Post-pastoral Perspectives of Korean Environment in Contemporary Art and Literature

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Mixrice, an art collective of artists Yang Ch’ŏlmo [Yang Chul Mo] and Cho Chiŭn [Cho Ji Eun] won the 2016 Korea Artist Prize for their provocative multimedia project that featured a two-channel video installation, titled “The Vine Chronicle.” Centrally documenting the various lives of trees, like a 450-year old Zelkova tree from the village of Kangdong-ri, the video portrays their itinerant lives as they are moved to various sites to fuel capitalist development schemes: camping resorts, apartment complexes and redevelopment sites. Using this exhibit and its unique post-pastoral perspective as a frame, this article explores contemporary perceptions of Korean environment in art and literature. In this study, I am interested in drawing connections among ecocritical artworks and literary works that highlight the dispossession of human and non-human life and the history of rapid South Korean development. These works seek to complicate notions of South Korean development, environmental degradation and migration through a post-pastoral frame.

**Keywords:** post-pastoral, Korean art, Korean literature, ecocriticism, South Korean development, Korean environment

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The Korea Artist Prize, an exhibition and prestigious award held by the National Museum of Modern Art (MMCA) in Seoul, in 2016 featured a multimedia installation by artist collective mixrice, otherwise known as artists Yang Ch’ŏlmo [Yang Chul Mo] and Cho Chiŭn [Cho Ji Eun]. A socially conscious collective whose past projects have incorporated such politically charged issues as the immigrants and foreign laborers that reside in the furniture factories of Masŏk, their 2016 work celebrated by the MMCA was no different in its clear focus and critical stance. The work in form, which featured mixed media of video, painting, pamphlet, installation and photography, offers alternative perspectives of the ties between human and nonhuman life. The video installation, “The Vine Chronicle,” that serves as a central thematic node in their exhibit explores the lives of ancient Korean trees as they are sold, bought, and transplanted by real estate developers.

When viewers enter the room of the multi-channel video “The Vine Chronicle,” they see different portions of a narrative that plays in a loop. There is no evident visual beginning and end to the narrative described, and the content of the narrative itself mirrors its medium and the viewing experience, describing South Korean “progress” and “development” as an ongoing cycle. The dual channel screen shutters out of sync flashing different scenes at increasing speeds to a quick offbeat anxious electronic rhythm. At one point of the narrative, a quiet envelops the room and only the faint but familiar sound of rustling leaves can be heard. The viewer enters the space to see a peaceful scene of a tree in its natural habitat, with the accompanying words: “This is the hole that the universe comes down from,” suggesting the primeval roots of the life of this ancient tree.

Figure 1: Mixrice, The Vine Chronicle, 2016, Two-channel HD video, Courtesy of Artist

Figure 2: Mixrice, The Vine Chronicle, 2016, Two channel HD video, Courtesy of Artist
As the viewing process continues, the channels shutter in and out in more quick succession, showing clips of the tree uprooted, caged, shipped elsewhere and given an identification number (Fig. 1). The viewer then sees a hilltop urban landscape replete with familiar cars, people and tall buildings (Fig. 2), and the accompanying channel features the words “Here was a mountain,” which is quickly proceeded with the urgent question: “It’s like now the mountain grows into a house, the trees have turned to houses?” The urban landscape then flashes to a barrage of newspaper photos of South Korean apartment development and reverts back to a photo of a barren development site, a mountain once again but instead a mountain wasteland of corporate development, which is paired with the words: “Foreseeable future” (Fig. 3).

Works like the mixrice exhibit represent the ongoing efforts by Korean artists, writers and activists to address Korean development through an ecocritical lens that attempts to restructure dominant perceptions of community, posited against the structural violence of human/nonhuman life. This article borrows from conversations among a wide range of cultural critics in ecocriticism, cultural studies and postcolonial studies and will focus on thematic connections among contemporary artists, writers and activists that call attention to a crisis in Korean contemporary life involving the loss of locality and the integrated consumption of the natural world and global capital. A common question that ties the artists and writers in this article together is their unique focus on material and affective identifications between humans and nonhumans.

While the artworks and literature discussed in this paper illuminate how this question can be further examined in the South Korean context, the ecocritical lens employed by these works adds another dimension of critique. In light of histories of destructive development and unchecked consumption of nature starting in the latter half of the 20th century, these works also offer a pointedly vexed view of the visual consumption of landscape, and challenge the politics behind representations of nature. In particular, these contemporary artists and writers are investigating the landscape frame: blurring lines among the urban landscape, a natural landscape devoid of human interventions, and environmental voids in the form of construction development sites.

This assemblage of representations of Korean landscape present what I call a complex
“post-pastoral” that scholar Terry Gifford has described as an ecocritical perspective that pushes for a reexamination of human relationships with the environment. Although Gifford focuses on the literary form, Gifford’s term, “post-pastoral,” is helpful in understanding contemporary works that are engaging in new ways with the sensorial and emotional connections between nature life cycles and human life (Gifford 1999, 52). While engaging with the scholarship of Fraser Harrison, Lawrence Buell and David Abram, Gifford (1999) describes this “post-pastoral” perspective as the heightened awareness of “the immanence in all natural things” and “the recognition that our inner human nature can be understood in relation to external nature” (156). David Abrams, in a similar vein, points out the stark difference between an urban environment and a natural environment. Abrams (1996) argues that there is an “otherness” in the human fabricated materials of the urban environment, and a tactile organic experience in earthly life: “The recuperation of the incarnate, sensorial dimension of experience brings with it a recuperation of the living landscape in which we are corporeally embedded” (48). Moving away from the legacy of pastoral thought that utilized a false abstraction of nature as a passive subject of human manipulation, the post-pastoral argues for complexity: for a focus on our sense experience as animals entwined within the biosphere.

In the South Korean context, contemporary artists and writers have taken on complex considerations of the relationship between human and non-human life, and projects like “The Vine Chronicle” connect dispossession of all kinds of life under the spatial contingencies of neoliberal urban policies: migrant laborers, the relocated poor and ancient trees all share the same liminal experience under shifting social and political circumstances. This post-pastoral perspective frames the degradation and migration of nature and human life as inextricably connected. The negative effects of Korean redevelopment cycles manifest in a visceral manner in the works, the body serving as a connecting node to the natural environment. And the “post” in post-pastoral lends itself to the postmodern, pushing against established conceptual boundaries and distinctions of form. The Korean post-pastoral perspective is intersectional and intermedial, connecting environmental and social structures of exploitation and moving across different visual forms, mirroring the interconnectedness of our contemporary cultural experience.

In addition to the utilization of a unique post-pastoral perspective, thematically these artists, writers and activists address what critics have called a crisis in contemporary life. The works featured in this article show a similar anxiety about the loss of locality in contemporary Korean life: a loss of belonging to place through the slow erasure of neighborhoods. Specifically, in the context of contemporary South Korea, this idea implicates the ways in which South Korean economic development and an increasingly consumption-oriented economy creates what Arjun Appadurai (1996) has called “a perpetual motion machine” (192) in which humans and non-human life are compelled to constant migration. In the

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1 This idea is indebted to ecofeminism that connected the marginal experience of women and minorities to the natural world. Terry Gifford writes about this important contribution, as well, and describes how ecofeminism has led to intersectional discussions of exploitation.
larger context of redevelopment history, violence against human and nature is most often associated with the rapid industrialization enacted under authoritarian governments during the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s, but this article will argue that the slow violence under recent and current democratic and neoliberal governments can be just as destructive.

Ecocriticism and South Korean Redevelopment

The “Vine Chronicle” and other contemporary works discussed in this article conjure a long history of redevelopment in South Korea, calling upon a half century of Korean modernization that spanned the years following the Korean War, and a multitude of projects driven by the South Korean government in collaboration with the Seoul city government. The term redevelopment (chaegaebal) used aggressively during the 1960s and 1970s came to typify these projects of urban beautification that aimed to solidify South Korea’s place in the world economy.

After the war, as the majority agrarian economy became increasingly reliant on industrial means, the migration of people from the countryside to the city in search of better jobs and higher pay swelled, and the shantytown settlements in the hills and around Seoul’s streams grew concurrently (Mobrand 2008, 368). The migration to the cities reached its height in the 1960s and 1970s, resulting in the tripling of Seoul’s population within 2 decades (368). The shantytowns (p’anjach’on) served as an entry point for the itinerant poor into urban society and were made up of huts put together very cheaply from found material, without many conveniences like water, electricity and proper sanitation systems (Porteux and Kim 2016, 376). The lack of housing infrastructure contributed to the easy spread of infectious diseases, and raised concern about the safety of the residents. The shantytowns’ locations were also a focus of concern; they were in undesirable areas, next to rivers subject to flooding during the wet season and in hills at risk of fire during the dry season (Porteux and Kim 2016, 376). Moreover, governments from the 1960s to the 1980s that focused on Korean modernization felt the shantytowns were eyesores. Respective governments focused on massive overall and redevelopment, which usually involved the removal of such unlicensed dwellings. Over the three decades, a recorded 69,844 households were removed (Porteux and Kim 2016, 376).

Within this history of redevelopment, there were a few incidents of mass casualties that disturbed the idyllic mask of urban improvement. One such incident was the Kwangju housing district incident in 1971 that was representative of government plans to “beautify” the city through the relocation of the “urban poor” and the industries in which they were employed. Kwangju, a suburb in Kyŏnggi province, was the location of one of the relocation projects set forth by President Park Chung Hee (Park Chŏnghŭi) from 1968 where residents of “substandard” settlements were promised affordable housing in a new satellite city. When the residents found the living conditions of the new city subpar—lacking in basic facilities like water, sanitation, roads, electricity and schools (Kyŏnghyang sinmun, August 11, 1971)—the government exacerbated the situation by banning resale and selling the land at a higher
price than was purchased initially (Kyŏnghyang sinmun, August 11, 1971). In August of 1971, residents of the Kwangju housing district petitioned the Seoul Metropolitan mayor, asking for the lowering of building site prices and tax exemptions. Upon being ignored, the protestors stormed the Sŏngnam Branch office and it resulted in a clash with the Seoul metropolitan police, with many wounded on both sides and high costs in damages.

The Kwangju housing district incident was one of many relocation projects that revealed the government’s hasty restructuring of the urban environment, emphasizing more concern with the glossy surface of development than with the quality of life of the uprooted residents. A particularly disastrous incident occurred in 1970 when a building collapsed in the WOW apartment complex in the Mapo District. Construction had been hastily completed during 1969 and after residents moved in 1970, a building collapsed on April 9th killing 33 people and injuring 40 people (Kyŏnghyang sinmun, April 14, 1970). The building had initially passed all standards by the municipal government, and had been declared a building “which had completely passed all requirements and had no issues” (Maeil Kyŏngje, April 8, 1970). Remaining construction was halted and the buildings in the complex were demolished (Kim and Sohn 2018, 154).

Clashes between government-driven urban redevelopment projects and displaced citizens reached new heights under the Chun Doo Hwan (Chŏn Tuhwan) government before the 1988 Seoul Olympic games. As the country prepared for an international event that could meaningfully establish South Korea as a leading economy in Asia, the stakes to revamp Seoul into a glossy global hub were raised. The evictions and forced relocation of residents under the guise of progress and global urban aesthetics has been well researched by internal organizations and scholars since, drawing clear and direct correlations between the preparation of the games and speedy restructuring of the city (Davis 2007, 16).

Though rapid development and industrialization were accompanied by excessive exploitation of the Korean natural environment, ecocritical works only gained significant prominence in the latter part of the 20th century and mainly involved a few literary works. Military dictatorships during the 1960s and 1970s hindered the growth of environmentally focused literature, because governments during these decades had a developmental focus and promoted an anti-communist atmosphere. Writing about environmental protection was asserted as anti-South Korean development: “Korean people were misleadingly compelled to believe that environmental destruction was none but an inevitable byproduct of development and security” (Sin 1999, 121).

Despite heavy censorship, there was rising concern about the environment in the 1970s as the nation underwent large-scale industrial growth and concerns about the nuclear industry and nuclear disasters increased (Ku 2004, 71). Literary works mirrored rising grassroots activism, as local residents in industrial cities like Ulsan, Onsan and Yŏch’an voiced their concerns about factory contamination of the local environment (Koo 2004, 190). The literature during this period focused on ecological crises, brought on by human greed and industrialization. They forecast dystopic futures about populations of people falling sick with disease as a result of their work and capitalist greed (Ku 2004, 71).
Ecocritical works started to gain a critical mainstream prominence in the late 1980s and 1990s after a series of democratization movements prompted the opening of the cultural sphere in the late 1980s. An organized civil Korean environmental movement took form after decades of accelerated industrialization resulted in widespread water contamination and air pollution; many scholars note the Onsan disease outbreak in 1985 as a breaking point that led to the establishment of environmental organizations (Cho 2004, 14). Literature responded to these social concerns and literary scholars began to consider environmental literature and its subsets as an important tendency of the time.\(^2\)

Cho Sehŭi’s fantastical novel “The Dwarf” (Nanjangī ka sŏaollin chagŭn kong, 1978) is one of the first novels to detail the disastrous effects of rapid industrialization in a setting similar to the industrial cities and factories where the environmental movements began. The main character, a dwarf, suffers from discrimination and his family’s hardships show the marginalization of the lower classes by social and economic systems that favor modernization at all costs. Cho highlights a triangulation of displacement: marginalized labor, the dispossessed poor and environmental degradation. The ecocritical literature during the 1980s and 1990s maintained a human centered vision of environmental degradation, but the connections made in texts like Cho’s that consider the interconnectedness of social and environmental exploitation are significant contributions to Korean ecocriticism.\(^3\)

Post-Pastoral Perspectives of Korean Environment

The artists and writers discussed in this article write with these extended histories of redevelopment in mind, and have incorporated these crucial histories in their work. While the National Assembly passed the Urban Renewal Act in 2013 in an effort to shift the model of urban renewal from complete destruction of neighborhoods to preservation, past models for urban change still persist, with areas of Seoul like Yongsan and Yŏngdŭngp’o slated for redevelopment. Meanwhile, contemporary ecocritical works approach current redevelopment in very different ways from the past. While past ecocritical works centered on the environmental pollution created by industrial waste and the clashes between residents and redevelopers, contemporary writers, activists and artists point to a visceral loss at the heart of cyclical Korean redevelopment and reconsider the relationship between human and nonhuman life.

\(^2\) An unidentified disease near Ulsan chemical factories resulted in an uproar and citizen organization against pollution.

\(^3\) In the late 1980s and 1990s, literary scholars started to organize certain literary trends as green literature, see Yi (1998) and Kim (2003). Scholars have written about the particularities of Korean ecocriticism in its opposition to Western objectification of “nature,” Korean traditional themes, and influences from Eastern philosophical traditions.

\(^4\) In Korean literature as well, books like Yi Kyŏngja’s (1988) Chŏlban ŭi silp’ae (The failure of half), which detailed the abject conditions of the city slums for lower class women and laborers, made important intersectional connections among feminism, class politics, and ecocriticism.
In contemporary narratives, the apartment complex is a loaded site that is alternatively a dwelling, community, ecological space, urban landscape and symbol of rapid Korean urban development. Director of artist collective “Listen To The City” Pak Êunsŏn [Park Eun Seon] (2017), captures the multiplicity of this representation in her description of the kind of “memory loss” that has taken over the inhabitants of Seoul: “To a generation born in concrete buildings and whose nature consists of landscapes attached to apartment complexes, remembering the city’s past and its natural elements might not be much of a priority.”

Park’s collective, “Listen To The City” focuses on changing perceptions of the Korean environment. In the above statement, the collective argues that cyclical Korean redevelopment has eradicated neighborhoods—the familiarity residents have to the natural and urban elements of a place—and points out a problematic artificiality in the apartment complex’s fabrication of nature. The numerous projects that the collective has undertaken often involve opposing development that dispossesses both nature and human beings. Projects, like “Unsustainable Cheonggyecheon”(2017) and “The Sandy Course of the Naesong River” (2012), involve a variety of methods—film, signage, events, photography, installation, pamphlets, books—that focus on changing viewers’ perceptions of the increasingly fabricated landscapes of Seoul. The collective, because of the diversity of its members, uses a variety of methods that present an activist spirit. For example, in the pamphlet for “The Sandy Course of the Naesong River,” the narrative and photography present the Naesong River as a complex ecosystem that is a source of rich farmland, and home to many species of birds, plants, animals, and insects. The accompanying pamphlet presents a rich biosphere of human and nonhuman life that coexists harmoniously.

Many of these elements can also be seen in mixrice’s 2016 exhibit, and reveal the ways in which artists have incorporated such materials as pamphlets and signage to create encounters with viewers. A quality that sets mixrice’s “The Vine Chronicle” apart is a unique perspective that juxtaposes trees with development sites in arrangements that capture the cyclical destruction patterns of South Korean development. This image (Fig. 4) depicts this fragmentation and, through these pairings, the artists resist an uncomplicated sentimental perspective of trees and the natural environment.
The video installation was also accompanied by differently positioned pieces in the surrounding exhibit that contribute to a post-pastoral effect. The exhibit featured a work called “Plant Graffiti” in which outlines of plants were spray painted on the wall, reminding one of urban graffiti, guerilla gardening and pressed flowers. An interesting contrast is the center installation, titled “Badly Flattened Land 2,” which contains the only organic material in the exhibit as a whole. Made of dirt that the artists collected from a redeveloped neighborhood, “Badly Flattened Land 2” is a patch of soil that has been pressed by human machinery and shaped into a blueprint of an apartment. White chalk lines outline what will be a kitchen, a family room, a bathroom, a bedroom etc. In an exhibit that presents so much natural and organic richness by appealing to the viewer’s sight and hearing, the encounter with the redevelopment blueprint, though filled with organic material, is in contrast very bleak.

Cho and Yang’s presentation of redevelopment as a familiar contemporary Korean landscape is a consistent theme that runs through both the exhibit and the video installation. Like Park Eun Seon’s “memory loss,” the artists have captured the “slow violence” of processes that do not often erupt in mass casualties, but are “violence[s] of delayed destruction that dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all” (Nixon 2011, 2). Micro-destructive habits and ongoing cyclical redevelopment schemes result in the destruction of forests, the displacement of people and the uprooting of environmental community. In most cases, both people and trees are uprooted, sold and transplanted without regard for the natural and affective ties that link humans and nonhumans alike to a place.

Artist Kŭm Hyewŏn [Keum Hyewon] also captures this “slow violence” of Korean redevelopment in her series labeled “Urban Depth” (2010-2011) and “Blue Territory” (2014). Capturing different topographies of urban development, her series of photographs in “Urban Depth” reveal the massive waste management facilities that are located under the city of Seoul. The artist, in her project statement, notes that she is interested in the particular ways in which “tacit laws requir[e] such places to be covered or be disguised as parks or squares because they are despised.” The artist through her photo series disrobes the gloss of modernization, and the artificial veil that disguises many of the “unpleasing” aspects of the city.

Keum’s 2007-2010 work, “Blue Territory” is also comprised of shots of unconventional material. In “Blue Territory,” Keum continues her focus on urban landscapes, and focuses on the common blue tarpaulin that is used on construction sites to control erosion. Though recalling classic landscape iconography with an expanse of vibrant sky, depth and texture of land, Keum reverses these pastoral expectations of landscape photography with its subject matter. At closer look, the blue expanse is a blue tarpaulin and a fence stands where there should be a row of trees. In one work, “The Green Pond 2” (Fig. 5), a luminous sky is reflected in a pond at the center of the photograph. Though the title of the work may recall such landscapes as Henry David Thoreau’s inspired Walden Pond, Keum’s pond is a murky pool of water covered with a thick film of algae, perhaps of runoff water from the construction site.5

5 This observation was introduced by my discussant, Jake Levine, at the Academia Koreana International Conference 2017.
Keum, in her artist statement, comments on the powerful imagery of the blue tarpaulin: “Like a magic show where the damaged residential area of the past transforms into the new and luxurious apartment complex, it is similar to the symbolic act of making it into a whole new environment as the blue tent is uncovered.” Keum continues to describe the duality of such change, as redevelopment forces certain classes of people out from their homes, but simultaneously contains hope for the future. Through reversals of such visual expectations, Keum embeds a serious and contemplative consideration of urban landscape in Korea, as one that is in flux and in constant “improvement” of the old. Her work, through its visual ubiquity to residents of Seoul, reveals the constant and ongoing restructuring of the facade of the city.

In another series “Green Curtain,” Keum further explores the thin line between the “toxic pond” of a development site and the eco projects that accompany such redevelopment projects. One such project is an artificial ecological park on Nanjido, an island off the Han River that used to be a landfill site in the 1970s. When the Sangam-dong neighborhood became the proposed location for the 2002 World Cup Stadium, the conversion of the waste disposal grounds into an ecological park was the environmentally friendly face of the large-scale redevelopment project. The photograph of the park is aptly named “Green Curtain” suggesting the multifaceted roles manmade eco parks play in marketing development as environmental progress and preservation.

The Loss of Locality in Contemporary Korean Life

In the case of “The Vine Chronicle,” the accompanying pamphlet makes connections among apartment complexes, “new cities” and the changing consumption of the natural world. In one
portion of the pamphlet, a paragraph description features a tree, a 450 year-old zelkova tree that bears resemblance to the majestic tree in the video installation. The tree was from the village of Kangdong-ni and the pamphlet details how the village was going to be submerged under water after the construction of the Yŏngju Dam. The tree was then uprooted and moved to the Korea Water Resources Corporation’s Yŏngju Dam construction office in Yonghyŏl-ri. When the villagers of Kandong-ri agreed to sell the tree to a landscape builder for 50 million won, the action was blocked by the K-water and Yŏngju City Authorities and was transplanted at the Yŏngju Dam construction office. During the process of transplantation, the tree died (mixrice 2016).

The rest of the pamphlet documents similar cases of tree transplantation: trees that were illegally and legally moved by landscapers in redevelopment plans, trees in village entrances and in apartment complexes that were designated for or the result of transplantation. There are also contrasting cases of a zelkova tree in Songp’a-gu that was saved by villagers, and primeval forests in Chejudo that quietly disappeared as a result of real estate development. In many of these cases, the trees died during the process of transplantation. Juxtaposed with this biographical focus on trees, the pamphlet documents side-by-side cases of redevelopment, past and ongoing constructions of apartment complexes and “new cities.” Many of the redevelopment sites mentioned in the work—the Cheju New Airport, New Tasan City, Kajaewŏl New Town—exhibit the uneasy relationship between the “simulacra of ecological urban development”6 and the dispossession of human and non-human life. In many of these cases, the narrative of ecological preservation accompanies projects of development, resulting in what scholars like O Yunho (2008) have claimed to be an artifice at the heart of Korean restoration projects.

This artifice can be connected to discussions of locality introduced by Arjun Appadurai (1996) in his book “Modernity at Large.” In his book, Appadurai discusses the increasing uneasiness of localities or what he calls “neighborhoods” in the context of modern nationhood and global belonging. The practices around locality have evolved in accordance with the times, and under globalization, for example, Appadurai notes the added importance and function of “virtual neighborhoods” that allow for new forms of community and belonging. Whether virtual or spatial, he describes the important function that “neighborhoods” play in producing “local subjectivities” that are often “at odds with the projects of the nation-state” (Appadurai 1996, 191). In Appadurai’s sense, neighborhoods are sources of local community that are often in tension with the production of national belonging. From the perspective of national identity formation, neighborhoods are fraught with “slippage” (Appadurai 1996, 191) because they are important and powerful sources of association and attachment. Because of this, projects of nationhood that ask for uniformity, discipline and productivity from their citizens are at risk in local contexts that do not conform to programs of national citizenship.

6 In the context of Ch’ŏnggyech’on development, from 2003 and 2005, O Yunho (2008) discusses contemporary ecological literature that accompanied the project: “the clean river” novels that he calls the fictions of environmental restoration. O compares the works and the restoration itself to Baudrillard’s “simulacra” that espouses an artifice of ecology (21–42).
Mixrice points out the ways in which ancient trees have played important roles as cultural symbols of the national imaginary. The national myth of restoration and ecological continuity is facilitated in South Korean development through the transplantation of the environment. And “The Vine Tree” points out the important role “landscaping” plays in the production of “local subjectivities,” in which primordial trees become part of the “exemplars of a generalizable mode of belonging to a wider territorial imaginary” (Appadurai 1996, 191). In this way, the disorienting experience of South Korean cyclical redevelopment, the regenerating of apartment complexes and new cities, is grounded through the transplantation of historic trees. Ancient zelkova trees become important selling points for shiny apartment complexes that promise an illusory sense of place, drawing attention to the important and lucrative consumption of nature in which villages sell “locality” to landscaping companies.

In contemporary literature, as well, there has been increasing focus on the apartment complex as a powerful symbol of loss at the heart of Korean local community. Within this body of work, author Kim Chongsŏng challenges the impression of the apartment complex as representative of local interests. In his short story “Yŏlliji ka innŭn p’unggyŏng” (A view of love trees, 2005), Kim documents the important transnational, national and local logics of the management of nature from the perspective of a resident of an apartment building complex in a suburb of Seoul. The narrative is written from the perspective of the main character, the wife of an academic who studies ancient trees from the Three Kingdoms period. The story weaves through her husband’s experiences of ineffective and hopeless environmental activism, seemingly stagnant in his career because of his efforts and migrating in hopes for a full-time academic position. At one point in the narrative, she overhears her husband discussing the importance of a 600-year-old Kwangnŭng Forest that is threatened by a waste management center being built nearby. Her husband reminds the listener that this is not the first time the forest has been threatened and that it has had an ongoing precarious life. During the 1988 Olympics, the government sought to advertise Korean nature to foreign visitors and built a road there, encouraging an unchecked excess of visitors that threatened the life of the forest.

In contrast, the wife is increasingly occupied and politicized by the changing environment of the apartment complex. At the discovery that the birch trees in complex 102 were cut down, she contemplates the affective ties of her and her husband’s relationship with birch trees. In her recollections, the birch tree is an important marker of memory and recognition that is linked with her emotional ties with places, particularly with T’aebaek Mountain and Ch’nma-do. For her and her husband, memories of these trees are foundational to their feelings of belonging to a social community. And walks to the local spring are rituals that underlie their attachment to local place.

The narrator discovers that the trees were cut down at the request of an opposing complex, put into action by the Saemgol Saemaŭl Women’s Society that acts as a managerial arm of the complex and as a subsidiary of the municipal government. In the end, the mineral spring frequented by the couple is also co-opted by the Women’s Society, closed for the presumed “protection of the environment” and rendered private property. An added
dimension to this is the particular symbolic register of water as a traveling and shared resource of nature. The mountain spring source, which is usually an important public resource for local residents, is taken over by private interests and the action is masked as environmental protectionism. The wife’s struggles with the women’s society of apartment complex reveal a confusing and complex set of interests in the management of nature by the residents, apartment complex representatives, private corporate interests and national interests. In contrast to Appadurai’s argument that neighborhoods often produce local subjectivities that are oppositional to national projects, Kim presents a conflicted view of the women’s society as not in tension with national programs, but in collusion with the national developmental and economic spirit.

Kim’s narrative can be compared to the Hwang Chŏngŭn (2016) novella One Hundred Shadows (Paek ŭi kŭrimja, 2010) that details another kind of neighborhood in Korean contemporary society. The main character Eun’gyo works in an electronics market that has been declared a redevelopment zone. In the novella, the shopkeepers and their businesses are a rooted community, and Eun’gyo has fond memories of visiting her father when he worked at his shop. Capturing the tension between redevelopment and local economy, the novella describes how national policies of economic development force the movement of people by not only transforming communities into slums, but also defining development in accordance with hegemonic transnational and national corporations over small local businesses. The novella describes what it means to be declared a slum from the perspective of a current resident:

Do you know what a slum is Eun’gyo?
Something to do with being poor?
I looked it up in a dictionary.
What did it say?
An area in a city where poor people live. Mujae looked at me.
They say the area around here is a slum.
Who?
The papers, and people.
Slum?
It’s a little odd, isn’t it?
It is odd.
Slum.
Slum.
We sat here repeating the word for a while and then I said, I’ve heard the word, of course, but I’d never thought of this place as a slum. (Hwang 2016, 101)

For water and its important symbolism between different and unequal communities, see Julie Sze (2013).

Hwang’s 2013 novel “Yamanjŏgin Aellisŭ-ssi” [Savage Alice] also deals with fringe urban populations through a reversal of the famous “Alice in Wonderland” story. The wonderland, in Hwang’s novel, depicts Seoul as a dystopia and the urban poor as a dispossessed and marginal urban population.
Eun’gyo’s and Mujae’s discussion of the slated redevelopment of their neighborhood highlights the disparity between national programs of progress and local subjectivities. To Eun’gyo and Mujae, their neighborhood is a home, a feeling formed through their familiarity with the streets, buildings and people that live there. Their confusion over the official declaration of their neighborhood as a “slum” highlights uneven programs of urban redevelopment that adhere to logics of capital accumulation to the exclusion of the people who live there. Eun’gyo makes a poignant observation about Korean redevelopment and the label “slum”:

I wonder if they call this kind of place a slum because if you called it someone’s home or their livelihood that would make things awkward when it comes to tearing it down. (Hwang 2016, 102)

When the buildings in the electronic market are torn down and a park is created in its place, Eun’gyo points out how small the park is. Like Keum’s poignant observation of eco-marketed projects, Eun’gyo notes the absurd size of the park in comparison to the countless number of people that were displaced.

Conclusion

In early 2018, South Korea hosted its first winter Olympics, in P’yŏngch’ang (Pyeongchang). It has been touted as the first “megaevent” in South Korea that was promoted by local actors. The administrators of Kangwŏn province strongly believed in the benefits that hosting such an event would bring, claiming that it would revitalize the province’s economy that had, in the past, been dependent on the mining and coal industries (Joo, Bae and Kassens-Noor 2017, 95). Together with industrial conglomerates (chaebŏls) and the national government, the bid was a success and Pyeongchang became the host of the 2018 Winter Olympics.

Yet perhaps because of the legacy of the 1988 Olympics, news of the successful bid were accompanied by vehement opposition from a variety of sources who objected to the event for political, environmental and social reasons. Previously mentioned artist collective, Listen to the City, moderated an event called “Olympics, Time Is Up! Korea-Japan Anti Olympics Forum” that offered a platform for activist groups to express their concerns about the event. Like the artworks and literature mentioned above, concerns emerged from a complex set of issues like the national economic burden of the undertaking and rapidly rising cost of living for the local people who would be priced out of their own neighborhoods. Because of its global scale and government concern for national reputation, the area quickly began to be overhauled with a developmental focus on building facilities for the athletes, improving facets of the tourism industry, and expanding transportation infrastructures (Joo, Bae and Kassens-Noor 2017).

During preparation for the games, many of the themes of this article came to the forefront
of discussion. One such concern was for local environmental protection. While local actors are often touted as the main proprietors of environmental conservation, the Pyeongchang Olympics shows that local interests that claim to serve “the good of the province” are often at odds with nonhuman life. Though the Pyeongchang Olympics won the bid for its platform of “environmentally sustainab[ility]” (Joo, Bae and Kassens-Noor 2017, 106), the city had to make concessions to meet standards for Olympic events.

The most publicized controversy was the committee’s destruction of a 500-year-old forest for a three-day Alpine Downhill ski event. Prior to the Olympics, the area had been protected under national law as “a forest genetic resources preservation area” because it was home to some rare species of insects and animals. This protection, however, was lifted in 2013 for the purpose of the 2018 event so that the committee could meet height standards for the event (McCurry and Howard 2015).

The Olympic and local authorities’ response to criticism echo the developmental logic that has been well documented by the artists and writers featured in this article. The local officials assured protesters that all the ancient trees that had been removed will be “restored” through the transplantation of other ancient trees after the Olympic event (McCurry and Howard 2015). While the Olympic organizers argue that these changes to local environment will be minimal, the contemporary artists and writers featured in this article have illustrated that life, both human and nonhuman, cannot be so easily “restored.”
References


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