Racializing Apparatuses and Embodiment Performance: Failed Seafaring, Migratory Labor, and a Vietnamese Bride in South Korea

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Introduction: After the Ship Sank
In April 2014, a ship named Sewol, carrying 476 passengers and crew on its way to Jeju Island, sank into the Yellow Sea near South Korea. The shipwreck exposed the Park administration’s incapacity to save civilians and ignited a huge political scandal that eventually impeached and imprisoned the President. In this paper, I discuss two modes of performance art’s embodiment of the actual/imagined body of its subjects through stage devices (the prosthetic) and reconstruction of the audience’s sense of temporality (the stage as temporal indicator). The paper focuses on a South Korean performance piece’s engagement with the navigational failure and the systematic racialization of Southeast Asian immigrants by multiculturalist art policies and apparatuses. The piece was exhibited in the summer of 2016 in a multinational industrial city where the artists staged conversational sessions and physical stage structures that are about or reconstruct one Vietnamese woman who was both a victim of the shipwreck and held a marginalized position in the xenophobic society. Here, this piece simultaneously participates in and challenges South Korea’s racializing regimes of multicultural apparatuses, called a “damunhwa jedo.” Heavily nationalist, paternalist, and assimilative, the apparatuses do not properly acknowledge the ongoing

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racialization of foreign-identified body or reduce such structural racism and xenophobia to issues of citizenship, national/ethnic origins, or cultural differences.

Resulting in 304 deaths and ten missing people, the shipwreck has occupied the nation’s political discourse and divided it into pro-conglomerate conservatives and liberal democrats. The former accused the other of taking unjust advantage of the shipwreck—which they argue was a mere accident—to incite hatred and distrust towards the ruling party. The latter, on the other hand, claimed that the shipwreck testifies incorrigible corruption and incapability of the status-quo (from which they strangely exempt themselves). However, the two sides share ethnocentric nationalism based on the consanguineous concept of Korean-ness and the idea of common ancestry; shortly put, the two capitalized on the “Child” discourse, either “give us back our children” or “stop using the death of our children,” to win the heart of the nation. This heavily contentious narrative prevents other discourses from emerging that might otherwise conceive different futures, where the idea of belonging denaturalizes citizenship discourses and acknowledges structural racism in the present society. Swept by nationalist polemics, visual art practices in South Korea have ambivalently, if not completely unsuccessfully, dealt with the shipwreck as an artistic subject to raise different discourses of belonging, the self, and the others.

Figure 1. Jee Song, Stage Modeling for Pattern of Ngoc, fabrics, needle, paper chair, aluminum cubic frame, 2016
One such case is the performance *Pattern of Ngoc* (2016), a project by South Korean artist Jee Song and the Community Space Litmus who built a circular stage at the Foreign Citizen Plaza in Wongok District, Ansan, Kyung-gi Province, South Korea between August 13-20, 2016. Sponsored by the municipal government, the project held two formal sessions. Invitees included fellow artists, government officials, NGO workers, bereaved families, local students who lost their friends, and survivors of the shipwreck. They discussed Korean society’s refusal to mourn a Vietnamese bride among the 304 victims, recovery from trauma, and how to remember the dead. The project of mourning and remembering the marginalized in the nationalist regime ironically serves normative family ideology and government-driven multiculturalism. For instance, the presence of immigrants was largely absent, and conversations were undertaken in the Korean language. In the process, the participants unwittingly situated the citizen-subjects in the position of the unalterable self, which defines its position by producing the Others, the absolute object of mourning and remembering.

As a government-sponsored public and community art project, *Pattern of Ngoc* invites several criticisms on this contemporary art genre: the separation of the artist subject as privileged citizen-insider and the minority subject as the object of sympathy and the
project’s heavy reliance on bureaucratic institutions and public funding. Such features often yield ambivalent situations in which the artwork backed by state multiculturalism discursively challenges the hegemonic order while, in actuality, serves the government’s assimilative agendas and interests. This ambivalence is inscribed in the performance piece’s division of internal and external frameworks, which are separate but mutually constructing. I am more intrigued by what exists outside of the official framework of the project; more specifically, what happened on the stage when there were no official public sessions, when it was unattended by artists and officials? Besides the formal sessions that are incorporated into the state multiculturalist apparatuses that aim to assimilate foreign-identified bodies, my reading asserts that the unattended stage, props on it, and the audience’s bodies operate as counter apparatuses to reveal the deep embeddedness of migrant subjectivity—though consistently marginalized and dehumanized—in the nation-state’s daily life and institutional structure. More specifically, disclosing structural racism in public art discourses that normalize race relations’ very constructed-ness and justify it as issues of cultural difference or citizen rights, the unattended stage uses two important mechanisms, namely a “temporal indicator” and “prosthetic performance.” These work to resist the racializing operation of South Korea’s politico-artistic institutions that feed on both right-wing and left-wing nationalist archives.

**Sociological Insights: Repressive Regimes of Asia-Pacific Migratory Labor**

Discourses about the shipwreck of Sewol have fixated on paternalistic sentiments towards 250 high school student victims. Political rhetoric in Korea identified the accident with “the loss of children,” arousing feelings of parental deprivation. Yet, the cheap

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and shabby ferry Sewol also shipped immigrants in Ansan’s ethnic enclaves, and Song and the Litmus’s performance project took at the center of their stage the shipwreck’s Vietnam-born woman victim named Pahn Ngoc Than from a fishing village in Cà Mau, southern Vietnam. The media’s coverage of Ngoc was heavily patriarchal and stiff with reproductive rhetoric, emphasizing that she was the mother of two Korean children and the wife of a Korean man. Her association with South Korea’s reproductive domesticity secured Ngoc a place in the discourse of social belonging; yet, heavily colored by the anxiety of low birth-rate and increasing mixed-race households, it assumes that only immigrants with familial ties to Korean households deserve (still partial) a national membership.

Figure 3. Jee Song and Wan Kim (the third in the right), *Here*, group therapy workshop, 2016

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As in the media, *Pattern of Ngoc*’s formal sessions demonstrate a similarly paternalist approach to the minoritized subject as these sessions traumatize Ngoc’s marginalization in the xenophobic society. The project reproduces the normative discourse of assimilation, which uncritically identifies the immigrant’s mode of being with un-ordinariness, a state of exception, and fatalistic trauma isolated from the nationals’ daily life; Ngoc is at best the other that citizens should embrace. This urge to embrace otherness outside us, with paternalistic touches on the work’s handling of the migrant subject, can maintain the binary structure between citizens and migrants, clandestinely forming race relations in the nationalist discourse of belonging. Providing the majority of funding sources for socially engaged art practices, Damunhwa or multicultural policies have mobilized Korean visual art practices in the assimilationist mission, which racializes, if not stigmatizes, the foreign-identified body and ethnic communities. Rather than the first/third worlds binary that largely constitutes Korean socially-engaged art’s globalist framework, comparative and transnational perspectives can offer more sophisticated understandings about the global and immigration from developing Asian societies to developed East Asian societies as artistic subject matters.

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Danièle Bélanger and Hong-zen Wang’s study traces the prolonged passage of immigration from Vietnam to South Korea, Japan, Taiwan, and Malaysia since the 1980s. They illustrate in detail how Vietnamese temporary labor migrants, called Lao động, are forced to go through predatory immigration agencies that extort from them on average between $4,000 to $12,000 USD as fees to have the “privilege” to work in those countries. The presumed privilege, however, often turns into a mirage. Early repatriation, for instance, easily means a bankruptcy to the individual and the entire family since many Lao độngs from rural towns mortgage their familial land or borrow a huge sum of money from loan sharks with high-interest rates. Also, the obligatory monthly saving policy—about one third of the salary—effectively frustrates the workers’ goal to send remittances to their family, which in turn reinforces the employer’s control over the migrant workers. These repressive policies also compel foreign workers to go undocumented because of the benefits of overstayed working, liberty to choose their employers, and evading mandatory saving plans. In this regard, the Asia-Pacific regimes of temporary migratory labor produces surplus values between South Korea and Vietnam.

7 Danièle Bélanger and Hong-zen Wang, “Becoming a Migrant: Vietnamese Emigration to East Asia,” *Pacific Affairs*, Vol. 86, No. 1 (March 2013). For the internal division of Vietnamese immigrant groups into Việt Kiều (Vietnamese repatriates from the West) and Lao động (Vietnamese temporary workers to East Asia countries), see Small, “Embodied Economy,” Op. cit.


9 Bélanger et al, “From Foreign Trainees to Unauthorized Workers: Vietnamese Migrant Workers in Japan,” *Asian and Pacific Migration Journal*, Vol. 20, No. 1, 2011, p. 44. It does not end there. The Vietnamese Government requires immigrants to pay a security deposit—about 3,000 to 5,000 US dollars, equivalent to two to three years of average income in Vietnam—for their timely return after three years of working, a stratagem devised by both Vietnamese and South Korean governments to prevent the migrant workers from overstaying or passing into illegal labor sectors.

10 Ibid., p. 46.
In a sense, *Pattern of Ngoc*’s formal sessions unwittingly collaborate with transnational institutions of multicultural labor and overlook immigrants’ agentive roles in shaping their strategies to navigate the neoliberal world and daily lives in the host society under severe conditions of being marked as racially and culturally inferior. Only after I visited Ansan did I realize that their being marginalized, racialized, and even objectified in death are not exceptional but part of ordinary experiences; the shipwreck, in this respect, was not the original signifier of traumatic marginalization but an extension of the very marginalization’s naturalized state in the xenophobic society. Perhaps as a potential indication, one Southeast Asian woman in the Ansan area responded to me about the shipwreck:

“I know there was a huge accident in my neighborhood. People cried a lot. You know, many kids died. Poor things. I still can’t imagine the sinking ship. I just don’t want to imagine. I know the Vietnamese bride, because I once met her at the Multicultural Family Support Center. It was sad to hear the news. You know, sad things happen to us all the time” (emphases added).\(^{11}\)

Here the shipwreck is thoroughly trivialized as one of the “sad things” that “happen all the time.” Also, even though *Pattern of Ngoc*’s public sessions were all about the tragedy of immigrants, the immigrant interviewee “can’t imagine the sinking ship,” which suggests to me that the artistic project fails to evoke its purported audience’s vivid imaginations about the subject matter—i.e., the un-romanticized realities of the immigrant subjects. It is, however, the unattended stage’s prosthetic performance and temporal indicator that cancel out the alienating and romanticizing effects of its government-sponsored other half.

**Prostheses: Embodiment Performance on the Unattended Stage**

In this section, I investigate the prosthetic function as one of the unattended stage’s two major mechanisms that challenge the divisive and racist operation of assimilative multiculturalism in the South Korean art scene. Art historian Jane Blocker interprets the prosthetic things that work with and/or include the body of the

\(^{11}\) From my informal interview with the local residents, conducted in August 2016. The interview was originally conducted in the Korean language, and I translated it into English.
performer and audiences as including “material objects, bodies, and words … we craft to stand in place of something else that is lost.”

More specifically, the prosthetic includes:

- a representation of something else (a photograph, archived text, or written narrative), a material artifact meant to spur a memory (an album, a lock of hair, a tattered doll), commemorative actions or gestures of both the intentional (staged reenactments) and unintentional (the quotidian acts and repetitions that Richard Schechner calls “twice-behaved behavior”).

In *Pattern of Ngoc*, the prosthetic directly indicates formal apparatuses, notably the circular stage and props. The stage mainly consists of a white circular structure measuring about 30 feet in diameter and a hexahedron cubic steel frame at the center. Inside the frame is a yellow ocher wooden chair, and outside are hammocks, plant pots, a black-and-white patterned pole, small picture frames, and various props. The artist collective built the stage in a plaza area of the outsourcing industry city of Ansan. Due to the city’s crucial role in the history of Asia-Pacific migratory labor, my analysis of the unattended stage’s prosthetic function should extend to the city’s urban surroundings, especially its thriving immigrant communities that clearly testify the racializing effect of the nationalist drama around the shipwreck.

Beginning in the late 1980s, Ansan’s industry was fueled by industrial internship programs and foreign labor laws that invited temporary migrant workers from Southeast and Central Asian countries to South Korea. The site of the performance, the *Foreign Citizen Plaza*, with its oxymoronic name, is located at the epicenter of Ansan’s densely populated districts, with 120,000 residents living within four square miles—a size and population similar to L.A.’s Koreatown. Half the residents in these districts were born outside South Korea, and, if one considers South Korea’s average 3.5 percent foreign population—less than a fourth compared to that of the U.S.—50 percent is an unusually high figure. If one only counts Wongok Dong, the immediate district of the performance, the ratio goes up to 88 percent especially because of the city’s

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13 Ibid. p. 16.
rampant redlining housing practices. The single district supplies a large number of labor migrants from the Global South to the city’s sweatshops and factories, preferably undocumented who are more “willing” to suffer under low wages, unsafe working environments, and the threat of deportation. They are the major performers on and the prosthetic to the unattended stage.

When the stage holds no formal sessions, immigrant workers come to the plaza and encounter the unattended stage and props. Not part of the artist’s formal plan, such random encounters signal a powerful potential of embodiment performance as a counter-apparatus to South Korea’s multicultural art’s racialization regime. First of all, the encounters constitute the stage, props, and the body of the audience as prosthetic to each other, and, due to their transient characteristics, are recorded in photographic documents. Indeed, a performance cannot stand on its own and requires props to support itself, including photographs and other reproducible mediums. In this sense, photographs, the props on the stage, and the audience’s bodies are all prostheses. For instance, a photograph of one random encounter shows a man quietly sitting on the yellow chair inside the cubic frame. Another image shows two playfully interacting immigrant workers; one is lying on the hammock and the other is rocking his friend’s leg as if the hammock were a swing. The audience-performers lean their bodies on the stage and props as they interact with one another in a quotidian manner with some sense of humor and relaxation. The whole process is highly corporeal as well as transnational, as the performance extends to its urban surrounding as a massive prosthetic structure to the host society and the Asia-Pacific regime of migration.

In the dilapidated district are rows of building complexes, homes for labor-intensive, light industrial factories that depend on workers without “right papers.” Protected by no insurance and basic labor rights, the migrant workers are very frequently exposed to injuries involving their body being cut, compressed, stabbed, fractured, burnt, scalded, pierced, sliced, mauled, and abraded. According to one member of the Litmus, the area’s most advanced industry is—half jokingly—“invasive surgery,” because “the only available medical treatment for them is cutting and sewing.” Unlicensed practitioners in what local migrants call “sewing factories” perform makeshift surgeries for injured workers. Their bodies, one can imagine, are like sutured patches with prosthetic limbs, indicating the vulnerability of the body of both citizen and migrant subjects. However, that their bodies are mutually dependent is systematically concealed by the normative myth of the “wholesome” body backed by the national health care or images of able-bodied citizen subjects. In contrast, the unattended stage’s prosthetic function vividly materializes tightly interlocked bodies in the regimes of transnational migration, which constantly produce the fantasy of secured borders by marking the foreign-identified

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16 Blocker, pp. 24, 149-192.
body as racially different while admitting few on the condition of fulfilling the heteropatriarchal mission to reproduce the nation-state.

The prevailing exploitation and bodily transformation of the city’s undocumented workers conjunctively render their body’s fundamental vulnerability especially visible, thereby enabling one to imagine from the intricate interactions of the body, props, and the stage the xenophobic transnational society’s prosthetic operation. The body of the audience, the stage, and props, intermingled together in random encounters, constitute an “archive” that embodies Ngoc and others—to borrow Rebecca Schneider’s words—“whose pasts are excluded from or do not fit neatly within the traditional archive,” which reproduces a linear sense of time. On the unattended stage, the highly corporeal sense of the bodies, always prosthetic to one another, is a crucial source of imagining a different archive or a sense of time, one that can challenge the current operation of patrilinear time, radically bend it, so that the past, the present, and the future do not necessarily make a rigid sequence but, instead, can be imagined as coexisting or spreading in a more contingent order of time. One strongly realizes such time-bending in the stage as a temporal indicator.

Stage as Temporal Indicator: Bending of Patrilinear Time
The term “archive” particularly pertains to the media and public discourses of the shipwreck of Sewol, which rendered the shipwreck’s victims and Ngoc as objects of the past. As hegemonic archives, such discourses create senses of time, marking certain bodies as racial minorities while denying the act of marking’s racializing operation, ultimately consolidating the heteronormative and multicultural fiction of a same-blooded Korea. This fiction’s mode of time is linear, only moving to and from, between the past and the future, and even the real and representation. In the national fiction’s multicultural vision, the task of reproduction is partly outsourced to foreign brides from Vietnam and China due to Korea’s low birth-rate. Migrant workers, international brides, the

17 Schneider, p. 13.
18 Blocker, p. 9. “[Dominant historical] methods privilege stable and coherent origins … that consider the past as a fixed ideal to which the historian must return and from which she cannot deviate …, that adopt linear temporalities …, and that enforce the rigid dichotomy between the real and representation.”
disabled, and ethnic others are becoming the past, and the body of Ngoc signifies a failed conception of the Korean race’s future.

By embodying the dead, however, the audiences on the unattended stage resist petrifying forces of South Korean multiculturalism’s paternalist historiography, which consign the body of Ngoc to the ethno-nationalist, heteronormative, and racial scripts: a mother of two Korean children and Korean man’s wife. Against such scripts, the circular stage structure functions as a temporal indicator, as an alternative archive, that embodies the sense of time in-between multilinear temporalities. According to Blocker, embodiment indicates objects and bodies’ excessive characteristics, and, as “the maternal form of historiography,” retains by repetition what was meant to be stored and buried as the past in the hegemonic discourse of belonging and official archives.

Embodiment in performances operates through forms and gestures. The stage’s circular platform, together with a pole standing close to the rim, resembles a sun dial, a device that uses the parallax between the Sun and the Earth’s rotational axis to divide and measure the flow of time. The sun dial’s precision cannot fail for it directly responds to the most fundamental phenomenon in the conception of time: i.e., the rotation of the cosmos, the irrevocable fact of the Universe. Yet, the stage is not a typical sun dial because the pole, working as the clock’s hour hand, is not located at the center, and therefore the rotation of its shade does not indicate the twelve hour signs supposedly marked on the stage floor. Rather, because of the slight disjunction made day by day, the stage-temporal indicator disturbs our standardized sense of time that is “predetermined by a cultural habituation to the patrilineal, West-identified (arguably white cultural) logic of the archive.” For instance, the moment when the shade of the pole reaches the chair at the center, an event that happens once a day and the measured time of which would defy the standard time-concept

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due to few millimetric difference, can indicate only one moment, disjointed from the concept of linear time and is itself immanent in our bodily sense. The sense of temporality reveals our perception of time’s excessiveness to the disembodied regime of enlightenment science.

Such a disjunction, or disembodiment, is well indicated in my brief talk with the artist. Accordingly, the time of the pole’s reach to the cubic frame at the stage’s center is designed to indicate the exact time of the shipwreck: “Four twenty-one p.m.,” the officially declared time of the ship’s “complete disappearance from sight.” The four-digit number “1621,” however, has little significance given that one’s memory of the sinking cannot be properly expressed in the standard sense of time. On the stage, whenever the pole’s shade touches the center day by day, the four-digit loses its boasted precision and falls into a temporal discordance: such a concept of measurement does not exist on the stage because the former’s constructed-ness fails in front of the infallible time indicator—infallible because the stage-temporal indicator reflects the terrestrial circulation. Infallible, indeed; but also, subjective, since it evokes one’s feeling at the moment of watching the broadcast of the ship sinking. I remember words collapse when the

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22 Jee Song, “Notes on ‘Pattern of Ngoc’,” the artist’s statement, 2016, unpaginated.
ship disappears from sight. The experience of the shipwreck can be said to reenact the moment over and over on the body of the witness. The memory is intensely somatic, and, in this crudest clockwork performance, each reiteration of the moment does not simply trace back to the origin but recalls our bodily reaction to the past moment in the form of present feeling. The mechanism of embodiment denaturalizes the daily operation of linear time and arouses the bodily experience of the sinking, repeating it day by day as acutely as it was in the initial moment. It is in the stage structure’s making of a multilinear sense of time that the racialized victim of the shipwreck can be imagined as living with one in the space and time—not necessarily fixed in specific moments but dwelling in contingent spaces and times of the shipwreck in the Asia-Pacific regime of migration.

I could see that Ansan is still living in the shipwreck; floods of banners, street petitions, sit-ins, and pamphlets about the shipwreck dominate the urban landscape. I asked how the audience, many of whom do not even read Korean, could respond to the project without knowing the detailed context. But the truth is that immigrants in the city cannot not know what it means: how can the locals whose lives are consistently shaped by xenophobic sentiments and assimilative multiculturalism miss the significance of the event whose discourses strive to mark them as racially inferior? Indeed, in the photographs, the foreign workers are not mourning or expressing moods of sadness or depression. There is a very quotidian air of humor, comfort, and intimacy. I believe that they derive such emotional responses from their daily encounter with the shipwreck, which is recurring every day around Ansan’s Foreign Citizen Plaza.

“How do we know that Ngoc had ever disappeared?”
What is contemporary to one person can be historical to another: Pattern of Ngoc tells us that while the majority of Korean people might view the work as remembering and mourning Ngoc as a tragic past, migrant workers and racialized brides in the multicultural regime of South Korea can easily find Ngoc to be their contemporary. In this respect, rather than attempting to remember the dead, the performance instead asks, to quote Joseph
Roach, “What evidence do we have that [the presumed dead] ever died out?”

Note that Ngoc is not visually represented in the project, though she is restlessly discussed in the formal sessions. She is vividly reenacted in the random encounters, but what happened to her is always obscure. Even though her family photographs and favorite plant pots sit on the stage, audiences do not know to whom those items belong. In other words, the reenactment does not bring about clear facts and memories of the past. I sense the past is always obscured, or, it is not incomplete memories that obscure the past; rather, it is the contemporary itself that is unclear. We falter in the contemporary, viewing it as already constructed as history. This unsettled and obscured vision of the contemporary tells us that in history, as Adam Gopnik suggests, “the past is often unknowable not because it is befogged now but because it was befogged then, too, back when it was still present.” One needs to ask: What is the time of the shipwreck? It is contemporary, I answer, meaning neither past, nor present, nor future, but moments that are missing and at the same time strongly embodied through prosthetic devices. Due to this sense of missing, or the absence of the body, the contemporary asks us to involve, to embody the moment.

Epilogue: The most bizarre way of remembering

On the day when the ship sank, first came the news that more than four hundred people were locked inside the ship. Two to three hours later came the breaking news that the passengers were now safe. I was relieved. Then another piece of news shattered my composure; the ship still capsized, with only small fishing boats around the vessel. Someone who escaped the ship cried that most passengers still remain inside the ship. The national disaster taskforce formed, but President Park was not there for the first seven hours. Someone asked, “where is President?”—it could be me, or my brother, or my friend, but knowing who makes little difference because we all had

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24 Blocker, p. 4. “Connected and separated at once, looking forward while turning back, gliding into the future while standing awkwardly in the past, the historian of the contemporary flails and falters.”
the same feelings of distrust. Rescue experts, naval architecture
pundits, physicists, aerologists, oceanographers, psychiatrists, and
high school teachers on the news claimed their opinion’s validity.
Every national news channel broadcasted live the sinking ship until
it was finally capsized with its stern pointing high up to the sky. A
nearby fishing boat sent a picture of the ship’s window, and I saw—or
I think I saw the image of—dozens of palms slamming the glass
panes. The footage soon disappeared from the screen, but the brief
exposure left me wordless. I imagined the passengers lying on what
were once walls, struggling to climb up to the deck too high above.
I remember when the moment came, and the ship disappeared into
the sea. Everything was vividly obscured, and if someone tells me
that the ship sank at “four twenty-one in the afternoon,” that would
have been the most bizarre way of remembering it.

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