

GRINDING THE SOULS: Politics of Interspecies Pity and the Labor of Care in a South Korean Animal Shelter

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When I first requested an interview with Yujin, a managing staff member of Animal Rescue in Action (ARA),¹ an animal shelter that rescues and provides care to homeless dogs in danger of euthanasia in Yangju and facilitates their adoption into homes in South Korea and overseas,² she said that she would prefer to do it over the phone. Her preference was not so much rooted in concern about the pandemic but in the fact that she felt she had no time to spare, as she needed to be online all day to talk with people interested in adopting dogs. During the interview, she told me how ARA had been run by “grinding the souls of a few [*myeonmyeochui yeonghoneul garaneoeo*].” Pointing to the routine burnout and high turnover among the staff, she said, “most people quit within a year. Those who become engaged too enthusiastically see their lives collapse, ruin their health, and then quit before a year goes by. But those who are only partially engaged generally stay longer.” Her words stuck with me throughout my fieldwork at ARA (2019–2022), an organization run predominantly by middle-aged women from lower- to middle-income backgrounds, while I sought to fathom the meaning of the intense and precarious labor of interspecies care these women embodied.

In this essay, I first try to situate ARA’s activities against the backdrop of the emergent politics of what I call “interspecies pity,”³ predominantly mobilized by

the increased visibility of animal suffering and human pity aroused by the spectacle of such suffering (cf. [Arendt 1969](#); [Boltanski 1999](#); [Ticktin 2015](#)). The attention to the suffering of animals as a population has seen rapid growth in South Korea in the past two decades, leading to the emergence of various kinds of groups working on animal rights, initiating related legislative changes, and redirecting social giving toward animal issues. I specifically look at how ARA's activities could not only flourish in but also be significantly constrained by the moralist politics of interspecies pity that makes running and working at ARA extraordinarily intense, as Yujin's above expression of "grinding the souls" indicates. This politics translates the labor of interspecies care into selfless affection and love and asks caregivers to prove their "grace" by refusing any reciprocity for the act of giving ([Pitt-Rivers 2011](#)). The pressure for grace then turns ARA shelters into places that actively reproduce feminized labor of the cheap and the flexible ([Weeks 2011](#)).

How can one reconcile the apparent irony of the explosion of pity for non-human suffering and the demand for the cheap yet devoted labor of women to provide this care? The rise of the view of animals as "socially most vulnerable" and the politics of interspecies pity that thrive on that image tend to downplay the issue of human difference and social inequality by highlighting a universal humanness (cf. [Song 2010](#); [Weiss 2016](#)). Yet the naturalization of care that prevails in this politics demands the kind of care that cannot be possible without the gendered exploitation of less educated, lower income women. This situation might make us ask how the search for pure and innocent suffering may not only render invisible structural inequality ([Ticktin 2017](#)) but in fact operate *precisely* by exploiting and reproducing existing social inequality. This reality also highlights the importance of addressing asymmetries and differences within "the human" that cannot be ignored in understanding the concrete nature of interspecies relationships, but that in anthropology's multispecies turn have received relatively less examination ([Kirksey and Helmreich 2010](#); [Kohn 2013](#); cf. [Lemke 2017](#)).⁴

The politics of interspecies pity, as seen in the case of South Korea today, seems to extend the need for women's shadow labor, which, as feminist scholars of political economy have often noted, constitutes the capitalist system's "invisible heart" ([Folbre 2002](#)). However, although women's gendered labor of care became readily available for exploitation in the maintenance of pity's moralization at ARA, their everyday entanglements at the shelters still resisted a complete subsumption to patriarchal capitalism, thus offering a rupture for my second intervention. In other words, women's conscious negation of what they do at ARA as "labor" or "wage work," and their unwitting yet persistent rejection of the rationale of

productivity by following their own enchantments with more-than-human sociality, reveal their labor to have what [Sylvia Federici \(2012, Location 197\)](#) called “the ‘double character’ of reproductive work,” with power to both integrate workers into the labor market—but also to disintegrate them from it. ARA’s activity of helping the system’s unwanted dogs survive and flourish in more-than-human adoptive kinship constitutes reproductive labor in its own right, but one that does not conform to economic rationality or capitalist world-making (cf. [Moore 2023](#)). In this light, the expression “grinding the souls” gains another, rather more affirmative meaning: in women’s own world-making, these words capture affective excesses not subsumed by the intensity of labor or the logic of productivity.

Below, I discuss how the labor of interspecies care at ARA emerges as a “curious double” ([Muehlebach 2011, 76](#)). On the one hand, this labor embodies feminized exploitation by being constantly vulnerable to the co-optation of the moralizing and naturalizing politics of interspecies pity. On the other hand, it becomes the site for intra- and inter-species entanglements irreducible to the logic of exploitation, thus creating new forms of care and sociality. I will first situate the ARA’s activities in the emergent politics of interspecies pity and discuss the politics’ tendency to (re)establish a moralist and dehistoricizing vision of human-animal relations and to erase human difference and inequality. I then examine a paradox ensuing from this politics—and the possibility that nonetheless emerges. That is, although interspecies pity’s blindness to human difference appropriates it to realize its own promise, everyday entanglements such as the ones occurring in ARA shelters are not entirely overshadowed by that coupling of moralization and exploitation.

In so doing, I continue critical and feminist endeavors to intervene in and reconstruct the notion of care when an idealized, totalizing, and often depoliticizing discourse of care has increasingly gained new purchase with the rise of the global talk in the Anthropocene ([Govindrajan 2021](#); [Parreñas 2018](#); [Ticktin 2021](#)). The discourse of interspecies pity and women’s practices at ARA both imagine “care,” but they do so differently. If pity mandates “graceful care” then translated into feminized exploitation, the ARA women establish an “interspecies kinship of care” that operates based on mutual enchantments, rather than exclusive entitlements. It appears that both the discourse of pity and the women themselves refuse the idea of labor per se, but the refusals head in different directions. Pity’s negation of animal care as labor aligns with the moralizing vision of care as selfless giving, which not only denies any material returns for women but also then serves as a pretext for stigmatization about doing *unworthy* things. The women’s own refusal

to describe what they do as labor may make them complicit in the devaluation of care work, but we can read into it a critique of the capitalist validation of what is worthy and what is not, thus revealing the very system of (de-)valuation responsible for their own exploitation/stigmatization. When coming to the shelter meant mourning the dead and not leaving the shelter meant responding to another's call, the ensuing care in fact meant nothing but coming to terms with mutual vulnerabilities. In what follows, I will show how ARA's activities, while always caught between the pressure for grace and the stigmatization for uselessness, may hint at a possibility of *commoning* care characterized by mutual enchantments, disowning and relational rearrangements.

INTERSPECIES PITY AND ANIMALS AS THE SOCIALLY MOST VULNERABLE

When I met Kim Cheon Soo, the then representative of the Veterinary Medical Association of Yangju, in the winter of 2019, he emphasized that only a few of the town's rescue dogs were put to death, something for which he credited the work of ARA, as they took in all dogs before they could be euthanized. South Korea's Animal Protection Act allows rescue dogs and cats to be exhibited online for up to ten days in hopes of either finding their original or new homes.⁵ If they cannot be returned or rehomed, the animals are to be "humanely handled" (*indojeok cheori*)—a euphemistic phrase for euthanasia. Commissioned by the city government of Yangju, the role of local vets like Kim was to take care of the rescued animals, treat the injured, find their homes, and put un-homed ones to death. The presence of a group like ARA, which Kim described as "practically focused on saving lives," compared to the larger and nationally renowned animal rights groups he thought of as more "event focused," spared him and other commissioned vets in Yangju the grim task of legalized killing, which was more unavoidable and widespread in other parts of the country.

Ten days after my meeting with Kim, I visited one of the shelters ARA ran in Yangju. It was a freezing February morning, with the temperature plummeting to negative 15 degrees Celsius. The shelter was located amid paddy fields, with no one in sight since it was off-season. Yet as I approached the shelter made up of five to six vinyl greenhouses, I was struck by the sound of hundreds of dogs barking. When I went into one of the greenhouses, I saw about a hundred dogs, each caged in a separate kennel with their name, estimated age, sex, and characteristics written on the front. This time, I was surrounded not only by the sound of barking but also the odor of dog feces. When a dog out to exercise ran fast toward me and

soiled my padded jacket with its paws, I saw Mihee, a staff member that I was supposed to meet that morning, doing her morning chores: changing food and water for the dogs and clearing away their feces from the night before.

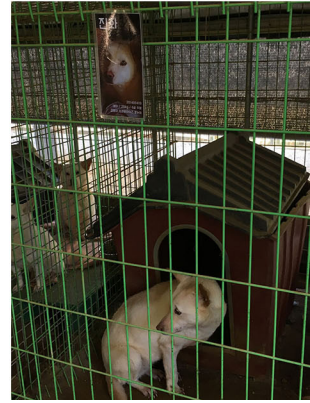


Figure 1 (left). Staff doing her morning chores in one of the ARA shelters.

Photo by EuyRyung Jun.

Figure 2 (right). The tags on the front of kennels show dogs' name, age, sex, and characteristics. Photo by EuyRyung Jun.

When Mihee was still a high school student in 2012, she found a stray Maltese dog on the street and took it to a police station. Soon the dog was moved to a local shelter commissioned by the city government, where its condition deteriorated. "You could see that the dog had obviously been neglected there. Many people like me simply report any stray dogs to the authorities without knowing they may be killed unless they find a home to go to," Mihee said. Her experience with the stray Maltese led her to ARA, which had just started operating in town and was saving dogs from euthanasia. The group started with fewer than one hundred dogs and now cares for about five hundred animals in three shelters located in Yangju and Seoul. Another staff member, Yujin, explained the motivation behind the creation of ARA: "[We thought] that although we might not be able to do something big, we can still save the kids [dogs] in Yangju. These are the kids who will die. They will be killed if they are put there [in these shelters]."

Both Mihee and Yujin reveal that, ironically, ARA emerged in response to a new sense of biopolitical responsibility, according to which the state's animal control places animals under the legal injunction of "live well or die," as a consequence of which they define killing as an "act of caring and responsibility" (Srinivasan 2013, 106–12; cf. Bocci 2017). In intervening in the utilitarian sacrifice perpetrated by the state, ARA's position rather resembled what Didier Fassin (2007)

termed the “politics of life” in his discussion of humanitarian organizations. Its efforts to bringing to their shelter as many dogs as possible, left after the tenth day, focused on saving individual animal lives, representing them as victims in need of defense. In contrast to the state’s premeditated responsibility, ARA’s intervention embodied a form of “response-ability” as the “capacity to respond” (Haraway 2016, 78). While deep uncertainty constantly threatened the group’s future, with the constant appearance of dogs with nowhere to go and limited space and capabilities in the shelter, ARA nonetheless acted in the face of the pervasive vulnerability obvious once it was known what would happen if nothing was done (Dave 2014; Jun 2019). The group could not simply *not act*.

However, it is not enough to merely address questions of interspecies compassion and vulnerability between the staff and dogs to fully understand the larger contexts in which ARA acted and became sustainable (Jun 2023). That is, what made it possible for ARA, which began with fewer than 100 homeless dogs, to become a group that rescues and offers shelter to 500–550 dogs annually within less than ten years, even without the nationwide visibility proffered by celebrities supporting larger animal rights and animal welfare groups? What can explain a seemingly endless stream of volunteers and donations, which even saw a rapid rise to more than 13 billion won in 2020, at a time when the entire national economy staggered under the fallout of COVID-19?

To situate the work of animal care embodied by ARA beyond the staff-dog relationship and thus understand what largely sustains its activities in today’s South Korea, it is important to consider the changing moral status of animals and their rapid entry into the realm of social assistance, within which animals have been increasingly defined as “the weakest of *sahoejeok yakja* [the socially weak]” (Lee 2017, 28). This recognition of animals as the most *vulnerable* social group and their inclusion in law (Cherkaev 2021), such as the Animal Protection Act, have been fueled by the increased visibility of the suffering of animals and by an interspecies version of what Luc Boltanski (1999) called “a politics of pity,” following Hannah Arendt’s (1969) distinction between compassion and pity. Unlike compassion, a co-suffering affect, pity can be aroused “without being touched in the flesh,” can travel easily, and “reach out to the multitude” (Arendt 1969, 80–84). An interspecies politics of pity, which operates by mobilizing the suffering of animals in general—that is, not “this animal, at this moment” (Dave 2014, 434)—as well as human pity toward the *spectacle* of animal suffering, discursively shapes the conceptualization of animals as the most vulnerable group within the world of more-than-human, social suffering.

In so doing, this politics extends a humanitarian framework and its universalist and moralist tendencies to the matter of animal suffering (Ticktin 2015). It mobilizes the innocence and helplessness of the animal victim and a totalizing and dehistoricizing vision of the timeless human oppression of animals (Song 2010; Ticktin 2017; Weiss 2016). Recent examples involved the killing of an eight-year-old female puma found roaming outside her enclosure in a Daejeon zoo in 2018 and the death of a cloned beagle abused for lab experiments at the veterinary school of Seoul National University in 2019. These events received nationwide attention that led to vociferous petitions on the online board run by Cheong Wa Dae, the then presidential office. The images of Porong-i, the puma, shot dead and lying still on a truck, and of May, the beagle, famished and rawboned, his genitals grotesquely swollen for the alleged semen collection, went viral on the internet, arousing public sympathy and grief. These incidents were portrayed as tragedies caused by the endless human exploitation of animals and as serious violations against the animals' right to life.

When denouncing cruelty against animals and highlighting the need for rescue, protection, and care, the politics of interspecies pity tends to progressively erase difference and inequality among humans (Moore 2023; Song 2010). It defines the human singularly as “an accomplice and a beneficiary in a society of egalitarian power sharing” (Song 2010, 54), thereby rendering human inequality invisible vis-à-vis the insurmountable profundity of animal suffering (Weiss 2016).⁶

A video titled “Pigs Murdered by Hammer” (“Dwaeji mangchi salhae sageon”), posted online in 2018 by the Korean Animal Welfare Association (Dongmul Jayu Yeondae/KAWA) and Korea Animal Rights Advocates (KARA), the two largest animal advocacy groups in South Korea, exemplifies how the erasure of human inequality and difference works in such contexts. Taken by a secret informant to denounce a local factory farm for animal abuse, the video shows a man, supposedly a farm worker, bludgeoning tens of piglets with a hammer, leaving those still alive struggling in pain. In this gory scene, the man and his acts emerge as the epitome of human violence and cruelty toward animals, as the situation that requires moral rectification. What slips from attention here is who the humans are that tend to work on factory farms: people in the most precarious social positions, often migrant workers. Arousing interspecies pity here deeply depends on ignorance of human difference and inequality, rather reintroducing a moral hierarchy among humans according only to their relationship with animals. One of the YouTube comments on the video, “I am not going to do that kind of work even if they give me one billion won,” is symptomatic of the stigmatization thus generated.⁷

When translated into the mundane world of care, interspecies pity's blindness to human difference reveals its biggest paradox, in which it ends up exploiting difference while refusing to acknowledge it. The rise of animals as the most vulnerable social group and the interspecies pity thriving on that imagery have allowed animal-rights groups such as ARA, to appear and flourish. This milieu also ensured that the larger of these groups, such as KAWA and KARA, managed to solicit more donations than traditional civic groups.⁸ However, I show below that while ARA survived on interspecies pity's humanitarian urge to rescue and care for animals at risk, the moralist tendencies of this politics bound it to the demand for pure, disinterested care that cannot be done without the exploitation of the cheap yet devoted labor of women. While pity does not acknowledge gendered difference, the type of care it mobilizes has a gendering effect. Below, I discuss how the ARA staff routinely face the pressure for pure care and what [Julian Pitt-Rivers \(2011\)](#) has called "grace," which refuses and indeed *stigmatizes* any compensation or returns for the act of (care)giving and inherently leads to a gendered exploitation that runs on the naturalization of animal care as "womanly."

PRESSURE FOR GRACE AND GENDERED EXPLOITATION

"When the CARE [Coexistence of Animal Rights on Earth] thing happened, we had such a hard time for months. All the donations stopped coming in. [People thought] every shelter was the same [as CARE]. That is why we fear such issues," said Yujin. She was commenting on a scandal involving one of South Korea's three largest animal rights groups, CARE, which shocked not only local animal-care circles but the entire country. In January 2019, a group of CARE staff members disclosed that its president, Park So Yeon, had secretly euthanized more than two hundred dogs that the organization had rescued from dog meat farms and other "abusive sites" for the past four years ([Choi 2019](#)).⁹ News story after news story followed, denouncing the moral depravity of Park, a well-known activist whose frequent appearances on animal-themed television shows had left the public impressed with her deep (com)passion for suffering animals. When the follow-up revelations included her misappropriation of donations, public anger and surprise exploded, with the media labeling Park as "Janus-faced."

What happened at CARE inevitably tainted the public image of local animal groups. The news shocked animal lovers, making them question the legitimacy not only of CARE but also of other organizations, including ARA. Recalling one of the biggest crises ARA had ever encountered, Yujin continued, "These kids [dogs] live on that money [from donors] month by month. But [when it happened] running

shelters became too difficult. It took so long to recover, and now the corona virus pandemic has come. At that time, there were lots of people who told us they wanted to switch from money to goods. And there were those who would call me out of nowhere and ask for an explanation. These people would say, ‘What kind of group is yours? How do you people use the money [from donations]?’”

Yujin’s words implied how much dogs’ everyday survival and well-being directly depended on how well ARA managed to maintain its reputation with outsiders, including donors and volunteers. Even the slightest damage to public appearance could become toxic, especially for a group such as ARA, which took care of a large number of dogs (perhaps the largest in the country as Yujin assumed) and relied heavily on monthly donations. Yujin told me a story from a few years ago, when local animal groups gathered to attack dog meat farms. ARA decided to step outside of the collective, after all, in fear of attracting public attention, which was well-received by other groups. Public action and risk-taking could potentially put their dogs in danger. Too much fame was risky as well, as it could trigger unwanted attention. “This is why we don’t want to become as famous as KAWA or KARA,” stressed Yujin.

This situation shows the kind of moral boundedness in which ARA inevitably found itself embedded, and the precarious conditions of its operations. Although interspecies pity, mobilized by the suffering of innocent animals, has generated the ground on which animal groups such as ARA could appear and flourish, its moral tendencies not only to establish a strict human-animal divide but also to define humans either as victimizers or saviors have strongly regulated the parameters of the group’s possible actions. Gifts rooted in interspecies pity were accompanied not only by suspicious regard for the recipients but also by pressure for them to provide pure, unconditional care, that is, possess grace.

To be a gratifier, however, means to be a giver of a free gift; the opposite of the kind of gift [Marcel Mauss \(1966\)](#) elaborated on, one that calls for return. Grace refuses any reciprocity for the act of giving, instead lavishing unaccountable love. The staff of ARA, for example, was expected to work for free or for a minimal reward to show their selflessness and disinterestedness, attributes that would make them deserving donation recipients and morally legitimate caregivers of dogs. In tired voice, Yujin said, “You know, we are so fed up with the situation” of constantly fearing any possible moral scratch. She knew that it would be better to run shelters more systematically by formally employing full-time, paid staff and having those who are competitive (*il jal haneun*) stay on longer. Yet this seemed impossible in face of the constant fear of being misread as profiteering from dogs.

They had to prove that they differed from “dog traders” (*gae jangsu*)—the biggest insult, yet not unheard of when dealing with faultfinding outsiders. As Pitt-Rivers (2011, 426) noted, the matter of maintaining “the purity of the motives of the gratifier” is intimately linked with that of maintaining one’s “moral supremacy.”

Yet when any evidence of material reciprocity suggested the contamination of the purity of own’s actions and love for the animals, what, one might ask, is muted and rendered invisible at the same time? Was it not precisely the fact that love takes labor (Govindrajan 2021), that taking care of hundreds of homeless dogs requires massive human effort and money, something effectively disappeared in face of the need to make ARA appear the morally legitimate caretakers of dogs? I did not ask Yujin this question, but she certainly would have agreed, especially considering the details she has often given me when talking about the intensity of the everyday work at the shelter.

In her discussion of the bovine politics in Himalayan India, Radhika Govindrajan (2021) notes the stark contrast between a discourse of idealized, purity-seeking yet bodily distant love for Gau-Mata (Cow-Mother) among male Hindu nationalists and the practice of embodied love by the rural women responsible for the grueling care labor of livestock. In ARA’s situation, the call for grace and pure care and the everyday care done on the ground were conjoined in a direct relationship of exploitation. As “opposed to calculation,” the search for grace in the moralizing politics of interspecies pity negates the worldliness of money and labor (Pitt-Rivers 2011, 437). Yet when that pity needed someone else’s devoted and often backbreaking labor to achieve its own promise, the negation became the ground of exploitation against (female) labor. Indeed, the mechanism of negation and exploitation in this relationship resembles that of naturalizing women’s reproductive labor in patriarchal capitalism (Dalla Costa 1983; Federici 2012). Women’s reproductive activity is labeled natural, feminine love, rather than labor in need of compensation; at ARA, the labor of interspecies care, predominantly provided by women in their thirties and forties, took the name of “women’s innate affection for dogs.” The face of the innocent gratifier sought by interspecies pity thus became dominantly feminized.

When I pointed out to her that the majority of the shelter staff were women, Yujin said, “Yes, yes, it is somewhat like that. Like *moseongae* [mother love] [that explains why women work at ARA despite many troubles]. [I think it is] something like mother love toward dogs.” The idea that women’s care for dogs in danger of euthanasia emerged from some innate female urge offered an appealing answer to why ARA persisted despite all the hardships. Yet this naturalization disguised the

fact that the reduction of female labor into “non-labor” legitimized the exploitation of cheap, if devoted, labor of women working at the shelter.

The staff at ARA were divided into two groups: The unpaid, managing staff (like Yujin) called *seutaep* practically ran the organization. Their tasks included counseling for adoption, managing the SNS (social networking service) accounts, accounting for donations, maintaining contact with overseas sister organizations, and attending to various ad hoc tasks. The minimum-wage shelter staff, called *jikwon*, fed the dogs, took care of their feces and dirty urine pads, walked and exercised the animals, closely watched individuals, reporting any problems to managing staff, kept the whole shelter clean, and dealt with many other tasks arising from the care of about thirty to seventy dogs at a time. The division of labor between the managing and the shelter staff inherently led to the hierarchy among them, which became important in running ARA shelters efficiently (Jun 2023). A slight class difference also seemed to obtain between the managing staff, who were relatively better off, often running small businesses such as nurseries or private institutes (*hakwon*), and the shelter staff, who tended to be of lower-income, less educated backgrounds and used to work in the service sector or small factories before joining ARA.

Nonetheless, it was somewhat fuzzy to say who was exploiting whom when almost everyone I met was intensely immersed in the work at ARA, receiving either nothing or minimum remuneration. The naturalization of dog care as a woman’s task emerged as a notable tendency not only among the managing staff like Yujin but also among some of the shelter staff, and it often cropped up in conversations about the few men working in shelters. For example, Bora, a passionate part-timer emotionally so attached to the everyday well-being of the dogs that she worked in ARA shelters almost to the same degree as the full-time staff, called some of the young men who had worked there “a little unique in many ways.” They would not consider coming to work in animal shelters where “the work is hard and the pay is small” without being “unique”—suggesting their lack of competitiveness as young men in finding more desirable jobs. “They come thinking that they will do rescue operations but become disappointed when they find out that what they have to do is feed dogs and muck out kennels. . . . You know, we are housewives and *ajumma* [a demeaning word for middle-aged, married women],” she slurred. Her words expressed her deep dissatisfaction toward those men who performed “only about twenty percent,” when she performed “one hundred percent.” At the same time, she appeared to repeat the social devaluation of care work and the naturalization of it as women’s work.

If Bora appeared still relatively indirect in gendering the shelter work, Jeong Youn, another shelter staff member who, I found, had the tendency of having normative conversations on things like what animal care should look like and what responsibilities pet owners should have, did not hesitate to define animal love and care as a “woman thing,” with men’s presence in that context reduced to a largely technical matter. She told me how often she had to control herself from being too involved in the work at the shelter and how she saw it as resulting from “women’s natural tendency for being reckless,” compared to “men who are basically more rational.” This is why *dongpan* (the animal scene) was inherently *yeocho* (predominated by women), she claimed.

The two women feminized dog care differently. If Bora highlighted the fitness of women (especially older women) for socially devalued care work, Jeong Youn saw women’s “inherent nature of being emotional” as the key factor that made them keen to love and care for animals. Either way, the “attributes of femininity” served as “*work functions*” (Federici 2012, 4; emphasis original). As gender difference became a source for them to make sense of their own engagement, they unwittingly legitimized their own exploitation. In other words, their exploitation was also self-exploitation, as they willingly participated in the process of naturalizing the so-called feminine attributes and of negating what they did as labor.

Yet because their exploitation also constituted a form of self-exploitation, I hesitate to say they were simply reproducing the alienated labor of women. Although they were perfectly filling the need for cheap, feminized labor created by the moral politics of interspecies pity, they were far from alienated. Rather, the deeply affective relationships they built with both humans and non-humans at ARA shelters—even though they were the condition of their own (self-)exploitation—very much *satisfied* their own desires. Solely identifying these women as “exploited” therefore does not fully explain the nature of their relationship with and engagement at ARA. Below, I discuss that women’s conscious negation of labor (and even work) requires a reading that does not confine them merely to the familiar trope of exploitation and alienation.

CRAZY WOMEN, OBLIVIOUS DOGS, AND IRREDUCIBLE ENTANGLEMENTS

My first volunteering day at ARA’s main shelter in Soorieup, Yangju, proved a hot, steamy day in July 2020. I was paired with Soo Jeong, a middle-aged woman with long, orange hair, to help clean the house where five to six small dogs lived. When I went inside, I noticed that she was already finishing wiping the floor of

the main room with a strong substance to prevent the odor of the dogs' urine from soaking through. The dogs were playing in the small front yard. She kindly showed me what to do in the other rooms and then left. About two hours later, when I was about to rest, sweating heavily from the intense labor, she came back and said with a smile, "Are you done? Once the dogs come back in, they will mess up the room again, and I will have to do this all over again. I repeat these chores every day."

It had been four months since Soo Jeong had begun working as a full-time shelter staff member at ARA. She said that she "used to do service work before, but had to quit because of corona." Like her, most of the shelter staff I met during my fieldwork at ARA were women who used to work in the service sector or small factories before joining the shelter. In particular, those who started working at ARA during the COVID-19 outbreak came to work because they could not stay in their original workplaces any longer. The urgent need for social distancing eradicated jobs, especially in the person-to-person service sector (*daemyun seobisue oup*) in areas such as "education; food and accommodation; public health; social welfare; and arts, sports, and leisure" which usually have a high demand for women (Shin 2021, 15). The fact that in 2020 this sector had the largest reduction in the rate of employment reveals the kind of existential crisis women of lower educational and income backgrounds in South Korea have faced, especially during the early phase of the pandemic. In the same year, three times more women (283,000) than men (109,000) became jobless compared to the previous year (Chang 2020), a situation caused by the sudden decline in the demand for service and relational labor in the market and the rising demand for women's care and reproductive labor at home.

However, for most of the shelter staff I met at ARA, including those who had lost their jobs during the pandemic, money was not their sole motivation for working there. Instead, as Jeong Youn, who lost her job at a duty-free shop, once told me, it was something "you cannot do if you think just about money." Many of them considered their work a special thing to do while off from "real work." This held especially true for those who used to serve as volunteers before becoming full-time shelter staff. It was what they did to "offer a hand to ARA that is always in need" as Jeong Youn would describe her motivation; or "for the kids [dogs]" as Taeri, another shelter staff in her mid-forties who used to work in a garment factory, once told me. That women do not come to work in a place such as ARA thinking of it as work for a wage was confirmed by Yujin's groan when she addressed the difficulty of finding shelter staff despite rising unemployment during the pandemic: "You know, we thought it would be easier to find people, because everyone said they were fired. [Laughs] Ah, [but] it was really hard to find

someone. So, [we thought] it doesn't matter [that they have a job or not]. People just don't want to do such hard labor!"

Perhaps we could re-read Bora's devaluation of shelter work and her dissatisfaction with the male staff's half-heartedness in doing their job against the backdrop of the above situation. It was work that comes with neither great monetary compensation nor any social honor. In that sense, it stood far from the stereotypical masculine pursuit—and rather what women were used to, willingly or not. If women like Bora and others worked wholeheartedly despite the trivial nature of the work, it was precisely its triviality that made men half-hearted in their tasks. Thus, when she slurred when saying “we are housewives and *ajumma*” to express her discontent with the young men disappointed that they do not do rescue operations, her slurring may indeed have hidden her contempt for men's educated inability to give themselves to socially unrecognized work, as much as it may have been the recitation of the devaluation of care labor and its naturalization as a women's job. “So, there are times when I wonder why they would even work in this kind of place,” said Bora, unable to refrain from simmering doubts by questioning those, especially men, who did not possess the same degree of devotion and passion, as being out of place.

However, it was not only to men in shelters that providing care for rescue dogs could be potentially meaningless. Women constantly faced their own families, who saw them as being too much into the dog business of ARA, which they considered rather useless. From the outset of my fieldwork at ARA, I was struck by the managing staff who would talk about their own disapproving families (especially their husbands), to whom they would even lie that they had stopped working for ARA or keep it secret if they had not. The fact that women's involvement with ARA could be at odds with the interests of their own family was detectable, too, among the shelter staff, but there it manifested differently. When I asked what made them work for ARA, some of the shelter staff mentioned, besides other reasons, the relative freedom they had gained from their maternal duties at home (e.g., “my daughter is now living away in her college dormitory” or “my kids have started going to school”). Thus, if the managing staff were with ARA despite their families, the shelter staff worked there thanks to their absence. Either way, their time at ARA significantly counted *against* their role as mothers and wives, thus adding another layer of meaning to women's involvement at ARA.

On the surface, this situation may mirror the double burden placed on women from lower- to middle-income backgrounds in South Korea who have to attend to the unshrinking demand for their domestic labor amid an ever-escalating

pressure to be productive in the labor market. On closer look, by engaging with supposedly useless activities in potential conflict with their own family, the women at ARA satisfied neither the household economy in its broad sense nor the larger patriarchal structure in which it is embedded. As long as the question of what they gave to capital and what they gave to themselves was a concern in women's engagement at ARA (Federici 2012, Location 196), its contribution to the system was ambivalent at best, while much of it pertained to following their own enchantments and desires. Although their passionate engagements simultaneously meant their potential exploitation under the politics of interspecies pity, their own entanglements at and with ARA were not easily reducible into the cheap labor of the "femitariat" (Moore 2023). Instead, to use Yujin's expression, which mirrored her perception of others' view on them, they were the "crazy women" lavishing their energy and time on a superfluous and expensive activity in the economic rationality. Their everyday work of helping dogs survive and (re-)flourish in more-than-human adoptive kinship constituted a re-productive activity too—yet counterproductive in the market sense.

How do we make sense of the irony of women's inter- and intra-species entanglements vulnerable to the co-optation of the moralizing discourse of interspecies pity, on the one hand, yet resisting their complete translatability into feminine productivity, on the other? When shadowed by the politics of interspecies pity, women's care for dogs at ARA is inevitably "haunted by labor" (Tsing 2015, 78)—as one that is feminized and exploited. The idea of labor clearly helps one recognize a form of gendered injustice and exploitation perpetuated under pity's moralization and naturalization. Even if women themselves do not define their activities as labor or wage work, they still remain haunted by labor, as they are not fully shielded from the broader politics of interspecies pity that brings a group like ARA into existence in the first place, and then translate women's desires and enchantments into "grace" and selfless devotion. However, if we do not shrink the heterogeneous elements arising from women's experiences into the project of interspecies pity and instead recognize the possibility of another form of world-making, how do their activities look from that perspective and what other meanings may be given to them? Here, I show that women's engagement with ARA may contain "uncaptured excesses" (Ticktin 2021, 918) that cannot be consumed by the logic of labor.

Many at ARA arrived at the shelter in mourning about the unanticipated death of animals they had lived with before, thus attending to the unfulfilled love and care for them. Jeong Youn, who lived with her husband and three dogs, had lost her first dog to measles within less than two weeks after her husband bought

it from a pet shop. This incident led her to adopt two dogs from animal shelters, including ARA. That she had such a short time with her first dog left her wanting another dog that she could properly care for. The manager of the duty-free shop she used to work for recommended she adopt a dog from a shelter. She did as advised and adopted another dog from ARA, for which she started volunteering while working at the shop. Likewise, Bora told me about her experience with a baby sparrow she accidentally came across at the factory she used to work at. She brought it to her house and took care of it like a pet. She said, “We would go to work together. It would not fly away and would stay inside my hood all day. I guess it thought of me like its mom.” But, one day she found it crushed to death on her pillow. “When it left like that within a month, the whole house felt like someone’s funeral. Even with a bird, even a wild one, [I couldn’t believe] we could commune.” After this incident, she adopted a stray dog she found near her factory and began volunteering at ARA.



Figure 3 (left). Staff holding a dog in the Gisan-Myun shelter. Photo by EuyRyung Jun.
 Figure 4 (right). Dogs having their exercise time. Photo by EuyRyung Jun.

If the stories of Jeong Youn and Bora show the power of loss as “generative” of new relationships in that “absence is always potential presence” (Parreñas 2018, 109), the new spaces of connectivity are not only cohabited but also significantly co-molded by the nonhuman other. While Yujin used the word *mother love* to describe the inborn nature of women inscribed in their bodies, it was often the dogs

that made the women their “mommy.” For example, when I asked her whether it was not very physically demanding to work at ARA, Joomi, a part-timer in her thirties said, “Yes, it definitely is. But I *cannot bear* to stop working here leaving these kids [dogs] behind” (emphasis mine). When she said this, I almost had a vision of dogs biting her clothes when she was about to leave them behind. I asked this question as she, who had spent the past ten years as a full-time housewife taking care of two young children before coming to ARA, stressed that she did not necessarily have to work as she did not face financial difficulties. With her children going to school now, she could finally secure some free time and was able to complete a certificate in pet beauty with the help of government assistance for the unemployed. When she searched for a place to do related work, part-time work at ARA came her way. Even though she could leave if she wanted, what bound her was nothing but those dogs. There inevitably developed between dogs and shelter staff as their daily caretakers a quasi mother-child relationship. In ARA shelters, which always had difficulty finding new staff members to replace departing ones, dogs made “surprisingly powerful demands” by appearing to want them, and only them, as their mommy (Ngai 2012, 64). Here, the specificity of the situation helped strengthen the mutual kinship between dogs and staff (Govindrajan 2015).

However, while staff members found it difficult to leave shelters, dogs had always to be ready to leave for adoptive homes. Indeed, ARA was run like a dog orphanage, where keeping the constant flow of dog bodies proved most important for securing spaces for new rescues. Thus, farewells proved frequent at the shelters. One morning, I witnessed a moment of separation when Jeong Youn greeted me by saying that there was an emergency. Heungmi, a lovely, mid-sized black-and-white dog, was going to the airport to leave for her new home in a U.S. town. However, she had not been bathed yet, so Hee Jin, one of the managing staff, had urgently been summoned to the shelter to bathe and take Heungmi to the airport. Usually, when a dog is adopted, it must be bathed one day before departure. Jeong Youn was worried that Heungmi might catch a cold on her long journey to the United States. The dog also needed to fast before getting on the plane, which meant that Sanggu, a big eater who shared the same kennel, needed to fast too. I said, “Sanggu will be lonely after his roommate Heungmi leaves.” Responding to my naïveté with a little laughter, Jeong Youn said, “Still, he will forget about her in a few days. These kids forget easily. Even mothers and babies forget about each other within a few months.”

Separation and forgetting form a normal part of everyday life at shelters. Thus, Jeong Youn’s reply seemed to clarify how well not only staff members but

also dogs dealt with the situation. Yet separation did not mean alienation and loss but the continuity and even consummation of kinship. For all their motherly care for dogs, staff members reserved terms such as “mommy and daddy” for their future adoptive human parents by calling themselves *emo* (auntie) or *samchon* (uncle).¹⁰ Shelters functioned like prep schools for interspecies kinship, where dogs’ human aunties or (to a much lesser degree) uncles make them into lovable and thus adoptable kids.

Joomi said she seldom used SNS but opened an Instagram account to follow adoptive families: “I get so proud [*ppudeut haeyo*] and teary when I see them go and have fun. (Laughs) Really. Truly. And, when I see those kids that are still stuck here, I try hard to take photos of them [to go online for adoption], wishing them to find good homes, you know? I wish they could all go somewhere and this place would disappear. We talk about it every day.” While dogs leaving for their own good made Joomi and others proud aunties, the presence of those still in shelters inevitably saddened them. At ARA, staff referred to the dogs that had stayed at the shelter for years and did not seem to have a good chance for adoption due to either age or illness as *mugeunji*. In its ordinary usage, *mugeunji* refers to mature *kimchi*, loved for its deeply fermented flavor. However, at ARA, the term highlighted the misfortune of some dogs and their state of being forgotten in the adoption scene.

Overall, this situation shows that dogs at ARA should be the forgetting ones, not the other way around, and that the interspecies kinship thus arising preaches disowning over owning.¹¹ The kind of relationality embedded in Joomi’s pride in seeing dogs go and have fun not only refuses but also exceeds the familiar doubling of separation and alienation, let alone that of labor and exploitation. Indeed, ARA embodies a form of care that focuses on reworking “relational arrangements” (Ticktin 2021, 918) and on commoning kinship, whereas the care that the politics of interspecies pity demands focuses on policing the moral purity of the caregiver, thus reproducing exclusion and inequality. In so doing, interspecies entanglements at ARA are not only not exhausted by the moralizing discourse of interspecies pity but also generate a possibility—however fleeting and seemingly trivial—to re-imagine a kinship of care that operates based on mutual needs rather than “moral deservingness” (Ticktin 2021, 919). In other words, although the structural hierarchy within which the two forms of care are embedded may seize women as shadow workers, from within the very shadow emerge new possibilities of care and sociality with the other-than-human.

BACKBREAKING YET ENCHANTED LABOR

In the late summer of 2022, I returned to an ARA shelter located in Gisan-Myun, Yangju. However, Taeri and Jeong Youn, the two shelter staff members who played an enormous role in helping set it up in 2020, no longer worked there. Taeri, who left me with the impression of a “quiet but avid worker,” suffered arthritis pain in her fingers and legs after a year of working at ARA and had waited for someone to replace her for long. Jeong Youn, who told me she would leave as soon as the work of setup was done when I first met her two years earlier, had extended her stay, and finally quit when summer 2022 came. She could not leave sooner because the entire duty-free industry she wished to go back to had collapsed under the ongoing pandemic and then again because it took long for ARA to find someone to replace her. As Yujin told me, working at ARA for a longer period was rare. Sooner or later, whether for women’s own physical or mental conditions or other factors, their full-time engagements eventually ended.

In this essay, I sought to understand the meaning of women’s backbreaking yet enchanted labor: first, in the context of broader politics of interspecies pity that appropriate it for its moralist search and, then, in women’s own affective entanglements with both humans and non-humans in shelters. Interspecies relation was important in both but featured very differently.¹² Politics of interspecies pity did not allow any reciprocity between humans and animals, and instead re-introduced a strict species hierarchy by fixing their roles into the savior and the saved. In the end, the politics of pity is drawn by the divide between the fortunate and the unfortunate than by matters of equality and justice (Boltanski 1999). In the latter, however, interspecies reciprocity played a major role in gluing women to shelters and made them grind their souls amidst their own sweat, reeking dog dung, occasional bites and injuries, and slowly surfacing pains. It was in women’s labor that two forms of relations and more than human world-making intersected with one another, making it once gendered exploitation and another irreducible entanglement.

On a broader level, this situation suggests the importance of not only considering the co-constitutiveness between social inequalities and interspecies relations but also seeing the possibility of new terrains that are simultaneously open (Davis 2016; Kim 2015; Kosek 2006). It is also in this context of “deep entanglements” that the notion of work and (re-)productivity should be rethought beyond the money economy of capitalism that operates on the exclusion and exploitation of what is called Nature, whether it be human or non-human (Besky and Blanchette 2018; Moore 2023). The labor of interspecies care that ARA embodies hints a

possibility of being (re-)productive otherwise by enabling “those ‘who were never meant to survive’ to” not only “do just that” (Hartman 2016, 171), but also weave and be woven into new relations.

ABSTRACT

This essay shows how the labor of interspecies care at Animal Rescue in Action (ARA), an animal shelter in South Korea, invites two divergent interpretations. On the one hand, this labor embodies gendered exploitation by being vulnerable to the co-optation of the moralizing politics of “interspecies pity.” On the other hand, it becomes a site for intra- and inter-species entanglements, that are irreducible to the logic of exploitation. The activities of ARA become not only sustainable but also bound by the politics of interspecies pity, which translates the labor of care into selfless affection and grace, thus reproducing gendered exploitation. At the same time, however, everyday entanglements in ARA shelters still create affective excesses that are not entirely subsumed by the politics of pity and generate new forms of care and sociality. Overall, I suggest seeing not only the co-constitutiveness of social inequalities and interspecies relations but also the possibility of new, simultaneously open terrains. [interspecies pity; care; grace; gendered exploitation; reproductive labor; South Korea]

초록

이 글은 한국의 동물 단체 ARA에서 수행되는 중간 돌봄 노동이 두 개의 상이한 해석을 요청하는 상황에 주목한다. 이 노동은 한편으로는 “중간 연민”의 정치에 취약해질 수 밖에 없는 상황에서 젠더화된 착취를 체현하나, 다른 한편으로는 착취의 논리로만 환원될 수 없는 얽힘의 장소가 된다. ARA의 활동은 중간 연민의 정치에 의해 지속가능해질 뿐 아니라 동시에 구속되며, 그 속에서 그들의 돌봄 노동은 이타적 애정과 ‘순수 선물’로 번역되고 그 결과 젠더화된 착취가 재생산된다. 하지만, ARA쉼터에서 이루어지는 일상의 얽힘들은 연민의 정치 안에 완전히 포섭되지 않을 뿐 아니라 새로운 유형의 돌봄과 사회성을 구성하는 정동적 과잉을 창출한다. 이 글에서 나는 사회적 불평등과 중간 관계의 상호구성됨, 더 나아가 그 속에서 새롭게 열리는 가능성의 지형들에 주목할 것을 제안한다. [중간 연민; 돌봄; 순수 선물; 젠더화된 착취; 재생산 노동; 한국]

NOTES

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1. The names Animal Rescue in Action, Yangju, and of people in this essay are pseudonyms.
2. The relative unpopularity as companion dogs for adoption in South Korea of mixed-breed, large-sized dogs locally called “Jindo mixes” makes it necessary for them to find adoptive homes overseas, mainly in Canada and the United States.
3. I use the phrase “politics of interspecies pity” to highlight similarities to the politics of pity (Boltanski 1999). “Interspecies pity” does not mean to suggest bi-directional pity between humans and animals, but pity involving another species as the pitied object.
4. For some exceptions to this tendency, see Chua et al. 2021; Govindrajan 2021; and Parreñas 2012, 2016, 2018.
5. In a growing number of places in South Korea, cats (especially feral ones) fall under the Trap-Neuter-Return (TNR) program and thus find themselves in a different situation than dogs.
6. This erasure of human difference may inevitably be in tune with the hegemonic stress on individual (human) agency and empowerment and the downplay of structural inequality in neoliberal sociality. The rise of the animal as socially most vulnerable has interestingly coincided with the emergence of the neoliberal political economy in South Korea.
7. Accessed August 23, 2023. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=86SSuW0h3qs>
8. For example, in 2022, KAWA and KARA together drew almost six times the donations given to People’s Solidarity for Participatory Democracy (Chamyeo Yeondae), one of the largest civil society organizations.
9. Since eating dog meat remains legal in South Korea, as of 2021, the country has about eight hundred small-to-large dog meat farms—a number quickly halved since 2017 (Han 2021). The passing of a bill in January 2024, however, means that dog meat consumption will become illegal beginning in 2027.
10. In the everyday social life of South Korea, extending kinship terms to even a complete stranger is not unusual. Given the cultural context, referring to the caretakers of dogs aunts and uncles appears not only apt but also a way of anthropomorphizing dogs.
11. The idea of disowning, however, should not be confused with that of “unmaking animal property” (Abrell 2016, 28): ARA rescues dogs to prevent them from being killed, not to free them from human ownership. Disowning here has more to do with removing dogs from the kinship relations they had developed with staff and making them ready for new kinship adventures.
12. Here, *interspecies relation* refers not only to affective, social, and material dimensions but also symbolic, cultural, and discursive ones. In that sense, the politics of interspecies pity may be said both to define and promote a form of interspecies relation.

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