Unpacking Women's Role in State Survival through Reproductive Technologies in South Korea

Introduction

Total Fertility Rate (TFR) is the calculated average number of children a woman is expected to give birth to in their lifetime. A TFR of 2.1 is deemed necessary to maintain a population, enough to replace the generation before it.[1] Countries such as the U.S., Japan, and Western Europe are known to be currently struggling with a TFR under 2.1, causing concern over the rising elderly population and declining future labor force.[2] A low TFR then becomes a critical public issue as the economy depends on its citizens to provide labor supply to industry, keeping the state alive. South Korea is especially ailed by this crisis as they currently hold the lowest TFR in the world. According to the South Korean government in February 2023, the TFR was revealed to be at an all-time low, 0.78, less than half the rate necessary to maintain a population.[3] As a country heralded as one of the fastest growing economies in the world, why does South Korea suffer from the lowest fertility rate? Though reproductive technologies and state policies incentivizing childbirth continue to grow, none have been successful in producing significant change. Using a feminist technoscience framework, I will follow the history of reproductive technologies in South Korea, arguing that the limits and potentials of technology for humanity are inextricably linked to women's bodies.

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[1] "Fertility Rate." Encyclopædia Britannica, April 19, 2023. https://www.britannica.com/topic/fertility-rate.

[2] Lane, Charles. "Opinion | Lower Fertility Rates Are the New Cultural Norm." The Washington Post, March 29, 2023. https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2023/03/29/investigating-low-fertility-rates/.

[3] Ahn, Ashley. "South Korea Has the World's Lowest Fertility Rate, a Struggle with Lessons for Us All." NPR, March 19, 2023. https://www.npr.org/2023/03/19/1163341684/south-korea-fertility-rate#:~:text=In%20South%20Korea%2C%20the%20fertility,the%20Korean%20government%20in%20February.

An Infertile State

Infertility is a growing public health concern as people who want to, are unable to give birth. Typically, the language of infertility is automatically linked to the woman, who fails to procure a pregnancy. This is due to the medicalization of infertility, which follows a greater pattern of women's lives being increasingly medicalized.[4] While infertility was formerly considered a private issue concerning couples, its medicalization has transformed it into "a medical condition that focuses primarily on women."[5] This shift is problematic in various ways. Greil and McQuillan argue that,

> When a condition is medicalized, biomedical agents assume the authority over defining and interpreting the condition, expanding their role in determining how it is to be treated, controlling access to treatment, and monitoring compliance with treatment regimens.[6]

Under the guise of science, a field regarded as neutral and objective, these institutions wield significant power in defining infertility as well as regulating its diagnoses, treatment, and surveillance. This translates into a public understanding of infertility as one guided by the state, an actor who holds regulatory power over institutions and is motivated by politics. While politics is not inherently harmful, modern reliance on colonial logic deforms them. Additionally, the patriarchal structure of government perpetuates a oppressive effect on women. The primary focus on women's bodies for treating infertility transfers as blame on women for "their condition". Solely women, therefore, are held accountable, being linked to their individual practices, which

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[4] Greil, Arthur L., and Julia McQuillan. "'Trying' Times: Medicalization, Intent, and Ambiguity in the Definition of Infertility." *Medical Anthropology Quarterly* 24, no. 2 (2010): 137–56. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1548-1387.2010.01094.x.

[5] Ibid.

[6] Ibid.

in turn determine whether they are worthy of treatment. In a world where women are disproportionately scrutinized, shamed and low self-worth are further programmed into their psyches. The Western vision of infertility also produces a "dominant image of 'infertile woman'" as "economically privileged women who attend infertility clinics."[7]

Infertility, however, reflects the state's failure to protect the reproductive health and rights of its citizens. Understood this way, the barriers to fertility are diverted from the biomedical conditions of woman and redistributed to greater systemic issues. South Korea serves as a unique stage to investigate these issues as a relatively isolated, homogenous state with a recent history of unprecedented economic transformation post-imperial occupation.

Post-liberation from Japanese occupation in 1945, the 1960s in South Korea was marked by "extreme poverty with the postwar 'baby-boom' population expansion."[8] According to the Korean Statistical Information Service (KOSIS), the TFR was 6.0 at this time.[9] This is reflected in the 1960 population pyramid, as shown in Figure 1, in which children and young adults make up a significant portion of the population. Symbolically, when viewing the graph as the state, it is relatively stable, with a wide, distributed base of support of younger generations. In 2023, however, the pyramid population looks radically different. With a TFR of only 0.78, the precariousness of the state is reflected in the weight of the growing elderly population and resulting pressure on a narrow, younger generation. Current conditions institute a fear of a slowly, dying state due to a retiring workforce without a replacement. The South Korean

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[7] Ibid.

[8] Yoon, Jung Won. "The Bio-Politics of Reproduction Technologies in Modern Korea, 1960-1990." *Korea Observer* 46, no. 3 (Autumn 2015): 577–98.

[9] Ibid.

government must now scramble to avert this crisis, but their efforts remain blinded by patriarchal and colonial traditions.

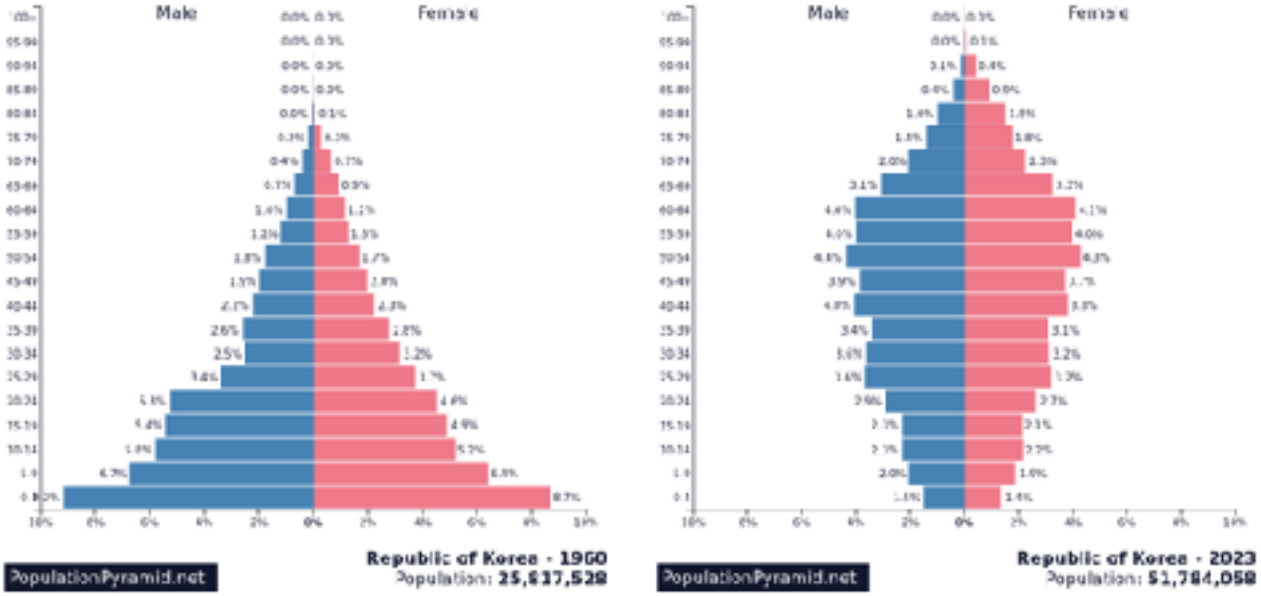

Figure 1. Republic of Korea population pyramid 1960 and 2023.[10]

Clay Women

In only around 60 years, South Korea has undergone a seemingly progressive transformation in reproductive policy, from female contraception for fertility reduction to the implementation of various pronatalist policies. However, the state's method and motive for population control remains domineering over women. The abrupt switch in reproductive policy is indicative of the government's lingering sexist assumption that women are objects whose bodies are malleable to the state, solely devoted to serving their purpose. The current policies continue to neglect women's needs as well as reproduces violence experienced by Korean women during war.

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[10] "Population Pyramids of the World from 1950 to 2100." PopulationPyramid.net. Accessed May 15, 2023. https://www.populationpyramid.net/republic-of-korea/1962/.

In the 1960s, the South Korean government focused heavily on fertility reduction through family planning, with an aggressive focus on female contraception. Female contraception included condoms, IUDs, the pill, and abortion. These contraceptive methods, however, had negative consequences on the health of women causing a multitude of mild to severe side effects.[11] Family planning was also a major state policy advertised as a "voluntary movement", despite being heavily propagandized with rhetoric associating having fewer children with being more civilized and prosperous. Primarily targeting rural populations in the 60s, the growth of cities in the 70s prompted the government to target the urban poor and manual laborers.[12] During this period, the image of a two-child family became idealized, which popularized female sterilization as a major contraceptive method. By the 1980s, the TFR had dropped to slightly below 2.0, achieving the 'ideal' fertility rate. As a result, by the mid-90s, family planning policies were terminated.

Today, South Korea's reproductive policies reflect the opposite side of the spectrum as the TFR drops unstably low. Since 2006, state response to low fertility has transformed from a "focus on childcare support for low-income households" to a more comprehensive "improvement to the quality of life for all generations".[13] Additionally, in 2021, the government allocated around 32 billion dollars of the state budget as compared to 750 million in 2006. Childbirth promotion policies, including expanded parental leave, financial aid for childcare and single mothers, as well as support for assistive reproductive technologies (ARTs), are all direct

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[11] Yoon, Jung Won. "The Bio-Politics of Reproduction Technologies in Modern Korea, 1960-1990." *Korea Observer* 46, no. 3 (Autumn 2015): 577–98.

[12] Ibid.

[13] National Assembly Budget Office NABO Briefing Report.

efforts the government has attempted to raise the fertility rate.[14] Criminalization and greater policing on abortions have also been implemented as a measure to combat the low TFR. However, these policies have remained ineffective as they skirt the core systemic issues of survival in South Korea and neglect women's reproductive health and rights.

The sudden switch from anti-natalist to pro-natalist policy also demonstrates the treatment of women as objects to be used for state production. Audra Simpson's "The State is a Man" examines the colonial roots of this phenomenon of women's death and governance.

> Feminist scholars have argued that Native women's bodies were to the settler eye, like land, and as such in the settler mind, the Native woman is rendered "unrapeable" (or, highly rapeable) because she was like land, matter to be extracted from, used, sullied, taken from, over and over again, something that is already violated and violatable in a great march to accumulate surplus, to so called "production."[15]

From 'camptown women' in U.S. military bases and 'comfort women' during Japanese occupation, rape has a very recent history that continues to today. Statistics recording sexual violence in South Korea are sparse due to domestic violence considered a private, family matter along with cases going unreported as South Korea's policies for violence against women are notoriously lax. However, according to the first of its kind 2021 study by the Korean Women's Development Institute surveying 7,000 women over the age of 18, 34.9% of women experienced sexual violence at least once in their lifetime, 46% of which were from domestic partners, and

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[14] Kim, Sunhye. "Reproductive Technologies as Population Control: How Pronatalist Policies Harm Reproductive Health in South Korea." *Sexual and Reproductive Health Matters* 27, no. 2 (2019): 6–12. https://doi.org/10.1080/26410397.2019.1610278.

[15] Simpson, Audra. "2 the State Is a Man: Theresa Spence, Loretta Saunders, and the Gender of Settler Sovereignty." *Coloniality and Racial (In)Justice in the University*, 2021, 136–62. https://doi.org/10.3138/9781487532048-004.

94.7% of sexual violence was committed by male perpetrators.[16] Furthermore, cases of child sexual abuse are largely undocumented but an additional study of 1,000 female teenagers from age 14 to 18 revealed 28.8% had experienced online grooming.

This history of violence against South Korean women suggests a necessary focus on healing and strengthening their health and rights in order to solve the issues of infertility. Yet, in parallel to the blame and shame placed on women for inflicted sexual violence, current and prospective reproductive policies "ignore and trivialize issues of reproductive health and rights."[17] Medical interventions for assisting pregnancy are imprudently endorsed while those preventing or terminating them are stigmatized. Though abortion was finally decriminalized in 2021, the fight continues as accessibility, education about abortion, and guidance of medical professionals remains infant.[18] This is because,

> …as with all bodies, these bodies were more than just "flesh"—these were and are sign systems and symbols that could effect and affect political life. So they had to be killed, or, at the very least subjected because what they were signaling or symbolizing was a direct threat to settlement.[19]

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[16] "46% of Cases of Violence against Women in Korea Perpetrated by Intimate Partner, Study Finds." 46% of cases of violence against women in Korea perpetrated by intimate partner, study finds : National : News : The Hankyoreh. Accessed May 15, 2023. https://english.hani.co.kr/arti/english_edition/e_national/1056632.html#:~:text=According%20to%20the%20results%20of,sexual%2C%20emotional%2C%20or%20financial%20violence.

[17] Kim, Sunhye. "Reproductive Technologies as Population Control: How Pronatalist Policies Harm Reproductive Health in South Korea." *Sexual and Reproductive Health Matters* 27, no. 2 (2019): 6–12. https://doi.org/10.1080/26410397.2019.1610278.

[18] "South Korea's Constitutional Right to Abortion." Human Rights Watch, July 6, 2022. https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/06/09/south-koreas-constitutional-right-abortion.

[19] Simpson, Audra. "2 the State Is a Man: Theresa Spence, Loretta Saunders, and the Gender of Settler Sovereignty." *Coloniality and Racial (In)Justice in the University*, 2021, 136–62. https://doi.org/10.3138/9781487532048-004.

As women increasingly enter the official political sphere, the state's motive for population control is revealed to not be progressive at all but merely a reproduction of patriarchal control over women's bodies. An 2018 interview of Jang Yun-Hwa, a 24 year old South Korean woman, she divulges that "I have no plans to have children, ever," based in her commonly held experience of the mistreatment of women in relationships and the workplace.[20] She shares that "many people around me have no children and plan to have no children" that references a cultural phenomenon called *sampo-shidae* or 'three giving-up generation', one that "gives up on courtship, marriage, and having kids."[21] Even though Yun-Hwa and others' decision to not have children is heavily criticized by elders who call their generation "too individualistic and selfish," as they do not share the sense of patriotism and duty to the country, their decision is indicative of a weariness of

> The settler state is asking to forgive and to forget, with no land back, no justice and no peace. I find this request for forgiveness by a killing state with what we now know and continue to know to veer towards the absurd if not insult, in spite of its conciliatory intent. This is because historical, bodily and heuristic violence along with theft are among the things that are really impossible to forgive let alone forget.[22]

Lastly, the interview ends with Yun-Hwa asserting that the concern of her country's culture dying due to the lack of childbirth is irrelevant as the patriarchal culture "Must die, Must die!"[23]

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[20] Maybin, Simon. "'Why I Never Want Babies.'" BBC News, August 15, 2018. https://www.bbc.com/news/stories-45201725.

[21] "Sampo Generation." Wikipedia, October 7, 2022. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sampo_generation.

[22] Simpson, Audra. "2 the State Is a Man: Theresa Spence, Loretta Saunders, and the Gender of Settler Sovereignty." *Coloniality and Racial (In)Justice in the University*, 2021, 136–62. https://doi.org/10.3138/9781487532048-004.

[23] Maybin, Simon. "'Why I Never Want Babies.'" BBC News, August 15, 2018. https://www.bbc.com/news/stories-45201725.

Sibaji: **The Surrogate**

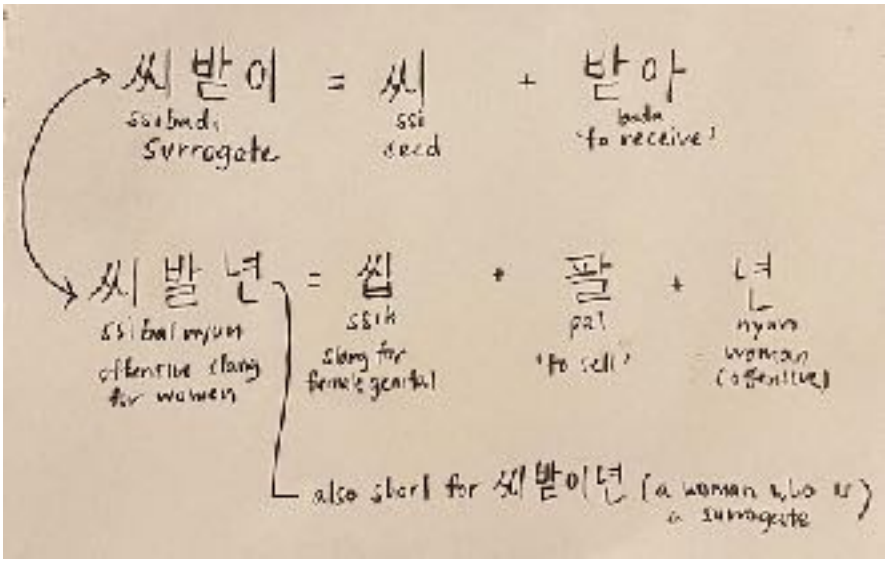

Figure 2. Origins of an offensive Korean slang for women

Ssibadi, a word for 'the surrogate', was a term used for breeding plants and animals. When used on a woman, it links to the insult *ssibalnyun*, combining the meaning of a woman who receives seed (gets fucked) and a woman who sells her vagina (fucks for money). *Ssibadi*, therefore, is a highly stigmatized term that South Korean women generally avoid associating with. On the other hand, surrogacy or *deh-rhi* translates to a surrogate or someone who acts as a surrogate in any situation, commonly used when a driver is called to drive on behalf of a drunk person. In the realm of parenthood, the meaning of surrogacy has commonly been used to describe a close relative or guardian who takes over the role of a parent. Surrogacy also includes the process of inseminating a woman, a gestational carrier, to give birth for a donor. This definition has been re-classified as natural surrogacy, and surrogacy, with no descriptor, almost synonymous refers to in-vitro fertilization or IVF. IVF is a procedure where an egg is retrieved from a woman's uterus and fertilized by sperm in-vitro, or outside a living organism. As the

government searches for solutions to its infertility crisis, IVF serves as a legitimized remedy while natural surrogacy remains a highly stigmatized practice**.** The adoption of technology as the state's preferred, "progressive" method of addressing infertility shows the ways in which women are simultaneously invisibilized as contributors to society as well as made highly visible in the sphere of bodily technologies, particularly surrounding reproduction.

Though IVF surrogacy is legitimized over natural surrogacy, Paik argues that the former actually "gained legitimacy through the continuing existence of the latter" and even perpetuates "old practices of natural surrogacy."[24] The state proposes IVF technology as the only solution to infertility, presenting a sterilized version of reproduction, removed from the "affective and carnal components" of natural surrogacy.[25] In this way, IVF surrogacy becomes a scientific innovation that is merely a part of the "routine technological intervention" of modernity as well as avoids disrupting the purity of the nuclear family. The medical use of egg and sperm in IVF allows the government to assert a narrative excluding nontraditional families such as LGBTQ+ and single mothers, who face discrimination without legal recognition or protection. The spousal requirement of IVF treatment also remains an immense barrier to desiring parents.[26] In this way, the state reveals its contradictory practices of promoting childbirth while preventing those who could contribute to their objective. IVF also engages in the morally ambiguous trade of transnational surrogacy. In the 90s and 00's, companies called DNA-BANK and Excellence were

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[24] Paik, Young-Gyung. "Return of the Sibaji?" *Asian Women*, 2010. https://doi.org/10.14431/aw.2010.09.26.3.73.

[25] Ibid.

[26] Strother, Jason. "South Korea's Baby Boost for Married Couples Excludes Nontraditional Families." The World from PRX, January 22, 2021. https://theworld.org/stories/2021-01-22/south-korea-s-baby-boost-married-couples-excludes-nontraditional-families.

found to traffick Korean ova to Japanese clients, news that disturbed the public as "the media portrayed the phenomenon as 'colonization of Korean wombs by the Japanese'."[27] Furthermore, cheaper locations for surrogacy services in China or Vietnam have created a gateway back to natural surrogacy as it not only proves cheaper but also easier for both broker and client to evade complex laws for identity registry under IVF. The sole endorsement of IVF illustrates how the state attempts to erase the woman, in concealing its entangled practices of natural surrogacy and submitting women as the problem to be 'fixed' by reproductive technology.

The Hwang Woo Suk case has also produced new meanings of surrogacy by revealing the various roles of women in biotechnology. While women are disembodied from their role in reproduction through ova trafficking, they are empowered in their role in 'egg donation culture' aiding scientific development. The scandal began when Hwang Woo Suk was nationally acclaimed for his worldwide scientific achievement of establishing "the first human embryonic stem cell with the somatic cell nuclear transfer method". Soon, however, he was accused of fraudulence in fabricating the data alongside the unethical collection of human eggs. It was revealed that he not only forced two associate female researchers to donate their eggs, but most of the eggs were trafficked from young women motivated by financial difficulties. Ova trafficking treats eggs as extracted objects from women used to advance reproductive technologies. In this way, women's disembodied parts, not women themselves, are treated as necessary for state development. Because South Korea's development has been highly reliant on science and technology, seen as the key to achieving independence, its bioethical policies were heavily influenced by state bias in protecting Hwang Woo Suk. This intentional negligence

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[27] Paik, Young-Gyung. "Return of the Sibaji?" *Asian Women*, 2010. https://doi.org/10.14431/aw.2010.09.26.3.73.

implicates the state in sacrificing women's health and rights for the development of biotechnology. However, even after the scandal was revealed, women continued to donate their eggs to his research. Leem and Park suggest this 'egg donation culture' introduces women's ownership of their bodies and ability to participate in politics.

> … it can be argued that women who donate their eggs are not necessarily simply victimized by patriarchy, national development ideology, or science. Their actions, on the contrary… show not only women's bodies as objects but also that their subjective rights in their own bodies are what mattered to egg donation in the Hwang affair.

By assuming the role of surrogate, women are able to participate in the world as actors, not merely subjects. This is not to say the objectification of women is justified, but to reveal the complicated ways in which women are "both reproductive bodies and social agents."[28] The collectivity of women's experiences, therefore, should be applied to our understanding of surrogacy to treat women as "neither victims nor free decision-makers, just like any other human actors."[29]

The notion of surrogate humanity introduced by Atanasoski and Vora explains the ultimate potential of technology as defined by the techno-liberalist notion that "specific types of human functions and human workers" are replaceable.[30] The development of reproductive technologies points to this goal as reproductive work is considered "work that could be done by the poor, the uneducated, the colonized, and women."[31] The South Korean government's

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[28] Ibid.

[29] Ibid.

[30] Atanasoski, Neda, and Kalindi Vora. "The Surrogate Human Effects of Technoliberalism." Essay. In *Surrogate Humanity: Race, Robots, and the Politics of Technological Futures*, 1–26. Durham, NC: Duke university press, 2019.

[31] Ibid.

temporary solutions for addressing infertility demonstrates how women are used as a means to an end—the state's survival. However, women choice to refuse participation in reproductive technologies is a critical limiting factor in its use and development. Technology alone cannot enact change without bodies to run them. Women's choice to participate also determines the potentials of reproductive technologies as the fight for women's health and rights steers the direction of technological effects on society. Thus, women's bodies act as a gateway to state survival, whether closed or open.

Conclusion

Technology, usually conceived of as a tangible, working contraption, is created in parallel to intangible, ongoing socio-political processes. It offers a materialization of cultural patterns, ones that are reproduced generationally. Reproductive technologies, therefore, are embedded with an inconceivably long history of violence passed down through the bodies of women who birth new generations. Though conceived as a solution to state survival, reproductive technologies can be subverted by women for their own needs and desires. By following the history of reproductive technologies in South Korea and their effects on culture, I am not only investigating the role of South Korean women in state survival but every woman. What is happening in South Korea is co-occurring to various degrees in all parts of the world. The matters of state survival serve as the ultimate playing ground for breaking it down. In South Korea, the stakes for state survival have reached a standoff. State death, being the result of self-inflicted violence, must fix itself. As South Korea grapples with the culmination of colonialist hierarchies in gender, women's bodies, in conjunction with technology, act as an in-dominatable landscape in which the state will either transform or perish. In the end, South Korea merely

serves as a case study in which the conditions of state death are undeniably written in its history and the future is left to the decisions of Korean women.