

Precarious Seoul:

Urban Inequality and Belonging of Young Adults in South Korea

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Introduction

The concept of precarity has been evolved from the term *precariat*, originally coined by Italian activists and popularized by British economist Guy Standing (2011). The term captures the global expansion of precarious work and its relationship with a wide range of social problems, and it is often used to describe precarious employment systems (Kalleberg 2011; Vosko 2010). Sociologists and other scholars expanded the concept of precarity to incorporate broader dimensions of security, citizenship, and social life. They emphasize the increasing prevalence of precarious labor and its discontents (antiprecarity movements) on a global scale while noting that social precarity manifests in distinct ways across diverse settings (Allison 2013; Arnold and Pickles 2011; Paret 2015). By bridging the concept of social precarity and the understanding of urban inequality in globalization, this article examines

how a host of young adults striving for their place in South Korean society must confront social precarity in new forms of urban inequality. I argue that urban young adults facing vulnerability in the emerging substandard housing types experience a new form of social precarity in the post-financial-crisis South Korea as they construct their sense of home in response to the complex dynamics of belonging in a context of deepening urban inequality.

The case of urban young adults in South Korea constitutes one of the most relevant illustrations of the discussion of social precarity. With its fast-growing economy, South Korea's recent economic, social, and cultural shifts have attracted global attention. However, the picture of South Korea's vibrant growth often leaves out how new forms of social precarity reflecting a broader global economic reordering have become a prevalent feature of the post-financial-crisis period of the social world. South Korea must meet increased demands for deregulation, privatization, and labor flexibility in response to an International Monetary Fund (IMF)-induced neoliberal model of economic and spatial restructuring. South Korea's neoliberal reforms following the 1997–98 Asian financial crisis (Kim 2004; Lim and Jang 2006) have resulted in especially bleak prospects for urban young adults (Abelmann, Park, and Kim 2009). Since the financial crisis, contemporary South Korean young adults have struggled with escalating urban inequality, including job insecurity and housing uncertainty. Young adults who grew up during an economic boom found their social worlds transformed by the crisis: full-time and lifelong employment declined, social services were curtailed, and social inequality increased (Cho 2015).

The metropolitan city of Seoul has become the social laboratory for neoliberal economic, social, and spatial reforms in South Korea, and the newly implemented labor and housing policies based on deregulation and privatization have created significant social precarity. Many youths who migrated to the Seoul metropolitan area to pursue better opportunities for education and employment now find themselves trapped, rotating through various low-wage, unstable, and precarious jobs and facing limited housing options. Informed by neoliberal global real estate markets and neoconservative family politics, the housing policies of the past decade have transformed housing into a battleground in which individuals seek to redefine the boundaries of social

security, mobility, and belonging. My research demonstrates that the contemporary urban inequality that largely affects young adults is not a transitory phenomenon but, rather, constitutes a prevalent feature of social precarity in South Korea in the post-financial-crisis period. The plight of young South Koreans trapped in the spatial injuries of long-lasting economic recession, who are at once precarious workers and vulnerable tenants, complicates our understanding of how social precarity is manifested and experienced through the emerging forms of insecure housing conditions, as they wrestle with a contradictory sense of home.

The research for this article involved fifteen months of fieldwork conducted between December 2009 and February 2011, including both participant observation and in-depth interviews.¹ I compiled twenty-two in-depth interviews from single South Korean young adults who ranged in age from their mid-twenties to mid-thirties and had lower- to middle-class family backgrounds. Some were college students while others were nonstandard employees in the early stage of their working life. All of my informants were immersed in the social world of the post-financial crisis and were participants (to varying stages and degrees) in the precarious labor market. They were also all temporary tenants in substandard housing units such as *panjiha* (semibasement flat), *okt'appang* (rooftop room), and *kosiwŏn* (extremely small single-room rental), mostly located in the Seoul metropolitan area. Interviews, which lasted about one to three hours, took place on or near college campuses or workplaces, and in some cases in their residences.

To develop my argument, I begin by reviewing prominent literature on social precarity, arguing that a focus on the ways in which social precarity is manifested and experienced through substandard housing forms is first required. The next section situates the deep disparity between the idealized notion of home and the precarious realities urban young adults face within the context of the broader economic, social, and spatial shifts in contemporary South Korea since the Asian financial crisis. Then, I draw from three illustrative informants' stories that speak to the complex dynamics of belonging in the context of rising urban inequality for young adults, by analyzing different ways in which young adults in Seoul reproduce as well as disrupt an idealized notion of home.

Politics of Precarity in Globalization

In *The Precariat: The New Dangerous Class*, Guy Standing (2011) proposed the term *precariat*, as a combination of *precarious* and *proletariat*, to denote a new population marginalized by globalization and the neoliberal restructuring. Although *precariat* has gotten popular attention by capturing the worldwide expansion of social deprivation and marginalization, the associated notion of precarity in social sciences has been predominantly used to understand increasing forms of irregular, insecure, and temporary employment conditions. Arne Kalleberg (2011) made an initial attempt to lay out the sociological understanding of precarious labor by tracing back the structural changes in employment systems and relations in the United States since the mid-1970s. The growth of precarious employment relations is evidenced by the increasing importance of nonstandard work arrangements and contingent work, various forms of risk shifting from employers to workers, and the resulting escalation of job insecurity. Virtually all jobs in the United States are now more unstable as precarity permeates the entire occupational structure, embedding “an equality of insecurity and uncertainty” (ibid.: 86).

Focusing on the interrelations between the economy and work structures without concerns for the broader socioeconomic and cultural contexts beyond the United States, this approach has recently been criticized and further extended to include various emerging forms of social precarity in the global context. Globalization scholars expand the empirical focus of economic polarization and precarious employment beyond the purview of the United States to the global South by highlighting some of the salient ways in which precarious work in the United States diverges from that in various national settings (Lee and Kofman 2012; Millar 2014; Munck 2013). The rise of precarious employment in many developing countries of the global South, for instance, is not merely an outcome of a corporate restructuring such as downsizing and outsourcing to increase organizational flexibility in global capital competition; more importantly, it is a necessary feature of the development strategy of the state so as to stay competitive in the global economy (Lee and Kofman 2012: 394). This can be clearly seen in the mass production of precarious labor forces in China for the past three decades, which has been conditioned by government policies that facilitated the

rural-to-urban migration and then dispossessed these migrants as second-class citizens (Ngai 2005). In other cases, for example, in South Korea, the state, often prompted by the dictates of international financial institutions such as the IMF, adopted the neoliberal model of economic restructuring, which includes deregulation, privatization, and labor flexibility (Shin 2013; Song 2009).

By criticizing Kalleberg's "work-centered analysis" of the expansion of precarity primarily based on the empirical manifestations in a massive array of survey data and official statistics, other scholars emphasize the diverse ways in which precarity emerges and reproduces not merely in workplaces but also markedly in other facets of life. Precarious work in some of the countries in the Middle East and South Africa is not just a job issue but, rather, a political concern that is indicative of the crisis of social reproduction in terms of intimacy, marriage, and citizenship (Lee and Kofman 2012; Paret 2015). Similarly, the growth of polarization and precarious work in European countries, including Italy, France, and Spain, and other advanced economies like Japan has been framed as broader social and political issues and has generated countermovements called "antiprecarity movements," which emerged in opposition to the increasing condition of precarity in the past decade (Cassegard 2014; Ross 2008). These antiprecarity movements focus not only on precarious employment relations and working conditions but also on wider social and political issues manifested through public demands for various pathways to quality of life, including social security, civic participation, and affordable housing. The notion of precarity, therefore, goes beyond job quality and the workplace, as it reflects the massive shifts in global economic restructuring, with increasing precarious labor in both formal and informal sectors of the economies on a global scale, and a broader array of social precarity in terms of social security, citizenship, and social life (Cassegard 2014; Kalleberg and Hewison 2013).

My research contributes to this growing literature by synthesizing the notion of social precarity and urban studies to analyze the changing dynamics of belonging in a context of new urban inequality. Urban scholars have begun to identify the interplay between the neoliberal restructuring of cities and urban inequality (Brenner, Marcuse, and Mayer 2012; Soja 2010) but have yet to bring their attention to the ways in which housing becomes

one of the main facets of social precarity. As the accelerated expansion of neoliberal globalization deregulates and privatizes not only employment systems but also real estate and housing markets (Forrest 2008), an increased polarization in housing affordability and conditions generates a variegated landscape of housing environments. With limited state capacity to provide affordable public housing for low-income households, many families and individuals in some developing countries established illegal or informal settlements on the margins of cities (Auyero 1999; Murray 2008). Some of the inhabitants resist severe displacement and dislocation by urban squatting, making rights claims to housing, organizing protests against the privatization of housing, and practicing everyday resistance (Lelandais 2013; Weinstein and Ren 2009). Little, however, has been discussed about how social precarity is manifested and experienced through the proliferating forms of irregular, insecure, and temporary housing conditions.

In this article, I examine how young adults who occupy new urban housing forms in South Korea struggle to navigate their sense of belonging in response to the shifting modes of social precarity. I highlight the ways in which underemployed young tenants in Seoul deploy various forms of “micro-tactics of belonging” (Robinson 2002: 37). I argue that the social precarity lived by South Korean young adults not only reproduces but also disrupts an idealized notion of home. The notion of home (*chip*) emerged as a complex and conflicting site where these youths seek to mediate between personal experiences and aspirations (Arnold 2007: 58–60; Bowlby, Gregory, and McKie 1997) and to articulate the meaning of social security, mobility, and belonging. It reflects the effects of macrolevel economic, social, and spatial transformations in contemporary South Korea on the microprocesses of social life. The following section describes how various neoliberal reforms in South Korea since the Asian financial crisis resulted in the proliferation of substandard housing forms, predominantly occupied by young adults who struggle to reconcile the idealized notion of home and their precarious realities.

Precarious Young Adults in Post-Financial-Crisis Seoul

The Seoul metropolitan area, including the City of Seoul and the surrounding Kyōnggi Province, constitutes only 11.8 percent of the country's total area, but its inhabitants (23.8 million) account for half (49.1 percent) of the national populace (Statistics Korea 2011). Socioeconomic institutions and activities such as government and public offices, headquarters of major firms, and universities are also concentrated in the area. Following massive peasant migration after the Korean War (1950–52), and the rural-to-urban migration of the developmental period (1960–87), contemporary young adults became the new domestic migrants seeking career and educational opportunities (Hill and Kim 2000; Song 2010). Seoul houses 24 percent (2.4 million) of the nation's young adult population aged twenty to thirty-four, and young adults accounted for 25 percent of the city's total inhabitants in 2010. Almost half (43.5 percent) of young adults in Seoul are from other regions, and one out of seven (14.3 percent) live in single-person households. More than 60 percent of young adults in Seoul are monthly renters, and nearly a quarter (22.8 percent) live in substandard housing units such as *panjiha* (semibasement flat), *okt'appang* (rooftop room), and *kosiwön* (extremely small single-room rental), which fall below the minimum housing standard set by the government.²

To understand these unprecedented demographic trends, it is essential to examine the broader economic, social, and spatial transformations in contemporary South Korea, which was steadily polarized during and after the Asian financial crisis, growing especially oppressive to the new urban poor, including underemployed young tenants in Seoul. The Asian financial crisis in South Korea, commonly known among Koreans as the “IMF Crisis,” occurred in 1997–98, when the government agreed to restructure its economic and financial systems in line with deregulation and neoliberalization in return for a financial bailout from the IMF (Song 2009). Under neoliberal labor-market reforms, lifetime employment disappeared, and underemployment became the new norm. Full-time, regular workers confronted massive layoffs and have been steadily replaced by low-wage, nonstandard or irregular workers ever since (Shin 2013).³

In a job market severely constrained by corporate bankruptcy and down-

sizing, youth underemployment aroused popular interest. Though civil society and the media engaged in a sensationalized debate over the 880,000 *wŏn* generation (88-*manwŏn sedae*),⁴ the government paid less attention to this social problem, owing to its ambiguous position on the family wage system, which prioritizes married men as legitimate breadwinners (Kim and Finch 2002). Although the neoliberal reforms increasingly drew on these unmarried and childless youths to satisfy the growing demand for a flexible labor force (Lukacs 2015), young adults were marked as an enemy in the emerging discourse on the “family breakdown” and blamed for the shrinking birthrate, delayed marriage age, and the growth of single-person households amid the prolonged economic hardships of job insecurity and future uncertainty (Cho 2005). As a result, the cultural category of youth expanded to include people in their thirties, and even forties, as they find themselves unable “to attain full adulthood,” being locked into “a state of perpetual mobility” (Lukacs 2015: 387–88).

The South Korean housing market was also transformed by various deregulating measures following the Asian financial crisis. Real estate and housing policy reforms accelerated the rise of real estate and housing prices well ahead of average incomes, generating large increases in real estate assets for some affluent homeowners while making housing unaffordable for many others (Ha 2010; Ronald and Kyung 2013). These reforms failed to address the housing market issues, and this in turn led to deepening urban inequalities and residential segregation. Likewise, deregulation and the privatization of housing systems facilitated the increased diversity of housing types ranging from luxurious condominiums (*chusang pokhap*)⁵ to substandard housing units such as panjiha, okt’appang, and kosiwŏn.

Kosiwŏn is a rapidly growing housing form involving small rental-room housing units clustered around college towns, business districts, and major subway stations in the Seoul metropolitan area. These rooms usually take up a section or floors of a building with other, differently purposed commercial spaces. Kosiwŏn originally sprang up to serve students preparing for various national exams (*kosŭ*) in the 1980s. They have since been modified into residential establishments targeting single and mobile populations, including “laid-off fathers” and the “IMF homeless,” who proliferated in the Seoul metropolitan area after the Asian financial crisis (Song 2009). A

room in *kosiwŏn* requires no deposit and costs between 150,000 and 400,000 wŏn (\$135–\$365) per month, depending on the location, size, and amenities. The bathroom, dining room, and laundry room are usually shared among tenants and maintained by the management. Each private room is furnished with a single bed, desk, and chair. Other amenities may include a wardrobe, television, mini-refrigerator, air conditioner, Wi-Fi Internet, private bathroom, and a window, but each of these incurs an additional charge. Usually, they have very limited facilities and are extremely small, varying from one to three *p'yŏng* (three to ten square meters). Nearly 20 percent (165,034 residents) of single-person households in Seoul in 2010 resided within 4,085 *kosiwŏn*, making this the most prominent housing type for urban single-person households (Shin 2011).

Panjiha, a semibasement flat, originally constructed and used for non-residential purposes, was widely appropriated as a residential space during the severe housing shortage in the Seoul metropolitan area in the 1980s. Panjiha accounted for 9 percent (308,660 households) of the total households in Seoul in 2010, covering a significant portion of poor urban families (Statistics Korea 2011). This is also the case for *okt'appang*, a rooftop room often constructed on lower-lying buildings in the inner city of Seoul without legal permits or protections; residents of this type of housing made up roughly 1 percent (29,141 households) of the total households in Seoul in 2010 (*ibid.*).

The grim reality facing today's South Korean young adults, who are incapable of owning "a room of one's own," often falling into a vicious cycle of cheap, substandard housing units, is fundamentally at odds with the widespread social norm of homeownership. Throughout the modern Korean history of severe political and economic turbulence accompanied by frequent personal and collective dislocations, the dream of homeownership (*nae chip maryŏn*) has been a pervasive lifelong project for members of the lower and middle classes. Homeownership is imagined to guarantee personal and/or familial security for persons acutely aware of the general lack of social welfare provisions (Abelmann 2003). The popular ideology of the developmental period involved a three-stage ladderlike conception of the typical housing progression from a parental house to a monthly rental, then from a monthly rental to a yearly lease (*chŏnse*), and finally, from a yearly lease to outright homeownership (Ha 2010; Yang 2012). Despite the massive

change initiated by the Asian financial crisis in South Korea's economic, social, and spatial conditions, the ideal of home "that exists simultaneously as a deep-rooted individual concept and as a cultural norm" (Wright 1991: 214) remained dominant. Even as economic downturns and the subsequent growth in urban inequalities undermined the bases of the ideal home, the ideal still functions as a powerful ideology driving the lifelong aspiration of homeownership and its discontents.

In the following sections, I present different ways in which young adults in Seoul reproduce as well as disrupt an idealized notion of home, by drawing on various microtactics of belonging. Young domestic migrants to Seoul, most of whom are precarious workers and vulnerable tenants living in emerging forms of substandard housing, occupy the hidden cityscape of social precarity. Their attempts to come to terms with their experiences and aspirations of home as they construct precarious lives far from both their natal and ideal homes reveal the uneven and hidden effects of neoliberal restructuring.

Lost in Home

Every block on the twenty-minute walk from Han's room to the subway station was under construction, with iron guardrails separating pedestrians from large gray excavators at work, busily digging.⁶ Han informed me that the district had recently been designated the New Town Project Area, and soon after, rents in the district skyrocketed, forcing people like him to move to substandard tenement housing in more peripheral neighborhoods of the city. The government initiated Seoul's New Town Project to promote equitable development across districts through urban renewal and gentrification. But this renewal involved the construction of massive apartment complexes and the eviction of low-income tenants like Han.

Han's residential story is typical of precarious urban young adults in post-financial-crisis South Korea: he first moved to Seoul before going through a cycle of vulnerable housing conditions once in Seoul. I met Han, a college student in his late twenties, at his panjiha rental room in a row-house unit located on the outskirts of a college neighborhood in Seoul. As a young newcomer from a small southern island town, Han lived in the panjiha room

with his younger brother for four years. Despite the uncontrolled dust and humidity, the black mold–spotted carpets, and the shared outdoor bathroom visited by sewer rats, Han chose to stay in the three-*p’yŏng* (ten-square-meter) *panjiha* room because it was among the cheapest housing he could find in the neighborhood. He paid a monthly rent of 100,000 wŏn (\$90) after a security deposit of 10 million wŏn (\$9,090). Before coming to the *panjiha* with his brother, Han wandered from one substandard rental room to another, most of which, like *kosiwŏn*, targeted single-person households.

Han could not afford a lease with a large deposit, let alone a down payment on a mortgage. He was limited to the proliferating forms of substandard housing such as *panjiha*, *okt’appang*, and *kosiwŏn*. He worked hard but in “part-time life” (*alba insaeng*) jobs at convenience stores and gas stations with a minimum hourly wage of around 4,000 wŏn (\$3.50). He could barely meet his living expenses, his ever-increasing college tuition, and his student loans. Han adopted strategies to manage the extreme experiences of displacement in the cycle of moving among substandard housing options, for instance, by “reducing possessions”:

I don’t ever buy books. When I lived in a *kosiwŏn*, even a single book copy would mean more luggage for later. And the amount of physical space it was taking up was too visibly noticeable to me. So I ended up spending a lot of my time in libraries, reading what I needed to read and taking notes. . . . I say notes, but I was practically transcribing books into my own notebooks, so I could save living space. Of course if I had more space, I would have just bought those books. But when it comes to *kosiwŏn* life, the utmost priority is to get rid of stuff for more space, whether it be clothing, books, or anything else.⁷

Han, an avid reader, showed me his bookcases made of cheap wooden boxes, which housed not books but his old college notebooks that recorded quotes from poems and novels. This example captures one of the distinct patterns of vulnerable housing conditions in Seoul. It is difficult for temporary tenants, including most of my informants, to maintain their possessions. This strategy of reducing possessions was an ordinary activity of this spatial environment and a microtactic of belonging in a restrictive and even claustrophobic space. This practice signals Han’s resigned distance from “ha[ving]

more space” where he could store all of his books, clothing, and furniture so as to keep organic connections to his own past and future embedded in his possessions. Han’s sacrifice of his possessions poignantly symbolizes a sense of ontological disconnection from the integrity of life that is central to his understanding of home:

But even so there were times when I felt kind of happy, because at the end of the day it [the kosiwŏn room] was still my own space . . . [a pause] of safety. I would feel . . . comfortable. It would have been impossible for me to live there if it was always completely unbearable. Those brief moments when I felt like I was safe, or that I could claim this space as my own. . . . They were important because I knew I had no other choice but to put up with its shortcomings and stay there. And still it was a type of housing, a place designed for people to eat, sleep, and relax. That’s a lot more than what, for instance, life in the military has to offer [laugh]. You still have your freedom, even if it’s tiny. And like I said, I knew I had no other choice but to live there. Of course I didn’t think of it as my “home,” though. It was still just a kosiwŏn [laugh].⁸

Han described his substandard housing environments as not “completely unbearable” but “my own space of safety.” Yet as he articulated his thoughts, he paused between “my own space” and “safety,” indicating both a fissure between the two terms and his effort to reconcile them. This fissure extends to the terms *housing* and *home*, as he described kosiwŏn or panjiha living merely as “a type of housing,” not “home.” His clear distinction between housing and home was another microtactic of belonging as a process of configuring relations with place and weaving the self through urban space. He and others perform a symbolic disidentification from the place they undeniably have to live, “to put up with its shortcomings and stay there,” reflecting a reduction in social security for young adults in South Korea. As precarious workers in the shrinking labor market who expected to earn low wages that could not keep up with swiftly ascending housing prices and rents, these South Korean young adults are lost—unable to find adequate housing let alone a home they can belong to or a place in society.

Seok in “Kosi-wönderland”

Seok, a white-collar worker in his late twenties, recently signed a one-year renewable contract for a panjiha located at a less-popular district in northern Seoul, with a security deposit of 50 million wön (\$45,450). He financed the lease with partial financial support from his parents and a consumer loan. Though he had some minor complaints about the old worn-out structure and design of the flat, he described his current living conditions as satisfactory, especially after moving from the kosiwön where he lived for a year and a half. He spent his college years struggling to survive in a highly competitive job market during an economic recession. During that period, he moved in and out of monthly rentals and relatives' houses, living far from his family home in a southern city. Although he was fortunate to be hired by a large company, his housing situation worsened, as he decided to live in a kosiwön unit with a monthly rent of 220,000 wön (\$200) to save enough to put a deposit on a decent studio.

In the kosiwön, Seok chose a room without a window to keep his monthly rent as low as possible. He planned to stay “just for three months but no more” but wound up staying over a year because of difficulties finding affordable housing options. He painfully recalled feeling trapped in that room:

The worst thing about kosiwön is, I think, how your nights and days end up blending into each other. My room had no windows, so at whatever time of the day I woke up, I only saw pitch-black darkness. Is it time to get up or not? What should I do? I always felt so confused and disoriented. . . . And the beds are so narrow that there's nothing you can do on it but lay there really straight and still. So yeah, I could feel my health deteriorating, both physically and mentally. . . . It was really depressing [laugh]. It was literally a space with no light. I feel like back then I was mostly in a state of numbness, without any sense of hope, just watching the days pass me by. “When would I move out of this place? Will I ever?”⁹

Seok found himself with little spatial and temporal control over his life, unexpectedly staying more than a year in the kosiwön. Similarly, Han referred to his two-year home in a kosiwön as “a prison cell, not confined

by the state but by economic reason.” In addition to the poor lighting, informants like Seok and Han were suffocated by the permeable nature of the walls between kosiwön rooms. Constructed of thin wooden boards, these walls provided little in the way of privacy or security. The thin walls also delivered unwanted signs of other residents, which in Seok’s case, resulted in an obsession with surveillance of physical and social boundaries. Whereas privacy involves the power to possess a territory and to control one’s own boundaries, both physical and symbolic (Somerville 1992), Seok’s room was a field of daily battle for control over territory and privacy. Because of these porous boundaries, Seok felt extremely uncomfortable when interacting with other residents of the kosiwön:

And when I look around, the people who live there would be so hopeless that the very sight of them would end up convincing me again that I had to leave this place as fast as possible. A lot of foreigners, and people with temp jobs. . . . And it seemed like a lot of old people were recently flocking there, too. I really have no idea where those types of people come from. They just don’t do anything. I see them hanging around [in the hallways] in the morning, and in the evening when I get back from work I would see them still hanging around. I’ve never seen them do any kind of work; they’re just *there*, all day long. Always in flip-flops and sweatpants, and I would look at them and think to myself, “Would I end up like that one day too, if I stay here for too long?” It was a truly frightening thought. I was really curious to know who they were, what they did for a living [laugh] . . . but I could never quite bring myself to ask them.¹⁰

Seok’s description of other kosiwön tenants incorporated common stereotypes of South Korea’s “losers”—the hidden or cyclic homeless, older welfare recipients (*sugŭpcha*), and migrant workers. His “truly frightening” picture replicated media stories depicting kosiwön as crowded, dirty, and unsafe substandard housing for the new urban poor. These stigmatized images coincided with his implicit view that “those types of people” were objectionable owing to their personal deficiencies in appearance, ethnicity, age, and employment status: they were people to distance oneself from.

By drawing a symbolic boundary (Lamont and Molnár 2002; Kusenbach 2009) between himself, the Alice in Kosi-wönderland, who would soon

escape his poor surroundings and other residents who were destined to remain stuck in *kosiwŏn*, Seok tried to redeem his own decency by identifying himself as a regular worker and an aspiring homeowner. This boundary drawing is situated within a broader context of economic, social, and spatial transformations in contemporary South Korea that profoundly shifted patterns of social mobility as well as the ways in which social mobility is imagined and narrated. Despite his hope for homeownership—indicative of the sustaining belief in the idealized linear conception of the normative housing career as moving from instability to stability—the widening gap between housing prices and household incomes places that dream out of reach for most urban young adults. Given that homeownership remains a social marker of security and mobility in South Korea, the symbolic boundary Seok strived to construct between him and the other tenants reflects a deep-rooted anxiety about the latent betrayal of the promise of homeownership and downward mobility in the post-financial-crisis era.

Debunked *Kosiwŏn* Cinderella

Another compelling narrative of social precarity among contemporary South Korean young adults comes from Yoon, an information technology worker in her late twenties. Whereas Yoon comes from a relatively better-off family background, her residential trajectory is analogous to those of Han and Seok: she left her family home to move to Seoul by herself and over the years moved from town to town and from rental to rental. Though she works in Kangnam, the upscale area south of the Han River in Seoul composed of business districts and upper-middle-class neighborhoods, she recently moved to a *kosiwŏn* that costs 290,000 wŏn (\$265) per month in Sinch'on, a college neighborhood in Kangbuk, north of the Han River. Given her affluent childhood, her good college degree, and her decent career, it is not surprising that living in a *kosiwŏn* produced a break in Yoon's self-understanding:

Growing up I never really had to struggle with money, so when I ended up giving up the admissions offer I got from a graduate program in the UK, that was the first time for me to really experience the despair of

being without money. It was an opportunity for me to confirm my so-called material class status, and to feel the humiliation of being a “person who doesn’t have money.” . . . Before that I was able to justify my living in a kosiwŏn as a temporary arrangement for me to easily move out of when I need to, but after that my self-perception had completely changed: “I am here because this is all the money I have, and because I am a person who can’t afford to pay security deposits for better places.”¹¹

Yoon explained her original reason for moving into a kosiwŏn as quite different from the other residents: she simply needed a “temporary arrangement” irrespective of issues like a security deposit or furnishings. This flexibility, she expected, would leave her free to move out whenever she wanted (she planned to study abroad soon), and she was glad to live close to her college alma mater because she could utilize its amenities, such as the library. Yoon articulated a stark contrast between her own “original reason” for living in a kosiwŏn and others’; however, later she could not avoid the painful and ironic truth that her current “so-called material class status” did not match her privileged background or her cosmopolitan striving toward transnational mobility in the competitive global higher-education system. The affluent-class horizon Yoon once took for granted narrowed as she confronted the difficulty of paying for college tuition and housing expenses without family support as a young woman. Her inability to afford graduate tuition and her inescapable residential status in kosiwŏn were intertwined, and she felt a keen sense of stagnation. As such, her boundary drawing was by no means successful; rather, her stigma management was imperiled, “as if the golden carriage of Cinderella turned into a pumpkin in front of the Prince,” as Yoon put it. Her struggle to avoid being revealed as the kosiwŏn Cinderella is captured by the following story:

Whenever I tell my friends over the phone that “I’m at home,” I would feel really weird about it. Should I say I’m at home? In my room? At the kosiwŏn? Because to be precise, this place is just a transitory space that I’m occupying for now. . . . And there is this big mistake I made recently. . . . So I have this strong aversion to fluorescent lighting. Especially when I’m under those orange or white lights, I start feeling really

squeamish. . . . So I installed an incandescent bulb on the wall [in my room], a simple job, nothing too fancy. With that light on I would feel a lot better. But after doing that, I felt myself getting *too* attached to that room, so to speak. “No, I can’t allow myself to like this room too much. . . . But then again, why not? At the end of the day, is there anywhere else in Seoul that I could actually consider ‘home’?”¹²

Yoon’s residential story in a *kosiwŏn* provided a momentous narrative of social mobility and belonging with a contradictory sense of home at its core. Yoon’s understanding of her relation to the *kosiwŏn* space is intermingled with the ordinary activities of spatial arrangement, furnishing, and housework that manage and maintain the *kosiwŏn* room: whether to bring in a modern stool, whether to replace her faulty window screen, and whether to install a light. The modest luxury of the incandescent bulb brought in to improve her *kosiwŏn* became problematic and potentially threatened her sense of home when it revealed the paradox that the more she took care of the room, the more anxious she felt about her residential status. In her quotidian homemaking activities, Yoon’s *kosiwŏn* room became a front line of belonging, in which she had to continuously draw and redraw the symbolic boundary between home and “unhome.” Her delicate yet obfuscating choice of terms such as *home* (*chip*), *room* (*pang*), and *kosiwŏn* also reveal the battle within her. Her feelings of disidentification and disaffection can be attributed to her orientation toward “the ideal home” (*isangjŏgin chip*), which brings together nostalgic childhood memories and romantic individual fantasies as necessary parts of her proper belonging. In Yoon’s tensioned sense of home, a *kosiwŏn* should be designated “a transitory space” to leave behind, notwithstanding the ironic awareness that a room that was “barely large enough for stretching my legs” was the only place she could “actually consider home” in Seoul.

Yoon’s analogy of the *kosiwŏn* Cinderella speaks not only to the individual failure of social mobility but also to fissures in South Korea’s promise of a homeownership society. Between the broken dream of ideal homeownership and the space she could actually inhabit in inner Seoul, Yoon’s narrative demonstrates the ongoing and situated struggle of making and unmaking home. *Home* is a loaded term for post-financial-crisis South Korean young

adults like Yoon, who have in the last decade muddled through mounting precarities in everyday life—of job, housing, and social life itself. Globalization and economic restructuring following the 1997–98 Asian financial crisis spurred neoliberal reforms that have unraveled the ideal home, both as a social institution and as a sign of social security, mobility, and belonging for South Koreans, though the dream of homeownership and the three-step housing ladder retain their normative force as social expectations and individual aspirations.

For the three informants I introduced in this article, instead of a stable origin of ontological security where they feel safe and comfortable from the world outside, home is experienced as a precarious site of insecurity, immobility, and unbelonging. They feel as if they do not have any place of belonging in the ever-changing society. It is in this context that I argue that contemporary South Korean young adults are tasked with living with and coming to terms with growing social precarity, which manifests in the discordance between the ideal home and their dismal realities. They strive to solve this conundrum in a variety of individualized and conflicting ways of microtactics of belonging, including reducing possessions, drawing symbolic boundaries, and struggling to make and unmake home.

Conclusion: Home Revisited

The residential stories of urban young adults I presented in this article illustrate the frictions between people's cultural sense of home and the fast-paced and rapidly transforming neoliberal South Korea. In a historical period of uncertainty and inequality generated by deregulation and neoliberal restructuring of the job market and housing system in South Korea since the mid-1990s, these young adults face a new social precarity that exceeds material deprivation. The long-lasting effects of these neoliberal shifts produced fear and anxiety, projected onto their vulnerable bodies and minds. Home emerged as a complex and conflicting fabric stitched together with desire and lack of social security, aspiration and the failure of mobility, and yearning and loss of belonging. Home reflected the bitter and brutal attempts of urban young adults to situate themselves, to make sense of their social situations, and to make themselves at home and unhome in the tyr-

anny of a social world at risk. I consider this constellation of home as an ongoing process of making and unmaking by young adults who struggle to come to terms with newly emerging forms of social precarity that reconfigure the boundaries and meanings of social security, mobility, and belonging.

The undermining of the ideal home is a differentially distributed experience: certain groups of people are more likely to be situated at the frictions and fissures of the shifting social conditions and meanings of home, straddling the line between a shrunken promise of homeownership and their precarious lived realities. Many young domestic migrants who left their natal homes to participate in Seoul's precarious labor market are trapped in the position of vulnerable tenants in substandard housing unit forms such as *panjiha*, *okt'appang*, and *kosiwŏn*. In tracing the way social precarity is brought to bear on the daily microprocesses of belonging for these South Korean young adults, I call attention to the uneven effects of neoliberal shifts in urban inequality on the lived experiences of social precarity in contemporary South Korea.

The stories in this article allow us to consider the ways in which new forms of social precarity unfold within the nation's neoliberal transformation, and they speak evocatively to the "regional resonances in a time of economic globalization and neoliberal restructuring" across East Asia and beyond (Anagnost 2013: 2). For instance, a significant number of contemporary Japanese young adults in states of NEET (not in education, employment, or training) or *freeta* (irregular worker) are commonly housed in their parental homes, in tiny dark cubicles at Internet cafés, or even in coffin-sized rentals, enunciating their state of endless uncertainty (Allison 2013; Driscoll 2015). These broader resonances suggest that increasing life uncertainties and the loss of belonging are part of a broader social quilt sewn from diverse forms of social precarity throughout Asia and beyond. In this regard, home is a privileged site for examining the comparative social realities that emerge under the new possibilities and constraints of the changing global political economy.

Notes

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- 1 All interviews were digitally recorded and fully transcribed verbatim with the informants' consent. All quotes used in this article were translated from the original conversation into English.
- 2 The minimum housing standard introduced by the Ministry of Construction and Transportation is composed of three categories: (1) minimum dwelling space and number of rooms, (2) basic facilities such as water supply, electricity, sewerage, and so forth, and (3) built environment and architectural structure under the building and/or environmental regulations (Ministry of Construction and Transportation 2004).
- 3 Nonstandard or irregular workers who experience low wages and discrimination in major welfare benefit programs such as unemployment insurance comprise nearly half (47.6 percent) of the total employees in 2006 South Korea, the highest rate among the OECD countries.
- 4 As a Korean equivalent to the 1000 Euro Generation in Europe, this term perhaps ironically stands not only for the normative birth year for this generation but also for the paltry monthly salary that young people could expect to earn in the fragile job market at the time.
- 5 This refers to the multifunctionality of the buildings, offering upscale housing with various commercial services, some of which form a South Korean version of gated communities.
- 6 All names used in this article are pseudonyms to protect my informants.
- 7 Interview with Han, March 2010, Seoul.
- 8 Ibid.
- 9 Interview with Seok, April 2010, Seoul.
- 10 Ibid.
- 11 Interview with Yoon, August 2010, Seoul.
- 12 Ibid.

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