

Abstract for the 2022 KoRN Conference

Performing Democracy in the Graveyard: The Gwangju Uprising and the Insurgent Grief of the May Mothers

Hayana Kim
Northwestern University

What is the interrelationship between performance, grief, and democracy? In this paper, I examine women-led grassroots activism for democracy during the country's last military dictatorship years. Although literature on pro-democracy movements in Korea is robust, little has been written about the contribution of women in this history. Scholars have also rarely examined the role of the body and affect in transforming politics in South Korea. This paper makes an affective and feminist intervention in historiography. I foreground the May Mothers (*owol eomeoni*), bereaved mothers of the Gwangju Uprising, illustrating the history of what I call *jesa* (memorial rites) activism – a commemorative activism through which the mothers turned an otherwise private ritual into a spectacular public assembly in the graveyard. My central argument, arising from my ethnographic field research, is that the May Mothers teach us an important lesson for democracy: they show that a society becomes more democratic when politics derive from grief – an expansive grief in which deaths previously erased and disavowed by the state arise prominently into communal memories.