Expressive Struggles: Neoliberal Temporalities and the Social Reproduction of Feminized Labor in South Korea


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This dissertation examines newly unionized female janitorial workers’ struggle in the process of public sector privatization that has unfolded after the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis in South Korea. It offers a critique of the discourse of labor precarity and the universalizing neoliberal temporality under global financial capitalism that is expressed in the post-developmental state. This ethnographic study utilizes the oral histories of women workers in their fifties and sixties to trace their life histories which encompass the developmental state regime (1970s – 1990s) and the neoliberal reform era (1997 – present) in Korea. The elderly female janitors’ life-stories demonstrate how multiple institutions, mainly the state, the law, labor unions, and the family, participate in the process of capitalist social reproduction of feminized labor. Firstly, I argue that labor precarity is not a new accumulation strategy in global capitalism and Korean developmentalism. The newness narrative prevalent in studies of labor precarity forecloses a radical critique of the reproduction of capitalist social relations by erasing histories of the laboring subjects whose lives repeatedly fall into the old and new categories of the Other and the outsiders. Seen from the female workers’ standpoint, labor precarity has intensified from the inception of developmental capitalism to its afterlife under the present neoliberal regime in Korea. This politics of forgetting erases the heterogeneous histories of feminized labor and reinforces the hegemonic neoliberal temporality that is produced by global financial capitalism. Secondly, I contend that the middle-aged women’s struggles at work and in their poverty-stricken homes are emblematic sites of reproductive crises and of a general contradiction immanent in developmental state capitalism and its neoliberal becoming. This view decenters the Western welfare state-centric discourse of labor precarity and suggests rethinking contemporary social struggles from the sites of reproductive contradictions. Lastly, I propose the concept of spatial intimacy as a node for larger coalition building strategies among precarious laboring subjects living under uneven geographies of neoliberal conditions of life. This study suggests that the notion of spatial intimacy that attends to the ways laboring bodies traverse between the realms of production and reproduction to create surplus value enables us to draw a cognitive map connecting various sites of social reproductive crises and to envision a radical feminist politics of care and solidarity.

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