnan 2016). QUV-coney, the anthropomorphized ice cream cone of QUV, a federation called the Solidarity of University and Youth Queer Societies in Korea; the rounded chameleon of the Jeju National University queer community, QUTE; Q-miho, the rainbow-tailed fox of the Gwangju QCF; and the Asiatic black bear of the Gyeongnam QCF, among others, are examples of cutely stylized objects and animals used at QCFs. At the same time, regional QCFs sometimes use mascots that combine symbols that flaunt the region’s historical and cultural distinctiveness combined with LGBTQ+ symbols. For instance, because of Jeonju’s image as a city of tradition, the Jeonju QCF uses a *banok* (traditional house) with a rainbow-colored roof. Jeju uses a rainbow horse; Incheon, home of the Incheon International Airport, uses a rainbow airplane; and Busan uses the character Gyagya the Seagull, who wears a sailor’s hat and a rainbow scarf around its neck.

### Bodily Adornments and Expressions

As a corporal ritual, bodily adornment “arouses communal emotions through an act of the body” and plays an important role in affirming a collective’s identity by “symbolically revealing the position and role the participant has as a member of society” (Kim Seungyeon 2011: 6). The bodily adornment seen at QCFs is marked by the performativity and creativity as well as playfulness of festival participants. One can find t-shirts, ribbons, stickers, face paint, and temporary tattoos with which to adorn the body at the festival itself, but a considerable number of attendees put a lot of time and effort into dressing themselves up before arriving at the festival. At QCFs, one can see handmade outfits and accessories, and some humorous decorations, such as a rainbow-colored squid hat. Some people wear flags big enough to wrap around their entire body, like a cape. There are also those who participate with bodily expressions flouting society’s customary gender norms, such as by crossdressing, genderbending, or exposing their bodies. Drag queens and drag kings challenge conventional masculinity and femininity, and there are many participants who attend the festival in light genderbending, wearing another gender’s clothing or accessories, even makeup. Numerous participants want to dress up their body in a way that is more fun or grandiose than usual. Some sport flashy clothes, like they would wear to a club or a party, while others dress up in cosplay, as if it were Halloween or a fancy-dress parade.

Among them, certain participants who cosplay as a toy soldier or a rainbow-wearing Rilakkuma (Japanese character that looks like a bear), Cthulhu (monster in an HP Lovecraft novel), or Harley Quinn recurrently participate in different festivals in numerous regions, and participants who are familiar with them greet or take photos with them. The toy soldier, famous throughout South Korea’s QCFs, first attended the festival in cosplay in order to hide himself, but then, when he saw other participants at QCFs and even homophobic protestors react positively to him, he said he began to feel loved. Wanting to reciprocate that feeling of being loved to other QCF participants and wanting to improve the image of the festival, he continued to come and go from the festivals wearing his mask (*The Kyunghyang Sinmun* 2019).

Meanwhile, festival participants cosplaying as Jesus walk around holding messages of support for the LGBTQ+ community on a handheld sign or sash, wittily conveying that standing on the side of the marginalized was the true will of Jesus. Ironically enough, there have been participants in

the counterrallies who cosplay as Jesus, walking around the vicinity of the festival while carrying a large cross inscribed with homophobic rallying calls, bringing into focus the contention between those inside and outside the festival surrounding symbols of Christianity.

There are also participants who belong to certain faiths and combine religious symbols with LGBTQ+ symbols. Monks from the labor committee of the Jogye Order of Korean Buddhism drape large rainbow flags over their habits as they stand at their booth and play drums on the plaza. Priests from the Rainbow Jesus group combine traditional religious attire with LGBTQ+ symbols by wearing the regular pastor or priest attire with a rainbow-colored stole, thus communicating a message of recognition and support for the queer people who share their faith.

Showing skin or being scantily clad is the focused target of attacks on QCFs as “festivals of obscenity.” In reality, the vast majority of participants do not expose all that much skin, and those who do, do not go beyond the standards of exposure seen in popular culture, among sport fans, or at some regional festivals. Especially following 2014, when the QCF began to receive press attention and the number of non-LGBTQ+ attendees grew, participants became cognizant of public opinion, and the trend of showing skin declined in general. However, rather than making this an issue of whether or not bodies were exposed or skin was shown, a more important



Figure 4. Jesus cosplay at the festival. (Incheon, 2019. Photo by the author.)

question to ask is what exactly exposing one's body signifies. Rather than finding the exhibition of one's body—which from time to time is disputed between queer people as well—to be a problem in itself, we can see it as actually evoking discomfort by creating a rift in the internalized gender norms that saturate our entire society.

The gender binary and normative heterosexuality permit only forms of expression that serve the desires of patriarchal, heterosexual men. That is, women exist merely as objects of heterosexual desire, and only bodies that correspond to that—young, beautiful, and thin, simultaneously seductive and passive—are permitted to be shown. The bare, fit bodies of gay and bisexual men expose men's same-sex desire to be a sexual agent and object. Moreover, the "dyke" or "butch" looks are bodies that refuse to be the object of men's desires (Johnston 2005: 33–52). One AFAB (assigned female at birth) woman exposes her breasts as an agent who challenges the gender norms imposed on women's bodies, not in order to arouse male desire. Trans people, drag kings, and drag queens proudly display characteristics that are considered impossible to coexist in a single body. By parading bodies that do not satisfy heterosexual men's desires, these people shine a light on the heteronormativity that tacitly exists in everyday life and reject it. Rather than being obscene, the bare body that protests shamelessly, provoking unease in the eyes of a patriarchal heterosexual, is rebellious.

Participants who have bodies not considered conventionally attractive—fat bodies, old bodies, faces neither pretty nor handsome, disabled bodies—freely decorate or expose their bodies as well. Negative assessments of bodies or the judgmental glances that are normal in South Korean society are rarely seen within the festival. From G-strings to Toy Soldiers, from shirtless people to Jesus cosplayers, the display of free and diverse bodies, in which provocation, cuteness, and gaiety coexist, can not only be seen as resisting binary gender norms but as acts of resistance using bodies to distort and expose the predominant values regarding the body. Participants dressed (or undressed) in this way display their affection with same-gender embraces and kisses, take pictures, and post on social media. Such actions occur all the time in all corners of the festival grounds. Furthermore, by posting on one's individual social media, participants are able to disseminate the atmosphere of the festival in real time to those outside the festival grounds.

### 3) Linguistic Expressions

If symbolic objects and behaviors convey out-of-the-ordinariness, playfulness, and subversion through visual information, linguistic expressions such as titles, slogans, hand-held placards, and rallying cries are noteworthy in their playfulness and subversion through satire and parody. Playful linguistic expressions are effective in responding to the negative messages broadcast by older generations and moralistic Christian-inclined homophobic protesters by using styles familiar to younger generations, who make up the majority of festival participants.

Once the homophobic counterrallies began to use placards that read “What’s with male daughters-in-law and female sons-in-law?” a queer activist group hit back with placards that read “A male daughter-in-law? That must be nice during the busy farming season!” comically being sarcastic about the absurdity and feudal nature of the heterosexual “normal” family that can be read in the words “male daughter-in-law” and “busy farming season.” Moreover, protesters sometimes attack young queer people by telling them that they are a source of shame or concern to their parents, but in 2019, PFLAG (Parents and Families of LGBTAIQ People in Korea) had signs that read “Yep~ My kid is queer” along with an emoji (graphic text) of a woman shrugging her shoulders. The phrase “Yep~ \_\_\_\_\_” (*eung~ \_\_\_\_\_*), often used by teenagers on the internet, has a similar nuance of dismissing one’s counterpart, similar to what is found in “ok boomer.” The parents of queer children shrewdly disregarded the message that one’s child being queer is something shameful to a parent.

While there are some names (e.g., “Vagina Victory”) that assert sexuality or queerness openly, many convey a “feeling” through pitch or wordplay, overlapping with the cheerful and vivacious feeling of the symbolic colors. The Green Party’s merchandise that had the words “What” (*muo*), “Why” (*wae*), and “Who asked you?” (*an mureobwatgeodeun*) written over a rainbow gradient background were popular with many people. The words “what” and “why” suggest a daringness that sees mainstream society’s normative attitude as amusing. Additionally, queer organizations or artists often use names with a Q or the first syllable of queer, *kwi*, in them (ThanQ, QUV, QUTE, FLAQ) or titles with cheerful and bright images—Ddingdong, Studio Sweet & Bitter (*seutyudio dalkkeunssapssal*), Motley Milk Tea (*japdahan milkeuti*), Neon Milk, Gyagya the Seagull—and such cheerfulness can be seen in their slogans (e.g., “sweeter than hatred”) as well.

Regional QCFs use local dialects as well as the historical and cultural characteristics of their locales to conceive of slogans that combine both regional character and the existence of an LGBTQ+ community there, such as “Tamna is queer” (*tamnaneun kwieo*; Tamna being the precursor to Jeju); “There are queers here!” (*yeogi, kwieo itsuda*, dialectic grammar) for Jeju; “The rainbow rises on the land with 1000 years of history” for Jeonju; “Queer in the sky” (*kwieo in cheon*, pun using the *hanja* for sky, pronounced *cheon*, the second syllable of Incheon), and “The sky’s on our side” for Incheon;<sup>4</sup> “Aren’t we queer!” (*kwieo aigal*, common regional dialectic grammar) for Busan; and “Light up the rainbow” (using the *hanja* for light, pronounced *gwang*, which is also the first syllable of Gwangju) and “Illuminating queer” for Gwangju.<sup>5</sup> Queer people can struggle with coming out in non-metro areas that are parochial and closed-off, and smaller cities may consider the existence of fairly invisible queer people to be a fiction or have a tendency to characterize queer people as being unfamiliar and foreign outsiders. Along with mascots that depict regional characteristics, slogans that either display the respective region’s historical character or use region-specific dialects effectively indigenize discourses on human rights, equality, and solidarity, transforming them from empty slogans, out of place in the lives and existences of alienated queers, into something that is “ours.”

#### 4) *Rituals of Recognition, Solidarity, and Memorialization*

In the sense that the countless small events taking place within the QCFs are symbolic acts that take place with uniform conventions, one could call them small rituals taking place within the larger ritual of the QCF itself. These rituals are intimately linked to the life experiences of the majority of LGBTQ+ people in South Korean society and evoke powerful emotions in the participants.

#### Onstage Remarks

Opening ceremonies, celebratory remarks, or statements of solidarity, as

<sup>4</sup> Emphasis is placed on Incheon being the home of the Incheon International Airport.

<sup>5</sup> The use of “light up” and “illuminate” is an example of appropriating the light of Gwangju, or *bitgoeul* as it is referred to in pure Korean, to “make bright” the negative assessments that can be accorded to LGBTQ+ people.

well as celebratory performances and other events, all take place on stages. These onstage events are also the part of the festival that most broadly reflects the intent and will of the festival's organizing committee. Because celebratory remarks and statements of solidarity reveal "who stands with the LGBTQ+ community," they can be seen as a vital political ritual in which the messenger of such remarks is just as important (or even more important) than the message they send. At the Seoul QCF, ambassadors from various countries or representatives of other East Asian LGBTQ+ Pride events, such as those in Japan or Taiwan, take the stage to deliver a celebratory message as well as to make a statement proclaiming their support for the rights of the LGBTQ+ community. At QCFs outside of Seoul, representatives from other regions' QCFs and local allied organizations make remarks. Through the onstage remarks from these figures, QCF participants are able to tangibly see that there are all sorts of organizations standing up for LGBTQ+ rights, not only in their own area but across the country and around the world; they experience a sense of belonging and solidarity because such organizations are doing similar activities and acting in solidarity. In particular, the celebratory remarks from North American and European nations as well as other so-called "developed nations" are significant in that they strongly legitimize that the human rights of the LGBTQ+ community are part and parcel of universal human rights. At the same time, the presence of delegates from "global powers" or "developed nations" at the festival puts pressure on anti-QCF protesters and law enforcement, thus functioning as a type of safety net for QCFs as well.

The presence of embassy representatives of global powers at QCFs is regarded somewhat ambivalently. This is because they are suspected of asserting the superiority of their own nation's system on the basis of their respect for LGBTQ+ rights or of using their advocacy for LGBTQ+ rights to shroud the discrimination or suppression faced by other minorities within their own countries (anti-black racism in the United States, Israel's suppression of Palestine, Seongju's deployment of THAAD missiles, and US army bases on Jeju, to name a few), otherwise known as "pink washing" (Siu 2016; Han Uri 2016). But with the position South Korea is in, holding a festival amidst a hostile atmosphere, festival organizers continue to make considerations and compromises in order to keep the balance between protecting the festival and South Korea's queer politics, which do not reflect the political logic of global powers.



### PFLAG's "Free Hug" Activity

Calling themselves "parents who love our kids," PFLAG (Parents and Families of LGBTAIQ People in Korea) is the most representative ally organization in South Korea, having actively and visibly worked from a position that can elicit very powerful and widespread bonds of sympathy in South Korean society. At QCFs, PFLAG members stand in front of their booth holding signs with messages like "Mom loves you just the way you are" and beckoning passing attendees over with hand gestures. Participants can approach the PFLAG members freely and hug them, at which time the parents embrace the attendee tightly and whisper messages of encouragement, such as "I love you," "I'm glad you're here," and "Take heart." This very simple act is repeated over and over, and takes place within an atmosphere of cheerfulness, but one almost always sees participants shed tears or weep for quite some time. For those who have been cast out of their families for being queer and those who hide the fact that they are queer lest they be cast out, PFLAG's hugs symbolize the recognition or the unconditional affection that participants are unable to receive from their families. Thus many are unable to hold back the emotions they ordinarily keep inside and erupt into tears. In such instances, often the parents hugging the crying participant will cry with them too, and onlookers will cry as well. The reason that participants who may not be close to one another feel so intimately affected by such a sight is that, either as a queer person themselves or a family member of a queer person, each individual can understand and sympathize with the suffering that other participants have been through.

### LGBTQ+ Blessings and Worship

Because the most powerful and dogged attacks on the LGBTQ+ community come from Evangelical Christian churches, queer people of Christian faith exist as "queer diaspora" (Siu 2018) within and without the border of queer/anti-queer, and it is common for these people to have difficulty in fully expressing themselves, whether in the queer community or in church. Pastors from Rainbow Jesus, a society for queer Christians and their allies, hold worship services at QCFs and bestow blessings to queer people in the Christian way.

The worship services held by Rainbow Jesus indicate that they are sermons for queer people by draping rainbow fabric over a simple altar, atop which they place a cross or hang a rosary, while the minister or priest



wears a stole decorated with rainbow colors. Songs and prayers also carry a message focused on God's love for LGBTQ+ people or similar acceptance as Christians. The worship services for queers have particular significance to Christian queers who have experienced internal conflict in the church or faced exclusion and oppression, and one can often see participants shedding tears during the service. Because the clergy who officiate these ceremonies can face repercussions, be tried for heretic acts, or be punished (depending on the church that they belong to), it is a volitional act that takes into consideration such a level of risk.

### Memorial Booths

From time to time, one comes across a memorial booth at a QCF, displaying portraits, activities, remarks, and posthumous artwork/writing of an LGBTQ+ activist who is no longer alive. It is an unfortunate reality that LGBTQ+ people in South Korea live a life of suffering amidst everyday discrimination, exclusion, isolation, and self-denial, only to pass away too early. Despite being on the younger side, ranging from their teens to 30s, a majority of the informants I spoke to knew multiple queer people who had died at an early age. In my four to five years of research, I myself knew of three or four well-known members of the LGBTQ+ community who lost their lives to suicide. Each time someone in the LGBTQ+ community passes away, the community becomes solemn, with people expressing their pain and sorrow by saying things like, "I don't want to go to funerals for my friends anymore." The bright, cheerful, and pleasant feelings of QCFs contrast the shadows of loss and death that lurk in the everyday lives of those in the queer community, and memorial booths at QCFs provide a chance for many people to collectively mourn the untimely loss of beloved members of South Korea's LGBTQ+ community.

## 4. Festivity and Politics of Queer Culture Festivals

As an exceptionally resilient and deep-rooted cultural convention that has existed since antiquity, festivals forge a temporary reality through symbolic processes and transform social structures through symbolic subversion (Stoeltje 1992: 261). As opposed to the original significance of festivals, described by Ryu Jeong-a as "a state in which the existing social norms and regulations temporarily collapse or are cast into chaos [...] when the social

structure undergoes upheaval” (2011b: 261), modern society’s festivals show marked desacralization and individuation. There are concerns that festivals are becoming commercialized into performance spectacles in which performer and spectator are differentiated, rather than viewing the newly emerging festivals as a ritualistic collective symbolic state (2011a, 2011b).

On their surface, QCFs have the characteristics of performance art festivals (2011b), a form that has become widespread in the twenty-first century, but characteristics of traditional and universal festivals can be observed as well. Here, by traditional festivity I refer to the “organic fusion of religious symbolism and non-routine play” (Ryu Jeong-a 2011a: 180), meaning subversion, community, and ritualism. These attributes are interconnected at QCFs. QCFs are secular events, and because of the opposition that they face from the Christian church, they can seem on the surface to be anti-religious. However, the ritualism of a QCF demonstrates its effects without the presence of a particular religion or god, and attendees still experience transcendence that goes beyond the individual—a state of collective effervescence, like that seen in social movements, rallies, revolutions, and games (Durkheim 2017).

Though there is a separation between performer and spectator for onstage events, the ritualism and community of QCFs is apparent in the constant and active participation of QCF attendees in the many booths. When compared to attendees of regular local festivals or performance art festivals, attendees of QCFs participate very actively in the festival, and a noteworthy number of participants do so not only once but regularly (Seoul Queer Culture Festival survey 2018). Among LGBTQ+ people, the yearly QCFs signify a ceremony where they can comfort and celebrate one another, that is to say, it is a sort of “queer holiday” (Siu 2016: 57).

At the same time, the ritualistic nature of the QCF is connected to its subversive nature through play and fun. A carnivalesque character that inverts the order of everyday life through play and a polyvocal nature in which diverse, sometimes conflicting, voices coexist are features of Pride events (Shepard 2010: 61–73; Santino 2011). Regarding the playful nature of ritual, Huizinga wrote: “Within a playground with ‘set divisions,’ play is had and performed. Furthermore, the festival’s atmosphere, which is within the atmosphere of elation and freedom, play is had” and “participants in the ritual are enraptured and transported to another world” (2018: 55–63), and this “atmosphere of elation and freedom” as well as the expressions and

reactions of festival participants enchanted by it can be observed in all parts of the festival.

As shown by the Stonewall Riots, to which modern Pride traces its origins, playfulness that does not wither under the oppression of mainstream society is in itself subversive. I view the subversive energy that playfulness has at QCFs as being related to the experiences of oppression that LGBTQ+ people face in their daily lives. For many LGBTQ+ people, homophobia and transphobia are very concrete forms of oppression in their everyday. Even if they are able to avoid discrimination and stigma by hiding their sexual orientation or gender identity that does not conform to social norms by staying “closeted” and through passing and covering (Yoshino 2017), they cannot be rid of the social isolation, pain of self-denial, and anxieties about being exposed and having to hide part of their identity. This pain can be seen in the poor health and high rates of suicide in the LGBTQ+ community compared to non-LGBTQ+ people, and it affects them through the deaths of their friends and acquaintances. Within this intersection of pressures, energy that is normally suppressed is expressed and released in diverse ways at QCFs.

The world represented at QCFs is one that is yet to come. Though it is not a religious ritual, within QCFs, a world that does not yet exist in reality, a “life wide open to utopia” (Ryu Jeong-a 2011a: 177) is pursued, and a “desired cosmic event is represented” (Huizinga 2018: 57). Within the time-space of the QCF, queer people, who are either “invisible people” (Yi Hyecheon 2019) in mainstream society or, worse, are the targets of active hatred and discrimination, become stars, and the customary social order and beliefs that harm LGBTQ+ people—heteronormativity and the monolithic gender binary, the ideology of the normal family, and Confucian puritanism—are turned on their heads. Though it is only a single day each year, the sense of liberation felt at the subversion of role and status is strong enough to be referred to as a “queer parade high” (*kwieopeobbong*), and the expression that a person walks away from the QCF with the strength to make it through another year can be heard often in the queer community. “In a queer person’s life, the dark feelings of loss, trauma, anxiety, shame, and fear are tangled together with the brighter feelings of joy, happiness, pride, passion, and trust” (Siu 2018: 207), and a QCF can be seen as a site where energy as commensurately bright as the daily feelings of darkness is expressed.

## 5. Final Words

In this article, I have examined the festivity of QCFs in South Korea as well as their political efficacy, based on ethnographic observations of the rituals and symbols present at the plaza events of QCFs as well as analysis of such observation. By occupying a public space for one day each year, these festivals create a territory in which LGBTQ+ people can temporarily be safe and free, and the significance of this space is dramatically increased by the homophobic counterrallies' attempts to disrupt the festivals. The festival grounds are territorialized through booths and symbolic objects, and the space is filled with practices by the linguistic and bodily expressions of participants.

Through an array of symbolic objects, onstage remarks and performances, and rituals, the messages that oppress LGBTQ+ people in mainstream society are refuted and mocked, and through rituals of recognition, the existence of LGBTQ+ people is affirmed. In these festivals, awareness, memorialization, and play all coexist, and, through participating, attendees are able to cast off the sense of isolation and loss that they usually feel and verify that they belong to a collective and transcendent queer community. Using various synesthetic combinations of linguistic and nonlinguistic signs, participants create a bright, joyful, plucky, and variegated image of queerness.

QCFs exhibit performance art and spectacle-like aspects of modern festivals, yet the communality, subversion, and rituals of traditional festivals can be observed there as well. Within the utopian space-time of QCFs, roles and status are subverted once a year. Individuals can raise their own unique voice within a single community, and their non-ordinariness, playfulness, creativity, and polyvocality are all remarkable. These bright, multi-colored images overflowing with personality openly challenge the meaning and position accorded to LGBTQ+ people in society—that is, the expectation that they are devious and immoral and should stay in the dark.

Finally, I'd like to summarize a few points that I was unable to cover in the space of this article as well as outline plans for future research. Here I focused mainly on the positive effects that the messages sent by QCFs can have for LGBTQ+ people internally and in mainstream society at large. However, of these messages, those that are the most convincing to “mainstream society” repeatedly represent the image of LGBTQ+ people as “ordinary citizens” at the festival, and so there is an aspect that legitimizes

the existence of LGBTQ+ people by emphasizing an identification with members of mainstream society. Because of this, there is research concerned with the possibility that the significant defiance exhibited at QCFs is being subsumed by heteronormativity (Han Uri 2016; Heo Seongwon 2019). The explosive growth of QCFs in recent years has had a considerable impact on queer visibility and the efficacy of queer politics, but with each success they come a step closer to normality, and thus there needs to be more detailed analysis on the paradox of the erasure of queerness's status as a marginalized identity.

Furthermore, I was unable to cover interactions between QCFs and anti-QCF rallies as well as the police sandwiched between them. It would not be an exaggeration to argue that, following 2014, the anti-QCF rallies and police have become a necessary constitutive component of QCFs, owing to their evolution through the extremely close interactions between them, and, following the progress of QCFs across the nation, a nationwide narrative of queer politics is forming. The affect created by the combination of these three parties changes dramatically when the parade exits the protected festival grounds and confronts the protestors on the street. In future research, I plan to look at the dynamics that unfurl when these three actors come together in both national and regional contexts.

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