

Mother/Whore: Prostituting Motherly Care in Neoliberal South Korea

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Abstract

As South Korea witnessed a neoliberal shift in the aftermath of the 1997 Asian financial crisis, economic competency and optimizing self-conduct came to constitute the threshold of normativity. Certain lives became increasingly identified as “disqualified” by the state and were then abandoned as “disposable.” This article examines E J-yong’s *The Bacchus Lady* (*Chugyŏjunŭn yŏja*, 2016) to examine how life and death are gendered and devalued in neoliberal South Korea. *The Bacchus Lady*’s Soyŏng is a sixty-five-year-old prostitute who figuratively and literally “kills” her male patrons. While repeatedly disciplined and punished for her unruliness, manifested in her lack of gender responsibility and neoliberal productivity, Soyŏng also complicates the threshold of neoliberalism as she becomes a “manager” of various lives. Remade into a voluntary and private solution to the state’s struggle to manage “disposable” lives by normalizing maternal and affective labor, Soyŏng problematizes the extreme and gendered discipline demanded by contemporary neoliberal conditions.

Keywords: motherhood, maternal care, reproductive labor, prostitution, affective labor, gender politics, neoliberal South Korea, human capital, *homo sacer*, sacrificial citizenship

Introduction

On a beautiful autumn day, amid the verdant trees of a busy park, an elderly gentleman saunters towards a bevy of women and stops in front of a small woman dressed in outdated head-to-toe denim. She looks up coyly, bouncing her curly permed hair, pulls up a large hobo bag, and walks off with her pert nose in the air. A few dainty steps later, she turns around and beckons the man to follow her. They enter a dimly-lit, seedy motel room, whereupon the man quickly undresses, and the woman, unlike before, bows meekly to him, and then proceeds to give him a tender hand-job. The camera then cuts to a high-angle establishing shot of the park's environs and slowly zooms into the woman approaching yet another client.

Such is the attentive yet impassioned portrayal of Soyŏng at work in director and screenwriter E J-yong's *The Bacchus Lady* (*Chukyŏjunŭn yŏja*, 2016).¹ Soyŏng is the titular “Bacchus Lady,” an elderly prostitute who sells Bacchus, a bargain energy drink, as a pretext for cheap by-the-hour-sex. Born on the eve of the Korean War, she worked as a housemaid and then as a factory girl in the 1960s, becoming a camptown prostitute (*yanggongju* or “western princess”) catering to American soldiers in the 1970s and 1980s, and now ekes out a meager living in a shabby one-room rental off the edge of multicultural It'aewŏn by selling her body and relying on daily installment loans from a begrudgingly patient neighbor.

What could have been yet another melodramatic “hostess film”—albeit with seniors—finds specificity in E J-yong's ambiguously political narrative.² While Soyŏng faithfully embodies the prostitute-with-a-heart-of-gold trope, *The Bacchus Lady* goes beyond depicting prostitution to question life itself. The film complicates the character of Soyŏng by rendering her as a kind mother figure who proceeds from providing elderly sex to assisting in elderly death. It is worth mentioning that the film's original title, translated as “Killer Lady,” is a double entendre for Soyŏng, who figuratively “kills” in bed and literally kills in life. Hence, she shifts from injecting life to sapping life—of old men.

A question left upon watching *The Bacchus Lady* is why Soyŏng kills. What does the act of killing—of the elderly by the elderly—suggest? How are her killing-services to be understood in light of her reputation

as a “killer” prostitute? Why is her killing framed as a compassionate and merciful act only to have her be punished by death in a state prison? Beyond bringing attention to the harsh realities of senior poverty and suicide in South Korea, what, ultimately, does *The Bacchus Lady*, so singularly about Soyŏng, purport to critique through her? For when Soyŏng recounts her career trajectory to a young, aspiring filmmaker, it is not a coincidence that *her-story* lies alongside defining moments in South Korea’s *history*—from the Korean War to militarized development to global neoliberalism.

My reading of *The Bacchus Lady* begins by positing contemporary South Korea as a neoliberal state.³ It is not difficult to see that the film critiques the devastation and destruction wrought upon those who fail to fulfill the demands of neoliberal rationality—and how the old, infirm, and/or unproductive are, as such, made expendable. Soyŏng by no means represents good human capital. She is poor, unskilled, promiscuous, single, and old and, therefore, made to sacrifice herself and left to die forlornly. The question then is: for whom and for what is Soyŏng sacrificed? Why does she care for—in the form of killing—several old men in the process? Ultimately, how does she complicate the threshold of neoliberalism (as state biopolitical technology) to reveal the “state” of gender politics in South Korea today?

Homo Economicus Becomes Homo Sacer

While neoliberalism is most commonly understood as enacting an ensemble of economic policies in accord with its root principle of affirming free markets—including deregulation, privatization, entrepreneurialism, and financialization—my understanding of neoliberalism relies on Michel Foucault’s conceptualization of neoliberalism as an order of normative reason that becomes a governing rationality so as to extend a certain formulation of economic values, practices, and metrics to all dimensions of human life.⁴ In other words, neoliberal rationality “disseminates the *model of the market* to all activities and configures human beings exhaustively as always, only, and everywhere *homo economicus*.”⁵

However, as Wendy Brown cautions, when humans are only and everywhere *homo economicus*, they take shape as only and ever human capital, “seeking to strengthen its competitive positioning” and “enhance its value through practices of entrepreneurial self-investment”⁶ to “attract investors.”⁷ Since human capital, unlike the Kantian individual, is not intrinsically valuable, its status is always “unclear, incoherent, and precarious.” Simultaneously in charge of itself, responsible for itself, yet potentially dispensable, the subject-as-human capital must constantly compete in order to remain within the economic parameters for all conduct and concern—so as not to be disposed.

In reading Foucault, Brown goes on to define neoliberalism as a “technology of government,” wherein “governmentality” refers to “the array of knowledges and techniques that are concerned with the systematic and pragmatic guidance and regulation of everyday conduct that profoundly rationalizes governing and self-governing in order to optimize everything in life.”⁸ That is, neoliberalism captures the way a normative order of reason comes to legitimately and ubiquitously govern and structure life as a whole *as if* complete and true. As a technology of life—on the level of both individuals and populations—neoliberalism becomes the technology *par excellence* of biopolitics. In our contemporary neoliberal age, then, all individuals must become autonomous managers of themselves and make investment decisions relevant to themselves in order to produce surplus value in their lives for the health of *all*, so that, purportedly, all may thrive.⁹ Individuals must be tethered to this rationality if they are to survive. This is precisely why, for Brown, the culmination of neoliberalism is “responsibilization” and “sacrificialization.”¹⁰

It is not difficult to see how responsibilization requires sacrifice that makes individuals expendable and unprotected. For being “responsible” also means being so for their own failures in the face of social competition. When competition is the central principle of neoliberal rationality, some will win (or, live) while others must lose (or, die).¹¹ Since human capital must bear the responsibility of enhancing and securing its own future, it is expected to self-invest wisely and productively. However, human capital is bound to the project of the

whole (whether a nation or firm) and is valued according to larger economic vicissitudes and exigencies. Thus, neither its responsibility nor its loyalty guarantees its survival. Instead of being secured or protected, a responsabilized *homo economicus* must sacrifice itself: it must accept, suffer, tolerate persistently life-threatening insecurity and deprivation—even death. Sacrifice is required for and essential to neoliberalism.¹²

In *Homo Sacer*, Giorgio Agamben “revises” Foucault’s conception of biopolitics by positing that politics always already began with life—because the sovereign exception that creates “bare life” or “*homo sacer*” is what brings sovereignty into being in the first place.¹³ According to Agamben, then, we are all potentially (if not actually) abandoned and exposed to violence as a constitutive condition of political existence. In our current “state of exception,” the very conditions that originally created the sovereign’s ability to decide who did and did not count as life—as human—are included in the mechanisms of state power such that anyone could at any point be *homo sacer*. Building on Foucault and Agamben, Achille Mbembe consequently asserts that biopolitics (politics of life) is at once necropolitics (politics of death).¹⁴ For Mbembe, the manifestation of sovereignty is to “exercise control over mortality and to define life as the deployment and manifestation of power.” This control presupposes the distribution of humans into groups and the establishment of a caesura between the “ones” and the “others.”¹⁵ This distribution of humans into “ones” and the “others” determines those to whom responsibility and recognition are extended by the sovereign state and those who fall outside that relation so as to be objectified or reduced to bare life so that their deaths do not matter.

This is why, in a neoliberal state, sacrifice is always self-sacrifice *for* rather than *to* something or someone. Moreover, as Brown asserts, it is in calling deprivation and disposability “sacrifice” that such an act, ironically, confirms and perpetuates neoliberal rationality. The expression “taking one for the team,” she argues, is purposefully tinged with morality so as to imply overcoming self-interest for a larger good. Yet, the fact is that doing so brings no immediate returns to those who sacrifice or are sacrificed. We are called to offer life, but without any guarantee that the benefits of this sacrifice will trickle down to our lives.

Hence, *homo economicus* is made, not born, and operates in a context replete with risk, contingency, and violent changes.¹⁶ Bare life is a status which is a consequence not of any essential quality of being, or of any act or crime, but wholly dependent upon the state. *Homo economicus* is always already *homo sacer*.

Madonna/Whore

Our first introduction to Soyöng is a shot of her walking. Upon reaching a gynecological clinic, she sees a little boy milling about and, with genuine concern, asks him if he has lost his mother. The camera cuts to her sitting in front of a young male doctor who recounts her symptoms. She cuts off the doctor, saying, "It's gonorrhoea, isn't it? That son of a bitch! No, I'm the bitch. Pills *and* shots, I need to get better fast!"¹⁷ While waiting for her prescription, she hears arguments ensuing from the doctor's office and then witnesses a young Filipino woman stab the doctor with a pair of scissors. She watches as the woman tries to escape but, caught in the tight clutches of a security guard, yells at the boy to run away. Realizing the boy's plight, Soyöng finds him, shields him from the security guard, and takes him home with her. When her landlord Tina asks why Soyöng is home so early and who the boy is, she quips genially: "Defective product: I couldn't sell, so I came home. I picked one up on the streets."

From the outset, *The Bacchus Lady* takes pains to paint Soyöng as both promiscuous *and* maternal. Dressed in head-to-toe patterned denim and platform booties, with heavy, colorful make-up and curly auburn-dyed hair, her appearance suggests a cheap imitation of young fashion and sets her apart from the other middle-aged women at the clinic. Her crass language and familiarity with sexually transmitted diseases further mark her as unfeminine and unchaste. Such qualities, however, are immediately juxtaposed with a genuine and almost instinctive concern for the (now) motherless boy, Minho. Without a hint of hesitation, Soyöng brings him home, changes, washes, and feeds him, gazes lovingly at his sleeping visage, and gently brushes away wisps of hair from his forehead.

Soyŏng's maternal side is further emphasized in her daily interactions with others. In the house she rents—with crippled doll-maker Tohun and illegal African migrant worker Adindu—from transsexual cabaret singer Tina, Soyŏng fosters a familial ambience by asking after everyone and candidly opening their doors as a mother would upon entering her children's rooms. Her last task of the day is to fill the pet bowl she leaves out for stray cats. With her male clients, too, Soyŏng is accommodating and patient as she tends to their every need. Never aggressive, authoritative, or overbearing, Soyŏng is gentle and kind to all those around her—children, cripples, transsexuals, migrants, seniors, and animals alike. Soyŏng performs such tasks without hesitation or resentment, as the act of caretaking comes naturally—almost instinctively—to her.

A longstanding gender ideal for women in Korea has been that of the *hyŏnmo yangch'ŏ* (wise-mother-good-wife). Time and again, across historical moments, women have been constructed and managed by the nation to serve as, first and foremost, mothers and wives (to men).¹⁸ Writing about the construction of gendered citizenship in the 1960s, sociologist Seungsook Moon explains how “women's integration into the modernizing nation and its industrializing economy hinged on their contribution as biological reproducers” and that “women's national duty was epitomized by their rational management of the household as housewives.”¹⁹ Unlike men, whose belonging in the nation was determined through productive and money-making labor in the public sphere, women were tasked with reproductive and caretaking labor in the private sphere—as mothers and (house)wives.

While Soyŏng earnestly performs the role expected of her gender, her being a prostitute complicates her identity—and her labor—with respect to such social norms. As an occupation that takes place in both the private and public sphere, prostitution rejects the facile division of gendered labor. In that it is productive (money-making) labor but can easily slip into reproductive labor, in that it involves the selling of the body but also of intimacy, and in that it stands between recognized and unrecognized labor, prostitution can dangerously spill over into normative gender territory. Most importantly, not unlike mothers and

wives, prostitutes construct men as normative heterosexuals in constant need of sexual gratification. That is, prostitution normalizes male heterosexual desire and girds patriarchal normativity.

In the case of South Korea, it is common knowledge that prostitution was a significant source of coveted foreign dollars—and that this economic function was what made it a worthwhile “industry” for the aggressively developmentalist state of the 1960s and 1970s. Yet, the consolidation of prostitution occurred through segregation and regulation. Prostitutes were sequestered in specific “comfort zones” (camptowns and red light districts) so as to keep “loose” women away from “chaste” mothers and wives (potential and current), and they were monitored and disciplined by the state—often invasively and violently—for diseases so as to keep foreigners pleased and spending their money.²⁰ This arrangement constructed prostitutes as an “inevitable social ill” and othered them from “normal” mothers and wives. Deemed “dangerous women,” for their potential to mother non-Korean children with foreigners, they failed to be recognized as citizens (worthwhile protecting) by the nation—despite their contributions to the South Korean economy.

Soyŏng speaks honestly and matter-of-factly about her past as a camptown prostitute and her present as a “Bacchus Lady” in a manner that seems to belie her marginalization in society. When she agrees to be interviewed by a young, politically-conscious documentary filmmaker, she claims that she is “unashamed” of her “job” because it is “one way to earn a living.” However, when she runs into Pokhŭi, a former Tongduch’ŏn camptown co-worker, who has since cleaned up and lives comfortably with a Korean husband by her side, Soyŏng betrays a sense of vulnerability. Not only is she clearly ashamed of prostituting (she cuts their conversation short and rushes off), she repeats the same lie reserved for her male clients: she is just a mother working to pay for her son’s graduate education in the United States. If her son had been, until now, a ghostly story, conjured to save face and justify her work, he becomes a literal haunting force with Pokhŭi’s revelation that Soyŏng catered her “so young” body to an American soldier and bore a mixed-race child, whom she gave up for transnational adoption.

The precarious spilling over from prostitution to motherhood is thus enacted by and embodied in Soyöng. Yet her crossing of the Madonna/Whore binary is not depicted as transgressive (with the power to reveal gaps and lacunae in this very construction); rather, *The Bacchus Lady* repeatedly emphasizes Soyöng's guilt at having abandoned her child—as a consequence of prostitution—and narratively frames Soyöng as a “bad” mother, woman, and citizen. Soon after her meeting with Pokhüi, Soyöng encounters a young Eurasian man dressed in US Military uniform at a fast-food store in It'aewön. She approaches the man and asks—in broken English: “your mom Korean? where your mom?” When the soldier tells her what could very well be her own story, tears well in Soyöng's eyes, and she looks upon him wistfully, as if he were *her* son. Her guilt is narratively cemented by the fact that everyone who hears her story (of giving up her son) shudders as if she has committed an unforgivable act.

Seeing Soyöng haunted by the memory of her lost son, it becomes clear that she is trying to recover a motherhood lost to her by playing mother to Minhö. *The Bacchus Lady* further underscores Soyöng's compensatory motherhood by drawing several parallels between her and Minhö's mother, Camilla. During the first night Minhö spends at her place, Soyöng finds a photograph of Camilla, a baby Minhö, and the gynecologist posing as a happy family in his storybook. This image mirrors an old, faded photograph that Soyöng keeps hidden in her vanity drawer—of her, a Eurasian baby, and a man in military uniform (with the corner where the soldier's face would be torn off). It is hard to miss the transgenerational and transcultural reverberations of imperial and patriarchal violence inscribed on the bodies of these two women.

In the middle of the film, when Soyöng returns to the clinic for an antibiotic shot, she asks the nurse how the doctor is faring and whether he is a bachelor. The nurse sharply answers, “No, he has three children. He married into a wealthy family.” Then, as she cleans up the medical equipment, she mutters angrily, to no one in particular but clearly audible to Soyöng: “He goes to the Philippines to study and instead bastards a child. Irresponsible men should be scourged. All Korean sons-of-bitches are the same.” Here, *The Bacchus Lady* draws into the issue of Kopino children.²¹ And, later, when Tohun tells Soyöng and Tina that

there are “tens of thousands of abandoned Kopino children like Minhø” in the Philippines, Tina passingly remarks, “It’s just like what they did in Vietnam. Ugh, men are so disgusting!”²²

Not only do the nurse and Tina generalize virile heterosexuality as a normative characteristic of Korean masculinity, but in their specific mention of the Philippines and Vietnam, they call out “sub-imperial” Korea’s mimetic violence upon “Third World” nations.²³ Writing about Korea’s military participation in the Vietnam War, Jin-Kyung Lee characterizes Korean military labor as a sexualized and racialized “surrogate labor” that engendered a “(sub)imperialist satisfaction.” Not only did their labor contribute to the Korean economy and aid a war-torn nation, but it also mimicked an imperial/neocolonial violence they experienced (and remembered only too well) in the aftermath of the Korean War. From massacring to pillaging to torturing Vietnamese civilians, what the Korean military did in Vietnam cannot help but bring to mind the actions of the U.S. military in Korea.

Within the context of neoliberal globalization (or global neoliberal capitalism), Minhø’s very visible presence and Tina’s linking of the Kopino to the *Lai Dai Han* issue are strikingly political.²⁴ Historian Steven Lee asserts that the economic foundations jumpstarted by the Vietnam War and further forged during the authoritarian Park Chung-Hee regime “established some of the foundations for the longer term accelerated integration of [Korea] into the capitalist world system, a process that has been described as Korea’s ‘globalization.’”²⁵ Just as Korea’s entry into globalization came at the heels of mimetic violence, so it continues to enact violence upon (certain) lives in the name of globalization. Heavily veiled under the heroic rhetoric of “aid,” however, such violence (past and present) is made un-visible, so that in lieu of an official state apology or reparation, Korea endorses companies to outsource or import labor—subsuming ethics and politics to economics.

That Soyøng abandons one child borne of neocolonial violence and takes in another from an analogous violence is, at once, poignant and painful. For it is not hard to assume, considering the history of Kopino children, that Camilla probably shared a similar career with Soyøng back in the Philippines (and shares a similar fate with so many transnational

camptown prostitutes in Korea today).²⁶ It is also possible to see parallels between Soyŏng and Camilla in that both wound Korean men: Soyŏng “colludes” with neocolonial Others while Camilla literally harms “native” Korean men.²⁷ Yet their likeness ends when Soyŏng is othered by even Camilla. Upon taking Minhø to see Camilla at the detention center, Soyŏng is first chastised by the state social worker for having “kidnapped” Minhø and then has to watch the impassioned reunion between *real* mother and son—from the sidelines.

With an expression that can only be described as a grimaced smile, Soyŏng appears more envious than relieved at the reunion between Minhø and Camilla. *The Bacchus Lady* reinscribes Soyŏng as a pseudo-mother, a wannabe at best, who lives with the guilt of having abandoned her own child and violated the “natural” desire to be a mother. This portrayal of Soyŏng seems particularly harsh in light of her current occupation. For if the highest value of women’s labor (in Korea) is reproductive in nature, then Soyŏng’s labor as a “Bacchus Lady” has no value. Not only has she squandered her reproductive capabilities away in her youth as a prostitute, she now has an old and diseased body that is biologically unable to reproduce. As a surrogate mother, she can only ever imitate the role of mother-as-manager-of-children’s lives. Her labor, moreover, is not productive but makes a product out of her. She is only a “product” and a “defective” one at that—unable to produce a competitive earnings stream.

Since a central aspect of neoliberalism is the demand that one be an “entrepreneur of oneself,” managing risks and rewards productively and viewing expenditures of resources as investments in expected future returns, Soyŏng is not a good *homo economicus*. Not only is she unable to re-produce a future, she is shown to be a poor entrepreneur. For, unlike Pokhŭi, who has managed to build a better future for herself, Soyŏng remains (stuck as) a prostitute—in a life filled with risk, disease, and misrecognition (and ambivalent shame). Old, diseased, and spent, Soyŏng’s only skill lies in providing “killer service” to men. While Tohun and Tina are both marginalized in terms of sexuality—Tohun for being crippled and Tina for being a transsexual—both have unique skill sets: Tohun hand-paints adult dolls (seemingly in high demand) and Tina is

the most popular headlining singer at an It'aewŏn gay bar. Furthermore, Soyŏng's clients, like Chaewoo and Song, are old men but still work or receive high returns from their pensions. Lacking skills and a legitimate job, Soyŏng can only labor in service work—whether that service be sex or murder. When Soyŏng confesses that she became a Bacchus Lady because she “hated more than anything to become an old junk-collector,” it seems the only available options for old, unskilled women are prostitution-servicing or peddling.

In lieu of collecting junk, Soyŏng extends her maternal “instinct” in her relations with the old men whom she services. It does not seem accidental that all of the men sit or lie inert on bed while Soyŏng gently coaxes and tends to them—as if taking care of babies. *The Bacchus Lady* remains quite chaste (despite its R-rating) save for one scene in which Soyŏng is forced to perform oral sex. Although she initially refuses, she reluctantly agrees when pressed: “Alright, alright, I’ll do it.” Sex work, for Soyŏng, is never depicted as erotic but always as weary and exhausting. That is, sex work is not so much sex as it is work. This work is so cumbersome that when a television show in the background of her motel room narrates, “Even today, through this and that, she endures,” it almost seems like a commentary on Soyŏng. Hence, she laments to the young filmmaker: “I must’ve been a sinner in my past life. I’ve worked serving others my entire life.” Soyŏng seems asexual as the film only emphasizes the generous giving (serving and caretaking) aspect of sex work.

Prostituting Motherly Care

The burden of sex(ed) work as service is further piled on Soyŏng when she learns that her former clients have fallen ill with age: Savile Song, so-called for dressing in dandy, bespoke suits (as in London’s Savile Row), lies paralyzed from a stroke; Chŏngsu, a hefty, muscular man, suffers from severe dementia; Chaewoo, despite appearances, lives with crippling depression (upon the death of his wife and daughter). Upon visiting Savile Song at the hospital, Soyŏng sees his son, daughter-in-law, and grandchildren (on a visit from the United States) bid him

farewell from afar (because he “smells bad”) and leave him in the care of a paid nurse. Once they leave, Soyŏng sits by his bedside, holds his hands, strokes his hair, and leans in to listen to all of his muffled words. Her actions bring to mind her first night with Minhŏ—and suggest her mother-ing of these three old men.

When Song and Chaewoo plead and insist that she “help” them with their deaths, Soyŏng—as she does with her clients’ demands—initially refuses but then reluctantly agrees. She feeds Song pesticide and commits her first killing; she pushes Chŏngsu off of Puk’an Mountain; she aids Chaewoo with his sleeping pills. In each of these instances, Soyŏng plays the mother—rather than the wife. Song is immobile and must be fed like a newborn baby; Chŏngsu barely manages to articulate himself and totters unsteadily like a toddler; Chaewoo craves attention and affection like a child. If these men once asserted their masculinity and practiced their authority by purchasing Soyŏng’s sexual labor, they do so again. Both Song and Chaewoo (speaking for Chŏngsu and himself) appeal to Soyŏng’s compassion and expect (as children are wont to do) her care: “Don’t you care? Don’t you feel sorry for me? ... You’d be doing a good deed for me.”

Not only is Soyŏng’s “killer service” made an extension of sex work as motherly (feminine) care, but it is also returned to the sphere of prostitution. All three killings occur in private or intimate settings (hospital and hotel beds) and borrow the syntax of prostitution. This is most notable when Soyŏng, Chaewoo, and Chŏngsu climb atop Puk’an Mountain together, and Chaewoo gets up to leave the two alone, telling Soyŏng to “do what [she] has to do.” It is also ironically telling that her final killing occurs atop the streets of Jongno. If she had labored for sex on these streets, she now does so for death above them. Regardless of her service, sex or murder, her labor remains passive—to be utilized *by* men *for* men only. Hence, even in the moment of administering death, Soyŏng is powerless—she is silenced and made to take care of others. When Soyŏng calls herself a “bitch” for having given up her barely weaned son for adoption, Chaewoo cringes as if she committed an unconscionable crime. It is telling that she is again framed as a “bad” mother forever compensating with caregiving. This scene is also reminiscent of the film’s

opening scene in which Soyŏng chastises herself for having serviced a man with gonorrhoea. The film likens sex (whether as reproduction or caregiving labor) with death. And, Soyŏng, who labors (unproductively) in both, is always the “bitch.”

But if prostitution had been merely laborious work without any (re) productive value, what might the killing of these old men signify? What does it mean that Soyŏng’s services move from instilling life (through sex) to sapping life (through murder)? What do these deaths mean within the context of a neoliberal South Korea—and that Soyŏng services these deaths? In “Right of Death and Power Over Life,” Foucault frames suicide as a kind of resistance in relation to biopower: “suicide testified to the individual and private right to die, at the borders and in the interstices of power that was exercised over life. This determination to die, strange and yet so persistent and constant ... was one of the first astonishments of a society in which political power had assigned itself the task of administering life.”²⁸

As seen in Chaewoo’s words, *The Bacchus Lady* frames Soyŏng’s killing as a “good deed” that stems from a distinctly feminized compassion and mercy. However, if suicide—death—is the ability to resist, to finally escape the grasp of biopower and its governing rationality of *life* through one’s own agency, it is an act of resistance that is available only to men. While Song, Chŏngsu, and Chaewoo can make the decision to kill themselves and be serviced as such, Soyŏng finds no such recourse and relief. Caught by the hotel’s surveillance cameras, she is branded an “elderly gold-digger” who exploits “weak old men” for money. For, under a neoliberal rationality, this can be the only reason one might “kill.”²⁹ Yet again, a dominant narrative silences *her*-story. Consequently, Soyŏng is promptly arrested for murder, imprisoned, and left to die—alone and naturally. She is, until the very end, interpellated by the state only to be disciplined—made to live out a life totally managed.

Feminist scholars have argued that not everyone is subject to bare life in the same way.³⁰ Whether paralyzed, demented, or depressed, the men can terminate life and signal their refusal of their designation as disposable human waste—even as they internalize neoliberal rationality

and consider themselves an expendable part of the population. Soyŏng, on the other hand, is made a voluntary and private solution to the state's struggle to manage the problem of senior poverty and death (as well as migrant women and biracial children). Unpaid, feminized, affective labor is idealized as maternal care and duty so as to tend to—and dispose of—old and foreign lives. And, for this, she is re-inscribed as ever more disposable.

Wendy Brown warns that “while neoliberalism formally promises to liberate ... it morally fuses hyperbolic self-reliance with readiness to be sacrificed.”³¹ She adds: “If the individual is at once the end-point of all responsibility—unprotected and unsecured—it is also thoroughly integrated into and bound to the project of the whole. So its fealty does not guarantee its survival.” Soyŏng is what Brown calls “the most thoroughly responsabilized individual,” who is always the first to be “cast off from the ship.” She feels responsible for abandoning her son, thus bears up uncomplainingly, makes no claims for more, and is ready to sacrifice to the cause of growth and society when called to do so.

Under a neoliberal governmentality, in which responsibility for the security, well-being, and quality of life has devolved from the state to one's “own capacities as free individuals to confront globalized insecurities by making calculations and investments in their lives,” Soyŏng shows herself to be, at once, an exemplary and failed neoliberal subject: although she lacks human capital, she is wholly governable. Thus, Soyŏng's “taking care of” (in all senses of the phrase) herself (she has worked for herself her entire life), Minhŏ (the illegal migrant child), and Song, Chŏngsu, and Chaewoo (the superfluous old), leads her to make adjustments and sacrifices to provide for her own material needs as well as for those of a larger community. In doing so as a woman, Soyŏng embodies the extreme gendered discipline demanded by contemporary neoliberal conditions.

Discarded and Forgotten

The Bacchus Lady ends with a silent (save for some diegetic sounds) montage. Soyŏng sits alone in the prison grounds, without make-up and

with bushy unkempt hair. The scene cuts to a prison cell where she eats, not with her younger looking cellmates, but alone. She appears so spent that she can barely lift her plastic spoon and chew her food. The scene then cuts to Soyöng lying rigid on a stretcher. A white sheet covers her entirely and she is wheeled out. The camera then pans through a room filled, from floor to ceiling, with little boxes with illegible markings. Finally, the camera stops at a single box with words scribbled carelessly: Yang Misuk. No Next of Kin. Ch'öngju Women's Prison. 1950.06.13 – 2017.10.05. Even in her death, Soyöng cannot be the person she wished to be: “so young” Soyöng. Taken back as Misuk, under the state/law, Soyöng is effectively erased and made un-visible.

Ending on a note of despair, the film shows how contemporary neoliberal governance is consistent with an exclusionary and carceral state that reduces certain categories of people to bare life that ultimately leaves no traces. Through Soyöng, who offers and takes life, the film shows how neoliberal Korean society is unmistakably bio-political: it is concerned with how to regulate life. *The Bacchus Lady* explores a range of social issues, such as senior poverty, illegal migrants, irregular workers, and state (police) violence, that continue to plague the neoliberal state.³² Played out in Soyöng's life as *her* responsibilities—undertaken in earnest and simple motherly good-heartedness—the film divulges the machinations of (bio)power and the conditions that allow it to persist. Authoritative acts rely on conventions, like gender norms, to be effectively implemented and then masked—so as to hide their contradictions, inadequacies, and violence.

While *The Bacchus Lady* manages to critique the violence wrought to certain bodies by neoliberal globalization, it is problematic that it does so by positing Soyöng as a maternal figure. Motherhood in *The Bacchus Lady* is privileged and enforced upon Soyöng. One day, without recourse to a baby-sitter, Soyöng takes Minhö to work with her and leaves him with the motel's receptionist. Just as she has completed her ritual (downing several gulps of *soju* and lighting an aromatic candle), Soyöng receives a call from the office informing her that the police have arrived for a bust. She slips out, telling her customer, “I can't get caught again, I'm sorry.” The next scene cuts to Soyöng walking out of the motel office

holding Minhø's hands as a policeman walks up the stairways. He looks at Soyøng suspiciously but then sees Minhø with her and continues upstairs without a word.

That the film can only develop its critique by making Soyøng a mother so as to naturalize her labor—affective and sexual—as (feminine) “sacrifice” points to the limits of *The Bacchus Lady*. While it may seem unfair to task a film as such, it would also be remiss to elide the ability of film to produce, construct, and disseminate knowledges. Hence, it is problematic that the film, by characterizing Soyøng as servicing motherly care and working *for* the nation, perpetuates sameness, rather than enabling change (for it re-produces and re-inscribes women and their labor as expendable). Nevertheless, it is possible to read some dignity in Soyøng's tranquil, if spent, demeanor at the end. That despite all, she remains human (not *homo economicus* or *homo sacer* but human). Soyøng, then, is both a symptom and a critique of the present, exposing its multiple contradictions and questioning what it means to live.

Notes

¹ While there have been a few narrative films on elderly sex, such as Park Jin-pyo's *Too Young to Die* (*Chugødojoa*, 2002) and Lee Chang-dong's *Poetry* (*Shi*, 2010), *The Bacchus Lady* is the first to depict senior prostitution on-screen. *The Bacchus Lady* received favorable reviews in Korea and abroad and saw actress Yoon Yeo-jeong win several awards in 2016.

² Hostess (a euphemism for prostitutes) films, such as director Kim Hosøn's *Yøngja's Heydays* (*Yøngja ũi chønsøngsidae*, 1977) and *Winter Woman* (*Kyøul yøja*, 1977), tend to portray a young, innocent rural woman come to Seoul in search of work, only to be ruined by powerful men and ultimately sacrificing herself for the sake of man, family, and/or nation.

³ Already nascent neoliberal reforms in South Korea were intensified in the aftermath of the 1997 Asian financial crisis. Forced to accept the International Monetary Fund's restructuring programs, namely liberalization, deregulation, privatization, and flexible labor, the so-called “IMF Crisis” ushered in a neoliberal age and transformed the foundations of Korean society.

⁴ Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1978-79*, ed. Michel Senellart, trans. Graham Burchell (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2008).

⁵ Wendy Brown, *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution* (New York:

Zone Books, 2015), 30-31.

⁶ Michel Feher, "Self-Appreciation; or, the Aspirations of Human Capital," *Public Culture* 21, no. 1 (2009): 21-41.

⁷ Brown, *Undoing the Demos*, 33-34.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid., 133. Neoliberalism emphasizes the devolution of authority to showcase its antipathy to centralized state power; it, then, deploys responsibility to "constitute, govern, organize, and measure conduct" to "remake and reorient for a neoliberal order."

¹¹ Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics*, 118. Foucault states that competition replaces exchange as the fundamental principle and dynamic of the market. Thus, when individuals are a damper on, rather than a contribution to, the good of the whole—be it firm or nation-state—they may be legitimately cast off.

¹² Brown, *Undoing the Demos*, 210-13.

¹³ Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995). The sovereign decides not the licit and the illicit but the originary inclusion of the living in the sphere of the law. Agamben cites the concentration camp as the most obvious model of the state of exception and the refugee as the most current instance of *homo sacer*. For him, *homo sacer* is no longer an archaic legal category but our way of political life.

¹⁴ Achille Mbembe, "Necropolitics," *Public Culture* 15, no. 1 (2003): 11-40.

¹⁵ This is what Foucault, in "Right of Death and Power over Life," labels racism. Michel Foucault, *History of Sexuality*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage Books, 1978).

¹⁶ Brown, *Undoing the Demos*, 84.

¹⁷ *The Bacchus Lady*, directed by E J-yong (2016; Seoul: KAFA, 2017), DVD. All translations are mine.

¹⁸ For more on the construction and management of the *hyōnmo yangch'ō*, see: Chungmoo Choi, Hyaeweol Choi, Seungsook Moon, Regina Song, Jiyoung Suh, and Theodore Jun Yoo.

¹⁹ Seungsook Moon, *Militarized Modernity and Gendered Citizenship in South Korea* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 88-89.

²⁰ Seungsook Moon, *Over There: Living with the U.S. Military Empire from World War Two to the Present* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2010), 39-69.

²¹ Lee Hyeon-suk, "Kopinos: Children of Shameful Korean Men," *Dong-A Ilbo* (Seoul, Korea), July 7, 2014. "Kopino" is a portmanteau of Korean and Filipino. Investigations from 2006 onward reveal that many Korean men—mostly students and business travelers—frequent brothels or take up "temporary wives" and end up fathering children whom they eventually abandon upon return. The Kopino population has increased continuously, with Koreans accounting for a quarter of the 4.7 million foreign

visitors, outnumbering all other nationalities. While no official tally exists, the number of Kopinos is estimated to reach up to 30,000.

²² The word used by both the nurse and Tina is “*ssajillō*,” meaning “to excrete or release.” The nuance crudely suggests the reckless ejaculation of semen.

²³ Jin-Kyung Lee, *Service Economies: Militarism, Sex Work, and Migrant Labor in South Korea* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), 37-77.

²⁴ *Lai Dai Han* refers to Korean-Vietnamese children born during the Vietnam War.

²⁵ Steven Hugh Lee, “Development without Democracy: The Political Economy of US-South Korea Relations, 1958-1961,” *Transformations in Twentieth Century Korea*, eds. Chang Yun-Shik and Steven Hugh Lee (New York: Routledge, 2006), 155.

²⁶ With the advent of globalization, camptown prostitutes have also become “global.” The majority of camptown prostitutes are (usually trafficked) migrant women from Southeast Asian or Eastern European nations. For more on camptown prostitution in South Korea, see Katherine H.S. Moon, Seungsook Moon, Ji-yeon Yuh, Grace M. Cho.

²⁷ Chungmoo Choi, “Nationalism and Construction of Gender,” *Dangerous Women: Gender and Korean Nationalism*, eds. Elaine H. Kim and Chungmoo Choi (New York: Routledge, 1998), 9-31.

²⁸ Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, 139. Giorgio Agamben, in *Homo Sacer*, also names suicide as a troubling challenge that complicates the violence of the force of law enacted by the sovereign on the body.

²⁹ This narrative framework is foreshadowed when Savile Song’s daughter-in-law, seeing Soyōng by his bedside, warns: “Father, who is this woman? You have to be wary of women like her. They say there are a lot of granny-leeches looking to milk old men nowadays. She wouldn’t come to see a paraplegic like you without an objective.” She then admonishes Soyōng: “You needn’t keep visiting. My father-in-law has no money.”

³⁰ Penelope Deutscher, “The Inversion of Exceptionality: Foucault, Agamben, and ‘Reproductive Rights,’” *South Atlantic Quarterly* 107, no. 1 (2008): 55-70; Geraldine Pratt, “Abandoned Women and Spaces of Exception,” *Antipode* (2005): 1052-78; Ewa Plonowska Ziarek, “Bare Life on Strike: Notes on the Biopolitics of Race and Gender,” *South Atlantic Quarterly* 107, no. 1 (2008): 89-106. As Geraldine Pratt argues, “there are real limitations to generalizing across the experiences of men and women, and across racialized and gendered forms of abandonment.” She states that it is “inconceivable” that bare life works in “a uniform way for men and women,” especially considering the way “women’s issues are often depoliticized by being enclaved within the private sphere, while women are simultaneously less able than men to maintain the stability of the distinction between private and public.”

³¹ Wendy Brown, “Sacrificial Citizenship: Neoliberalism, Human Capital, and Austerity Politics,” *Constellation* 23, no. 1 (2016): 11.

³² In *The Bacchus Lady* contemporary South Korea as a neoliberal state begins to show its cracks. It is not coincidental that two real-life political issues are embedded in

the film. When Soyŏng prays in front of Chogye Temple, the camera pans a band of riot police and then slowly reveals protestors carrying signs boldly reading “Release Han Sang-gyun!” Han Sang-gyun was a labor union activist-leader who was unduly laid off from Ssangyong Automobiles and arrested during the Park Geun-hye administration under false charges of violating traffic and mass demonstration laws—and released a year into the Moon Jae-in administration. In another scene, following the news report of Soyŏng’s “killing,” the television screen shows the killing of farmer Paek Nam-ki by riot police’s (illegal) water cannon during a peaceful mass demonstration. Retrospectively, it might be possible to read the film as representative of a transitional phase from a neoliberal to welfare state.