



Cross-Cultural Studies

Special Issue, 2025.

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겨울

2025

Winter

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경희대학교 비교문화연구소

비교문화연구 CCS

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ISSN 1598-0685(Print)
ISSN 2671-9088(Online)

비교문화연구

Cross-Cultural Studies

2025 특별호

경희대학교 글로벌인문학술원
경희대학교 비교문화연구소

SPECIAL ISSUE (Winter, 2025)

Judith Butler and South Korea

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[Introduction]

Butler in South Korea

Alex Taek-Gwang Lee

(Kyung Hee University)

Haeook Jeong

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On the night of 3 December 2024, South Korea's democratic life briefly revealed its most brittle seam. Then-President Yoon Suk Yeol declared emergency martial law, a move widely characterised by analysts as an attempted "self-coup," a bid to preserve executive power by suspending the ordinary procedures of democratic contestation. The decree collapsed within hours under legislative defiance and mass civic mobilisation, but the event did not simply "pass." It reorganised the political imagination of the present: it forced a confrontation with how easily the language of national security and the choreography of emergency can be used to hollow out democratic institutions from within.

Judith Butler happened to be in Korea at precisely this conjuncture. That coincidence is more than anecdotal, not because it grants philosophy a prophetic aura, but because it condenses the problem that Butler's work has long named: democracy is not a settled constitutional arrangement but a precarious practice, to say, embodied, conflictual, and always vulnerable to being undone by the very powers that claim to protect it. Butler's visit was tied to a lecture on democracy and the

humanities, delivered the next day, 4 December 2024, and subsequently circulated in edited form, insisting on the humanities as a site where democratic life is rehearsed: through critique, imaginative recomposition, and the cultivation of shared worlds. That the visit unfolded amid the sudden reappearance of martial law, i.e., an old technology of Korean authoritarianism, made visible how quickly democracy can be converted back into a security state, and how swiftly citizens must therefore become, again, the guardians of democratic procedure and its meaning.

If this special issue begins from that convergence, it is not to treat Butler's presence as a symbolic ornament to a national crisis. It is to propose a set of questions about time, memory, and unfinished political modernity in South Korea: Why did a martial-law decree become thinkable again, and why could it be staged as a "necessary" act in the name of saving the nation? What forms of affect, such as fear, resentment, grievance, and humiliation, were mobilised to make emergency rule appear as a plausible remedy for parliamentary conflict? And what does it mean that the democratic counter-force was not only institutional, the legislature, but corporeal, a rapid convergence of bodies, infrastructures, media devices, and improvised solidarities in the streets?

A year later, the calendar has turned past 3 December 2025, and the crisis has entered the juridical chronotope of investigation, indictment, and trial. Yoon was removed from office by the Constitutional Court in April 2025, and criminal proceedings over the martial-law episode have continued, with verdicts still pending into January 2026. The courtroom is now the most visible theatre in which responsibility is assigned, and narratives are stabilised. Yet the courtroom is also a narrowing lens. It risks presenting the self-coup as an exceptional deviation, in other words, an aberration attributable to particular actors, rather than as a

symptom of deeper, longer histories: of anti-communist constitutionalism, of the continuing availability of "emergency" as a political instrument, of the periodic reactivation of militarised sovereignty, and of the unresolved social antagonisms that democratic procedures have managed but never metabolised.

This special issue argues that the deeper cause of the self-coup cannot be found only in the opportunism of individuals or the volatility of partisan struggle. It lies, more structurally, in a crisis of political mourning and political transmission: the unsettled fate of the radical democratic energies of the 1980s, and their ambiguous afterlives. The decade of student uprisings, labour militancy, and minjung politics sought to re-ground democracy in lived practices rather than formal guarantees, through solidarities forged in workplaces, churches, neighbourhoods, and streets. But their defeat was not only the result of repression. It was also the result of a specific kind of neutralisation: the absorption of radical energies into technocratic liberalism; the conversion of popular sovereignty into managerial governance; the displacement of emancipatory desire into depoliticised nationalism; and the fragmentation of collective projects into moralised identities or private aspirations. The "failure" at stake here is thus not the failure of courage or commitment; it is the failure of radical energies to become durable institutions, durable cultures of critique, and durable forms of egalitarian life.

In this sense, the self-coup of 2024 should be read as an eruption from a blocked historical sequence. The 1980s promised a democratic rupture with authoritarian developmentalism and Cold War anti-communism. Yet the post-1987 democratic settlement in the South did not abolish the deep grammar of the security state; it re-coded it. Under conditions of geopolitical division and permanent militarisation, democratic institutions

could flourish while still harbouring the dormant possibility of emergency suspension. The self-coup activated that dormancy. Its discourse, invoking “anti-state forces,” “subversion,” and existential threat, shows how easily the state can reclaim the power to define the enemy and how quickly political opposition can be re-described as treason rather than as adversarial.

Butler’s work matters here because it provides neither a simple defence of liberal democracy nor a romanticisation of insurgency. It insists, instead, on democracy as a fragile relation, a set of obligations produced by interdependency, vulnerability, and cohabitation. In Butler’s account, the public sphere is never merely a legal space; it is made by bodies assembling, persisting, and demanding livable conditions in common. Democracy is therefore not secured once and for all by constitutional form; it must be repeatedly enacted as a practice of appearing together, often under conditions of threat, precarity, and police management. This framing is acutely Korean, not only because Korea has repeatedly seen public assembly become the decisive counterpower to executive overreach, but also because the memory of authoritarianism is carried as embodied historical knowledge: a sense, transmitted across generations, of what martial law does to streets, institutions, and speech.

At the same time, Butler’s 2024 lecture foregrounded another dimension that the self-coup rendered unmistakable: the tight linkage between anti-democratic politics and the assault on critical education, on the humanities, and on the very capacity to imagine alternative futures. In many contemporary contexts, the attack on universities is not an incidental culture war; it is part of the infrastructure of authoritarian desire. The erosion of democratic life proceeds not only through coercion but through the cultivation of phantasms, narratives that convert social

complexity into scapegoats and promise moral clarity through exclusion. Butler has argued, in adjacent contexts, that anti-gender mobilisations function precisely this way: they produce “gender” as a threatening fantasy object, enabling coalitions between nationalist resentment, religious moralism, and authoritarian statecraft. Korea’s recent crisis has made that triangulation newly legible, as far-right Protestant networks and anti-feminist rhetoric have appeared as essential forces in the public sphere around the martial-law crisis.

For this reason, the special issue proposes to read Butler *in Korea* and *Korea through Butler*, not as an exercise in theoretical application, but as a method of re-describing a conjuncture. “Vulnerability” here is not a sentimental category; it names the condition of social interdependency that authoritarian politics seeks to deny or exploit. “Assembly” is not a celebratory image of protest; it is the material practice by which democratic claims become visible and by which state violence is tested, resisted, or reconfigured. “Precarity” is not merely economic insecurity; it is the unequal distribution of livability, who is protected by the state and who is exposed to its indifference or its force. And “mourning” is not private grief; it is a public labour of acknowledging whose lives count, whose losses are recognised, and which histories can be narrated without censorship or ideological distortion.

The guiding wager is that Korea’s 2024–25 crisis cannot be understood without addressing this missing labour of mourning and critique. The unresolved fate of the 1980s is not simply a historiographical problem; it is an active political force. When radical projects are defeated without being adequately mourned, their energies do not vanish; they return in displaced forms: as cynicism, as resentment, as the longing for sovereign decision, or as a depoliticised nationalism that promises unity by erasing

antagonism. The self-coup can be read as one such return: an attempt to short-circuit political conflict by converting it into a state of exception. Conversely, the mass refusal of the decree, by legislators, by citizens, by those who converged in the middle of the night, suggests another possibility: that democratic memory, too, returns, not as nostalgia but as embodied competence, a practical knowledge of how to block authoritarian choreography in real time.

Accordingly, this special issue invites contributions that move across several interconnected registers. What Butler's presence in Seoul made palpable, perhaps despite itself, was that the "crisis" did not begin on 3 December 2024. It was already there as a long deformation of democracy: a chronic vulnerability produced by unresolved histories, securitised political forms, and the periodic reanimation of authoritarian techniques. The coincidence, then, becomes a method. To place Butler's vocabulary next to Korea's self-coup is to name what is otherwise normalised: that democracy is not a possession but a practice; that it depends on embodied solidarities; and that without the hard labour of mourning defeated emancipatory projects, without learning how and why they were neutralised or turned against themselves, the same forces will reappear, demanding emergency, purity, and sovereign decision as answers to political life. This special issue begins from that recognition, and from the urgency it implies: the task is not only to interpret the self-coup and its aftermath, but to clarify the conditions under which democracy can be made durable, not by eliminating vulnerability, but by organising it as the basis of equality, cohabitation, and collective protection.

The essays gathered here begin from an equally decisive premise: that the present crisis is also a *scene of invention*. It has generated new vocabularies, new collectivities, and new practices of democratic life

that do not simply "respond" to the attempted suspension of democracy, but actively recompose the meaning of democracy under conditions of precarity, polarisation, and resurgent authoritarian desire. In that sense, this special issue does not treat Butler as an external lens applied to Korea; it reads Butler *with* Korea, in the way that conjunctures compel theory to become accountable, forced to name what is taking place, to recognise what is newly thinkable, and to register those moments when political life produces its own concepts.

Tae-won Jin's "We Are Each Other's Witnesses: Democracy of Testimony After the 3 December Self-Coup" sets the tone by refusing the familiar genre of protest analysis that measures demonstrations only by their immediate demands and outcomes. Focusing on the mass mobilisation at Namtaeryeong Pass, Jin argues that what unfolded there exceeded a mere impeachment rally. Namtaeryeong becomes, in his reading, a dense democratic scene in which groups that had long fought in relative isolation, such as farmers, workers, women, sexual minorities, migrants, and disabled people, among others, were compelled into a shared space of appearance where they did not simply *present* their grievances but began to *witness* the wounds and struggles of others. The key shift is ethical and political at once: participants come to take responsibility not only for articulating their own injury but also for speaking with and for those whose suffering has historically been disqualified from public intelligibility. Jin names this emerging practice a "democracy of testimony": a form of mutual recognition grounded not in abstract consensus, but in the affective labour of listening, attestation, and the forging of ties across heterogeneous conditions of precarity.

Jin's conceptual move is inseparable from Butler's insistence that public assembly is not a mere aggregation of pre-existing identities but a

performative act of embodied co-presence, an appearance of interdependent bodies whose gathering becomes evidence of the conditions under which they can (or cannot) live. Jin shows how this Butlerian thesis is rendered concrete in the South Korean protests of 2024, where precarity is not only displayed as injury but rearticulated as the basis for reciprocity: a democratic “we” assembled not by sameness, but by the shared risk of exposure and by the commitment to make one another’s lives speakable. Just as crucially, Jin expands the field of testimony beyond the immediate moment of protest by tracing how Korea’s democratisation has repeatedly returned to sites of state violence that long remained at the edge of recognisable history, Gwangju, Jeju 4.3, Yeosu-Suncheon, Brothers Home, and No Gun Ri, asking how inevitable deaths became publicly nameable. In contrast, others remained structurally “ungrievable.” In doing so, Jin draws on Butler’s account of frames of recognisability to argue that democratic struggle is, at its core, a battle over those frames: over the very conditions under which suffering can become an event, a loss, and a demand. His essay thereby offers one of the special issue’s central propositions: that testimony is not a moral supplement to politics but a democratic practice that continually redraws the boundaries of who can belong to the political “we.”

Where Jin foregrounds testimony and assembly, Chang-Ah Yang’s “Post-Fascism and the Crisis of Critical Thinking” brings the broader political ecology into view by situating Korea’s recent far-right mobilisations—both the self-coup and the subsequent pro-martial-law, anti-impeachment rallies—within a global conjuncture of post-fascism intertwined with neoliberalism. Rather than treating the far right as an eruption of irrationality or a merely local pathology, Yang insists that it has a structure: a mode of politics in which neoliberal competition

intensifies insecurity and resentment, and those affects are then displaced onto gendered, sexual, racial, ethnic, and cultural “others.” In this frame, the familiar populist division between “pure people” and “corrupt elites” is not simply rhetorical; it becomes an apparatus for distributing rights and restricting social membership—particularly through welfare chauvinism and the gradual erosion of universal citizenship.

Yang’s argument is distinctive in the way it refuses a comfortable separation between “extremists” and “moderates.” Post-fascism, on this account, does not only arrive from outside the mainstream; it is metabolised by it. Mainstream parties’ adoption of neoliberal notions of fairness and competition—where inequality is moralised as deserved—creates a receptive infrastructure for the claim that minorities are receiving “special treatment” or “reverse discrimination.” Here, Yang’s engagement with Butler (in dialogue with Arendt) yields a sharp redefinition of critical thinking: not as a neutral cognitive skill, but as an ethical-political practice grounded in plurality, cohabitation, and interdependency. Critical thinking becomes the labour of interrogating the frames through which “normal citizens” and “threatening genders” are produced, and of refusing the fantasies of homogeneity that make violence appear as protection. Yang thus anchors one of the special issue’s most urgent stakes: that the defence of democracy today depends on reconstructing critique as an embodied, relational practice, a form of thinking that is inseparable from how we live with others.

Dohyung Kim’s “Butler for and against Levinas” reopens a different debate that has often been staged too narrowly: the question of whether Butler’s turn to ethics, particularly her engagements with Levinas and Arendt, signals a retreat from political critique. Taking Levinas’s warning about being “duped by morality” as a point of departure, Kim argues

that Butler's ethical work neither replaces politics nor floats above it; rather, ethics appears as the *stakes* of political encounters, especially when those encounters are saturated by violence, dispossession, and differential recognisability. In this reading, Butler's appropriation of Levinas belongs to a sustained critique of the Enlightenment ideal of the atomistic subject. The ethical relation is not an optional add-on to a sovereign "I," but the condition under which subjectivity becomes thinkable at all.

Kim's most illuminating move is to show how Butler works with Levinas "against Levinas," shifting responsibility away from a singularised moral drama—*my* responsibility for *my* other—towards a collective, political horizon: responsibility for "our others," grounded in shared precariousness and mutual substitutability. That reorientation allows Kim to bring into focus Butler's crucial distinction between universal precariousness and politically induced precarity, and to show how Butler's social ontology of the body becomes a platform for resisting violence under neoliberal conditions. By linking the Levinasian "face" to Butler's frames of recognisability, for example, visibility, media representation, and the differential allocation of whose lives count, Kim clarifies why Butler's ethics is, in fact, a political philosophy of nonviolence: nonviolence as an openness to interdependent vulnerability, and violence as the attempt to restore sovereign unity through domination. The essay thereby provides a conceptual hinge for the issue as a whole, demonstrating how Butler's "ethical turn" is best understood as a radicalisation of political critique under contemporary conditions.

Dae-Joong Kim's "Queer Bodies, Material Ethics, and Democratic Becoming-with in Times of Precarity" extends these questions into a material and more-than-human register, beginning explicitly from the

Korean democratic crisis, such as martial law, impeachment turmoil, Namtaeryeong, and rethinking Butler's concepts in dialogue with posthumanism and new materialist ontologies. The paper's method is exemplary for what it asks of theory: it does not simply "apply" Butler, but stages scenes where Butler's concepts are made to encounter their own limits and potentialities. By analysing concrete political episodes, Kim shows how assembly is not the gathering of a pre-formed people but a queer assemblage of bodies and materials that sustains life under conditions of injury. Democracy here becomes a process of "becoming-with": a weaving of interdependent bodies, matter, care, and affect that precedes institutional recognition while also pressing on it.

Kim's reading of Jeanette Winterson's *The Stone Gods* then opens a speculative dimension: queer love and care across human/robot boundaries; solidarities among those rendered "unlivable" under necropolitical conditions; and the extension of grievability and vulnerability into more-than-human imaginaries. This is not escapist futurism. It is a wager that Butler's recent critique of anti-gender discourse and her ethics of nonviolence can be reconceived through posthuman and materialist lenses, thereby offering a different account of critique itself, as a performative experiment in making new norms livable. The essay thus expands the special issue's horizon: democracy after Butler is not only a problem of institutions and rights, but of material conditions, infrastructures, and the distribution of care across human and non-human worlds.

Finally, Soonbae Kim's "Stitching the Self: Judith Butler, Digital Identity, and Shelley Jackson's *Patchwork Girl*" relocates Butler's ethics into the domain of digital subjectivity, challenging the prevailing tendency to treat hypertext and online identity primarily through metaphors of fragmentation and decentralisation. Drawing on *Giving an Account of*

Oneself, Kim reframes digital subjectivity as an ethical scene of address: a condition in which the subject is compelled to speak in borrowed languages, within inherited norms and codes, always partially opaque to itself, yet responsible to the other who calls it to account. In a striking turn, the essay treats the reader's interactive engagement—clicks, navigational choices, returns, detours—not as an expression of sovereign agency but as a practice of procedural ethics. The digital “self” becomes stitched from fragments that are never wholly one's own, and the hypertext interface becomes a seam-exposing apparatus that makes visible Butler's key claim: subjectivity is relational, dependent, and constituted through the demand to give an account that can never be complete. This contribution thereby adds a crucial contemporary dimension to the issue's concerns: how democratic and ethical subjectivation is reshaped by the infrastructures of digital mediation, where platforms and interfaces increasingly format recognisability, visibility, and narrative accountability.

Taken together, these essays propose that democracy after Butler is neither a settled form nor a purely normative ideal. It is a contested practice that unfolds across assemblies and testimonies, across the seductions of post-fascist resentment and the labour of critique, across ethical exposure and collective responsibility, across material infrastructures of care and digital scenes of address, across necropolitical regimes of derealisation and the stubborn insistence that certain lives must become publicly grievable. If the 3 December self-coup has revealed how quickly the choreography of emergency can suspend democracy, the contributions in this special issue insist with equal force that democracy persists—and must be reinvented—through practices that make interdependency speakable, that redraw the frames of recognisability, and that widen the political “we” without requiring unity as sameness.

In this sense, the question animating the issue is not only what Butler can offer to Korea, but what Korea's present conjuncture compels Butlerian thought to become: more concrete, more accountable, and more attuned to the fragile, embodied labour by which democratic life continues to be made.

[Keynote Essay]

Democracy and the Future of the Humanities*

Judith Butler

(University of California, Berkeley)

“Thinking thought usually amounts to withdrawing into a dimensionless place in which the idea of thought alone persists. But thought in reality spaces itself out into the world. It informs the imaginary of peoples, their varied poetics, which it then transforms, meaning, in them its risk is realized.”

Edouard Glissant, *The Poetics of Relation*

Many young people tell me that they fear there is no future, or that they do not know how to think of it. They think of the future not as the rolling out of progress, but as a void. or they see the destruction of the earth, the open-ended wars, and the intensifying gap between rich and poor as conditions that will only worsen with time. Often, they rightly worry about the future of the earth, the destructive effects of fossil fuels, and wonder how many forms of life will be jeopardized or disappear. Or they see that work is more often available as short-term contracts, and that wages cannot cover the costs of living. They, and we, see open-ended wars, conflicts that are murderous that have the

* This article was presented on December 4 2024, as part of the *Transformatio Futura* lecture series, organised by the Centre for Cross-Cultural Studies at Kyung Hee University.

potential to spread rapidly through different regions of the world.

When they ask about the future, they are also asking: what can be imagined? If we say there is no future, or that the future moves in the direction of ever more destruction, then we are, in fact, imagining something: it is a dark picture, one that shows no signs of hope. And yet, if we are imagining something dark, we are still imagining. And it may be that our powers of imagination hold the hope we find missing in the more pessimistic accounts of the world. When we say, for instance, that we are imagining the end of the world, or the end of the world as we have known it, we are imagining the end to imagination itself. Something difficult, or impossible for the imagination to do. For it is one thing to imagine an ongoing destructive process and quite another to feel one's own power to imagine draw to a halt, potentially destroyed by the destructive processes one sees. However, if we are still imagining all this, then our imagination is taking form in some way, developing a picture, moving laterally through a sequence of associations, forming a cluster of images, narrating a story about how history may unfold, or what landscapes now lay before us. If we have an image or story to communicate, we find a form or discover that the image or story is already taking form and that the story took shape in one of the languages we speak. We are not predicting the future at such moments, since it is the unknowable dimension of the future that has us concerned. And so, we find that in our fear about the future are a series of imaginings, and what we imagine is framed and formed in ways that support one kind of interpretation of what will happen over another. The frame and the form are central to the fear we feel and to the imagining we do. All this happens not only inside the mind, but in the modes through which fearing and imagining take place: specific sensuous

modes of presentation, specific media serve not only as vehicles for thought, but as formative powers in themselves. The media brings something to the object it represents, whether the language of story, the lost sounds of natural history or the future of democracy. Thus, the fundamental questions of the humanities concerning what and how we express a point of view or create a vision of the world is already at work when we ask about the future and try to fathom its possible forms. This is why, in my remarks today, will be arguing that the most compelling and urgent existential questions require the the arts and the humanities.

Imagining the future is part of what it means to live life now, and we cannot easily inhabit the present without a sense that the future is possible, and that it will preserve what we value most. In addition, I would suggest that without a way to imagine the future, there can be no democracy. Democracy is that form of rule that is by and for the people. It is the people who come together and decide how best to live with one another, who make the laws under which they agree to live, and who seek, through debate, to produce an abiding understanding of what it means to live together? There are, as you know, various freedoms exercised under conditions of democratic self-rule. People are free to assemble and to move, to express their views, and to affiliate with political groups. But the people are not, as it were, this or that political group or a specific organization or party. The people have various affiliations, and they assemble in different places and for different purposes, espousing conflicting viewpoints, seeking to gain support for their vision of the world. Who are the people? They are invariably diverse, and under some political conditions, that diversity is denied. Forms of subjugation and exclusion are developed to narrow the scope

and multiplicity of the people. For instance, under conditions in which citizenship is unequally distributed, suspended, or foreclosed, then not all people are considered to be “the people,” since not all people can exercise those freedoms that are supposed to be equally shared. Some people fall outside the law, especially if they are not citizens or their rights of citizenship have been suspended at the border or in prison.

But are the people in some sense also prior to the laws by which they governed, and in what sense? The people who come together to found a state, or the people who come together to ask for legal access to the state, are both, in some sense, before the law. After all, if the people then make the law, the people precede the law. They are lawless at the moment that they make the law for the first time. Democracy is the rule of the people, but only some people are making the laws, or debating what the laws should be. And yet, democracy is not rule of some of the people, and it certainly is not rule of some of the people over other people. Democracy requires that all the people participate equally in the collective democratic right of self-determination, which means that a democracy worthy of its name will refuse to abandon some people to a condition of non-participation where democratic processes are barred or rendered impossible. The exercise of collective freedom remains legitimate if, and only if, it is shared equally.

The people are not fully defined by the laws they make, since they can change or repeal the law. That is also a democratic precept. People assemble to make new rights, but when they do that for the first time, they have no legal right to assemble but only a collective practice of freedom that brings a new form of governance into being. This is the account offered by the philosopher, Hannah Arendt. In these moments of founding, people assemble to find a way to assert and safeguard that

right. Their power is their freedom, the freedom to make a new organization of the world, and that freedom should be embodied in the laws they collectively make. Not note: that founding freedom is not at first governed by law. It must make itself into law in order then to become a freedom governed by law. And if the people repeal a law, or overthrow a regime because their freedom is no longer embodied by the law, the people are then released from that law, throwing off its shackles. What I have been describing is an an-archic act of founding that posits law as well as the means by which law can be reproduced and preserved.

Perhaps it sounds like I am speaking of an ideal time, or that I am imagining without time and space? This founding moment of law, one upon which both Walter Benjamin and Jacques Derrida reflected, is not easy to imagine. It is an experiment in time and space, not an historical period that anyone can actually embody. It is a hypothetical scene, an imaginary positing, sometimes cast as a state of nature. For those of us living within societies governed by existing law who want to understand, and judge, whether or not the states in which we live are legitimate, we have to ask about the conditions of their very institution, the process of coming into being, whether the law still embodies the will of the people or ever did. To do that, we have to imagine outside and before existing law, and that seems very difficult. For those of who grew up, and were formed, inside a system of laws, our very way of looking at the world, of imagining the world, is very much informed and structured by those laws. To imagine outside the laws in which we were formed demands a certain de-constitution of who we are, a way of thinking outside, or against, the laws by which we were formed, which means thinking against our own formation. This is a critical perspective, to be sure, in

the sense that critique asks after the conditions by which laws and legal institutions are constituted and seeks not to take them for granted as inevitable. But it is also an act of imagination which transports us outside the law, or before the law, to ask about its legitimacy.

How do we ask about a time prior to our own formation that lets us think about questions such as legitimation. For John Rawls, for instance, the counter-factual is essential to political life. In democratic deliberations, we have to consider what society might have been like had it been founded and formed differently. But there is another way that imagining works in democratic deliberations. The decisions we must make about the future of the world, and the planet, involve giving some form to that imagined future. Thus, imagining a possible future, or a different one, is essential to democratic deliberations. Some of the key questions for democratic self-determination include: what world do we wish to bring about? What future do we collectively wish to see realized in the world? For those tasks, both of which are indispensable to democratic deliberation and self-determination, there has to be a collective imagining, a way of sharing fears and dreams as part of the political process, a future-orientation for which prediction and calculation do not suffice. In this way, both the existential requirements and the political conditions of democracy require posing questions that engage the imagination: what kind of future is left? what kind of future can we still imagine?

Some have argued that imagining, or the aesthetic domain more broadly, is insufficient for such a task, that it is apolitical, or that it is not the same as action. What we need, these critics argue, is action. And of course, yes: we do need action, plans, and new policies. There is no question there. But can we separate such actions from the imaginary? And how does the imaginary relate to the kinds of anti-democratic

passions that we need to defeat, and to awaken those very different passions that might fuel a more egalitarian counter-imaginary for our time? An imaginary is not just my imagination or yours, but a way of structuring the imagination in the service of political ideals.

In fact, political action, I am suggesting, is not fully separable from the imaginary. In particular, an oppositional stance, however negative in form, also implies an imaginary we may or may not fully be aware of. Indeed, imagining as unconscious and conscious elements, and sometimes are imaginings are closer to reveries and to dreams. And as Drucilla Cornell has taught us, we are also imagined all the time, working within and against the ways that other have imagined us. Only as being already imagined do we start our own imagining. But my point here is relatively simple: when, for instance, we say no to the violence at the border, or the war against Ukraine, or the genocidal actions in Palestine, or the horrific situation in Sudan, we object because we believe that injustice is being committed and that something valuable is being destroyed in our world. We think, for instance, that it is wrong for human life and other forms of life to be destroyed in this way and for such purposes. In our objection and opposition, our “nay-saying,” a form of imagining is already in play. We are saying, perhaps without saying, ‘we want to live in a world in which such wars are not happening, such destructive powers are not normalized, where economic and ecological catastrophe can be reversed and repaired.’ There is then, operative in our objection, a desire to live in a different kind of world, one, for instance, in which border and military violence is not happening. In saying no, in tarrying long with the negative, we are already embarking on a form of imagining. We may not fully notice it, but we are at such moments insisting on a different version of the world. In our protest, we stand

for a different kind of world. We may not say to ourselves, “this is the world I imagine” and we may not be aware that we are imagining much less ask what form that imagining should take. Within democratic deliberation, we ask the question directly: what kind of world do we want together to bring into being? But our pre-judicial reveries and imaginings are already at work, and they constitute the reserve from which our explicit political desires are crafted.

There are good reasons to ask these kinds of questions now. For those who live in fear after the election of Donald Trump, it appears that the American people have by a clear majority voted against democracy. But since they have voted, they engaged in an electoral process that is part of democracy, indispensable to its operation. To decide their future, the people must come together to vote, which is an exercise of freedom and judgment, and they must agree to live by the results collectively achieved. And yet, if democracy is to have meaning, and if it seeks to remain legitimate, then the people must safeguard the equal rights of all the people and their equal freedoms. The constitutional forms that safeguard democracy can be dismantled through the will of the people. The people can decide that only some of them should count as the people, and others should be deported. That, too, can be decided by electoral means, especially if constitutional and international rights are suspended. The people can, in other words, exercise their popular will or collective freedom to elect someone who has promised to destroy the balance of powers, to initiate mass deportation and to undo constitutional protections for women and trans people, for migrants, and for the voting rights of Black people. The people have agreed to augment presidential power at the expense of their own rights, and as rights-stripping becomes an ever more accepted political norm, the

people can, in exercising their democratic rights, seek to diminish or eliminate the rights of already precarious or endangered communities.

So, democratic means were honored – there was an election. And yet, democracy is not reducible to its parliamentary form and yet those who seek to undo electoral institutions are clearly seeking to undo democracy: this is the paradox – not the contradiction – with which we are not confronted. The electoral college in the United States, for instance, has always been a defense against the powers of democracy, even as it is, in the US, one of its parliamentary instruments. It was founded on the belief that the people do not have the education or capacity to judge what is right for themselves, and that a select group of electors should be invested with the power to decide what the true or best will of the people should be. The electoral college is an example of an anti-democratic parliamentary institution charged with the task of undoing democracy in the name of its defense and through its instruments. It is an institution that fears and devalues the will of the people. As indispensable as parliamentary procedures are to democracy, they are not enough to secure its future. And this question of the future is lingering here, as the problem before us, the one that will, I hope, illuminate the essential relation between democracy and the humanities. For if we are asking what relation democracy has to the future of the humanities, we should be prepared to find that there is no democracy without the future, and no humanities without an imagination that includes imagining the future and its possible forms.

As I mentioned earlier, when political philosophy refers to the founding of a new polity, it paints a picture of a group of people freely assembling to decide upon the form of government and the rules by which they will collectively live. But this imagining is not exactly an

historical scene. It is a fiction meant to underscore the primacy of free forms of gathering, the distinct operation of freedom prior to, and apart from, laws. It also lays the groundwork for dissent and even revolution. In telling the story in the way we do, we are asked *to imagine* such a scene. That imagining lifts us out of the received network of laws within which we live and, for some of us, within which were formed as political subjects. This thought experiment is at once fictive and critical, for without being able to take leave of the space and time in which we live, we cannot ask about the legitimacy of the laws that have become naturalized or normalized within our time. The beginning of democracy requires a transport into a necessary fiction. Here again, we see how democracy, and the question of legitimacy, relies upon a kind of imagining. And if we are to imagine otherwise, that is, think of new ways in which polities might form that would more fully realize the ideals of democracy, we require the imagination. Transformation, dissent, and revolution are impossible without collective imagining.

The act of founding a new state, I suggested, involved people gathering to make new law, and yet the gathering and the making are not at that moment regulated or controlled by law. As Walter Benjamin has argued, the act of founding a new polity, the act by which law is first instituted, is outside the law, even as it is the foundation of what we call democracy. Does democracy, by its very definition, precede all its parliamentary forms? Is it operating before and outside any of its elections, even as elections are, to be sure, essential to democracy? Democracy, I would suggest, occurs in fugitive (Wolin) and wild forms that are not captured by the vote, and are certainly not represented by those who, through becoming elected, seek to strip the rights of those who assemble and speak for justice, for those who deserve to apply for

residency or citizenship, for those who are working at a wage that leaves them without housing, with unpayable debt, subject to economic forms of terrorism administered by banks and states. Under conditions in which democracy is imperiled by democratic elections, several questions emerge: what bonds of solidarity can we now make that keep a vision of democratic life alive? what practices of radical care and support can we provide for those most severely disenfranchised by an election? But perhaps most importantly, what new imagining can we offer that would have the power to defeat a vision of the world based on racial and ethnic hatred, on attacks on gender and sexual minorities, one that proposes capitalist accumulation and the decimation of social services as a dystopic version of the public good, the continuation of war and the destruction of the earth.

It is, of course, a kind of extraordinary proportion when the will of the people proves to be against the will of all the people, when some people insist on exercising forms of power that deprive others of any access to political belonging and self-determination. The people can turn against the people, and they can do this through democratic means. But that is no reason to turn against democracy. It is, however, a reason to renew a sense of democracy in new, more expansive, and more compelling terms. And for that we need a new imaginary built from the potentials immanent to the everyday practices of solidarity, including, in the US, the encampments and the protests, the struggle for the unhoused, against prisons, against the violence at the border, and against genocide and the complicit powers that aid and abet its indefinite continuation.

Let us consider that anti-democratic political movements are often characterized during our times as engaged in stripping rights from vulnerable groups and plotting or enacting forms of eliminationist politics.

Such conduct, which belongs more readily to fascist movements against democratic freedoms and rights, engages in nationalist campaigns against migrants and ethnic minorities, foments resentment against religious minorities, engages in propaganda about the dangers of “gender”, the equal rights of women, and parental rights of gay people, and the rights to health care on the part of trans and gender nonconforming people. In other words, those who belong to communities most clearly exposed to violence and exploitation are named as the cause of instability of the world. And under fascist conditions, these people, issues, movements, kinds of research, are figured as variously threatening the fundamentals of society. Gender is said to be a force with the power to destroy the family, the church, and the very distinction between men and women. Critical Race Theory is said to be a threatening ideology that will indoctrinate those who seek to read the books in, or related to, that field of study. Migrants are said to threaten the jobs of those who belong to ethnic, religious, or racial majorities, not just taking their jobs, but their daughters, and their presumptive place of supremacy in the social order. In many of these cases, “phantasms” are constructed that fault academic disciplines or fields of publishing for destroying the future of social institutions that many find valuable. And in some cases, “gender” itself is characterized as a demonic force, as an indoctrinating ideology, as a fatal virus, or a nuclear bomb. The hyperbolic status of these descriptions tells us that very basic fears are operating in the construction of these phantasms. Ironically, the critics of gender claim that it adheres to a theory of social construction, and that this is a problem, since it implies the denial of material realities. But the anti-gender movement engages in a wild and irresponsible “construction” of gender, making it into a “phantasm” that collects fears and anxieties, transforming them into

hatred and eliminationist politics. What is needed in the face of such phantasms, ones that include hyperbolic and derogatory depictions of migrants and minorities, is both a patient and considered analysis of what gender studies and gender policy are, that is, what are their aims, and how those aims comport with ideals of democratic life, including freedom, equality, and justice. Indeed, without a patient and considered analysis of issues that have become flashpoints within social and mainstream media, the public has no way to criticize, doubt, and refute the propaganda about gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, and migrants passes itself off as the truth.

For instance, the reason to oppose gender violence is that no one should have to live in the world fearing violence from intimates, from institutions, from the state, since violence not only constitutes the deprivation of dignity, but of freedom as well. If we accept that all people should live with dignity free of the fear of violence, then we would agree to opposing gender-based violence as well as racist violence or violence against minorities. If we think that every person should be able to secure conditions for their flourishing, and if living in a specific gender supports that flourishing, why would we not accept that gender freedom is essential to human flourishing, and that equal treatment further realizes democratic ideals?

The attacks that rely on phantasms of replacement and potential destruction draw upon fears that people already have about the future. As I have made clear, we have many reasons to fear for the future: climate change, forcible displacement, war, increasingly precarious work conditions, the widening gap between the rich and poor. But if instead of naming those as the reasons we are right to fear for the future, we decide to attribute the force of destruction to women, gender and sexual

minorities, racial, ethnic, and migrant groups, then we have not only concealed those more fundamental reasons, but we have scapegoated minorities, strengthening the political forces that would further strip them of their rights, their legal status, and their claims to equality, freedom and a life without the fear of violence. But to understand how all this works, we must support forms of high education that support open critical inquiry, evidence, good argumentation, and historically informed analysis.

Thus, in these days, we have every reason to be concerned about attacks on higher education, on intellectual life and open inquiry, a value shared by academic freedom and democratic life. And when higher education is faulted for its elitism, or when it is defunded by neoliberal regimes, people become increasingly susceptible to the fascist and authoritarian claims that it is the most vulnerable people in the world who are most dangerous. Once that proposition is accepted, then plans to curtail that danger emerge: strip them of their rights, eliminate them from society, sequester them through psychiatric means or imprisonment.

I suggested above that people do require certain conditions for their flourishing. Infrastructures of life condition the very possibility of persisting in life. And when those infrastructures fail, we too tend to fall, to fall apart, or to discover that we have no self-sufficiency without the social and ecological conditions that support our lives. We may well ask, what allows people to persist during times of war, under conditions of occupation, or when the social field presents a constant threat of violation or violence against one's own body?

There is, at least in English, a grammatical expectation that "persistence" is what a subject does, a human subject. But surely animals endeavor

to persist. And is the persistence of living creatures not also dependent upon those conditions required to continue to live and even thrive in this world and on this earth? Although persistence characterizes what a human subject does – someone persists, she persists! – that doing is not always constrained by the subject form. Further, persistence in life is less a goal than a precondition of achieving any goal, often assumed to be the unspoken force driving both survival and action. But sometimes persistence itself is an achievement especially when forces exist to thwart that possibility. Persistence seems to imply a field of obstruction, something to get through or over, a block or barrier to dismantle. It only tenuously attaches to selves and subjects in their singularity. Persistence, however, is not the same as self-preservation conceived as a stubborn drive residing in each individual as their own proper life force. I find myself asking: What version of the self is presupposed by self-preservation? Who can claim self-preservation in a court of law, and whose claim is more regularly dismissed? Whose self is considered worth preserving, and whose has been considered dispensable? If the police can kill in the name of *their* self-preservation or self-defense, what does that say about the kind of self they are assumed to have, and the living selves they are entitled to destroy? And if any number of marginalized people do not have access to that same legal rationale, does it really follow that they do not have a self that is entitled to preserve itself? If the right to one's own life and dignity is a precept of democracy, then does it not follow that everyone should be the kind of self who can lay claim to life and dignity?

I would suggest that persistence names a power beyond singular selfhood, a collaborative and collective power to lay claim to life, to equality, to a future horizon; it asserts the value of a life precisely when

the conditions for self-preservation (the social condition in which lives are differentially valued) are frail or absent. But, also, persistence may involve moving beyond some of the categories that are most familiar to us.

To persist as a living creature requires opposing those powers that would undermine or eradicate the living character of one's life. We talk about this life, one's own life, but to the extent that this life is living, it is already an interdependent life, not as singular as it may think. There is then, with the thought of persistence, a call to rethink the singular life, but there is also a link between persistence and *resistance*. To live, to desire to live, to live in the mode of desire, to live without fear of being nullified, requires on economic and ecological networks that resituate our singularity within the interdependent relations that exist among the living.

Persistence is shadowed by the possibility of not persisting, the end of persistence, the vanquishing of life force and of life itself. We live, we live intensely, with the awareness that we will not always live, and that none of us has complete control over the place and time of our vanishing. We love, we love intensely, not knowing what the time of life will be for those we love. If we know our lives can be lost, we have a sense of our precarity, but also of the conditions required for life to be reproduced and regenerated. Those conditions include the infrastructures of life, health care and food distribution among them. And this is one reason why the historians of genocide, Raphael Lemkin among them, identify the destruction of infrastructures of life as a genocidal act, one that takes aim at the foundations or conditions of life itself. What is, then, the opposite of genocide? It would be the creation of a form of political life that secures and regenerates the very

infrastructural conditions of life that allow for greater freedom, equality for embodied beings who seek to persist and live without fear of violence or being vanquished.

I began today by referring to the way that the imagination matters for having a sense of future, and suggested that without ways of imagining, there can be no sense of future life and no meaningful sense of democracy. Living in a world in which some people are publicly grieved, and others vanish from view without a trace, we can see that unequal grievability is a component part of social inequality.

The arguments we make in favor of social and economic equality among humans are not sufficient to establish the interdependency of living processes without which climate change cannot be understood or stopped. What shift in perspective is required to consider the living world itself as grievable? If the human can no longer serve as the center for such a task, how is interdependency to be thought, and in what manner is it actually lived? Further, what changes in our temporal understanding of life and finitude are required, such that this body, before any death, can understand itself as living an unmarked life. Antigone objected to the prohibition that would keep her from burying her brother, for his life was to be honored and acknowledged. But for the life very much alive but living without honor, dignity, and acknowledgment, the situation is at once proleptic, grasped through the future anterior, and very much present not as a death in life, but rather as a distinct sense of living an unacknowledged life heading toward an unmarked death.

Thus, the condition of being grievable or ungrievable, or unevenly grievable across contexts, does not always seek recourse to a future perspective that will look back on the life that has been lived. For, to

repeat, grievability is an attribute of a life as it is lived, or a modality of life. We can ask the question of grievability of every life not just to ascertain how others regard that life, but in what way institutions and infrastructures regard that life. Grievability, understood as unequally distributed, differentiates those considered more alive from those considered nearly dead, or already so, even though all of them are living in some way. As such, the question of who is grievable pertains not only to those already lost, but to those who are living a sense of being “already and irreversibly lost” in everyday life. Conversely, those who know that everything will be done medically and socially to keep one alive, protected from accidents, free from zones of war, experience a greater sense that their lives are grievable, that is valued by others, and that a web of social and economic relations exist to secure for them the sustaining infrastructures of life. If to live without a sense of being able to live further or to persist, the temporal horizon of life collapses, and the present moment does not necessarily portend the next. This life can be lost, and the world is arranged in such a way that this life can be lost. We need only think about the residents of Gaza who write about the expectation that they will die, and then actually do die. They leave a testimony for a world by which they were abandoned. They assert their grievability at the same time that they know they are not, in the eyes of those bombing them, regarded as potentially grievable beings. Or maybe, the Israeli air forces that bomb them know full well that whoever survives in their own communities will grieve them, and they seek to plunge those communities into a grief unbearable enough that that they will never rise up against occupying forces again. I do not know all that they think. But history would suggest that the destruction of life at such a scale only strengthens the resolve of those who survive

to resist oppression.

Why is grief important for our common life, even for our ideas of democracy? I am not sure we can understand social and economic inequality well if we cannot take into account whose lives matter and whose do not. To establish a principle that all lives are, or should be, equally grievable, is to say that all lives are, or should be, equally valuable. Without that latter claim, there can be no substantive understanding of equality. Further, when we take into account the loss of lives, including animal lives, that take place through war or through climate catastrophes, we can be led to ask, for what are we living? The question, what are we living for is bound up with the question of how we, whether as a global or local community, want to organize our shared life, our interdependency, and our relations to living processes similarly threatened by war, the ravages of capitalism, and climate destruction. And once we ask this question, we are already taken up by a radical form of imagining that would establish the grievability of all those who have lost their lives without a memorial, those who have become a mere demographic item in a report that rarely sees the light of day. So how might we now in the face of so much preventable loss insist upon the equal value of lives where that value in every instance is immeasurable, where that value cannot be understood outside its relations to others? Can we move the institutional imagination past calculation and self-interest to insist upon the immeasurable and interdependent value of life and of those principles such as equality that belong to us as social and living creatures in the world?

We who work in language, for whom language gives us a world, know that it matters when we say, “this is or was a life” (as Primo Levi said) in the context of a set of social powers that deny the living

character of some lives way before those lives are actually taken. “These are lives” “This is a life” – none of these assertions create a life, but they do seek emphatically to secure its status and value as living. The “indexical” matters; life depends upon that indexicality, someone or something pointing out a living being, the senses funneled in the direction of a life whose existence is predicated; the pronouns matter, for they mark our social existence and legibility. The name matters for both the living and the dead. Such operations of language are both part of mourning and part of protest, crucial for rethinking who counts – who can count – as ‘the people’. In Palestine, the ever-present phrase can be seen and heard on literature and in life: “we exist!” – an emphatic existential declaration. Mahmoud Darwish, the great poet writes: “Standing here, staying here, permanent here, eternal here, and we have one goal, one, one: to be.”

When we refer to “this” life, even this very human life that took a plane to meet with you today, the “this” never, strictly speaking, belongs to me – the indexical wanders off, could be used by anyone, and is. It marks the existence of others as easily as it marks my own. At the very moment in which even the lyrical “I” seeks to establish its indisputable singularity, it is also someone else’s singularity, so this first-person pronoun disperses into an anonymous sociality. Who and what speaks when this “I” speaks? Claudia Rankine asks the question in this most interesting way: “If I am present in a subject position what responsibility do I have to the content, to the truth value, of the words themselves? Is ‘I’ even me or am ‘I’ a gear-shift to get from one sentence to the next? Should I say we? Is the voice not various if I take responsibility for it? What does my subject mean to me?”

So, language matters, graphic and musical forms matter, performance

also registers life, committing it to the registry of the living and so already reverberating with lives both proximate and distanced: even in solitude we are more accompanied than we know, perhaps more supported and overwhelmed by a litany of voices whose origin we can neither fully know nor enumerate. And this indexical, even as it perpetually misses its mark, marking more than was intended, never naming only one, eluding every property claim, connects our lives beyond market value and exchange, both anonymously and indispensably. You are already in the language by which I point to myself: I am already in your hands and taken in by your breath, you whose names I do not know, who share the air and the surfaces of the world, requiring shelter and food that carries with it the labor of so many whose names are never known, but without whose anonymous labor, we could not persist as the living creatures that we are.

Of course, we are all trying, when we can, to find agency, connection, and creative powers under conditions of duress, even as those conditions are not the same for all of us. In finding the capacity to act, to make, and to connect, we draw upon powers that come from elsewhere, from a world in which we are hopefully nourished and supported enough to write and act. And that is why, as we think about what it means for the humanities to persist, for our students to carry on with their studies, or for any of us to persist in and beyond this pandemic, we are always asking about the institutional and social conditions under which persistence becomes – or fails to become – a possibility. Persisting in the academy is less the prerogative of individuals who demonstrate spectacular will than the direct consequence of conditions of work that allow for flourishing: a livable wage for staff, adjuncts, and graduate student teachers; decent and equitable fellowships at the graduate level;

the forgiveness of debt for all those students who have taken loans to study and to secure a degree; new forms of graduate training that affirm the wide range of positions open to PhDs in the humanities, even if that means that humanities professors have to retrain themselves to help guide students along those pathways. Those who are working in adjunct positions without health care are living proof that our institutions are not yet humane. They are also the ones most imperiled as principles of academic freedom are being eroded, and it becomes increasingly the case that people do lose their positions because of political viewpoints they express outside the classroom. As democratic rights are being suspended or destroyed, so too are principles of academic freedom when the extra-mural utterances of faculty are no longer protected from retaliatory action by their universities and state powers.

To live now is generally to live with the expectation that living will continue, that a series of “nows” will follow, such that anticipation is built into the now: this is a futural disposition. The future anterior, the perspective that will have looked back upon our lives presupposes another life looking back on us, narrating our lives in our absence in a time that no longer counts us among the living. That future anterior is imagined from within the present, but it constitutes a second way that future time informs the present moment. “This will happen” is replaced by “this will have happened.” Will someone say, “this was a life” in the future? Will someone have said, “this is a life”, in some indefinite future? This is not the classical question, is this a life worth living, but a variation: *will this have been a life deemed worth living?* It is in the voice of an other that the value of this life will, or will not, be determined, if the determination happens at all. But that is not the only way that the grievability of a person can be understood. We each live

with a sense of whether we are living a life that would be missed or mourned were it to be lost. And those who feel that they have been degraded as a living being may well live with a living sense of their own ungrievability. Grievability might be thought of as a criterion for understanding the value of a life, as I have suggested. But that value cannot be determined without considering whether that living being has had access to conditions that support or further living itself – legal status, health care, shelter, to name but a few. But if someone lives in the world as ungrievable, that person is alive, but living with a sense that one’s life is not considered by others, or by society more generally, to be fully living, or living in a valuable way. This is not about imagining a future in which this life will be regarded, but the present sense of the value of one’s life; “ungrievability” is thus the lived sense of a devalued and dispensable life – an experience of the living of the devalued sense of its own life. When, for instance, exposed to violence and hunger by virtue of state policy, or denied health care by virtue of the organization of health care along increasingly privatized arrangements, one becomes aware that what we might tentatively call “the world” considers the loss of one’s life to be no loss.

Some would say that what is needed is to humanize the de-humanized. And that seems partially true, but not enough to address the problem at hand. That is surely one way to put it, but if human living depends on a wide range of nonhuman life forms, or living processes, then humanism will not suddenly solve the problem at hand. If we object to some humans being treated as less than human, then we accept that human lives are valuable in a way that animal lives are not. But if we object to the kind of loss that is affecting all life forms and life processes, then we human life must be rethought in relation to those

other forms of living. In other words, we can object to some humans being treated not as humans, but if our response to that manifest inequality is to consolidate human life at the expense of all other living beings, then we have reproduced the kind of anthropocentrism that severs human life from its relations with nonhuman life. And if that connection is lost, then we have to way to grasp, to grieve, and to resist the effects of climate destruction which effects not just the human form of life, but the soil, the air, the other species, and the geological and ecological dimensions of this world.

The arguments we make in favor of social and economic equality among humans are not sufficient to establish the interdependency of living processes without which climate change cannot be understood or stopped. What shift in perspective is required to consider the living world itself as grievable? If the human can no longer serve as the center for such a task, how is interdependency to be thought, and in what manner is it lived? And can this question about how best to organize our life together be separated from the question of the future of life itself? I think not. But here again we see how the value of the humanities interlocks with the basic questions we pose about the form of our shared life, the question that inaugurates and invigorates democracy as we know it. In these times when war, climate catastrophe, the rise of authoritarianism, and the decimation of social goods by capitalist regimes, exposes our frailty and interdependency as living creatures, we need what powers we have to shape community and to expand practices of care and solidarity beyond the strictly domestic and national spheres. These questions require patience and imagination, which are two signal virtues of the humanities. And that form of study requires critique, but also an exploration of what kind of world we can affirm for life to

persist in its frail, persistent, and interdependent forms. we can no longer look away from the quotidian ways that white supremacy, militarized nationalism, gender discrimination and violence, exploitation and abandonment are reproduced across social institutions, including universities. It is time to ask how we can rebuild and renew in the face of institutional histories of error we can no longer afford to deny? Where and how do we move out into public worlds without the power to physically gather to recraft its newer form, to press open the potentials of transformation, to repair and regenerate the earth, to affirm the ideals of justice outside the carceral framework, opposing violence and discrimination against women, trans, and queer people, rebuilding as well our infrastructures so that those physically challenged are full participants, and to think equality beyond the boxes that are checked and tallied. Diversity and inclusion are indispensable, but they will never quite name our utopia. We are search of those names.

For those of us who work in the humanities it has never been more important to learn how to show how important the humanities are for understanding the world in which we live, for making sound judgments, interpreting words and deeds, the promises of leaders, for imagining ways to live together that manifest the very ideals of equality, freedom, and justice we wish to make manifest in the world?

Public and private institutions would do well to help us now think through the fundamental questions of persistence and loss, of living on, in keeping company with those who have passed, to help us understand what connects and divides humans across communities and environments, languages, and regions, and what role collaborative and critical imagination has during times in which crisis and futurity are clearly the issues. We teach language and translation, literary form and technique, but what if

we are, as we do this, also developing together a poetics for the living, a technique for persisting, that does not deny the loss, the history of violence, and the recurrent error, but moves through and with all of them to establish a more truthful transformation, one that moves us to move others toward that goal.

So often in a literature class, we open a novel or start to read a poem, and the first question is: *where are we?* Or *who is speaking?* In other words, we begin with a disorientation that allows us to reimagine a world anew. We interrogate and leave the space-time of that fictional world only to return with that other world illuminating our own. The poetics of life, the techniques for living, that emerge from our collaborating worlds, give us the value of language and life in their vital intersection, as something that happens in relations, what Glissant called “a poetics of relation.” The poetics of relation for our time, a time ripped up and divided against itself, is not only to make the value of the humanities known to a wider public, but to answer the call emerging from so many publics for a collaborative imagining. For we can hear those questions as a public cry and demand: where are we? Who is speaking? Who longs to know that they exist, who cries in a language the rest of us have yet to learn?

We Are Each Other's Witnesses: Democracy of Testimony After the December 3 Self-Coup*

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❖ ABSTRACT

In this article, I conceptualize the solidarity protests of marginalized groups—such as those at Namtaeryung following the December 3 self-coup—as a form of “democracy of testimony,” guided by the philosophical insights of Judith Butler. The significance of the Namtaeryung Daechup (“great victory”) lies in the fact that marginalized individuals, who had previously fought in isolation within their respective domains, came together in mutual solidarity. I refer to this as a “solidarity of mutual testimony,” wherein each participant becomes a witness to the struggles of others. This form of solidarity exemplifies the anarchist characteristics theorized by Jacques Rancière and Catherine Malabou. It also signals that the current impeachment crisis must not remain at the level of the 2017 impeachment but should instead advance toward a deeper realization of democracy—one driven by such acts of collective resistance. However, I argue that a Derridean aporia exists between this mutual testimony and democracy itself. Paradoxically, solidarity that resists the state may end up legitimizing the state's oligarchic power. Therefore, the critical task for a democracy of testimony is to engage in an impossible dialectic grounded in the aporetic tension between democracy outside the state and democratization within it.

* This work was supported by the Ministry of Education of the Republic of Korea and the National Research Foundation of Korea(NRF-2021S1A5C2A02087347)

Keywords : December 3 self-coup, solidarity of mutual testimony, Nantaeryung Daechup (great victory), Judith Butler, aporia, anarchism, Jacques Derrida, Catherine Malabou

I. Introduction:

The Antinomy of Testimony and Democracy

The December 3 self-coup attempt led by Yoon Suk-yeol last year was provisionally brought to an end through three legal procedures. The first was the passage of the presidential impeachment motion by the National Assembly on December 14. The second was the Constitutional Court's ruling on April 4 this year, which upheld the impeachment. The third was the presidential election held on June 3, in which candidate Lee Jae-myung was elected as the 21st president. Once judicial punishment is carried out through future investigations and trials of the insurrectionist forces, the legal processing of the insurrection will be finalized. However, few would believe that this alone could fully conclude the first self-coup to occur in 45 years. This is because far-right politics continues to operate powerfully even after the impeachment and the establishment of a new government.

Against the backdrop of this historic event, I wish to offer a few reflections on the theme of testimony. In my view, testimony is one of the most timely and incisive concepts through which to think about the current political situation triggered by the December 3 self-coup. Some may question what relevance testimony has to a self-coup. But I argue that the concept of testimony—its theoretical implications and political

stakes—can illuminate the dilemmas we now face, the dangers we must avoid, the risks we must dare to take, and the ways in which we might reinvent democracy, constitutionalism, and the rule of law in the face of the persistent threat of far-right politics. Does not the concept of testimony possess precisely this kind of critical potential?

Rather than beginning with a lengthy preamble, I would like to present the core arguments of this paper in the form of three propositions:

- First, testimony is impossible without democracy or democratization.
- Second, conversely, democracy or democratization is impossible without testimony.
- Third, and most crucially, the relationship between testimony and democracy is one of antinomy. It is only by passing through this antinomic relation that we can redefine—and thereby reinvent—democracy.

Is it even possible for these propositions to hold? Do they have any validity—or at the very least, a measure of persuasiveness? More fundamentally, is the propositional form itself suitable for elucidating the relationship between testimony and democracy? On these questions, I remain uncertain. Yet, for some reason, from the moment I was first invited to participate in the conference until the presentation itself, and even now as I write this paper, I have been intensely possessed by the theme of the intimate connection between testimony and democracy—and thus, however paradoxical it may sound, the theme of the antinomic relationship between them. I only hope that this ghost (or these ghosts) possessing me will guide me faithfully to the end.

II. The First and Second Propositions: The Asymmetry Between Testimony and Democracy

Demonstrating the truth of the first proposition—that testimony is impossible without democracy or democratization—does not seem particularly difficult. It is empirically self-evident. Without the democratization of 1987, the “Gwangju Incident” could not have become the “Gwangju Uprising,” let alone the “Gwangju Democratization Movement.” Likewise, the “Jeju Riot” could not have been rearticulated as the “Jeju 4.3 Event” or the “Jeju 4.3 Uprising.” The “Yeosun Rebellion” would not have become the “10.19 Yeosun Event,” and the atrocities committed at institutions like the Brothers Home or the Seongam Reformatory might never have come to light. Even the “Nogunri Massacre” might not have been recognized as an event at all. This is not unique to Korea. In Africa, Latin America, and the post-socialist states of Eastern Europe, it was only after democratization processes began that investigations and testimonies regarding various forms of state violence under the previous regimes became possible (Hayner, 2001).

Thus, the first proposition—that testimony is impossible without democracy—can be said to have both validity and persuasive force. However, the second proposition is likely to provoke skepticism. Even if testimony becomes possible only after democracy or democratization—if we accept that democracy, with its essential elements such as freedom of speech, conscience, assembly, and association, inherently enables testimony—can we truly say that testimony itself possesses the power to enable democracy? Does testimony contain an intrinsic capacity to bring about democracy or democratization? Just as democracy

makes testimony possible, and just as testimony cannot exist without democracy, can we also say—symmetrically and inversely—that democracy cannot exist without testimony? That testimony makes democracy possible?

The second proposition, in fact, appears to posit a certain symmetry between democracy and testimony. And many may question whether testimony is truly significant enough to occupy a position symmetrical to democracy—or more precisely, whether it is appropriate to situate testimony within such a symmetrical relationship, even if its importance is acknowledged. Would it not be more fitting to associate testimony with state violence, social violence, or the Holocaust? Or with structural discrimination against women, sexual minorities, migrant workers, or persons with disabilities? These issues are certainly related to democracy in some way, but they cannot be fully subsumed under it. Rather, they point to something beyond—or perhaps prior to—democracy: the question of human dignity, the problem of radical evil, and the denunciation of racism, nationalism, sexism, and ableism. If we were to place these issues—ones that arguably constitute the very essence of testimony—within a symmetrical framework with democracy, we risk flattening or erasing their specificity.

We might go even further. While testimony is fundamentally connected to the issues listed above, can we truly say that they constitute its core? Perhaps the essence of testimony lies elsewhere: in the problem of memory, and in the relationship between memory and linguistic communication—whether in narrative form, courtroom testimony, or simple speech. This includes what Jean-François Lyotard called the “phrase-affect” (Lyotard, 2000).¹ Whether it is speech composed of “non-sentences,” or utterances that defy conventional syntax, testimony

ultimately concerns the relationship between memory and language, between memory and speech. To position testimony within a symmetrical relation to democracy may risk confining memory within legal or administrative frameworks—an outcome that would be deeply troubling.²⁾

I find myself partially in agreement with these critiques, yet I also hold a somewhat different perspective. I agree insofar as the issue of testimony cannot be resolved within a symmetrical relationship with democracy, nor can it be reduced to such a framework. Testimony is both beyond and prior to democracy. Therefore, if testimony is to be understood as relating to democracy, that relationship is better described as asymmetrical rather than symmetrical.

At the same time, it is precisely because of this asymmetry that I believe testimony is necessarily and inextricably linked to the question of democracy—and must be. The asymmetry of testimony constitutes its essential force, its generative capacity to make democracy or democratization possible. In this sense, it forms the foundation of the second proposition: that democracy is impossible without testimony.

Testimony's asymmetrical relation to democracy—its excess and its deficiency—points not only to the limits of democracy as we know it and as we practice it, but also to a democracy that exceeds those limits. This may be a democracy to come (Jacques Derrida), a savage democracy (Claude Lefort, Miguel Abensour), or, as I will discuss further below,

1) Lyotard's major work *Le Différend* (Lyotard, 1984) is arguably one of the most important philosophical texts on testimony. For a compelling study on this point, see Cho 2022.

2) A compelling reflection on this point can be found in Song 2022. Song's work offers a nuanced examination of how legal frameworks engage with historical state violence, and it raises critical questions about the limits and possibilities of testimony within juridical and institutional contexts.

a democracy as anarchism (Jacques Rancière, Catherine Malabou, Étienne Balibar). Testimony, in this regard, gestures toward and anticipates the potentiality of a democracy that is not yet realized.

Let me offer an example. Earlier, I argued that without democracy, the “Gwangju Incident” could not have become the “Gwangju Uprising” or the “Gwangju Democratization Movement.” But if we reverse the perspective, it becomes equally clear that the democratization movements of 1987 and beyond would not have been possible without the testimonies from Gwangju in May 1980. Without the witnesses who risked their lives to speak of Gwangju, democracy itself might not have emerged. If not for the final words of martyr Yun Sangwon—“Even if we die by their bullets, that is the path to eternal life”—and if not for “those young and younger ones” who gave their lives at the Jeonnam Provincial Office, saying, “Someone must survive to testify to this precious history”(Gwangju Jeonnam Women's Association, 2012:112), then the Gwangju we know today might never have existed as such. Nor would Gwangju have served as a driving force for Korean democracy.

III. The Ambivalence of Testimony

The testimony of May 18 (5.18) appears to persist even after democratization. Moreover, post-democratization 5.18 and its testimonies sometimes serve as catalysts for new democratic practices, while paradoxically functioning as regulatory principles that constrain or diminish democracy. It is as if the testimony of 5.18 resists being subsumed under democracy—as if it exceeds and precedes the democracy we know, practice, and inhabit. The testimony of 5.18 seems

to have departed from the memories and voices of its martyrs and participants, taking on a life of its own—one that is marked by contradiction and antinomy.

A striking example of this is the tension between 5.18 and queer activism. Olton Kim has recently explored this issue in a compelling article. According to his account, when the first Queer Culture Festival was held in Gwangju in 2018, the Gwangju Christian Council opposed the event, claiming that it “exhibited and sold sexually promiscuous items and engaged in behavior that undermines public morals, thereby provoking numerous legal and ethical controversies among citizens” (Kim, 2023:298). Furthermore, Junhee Kim, Secretary-General of the same organization, criticized the festival by stating: “The May 18 Democracy Plaza is a sacred site where Gwangju citizens shed blood for democratization. Holding an event there that lacks broad public consensus is inappropriate” (299). Furthermore, one of the parties directly involved in the May 18 Democratic Uprising—the Emergency Committee of the Association of May 18 Detainees and Injured—also participated in the criticism, asserting that “the Queer Festival, scheduled to be held at the heart of the sacred ground of democracy, the May 18 Square, is a depraved cultural event committed before the tears of the May spirits have even dried” (288). This reflects the operation of a binary equation: “May Uprising = Sacred vs. Queer Culture Festival = Degenerate” (299~300). In contrast, the Queer Culture Festival Organizing Committee emphasized that May in Gwangju is “the resting place of the May spirits who shed blood and fell for a world where everyone lives together in equality—a world of great unity.” They further argued that “Gwangju, in particular, has a moral imperative to embrace all minorities within the community and move forward together” (309~310).

Such conflicts manifest in other forms as well. On February 19, 2023, the Association of Injured Participants in the May 18 Democratic Uprising, the Association of Contributors to the May 18 Democratic Uprising, and the Korea Special Forces Comrades Association jointly issued a “Joint Declaration for Forgiveness and Reconciliation” (hereafter referred to as the Declaration) in Gwangju. When this was met with criticism and objections from many citizens, including the May Spirit Countermeasure Committee, one member of the official May 18 organizations responded by stating that, as a victim, he had the right to forgive, and that those unrelated to the incident had no standing to comment on the matter (Park, 2024:150). For this individual, engaging in forgiveness and reconciliation with the Korea Special Forces Comrades Association—without question or scrutiny and within a state-sponsored event—constitutes an act aligned with the spirit of May 18, and thus a form of testimony to that spirit. This raises the question: who, and by what authority, can criticize or refute such testimony from a May 18 participant? Perhaps only another participant could claim such authority and right. However, if this logic is accepted, May 18 risks becoming further sanctified, its circle of participants narrowed, and its legacy reduced to a matter solely between the participants and the state.

In a similar vein, Kim Young-hee has pointed to another dimension of May 18’s ambivalence. She argues that the very process of May 18 being officially recognized and institutionalized as a democratic movement—thus elevating its testimonies to the foundational status of the state—implicitly contains a form of state violence (Kim, 2020). In this case, state violence operates on two levels. First, by legalizing and acknowledging May 18 as a democratic movement, the state grants itself absolution for the original massacre it perpetrated, positioning itself as

the authority to judge and validate both the violence of the massacre and the democratic virtue of its victims. Second, from this transcendent position, the state assumes the power to determine the eligibility of victims. It sets criteria for who qualifies as a May 18 merit recipient, how those qualifications are graded, and demands that victims testify and prove their suffering accordingly. The state then claims the right to include or exclude individuals based on its own standards. This ultimately results in the state monopolizing the right to remember and testify about May 18—at least on legal and institutional levels. From this point forward, the authority to decide who counts as a participant, who does not, how merit is classified, and which memories and testimonies are deemed credible and true, belongs to the state. In my view, this aspect of the issue is crucial. Testimony does not maintain a linear or harmonious relationship with democracy. While it enables democracy and can serve as a force for further democratization—even after democratization itself—it can also act as a catalyst for democracy's degeneration into conservative and even reactionary forces. Why does testimony have such ambivalence, and how does it come to form a paradoxical relationship with democracy?

IV. What Is Antinomy?: Through Derrida's Reflections

To grasp this issue, it is necessary to detour through a brief philosophical discussion on the concept of antinomy. As is well known, the term “antinomy” (from *anti* + *nomos*), inherited from Western antiquity, was given philosophical prominence by Immanuel Kant. For Kant, the concept of antinomy was so significant that it awakened him

from his “dogmatic slumber” (*dogmatischer Schlummer*) (Lee, 2010). In Part II of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, titled “Transcendental Dialectic,” he presents four antinomies, which profoundly influenced the development of German Idealism. In contemporary philosophy, Jacques Derrida stands out as a thinker who inherited, transformed, and developed Kant's notion of antinomy in a distinctive way. Since the 1990s, in works such as *Force of Law*, *On Hospitality*, and *On Forgiveness*, Derrida has revealed how aporia and antinomy constitute essential elements of justice and hospitality, thereby clarifying the practical dimension embedded in deconstruction (*déconstruction*).

He, especially in *On Hospitality*, elucidates the antinomic relationship between unconditional and conditional hospitality. He first demonstrates that these two forms of hospitality are in a mutually conflicting or mutually exclusive relationship:

It is as though hospitality were the impossible as though the law of hospitality defined this very impossibility, as if it were only possible to transgress it, as though *the* law of absolute, unconditional, hyperbolic hospitality, as though the categorical imperative of hospitality commanded that we transgress all the laws (in the plural) of hospitality, namely, the conditions, the norms, the rights and the duties that are imposed on hosts and hostesses, on the men or women who give a welcome as well as the men or women who receive it. And vice versa, it is as though the laws (plural) of hospitality, in marking limits, powers, rights, and duties, consisted in challenging and transgressing *the* law of hospitality, the one that would command that the “new arrival” be offered an unconditional welcome. (Derrida, 2000 :75-77)

Here, what Derrida calls “the law of hospitality itself” refers to absolute, unconditional, and hyperbolic hospitality, demanded as a categorical imperative. True hospitality, according to this view, must not impose any conditions on the other who is to be welcomed. Genuine hospitality means accepting and welcoming the other without question or judgment. Even if the other might be a terrorist, a perpetrator of sexual violence, a financial fraudster, or someone who poses potential social danger, unconditional hospitality entails accepting them nonetheless—and only such hospitality can be considered truly hospitable. True hospitality can only be realized by risking such dangers. Conversely, the pluralized “laws of hospitality” seek to enact hospitality through specific conditions, norms, and procedures. This form of conditional hospitality is, in fact, the one practiced by most democracies. At airports, seaports, or land borders, when receiving foreigners, officials typically ask for their name, nationality, occupation, and purpose of entry. If the individual is deemed unlikely to harm the country or society, entry is granted.

Thus, although both forms bear the name “hospitality,” they inevitably come into conflict. The absolute law of hospitality commands that hospitality be extended while disregarding the conditions, procedures, and norms imposed by the conditional laws of hospitality. This is because attaching conditions to hospitality disqualifies it from being considered genuine. Conversely, from the perspective of conditional hospitality, the demand to welcome the arriving other unconditionally undermines the very conditions that make hospitality possible, thereby rendering hospitality itself impossible. After all, the one who is welcomed may harm—or even destroy—the host at any time.

However, Derrida’s notion of antinomy does not merely refer to the mutual incompatibility or conflict between two opposing claims. The

true core of Derrida’s concept lies in the fact that each seemingly irreconcilable position presupposes the other as a condition for its own possibility. In short, each side enables and requires the other, while simultaneously being locked in a relationship of conflict and mutual exclusion. This is the crux of what Derrida calls antinomy.

From the standpoint of unconditional hospitality (“the law of hospitality itself”), conditional hospitality (“the laws of hospitality”) degrades hospitality by restricting, regulating, and even normalizing it through various conditions. Therefore, unconditional hospitality must distance itself from conditional hospitality. Yet, at the same time, “even while keeping itself above the laws of hospitality, *the* unconditional law of hospitality needs the laws, it *requires* them” (79). Derrida describes this “desire as constitutive,” because without conditional hospitality—without concrete implementation through institutions and practices—the unconditional law of hospitality risks becoming abstract, utopian, and illusory, and thus may be transformed into its opposite (Ibid.). From the perspective of conditional hospitality, as previously noted, unconditional hospitality demands the welcoming of the other—who may be dangerous—without question or judgment. This paradoxically or even perversely threatens to erase the very possibility of hospitality. Thus, Derrida writes: “In order to be what it is, the law thus needs the laws, which, however, deny it, or at any rate threaten it, sometimes corrupt or pervert it. And must always be able to do this” (Ibid.). To negate, threaten, and at times corrupt or pervert the unconditional law of hospitality is not only a possibility but a necessary task for conditional hospitality. Yet, from another angle, this necessity does not arise from a desire to destroy hospitality, but rather from the need to preserve it—to ensure that hospitality is not annihilated. If conditional hospitality fails to maintain

its connection to hospitality, it becomes not hospitality at all, but a pursuit of interest or an exercise of power. Therefore, in order to be called hospitality, conditional hospitality must presuppose the possibility of unconditional hospitality and affirm that only unconditional hospitality constitutes true hospitality. The paradox that what is indispensable for unconditional hospitality to exist may also render it impossible—and that what is essential for conditional hospitality to function may also corrupt or pervert it—is the antinomy Derrida identifies in the problem of hospitality. This same antinomic structure appears in the relationship between law and justice, and between unconditional and conditional forgiveness.

V. The Antinomy Between Testimony and Democracy I: Judith Butler's Analysis

The reason we must detour through a discussion of antinomy when addressing the relationship between testimony and democracy is that the same antinomic logic appears to operate within this relationship. To explore this point, it is helpful to examine Judith Butler's reflections. In Chapter 7 of *Parting Ways: Jewishness and the Critique of Zionism*, Butler offers a compelling account of the antinomic nature of testimony.

Drawing on a paper by American historian and narrative theorist Hayden White on Primo Levi (White, 2004), one of the foremost figures in Holocaust testimonial literature, Butler analyzes the antinomy inherent in Levi's testimony. Her core argument can be summarized in three points.

1) Primo Levi's Political Predicament

First, Butler highlights the political predicament Levi faced. On one hand, Levi sought "a clear and transparent language, one that might rise to the level of scientific rigor" (Butler, 2013:184) to counter revisionists who dismissed Holocaust memories and testimonies as mere stories and denied their credibility. On the other hand, Levi was wary of the crystallization effect produced by narrative accounts of memory. This crystallization refers to the process by which the narrative conveying the testimony becomes relatively independent from its original source, maintaining its own coherent sequence and generating effects that diverge from the original memory. As a result, the narrative may lead a life of its own, producing unintended consequences and being appropriated for purposes beyond the control of the original witness.

Butler particularly points to the issue of using the Shoah to justify Israeli militarism and "the exploitation of history" (Ibid.). In this context, she poses the question: "Is there something within language that can resist these two political trajectories—both of which Levi found unacceptable?" This issue carries particularly serious implications because it is closely tied to political concerns. On one hand, it is connected to the problem of revisionism. Revisionists—those who deny or relativize the Holocaust—seek to undermine the reality of the Holocaust by questioning the truth and credibility of survivors' memories and narratives. On the other hand, memory and narrative are also employed by forces associated with the Holocaust—particularly the state of Israel—as essential tools for legitimizing their own violence. Thus, the problem of memory and narrative regarding the Holocaust faces a dilemma: it must resist those who deny its truth, while also distancing

itself from those who instrumentalize that truth to justify violence.

2) The Antinomy of Testimony

Levi's political dilemma is closely linked to the antinomy of testimony. The antinomy Levi presents arises from the inevitable gap that emerges when someone who has experienced an event attempts to speak about it. First, there is the disjunction between the event itself and the survivor's memory of that event—what might be called the problem of memory as a “faulty instrument.” Beyond that, there is also a gap between the survivor's memory and the narrative that conveys it. This difference stems from the fact that memory still belongs directly to the one who experienced or witnessed the event, whereas the narrative of that memory becomes detached from the subject and circulates independently. This is especially true when the narrative persists in the absence of the witness—or when narrative becomes a privileged means of preserving memory precisely in the absence of the witness. Derrida identifies this as one of the defining features of writing (*écriture*): writing presupposes the absence of its author, and thus, by definition, writing is always “posthumous” in nature (Derrida, 1972).

For over forty years after his liberation from the Nazi concentration camps, Levi continued to testify about the Holocaust. Yet over time, he increasingly confronted questions such as: Is what I remember truly accurate? Do the stories I write faithfully convey my memories? Has my trauma distorted my recollection?

Did the Nazis perchance succeed in making the event untellable, unnarratable? If the narration proves not to be fully tellable, would

that be a Nazi success story? Or can we safeguard the fallibility in and of narrative for another purpose? Is there a way to consider the fallibility of narrative, its very breakdown, as the evidentiary trace of trauma itself? (Butler, 2013:189)

This final question encapsulates Butler's central argument. If the memory of a survivor who experienced an atrocity like the Holocaust is inevitably incomplete and emotionally charged—thus inherently prone to distortion, transformation, and error—and if narrative, by its very nature, adds another layer of potential error in transmitting that memory, does this lead us to conclude that memory and testimony about the Holocaust and state violence are inherently unreliable and ultimately unrepresentable? Or, alternatively, might the very potential for error and the impossibility of perfect representation serve as a form of testimony and evidence in themselves?

This is where the previously mentioned problem of “crystallization” arises. The memory of suffering becomes “crystallized” through narrative. Once crystallized, the narrative detaches from its referent and begins to lead a life of its own. In this process, memory is reconstituted within the crystallized narrative. “Indeed, the telling of the story performs a crystallization of that memory of suffering that transforms memory such that some of the original memory is lost. Thus, the story takes on a life that comes at the expense of the memory itself. Paradoxically and painfully, the story can actually become the means by which the original suffering becomes lost to memory” (191). Levi himself expresses this in *The Drowned and the Saved*: “A memory that is recalled too often and told in narrative form tends to become fixed in clichés, soon crystallizing into a perfected and revered version of the experience. Such memory replaces the raw memory, sacrificing it and growing in

its place.” This leads to the danger that “the story threatens to substitute for the events it relays, and crystallization is the means of that substitution” (Ibid.).

This leads to a potentially troubling conclusion: “The substitution comes at the cost of the event, and so it would seem that a certain strict accountability applies: the story is purchased at the expense of the event itself, just as the life of the survivor is understood to come at the expense of the dead” (Ibid.). Does this mean, then, that we can never access the truth of the Holocaust—that any narrative about the Holocaust inevitably betrays the truth of the event itself, leading to the conclusion that the Holocaust is unrepresentable? Butler seeks to offer a more nuanced account. She recalls the work of another Holocaust survivor and witness, Charlotte Delbo, who in her book *Auschwitz and After* distinguishes between sensory memory (deep memory, *mémoire des sens*) and external memory (*mémoire externe*) (Delbo, 2024). Here, external memory refers to a memory that does not relive the event in order to speak of it. If the author were to present the event through the mode of sensory memory—directly re-experiencing the event—they would be forced to relive the immense shock and pain of the event, rendering narration impossible. It is precisely to escape this shock that external memory becomes necessary. From this, we arrive at the conclusion that “speaking must always be at some remove from reliving, and must remain so. Only under such conditions can we say that “testimony acts in ways that memories cannot, and memories depend on stories to be transmitted and to endure” (Butler, 2013:192).

Here, Butler, drawing on Hayden White’s argument, asserts that for Levi, testimony “produces the referent” (Ibid.). This should not be mistaken for a relativist or skeptical claim. White’s point is that “if

these events are to be transmitted to listeners, they must be mediated through rhetorical terms that produce or arrange referents for us—terms that clarify and give meaning to the events” (193). In other words, White argues that in order to produce referents and capture the reality of the event, we require figuration. From a realist perspective, this might seem counterintuitive. However, White maintains that Levi deliberately turned away from realist narrative, and that this refusal was part of his ongoing effort to approach the impossible truth of the Holocaust. In contrast, some may argue that we must preserve the referentiality of the event through language at all costs. Butler contends that such efforts carry two paradoxical implications (1). In order to preserve the referent, “we must act upon it,” because “without acting on the referent, the archive cannot be preserved” (193). (2) “Second, for the reality to be communicated—which means that conditions of incredulity must be overcome—language must act on the facts to produce them as a graspable reality” (Ibid.).

What Butler ultimately seeks to argue is that there is no such thing as an event that exists “as it is”—a referent that exists independently of the subject. Particularly when we attempt to pursue the truth of an event in opposition to those who deny its existence, we tend to presuppose an objective reality or referent that is independent of subjective judgment or intervention. Butler, however, contends that such a presupposition is valid only within a realist framework, and is therefore a mistaken assumption. Instead, what we must keep in mind is that the pursuit of truth regarding an event necessarily presupposes the preservation and recording of that event—especially when the event belongs to the distant past or involves extreme suffering and trauma, as in the case of the Holocaust. Yet the act of preserving and recording an event inevitably

involves the two dimensions previously discussed: (1) the need to act upon the referent, and (2) the rhetorical mediation required to make reality communicable. Thus, this process affirms that the event must be constructed retrospectively, while simultaneously demanding that its truth be disclosed as objectively as possible—a task that is, in many ways, paradoxical or antinomic. Complicating matters further is the fact that the repetition of an event through narrative often takes on the character of a “traumatic compulsion to repeat” (195). This repetition is compulsive because revisiting and re-experiencing a traumatic event like the Holocaust is painful not only for direct witnesses and survivors, but even for those who experience it indirectly. Yet the subject is drawn—often unknowingly—by a force that compels them to repeatedly recall and narrate the traumatic event. Butler thus describes such repetitive narration as “not strictly decided, but rather compelled” (194). What is even more troubling is that this compulsive repetition of traumatic events means “we cannot fully control the discursive use of stories that have already been told” (Ibid.). When someone who directly experienced an event narrates and discursively frames it, the narrative begins to live its own life, replacing the primary memory of the subject. Especially in cases of severe trauma, “and, though the traumatic effect is transmitted—along with the crisis of volition that comes with that trauma—it can become unmoored from its original aims” (195).

In other words, the narrative and discourse surrounding an event can be refracted in multiple directions depending on the purposes for which the event is being mobilized. This, in turn, retroactively influences the narrative and discourse about the event itself—and even the referential status of the event.

Butler identifies a dual danger in this context. First, she notes that

“crystallization is both the condition for preserving the record and a risk, and thus appears to be a prerequisite for refuting revisionism.” At the same time, she emphasizes that “this process of crystallization is linked to an acute sense of explainability.” In other words, it is closely tied to political efforts to exploit and instrumentalize the Shoah. Butler refers to this as “another permutation of crystallization” (194). The implication is as follows: when Shoah discourse replaces memory, it produces a specific outcome. It is used “to externalize guilt completely (and infinitely), thereby constructing the other as someone who can fully explain the suffering that continues to be endured.” As Butler later elaborates, the Israeli state and Zionists no longer confine the perpetrators of the Shoah to figures like Hitler or Nazism. Instead, they extend the category to contemporary opponents—such as Palestinians or Arab militant groups—by designating them as potential perpetrators of a renewed Shoah. This move serves to justify their own responses and acts of violence. It sustains a traumatic temporality in which the past is never truly past, and it collapses the historical distance between “then” and “now.” In this way, the Holocaust is not treated as a historical event that has ended, but as a perpetually present issue—one that can always recur. It is exploited for contemporary political purposes, used to label others as fascist forces and to justify violence against them. Butler argues that “the transferability of affect and the transmissibility of trauma” are essential to this kind of historical displacement from one political reality to another.

3) How Should We Respond to the Antinomy of Testimony?

According to Butler, the misuse of the Holocaust is not exclusive to

Zionism. On one hand, those who participate in peace processes or criticize the Israeli state may be accused of wanting to send Jews back to the gas chambers. On the other hand, Israel's violent actions toward Palestinians are sometimes condemned as mimetic repetitions of the Nazi regime. Butler criticizes both responses as forms of Holocaust exploitation.

However, she also rejects the idea that “to forget the Holocaust and to live in the present” (197) is a solution to this exploitation. The Holocaust has irrevocably altered history for Jewish people and continues to operate as an undeniable force of reality. It has become something that cannot be forgotten. Therefore, Butler insists that what matters is recognizing how history has been transformed by the Holocaust and its instrumentalization. She pays particular attention to the dual ways in which the Shoah is mobilized. On one hand, Israel speaks more in the name of the dead than of the living—it has become the voice of the dead. On the other hand, the Shoah is routinely used to justify war and to position Israel as a defensive victim. This simultaneously obstructs the expansion of Holocaust lessons into a broader politics of human rights. “All is compared to the Shoah, dwarfed by the Shoah, and therefore all is allowed—be it fences, sieges, curfews, food and water deprivation, or unexplained killings” (198). Ultimately, this leads to a question about the difference between two forms of politics. On one side, whether in defense of or opposition to Israel, there is a politics that continually invokes and exploits Holocaust trauma. On the other side, there is a politics that “reflects on what political conditions are necessary to foreclose crimes against humanity” (199). Butler clearly advocates for the latter. To do so, we must prevent “‘then’ from replacing and absorbing ‘now,’” and escape the danger of producing blindness to the

present. In other words, “only by making the Shoah a past event can we begin to derive principles of respect for life and land, equality, and justice from that experience.” Butler adds, “this would be another way of never forgetting”—a way that leads to reflective comparison rather than keeping the past as an immortal presence in the present.

In this regard, Butler concludes that Levi, toward the end of his life, came to see “the ‘diasporic’ condition of the Jewish people as a better alternative,” thereby moving closer to Hannah Arendt’s political perspective. Levi expresses this view as follows:

I’ve thought a great deal about this. The center is in the diaspora, and the center is returning to the diaspora... I prefer that the gravitational center of Jewishness remain outside Israel... I would say that the best Jewish culture is bound to the fact that it is dispersed and polycentric... The history of the diaspora is a history of persecution, but also a history of exchange and interethnic relations—in other words, a school of tolerance... Everyone is someone’s Jew. And today, Palestinians are Israel’s Jews. (198-199)

VI. The Surplus of “Commie”

Having examined Butler’s extended analysis of the antinomy embedded in Holocaust testimony, what lessons might we draw from it? Two aspects seem particularly important. Butler’s reflections on Holocaust testimony appear especially relevant to the discourse surrounding “commies” (*ppalgaengi*) in South Korea. Since democratization in 1987, the May 18 Democratic Uprising has been officially recognized as a pro-democracy movement, a special law has been enacted for the Jeju

April 3 Incident, and another for the October 19 Yeosu-Suncheon Incident in 2021. However, these developments do not mean that the issues of memory, testimony, or restorative justice surrounding May 18, Jeju 4.3, or 10.19 have been resolved. Crucially, these official procedures—state recognition of violence, compensation for victims, and restoration of reputations—have been carried out while excluding the figure of the “commie.”

At the same time, the “commie” discourse continues to wield formidable power as a tool of exclusion. It resurfaces in the form of “Gwangsu”—alleged North Korean operatives dispatched during May 18—and is used to delegitimize the entire uprising and the Gwangju-Jeonnam region. It is also mobilized to attack advocates of anti-discrimination laws or student rights ordinances. Discourses on human rights, LGBTQ+ issues, and labor unions are metonymically equated and collectively denounced as “commie” agendas. Moreover, in the far-right backlash against the December 3 pro-presidential coup and the National Assembly’s impeachment resolution, the epicenter of “commie” ideology is no longer North Korea but China. This leads to the irrational and authoritarian equation: China = Democratic Party = pro-impeachment = commie. Despite its illogical and anti-democratic nature, this equation exerts considerable influence.

Why does the “commie” discourse remain so powerful? It is not unrelated to the force of memory, the power of testimony, and the crystallization effect produced by narrative. Just as Israel actively deployed Holocaust discourse after the 1967 Six-Day War to demonize Arab forces, far-right groups in Korea—despite being perpetrators or descendants of state violence and civilian massacres since 1945—have wielded the “commie” label as a weapon against democratization

movements for nearly 80 years. Nevertheless, since the enactment of the Framework Act on Truth and Reconciliation in 2003 and the official activities of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, resistance to “commie” discourse within democratization movements appears to have weakened. The abolition of the National Security Law is no longer a central agenda in social movements, and beyond criticizing it as an “anti-human rights discourse,” little active resistance seems to remain. Paradoxically, this juxtaposition of human rights discourse and “commie” discourse may result in the equation: human rights discourse = commie discourse. Even though human rights are constitutionally grounded, once this equation takes hold, it can escalate—as seen in far-right opposition to impeachment—into attacks on the Constitutional Court, the judiciary, and ultimately the Constitution and constitutional order itself.

This issue is closely tied to the limitations of the democratization movement after 1987 and the transitional justice efforts that unfolded in the 2000s. At the heart of these limitations lies the question of how to address the figure of the “commie” (*ppalgaengi*), which constitutes a crucial part of Korea’s historical past. In the course of democratization and transitional justice, the “commie” has been either reclassified as a “civilian” or “non-combatant,” or alternatively, as a “victim.” This is particularly evident in the handling of the Jeju April 3 Incident. A key example is the 2001 Constitutional Court ruling on the Jeju 4.3 Special Act. In this decision, the Court, while preparing for the implementation of the Special Act, premised the illegality of the 4.3 uprising and denied victim status to those who led the rebellion. Specifically, the ruling stated that “those who, as top-level or mid-level commanders of armed communist forces, actively and directly resisted military and police

suppression; those who, by directly or indirectly leading or inciting reckless provocations, were responsible for the outbreak of the Jeju 4.3 Incident as core members of the South Korean Workers' Party's Jeju branch; those who collaborated with armed guerrillas to kill military and police personnel, their families, or participants in the constitutional election; and those who actively led arson attacks on police stations and public facilities—such individuals cannot be regarded as ‘victims’”(For a critical discussion of this issue, see Ko, 2011; Lee 2002).

In this context, Jae-Seung Lee's proposal—based on the insight that U.S. military occupation in Korea was not merely a fact of power but a legal phenomenon—is particularly significant (Lee, 2021). Drawing on John Rawls's concept of the “original position,” Lee suggests that the occupied space should be understood as a social contract situation in which “any individual or political force must be able to participate equally in the design of society” (325). This normative assumption—essential to the foundation of liberalism and thus something the U.S. government and military occupation must presuppose if they claim to uphold liberal values—requires fundamental equality among all parties to the contract. Without this assumption, the condition of the original position cannot be established, and the social contract itself becomes impossible. Second, this means that the U.S. military occupation, as an “original position,” implies the equal subjectivity of the Korean people—specifically, that in the liberated space, Koreans should have been able to autonomously exercise their collective right to self-determination.

Starting from this legal and political-philosophical premise, a different interpretive path opens up—one that contrasts with the Constitutional Court's retroactive application of concepts such as “liberal democratic basic order” and “the identity of the Republic of Korea,” which were

not yet established at the time, and which served to suppress international legal questions. Instead, the Jeju uprising can be understood as “the final phase of a nationwide popular resistance against the rightward shift of U.S. military governance in South Korea since the fall of 1946” (331). In short, the U.S. military government violated the Korean people's right to self-determination in three key ways: (1) by obstructing the establishment of an autonomous unified state—thus violating political self-determination; (2) by excluding communist and leftist parties from the formation of South Korea's political order—another violation of political self-determination; and (3) by undermining economic survival and autonomy—violating economic self-determination. The Jeju 4.3 uprising, then, can be interpreted as a legitimate exercise of the Korean people's right to resistance against these infringements—a right that was widely recognized under international law at the time.

Lee's work thus represents a critical intervention in the dominant framework of transitional justice, which has tended to incorporate Jeju 4.3 into the history of state violence while simultaneously relying on a “victim discourse” that draws an unbridgeable line between those who are grievable and those who are not.³⁾ This framework, whether intentionally or not, presupposes a present-day state that is detached from and transcends its history of violence. Lee challenges this assumption and seeks to move beyond the binary oppositions—victim vs. militant, civilian vs. commie—that have shaped past efforts at historical reckoning. His work asks whether these hierarchies can be overcome through broader

3) As is well known, the concept of “grievable” is one of the key categories that Judith Butler introduced in her theoretical work during the 2000s, and we believe this concept carries profound implications for thinking through state violence in Korea, including the Jeju 4.3. See Butler, 2010; 2020.

categories such as “civilian” or “citizen,” and in doing so, marks a significant achievement.

From this perspective, Lee concludes his paper by criticizing the U.S. military government, the South Korean government at the time, and the Constitutional Court’s 2001 decision—which excluded the leaders of the uprising from victim status based on the retroactive application of “liberal democratic basic order” and “national identity.” He writes: “From the standpoint of reconciliation and coexistence, all those who lost their lives in the Jeju 4.3—regardless of political affiliation—should be mourned as victims of the event. Only then can we historicize the past as past and achieve peace and reconciliation” (Lee, 2021:359). This assertion—that all participants in Jeju 4.3, regardless of political ideology, have the right to be mourned as victims—represents a meaningful advance, especially considering that the 2001 Constitutional Court ruling and the Jeju 4.3 Special Act excluded leftist affiliates from the category of victims. As Judith Butler has argued, this is a crucial effort to deconstruct the entrenched practice of dividing and hierarchizing those who are grievable and those who are ungrievable in the context of transitional justice.

However, based on Seong-Man Ko’s critique of the revised second-phase Jeju 4.3 Special Act of 2021, Jae-Seung Lee’s deconstructive intervention still appears to have its limitations. Ko points out that even under the amended legislation, leftist insurgents remain excluded from the scope of public mourning, resulting in what he calls a paradoxical outcome: “‘victims’ are redefined to include only government suppression forces and civilians, while excluding the armed resistance forces” (Ko, 2021:204). This is problematic not only because it contradicts the lived experiences and testimonies of those involved—particularly by including

the suppression forces, who were the primary agents of the massacre, in the category of “victims.” More fundamentally, Ko argues that “a structure in which only civilians and suppression forces are officially recognized serves to marginalize the history of resistance symbolized by the armed forces and to erase the memory of that resistance” (206). If this is the case, then even Lee’s assertion that “all those who lost their lives in the Jeju 4.3—regardless of political affiliation—should be mourned as victims of the event” may not lead to meaningful change. Rather, it risks producing a new kind of sublimation: the state (and the United States), once the perpetrator of violence and massacre, is now elevated to the position of a transcendent or transcendental subject that holds the sovereign authority to delineate perpetrators and victims, the grievable and the ungrievable.

VII. The Antinomy of Testimony and Democracy II: Testimony as a Transformation of Democracy

1) The Limitations of Agonism

These limitations are closely tied to the fact that Jae-Seung Lee grounds his political philosophy in the politics of agonism. “In order for a peaceful political order to be established among opposing forces, agonistic politics must replace antagonistic politics” (Lee, 2021:358). The term *agon*, meaning “contest” or “conflict” in ancient Greek, gained prominence in modern philosophy when Michel Foucault used it to describe power relations as strategic games between free individuals (Foucault, 2001). Agonistic politics became a major theoretical current

in Anglo-American political philosophy when radical democratic theorist Chantal Mouffe proposed it as an alternative to the liberal tradition. She distinguished it from the model of class antagonism and defined it as a model of “agonism” or “agonistic pluralism” (Mouffe, 1994; 2000; 2013).

Lee emphasizes the necessity of agonistic politics because, as he puts it, “while antagonistic politics turns competitors into enemies and drives them into the mountains, agonistic politics tames enemies into competitors and brings them down into the city” (Lee, 2021). Agonism is a form of politics that “presumes not only oneself but also one’s adversaries as constitutive parts of the political.” Lee identifies Yeo Un-hyung and Kim Kyu-sik—figures who pursued left-right cooperation during Korea’s liberation period—as representatives of agonistic politics. Agonism is characterized by two key attitudes: “Those who participate in political competition do not possess the right to annihilate their opponents and must restrain themselves as role-performers. Agonism excludes violence in external actions and embraces internal difference as a condition of politics.” Thus, Lee’s understanding of agonism is a politics that accepts the impossibility of ultimate resolution. “For agonists, any political order is a provisional compromise oriented toward the future. Even the two divided Koreas are provisional political entities to one another, insofar as they consider the political future of reunification.” In short, Lee sees the mutually destructive antagonistic struggles—where each side sought the total annihilation of the other—that occurred around the Korean War and the Jeju 4.3 Incident as central tragedies of modern Korean history. He seeks a political-philosophical alternative in agonistic politics.

His proposal carries intuitive appeal, especially when considering the Korean Peninsula’s history of annihilation, dictatorship, war, and state

violence, as well as the entrenched antagonistic division system and the persistent reactionary movements even after democratization. However, the agonistic politics he envisions may be overly idealized and fails to adequately account for the political asymmetry between ruling powers and the people. Machiavelli once captured this asymmetry by noting that while elites desire to dominate, the people simply desire not to be dominated. Agonistic politics is idealized because antagonism does not arise between two symmetrical forces, but rather from exploitation and oppression by dominant powers. This critique applies equally to Foucauldian politics, which does not sufficiently address the asymmetry between rulers and the ruled, or between oligarchic forces and the masses. This marks a key difference between Foucault and Althusser (Jin, 2019). Therefore, for agonistic politics to be viable, it must presuppose the capacity of the people to restrain or counteract the overwhelming power of dominant forces. Yet Lee, by focusing on the moment of “taming the enemy into a competitor,” seems to sideline or weaken the issue of asymmetry. In such a case, agonistic politics aimed at coexistence and reconciliation risks becoming a politics of domestication—one that operates within the rules of the dominant order. His version of agonism, in fact, does not appear so different from Rawlsian liberal political philosophy.

2) The Politics of Minority Solidarity: Becoming Witnesses for One Another

In the intense contestation surrounding the impeachment and counter-impeachment movements following the December 3 self-coup, two events stand out: the movement referred to as the “Battle of

Namtaeryeong” and the “storming of Western District Court.” These two moments clearly illustrate how the 2024–25 impeachment process differs from that of 2016–17. During the earlier impeachment, many were quickly swept up in a sense of triumph, celebrating with lofty rhetoric such as “Candlelight Revolution” or “Candlelight Citizens’ Revolution.” I personally never agreed with such expressions and always used quotation marks to signal neutrality. Yet at the time, not only the Democratic Party and its supporters but also the intellectuals—especially progressive ones—too readily embraced the term “Candlelight Revolution” and claimed the victory of the protests as “our victory.”

However, the current impeachment moment makes it clear that we must more precisely define who “we” are. The impeachment of Park Geun-hye was considered “our victory,” but in truth, that “we” was constituted by excluding many minorities. Anyone who participated in the candlelight protests back then would recall how rarely minority voices were given space on stage. And even when they did speak, if they tried to express their identity—as irregular workers, women, LGBTQ+ individuals, or people with disabilities—they were often met with jeers or told to sacrifice their concerns for the greater good. The prevailing logic was: first, impeach; then, form a democratic government; and only afterward address the issues of marginalized groups.

In contrast, the current impeachment movement features active participation and speech from minorities across various sectors. As the “Battle of Namtaeryeong” demonstrates, there is a growing tendency not to identify with one’s own distinct identity, but to align with the most vulnerable—those who are doubly marginalized—and to identify with their struggles. Those who, for a long time, had no one to testify to their fight and were forced to bear witness to themselves are now

stepping forward as witnesses to each other’s solitary struggles.

Many speakers at the impeachment rallies have movingly conveyed this shift. One young female farmer shared the following:

“The shock of martial law awakened my sensitivity and broadened my perspective. I discovered the existence of ‘farmers as neighbors,’ and when they were crushed by state power, I felt it as if it were my own pain. This triggered a surge of super-empathy—beyond objectification or superficial compassion—along with conscience, a sense of justice, and responsibility. I began to notice the deepest points of similarity between myself and those I once thought of as distant others, and I felt a visceral synchronization. Listening to farmers’ demands, I realized that the discrimination and hatred I had endured were being equally applied to my neighbors. Concepts I had only known intellectually—or not at all—such as sovereignty, human rights, balance of power, solidarity, civic consciousness, equality, freedom, resistance, and peace, passed through my body and through the crowd connected by a web of solidarity. This embodied knowledge of democracy generated a massive affect. That affect was felt as heat.” (Kim, 2025:171-72)

This recognition of one’s own struggle in the struggles of others, and the solidarity built on shared sensitivity and awareness, is what Kim identifies as the core of the Namtaeryeong movement and a key achievement of the current impeachment protests.

Another disabled citizen offered a different perspective on one of the most visible aspects of the current protests: the enthusiastic participation of young people in their 20s and 30s, who bring colorful light sticks—reminiscent of pop concerts—and turn the rallies into festive gatherings. He cautions against interpreting this as a sudden political awakening

triggered by martial law, or as a newfound sense of communal responsibility. Instead, he asserts: “As a young disabled person, I’ve always seen them as people who resist.” He continues:

Those who are now gaining attention as if they’ve newly emerged in this impeachment moment are not a demographic that had long hidden in the margins of politics and only recently decided to step forward. They have always been active members of society, practicing democratic ideals in their own spaces. The reason they are finally being seen is not because they’ve just entered the streets, but because they are finally being recognized. For too long, Korean society has failed to count those with different bodies and stories as members of the community. We have ignored and turned away from the desperate struggles and voices of liberation unfolding at the edges of life. (...) The task for political institutions and civil society—those who represent the official ‘we’ of Korean democracy—is not to indiscriminately expand the boundaries of ‘we’ by enlightening the so-called ‘next’ generation. Rather, it is to first reflect on the past, in which the exclusion and marginalization of minorities was treated as an inevitable feature of political movements. Instead of asking how to cultivate these newly visible ‘next’ individuals into democratic citizens, we must first ask why the existing ‘we’ failed to recognize them, and why it produced exclusion by naming them as ‘next.’ (Byun, 2025:300)

3) The Aporia of Anarchist Democracy:

Lyotard, Rancière, Malabou, and Derrida

What kind of democracy is demanded by the solidarity of minorities and the mutual witnessing they enact? What form of democracy, what

democratic practice, can respond to such testimony? I believe that the notion of democracy as anarchism, as proposed by several contemporary European political philosophers, offers one of the most compelling possibilities.

To begin with, we might consider the democratic theory of Jacques Rancière, a French political philosopher widely introduced in Korea. Rancière can be seen as a philosopher who, in certain respects, rehabilitates anarchism philosophically. While he is critical of anarchism as a historical reality, his philosophy itself bears a distinctly anarchist character. This is primarily because he regards the entire tradition of Western political philosophy—from Plato through Aristotle to the present—as a philosophy of *arkhe* (principle or commandment), whereas the true democracy he advocates is based on *an-arkhe*—that is, the absence of principle, or anarchy (Rancière, 1998). Because he considers *an-arkhe* to be the foundation of genuine democracy, Rancière classifies all existing regimes as forms of *police*. Here, “police” refers not to law enforcement but to the distribution of the sensible (*partage du sensible*)—the structuring of what can be seen, said, and done. From antiquity to the present, political regimes have justified oligarchic rule, and this rule is sustained by establishing relations of domination and subordination at the level of the sensible. As long as this regime of distribution persists, it makes no difference whether the president changes, parliamentary seats shift, or whether the system is socialist or liberal—all remain within the domain of *police*. Rancière acknowledges that significant differences may exist between forms of *police*, but insists that they are all *police* nonetheless (Rancière, 1995).

Only political practices grounded in “the part of those who have no part”(part des sans part) can enact democracy in its true sense. Rancière

further argues that the institutional form most appropriate to democracy as *an-arkhe* is not the electoral system but the lottery. While elections are widely regarded as essential to modern democracy, Rancière contends that they are inherently aristocratic, based on the idea of qualifications for rule—greater competence, virtue, or merit. In contrast, the lottery is the politics of “anyone.” Because it entrusts public office to chance, it resists reduction to the logic of rule based on *arkhe*, and refuses to naturalize the oligarchic order that *arkhe* legitimates.

I believe that the democracy responsive to minority solidarity and mutual witnessing must be this anarchist democracy—democracy without *arkhe*. Above all, Rancière’s democratic theory is grounded in the solidarity of “those without a part” (*sans part*). He distinguishes between identification and subjectivation in this context. Identification refers to the allocation of identities within the distribution of the sensible: the king is the king, the servant is the servant, the peasant is the peasant, the merchant is the merchant, the student is the student, and the woman is the woman. This network of assigned identities constitutes identification. Subjectivation, by contrast, is defined as follows: “What is the process of subjectivation? It is not the formation of a self (*soi*), but the formation of a one (*un*)—a relation between self and other (*autre*)” (Rancière, 1998:123).

This definition shows that subjectivation is not a relation between two pre-existing identities, but a relational process of composition. Rancière contrasts subjectivation and identification in three key ways: First, “the logic of political subjectivation is not a simple affirmation of an identity,” but rather “a denial of the identity fixed by the logic of *police* and imposed by the other.” (124) Second, “the logic of political subjectivation is a demonstration” (Ibid.). This means that subjectivation is not a logic

of annihilation that negates or excludes the adversary, but a logic of composing a common place. Thus, a central task in Rancièrian political subjectivation is to show how the composition of a common place differs from the construction of dialogue or consensus. Third, “the logic of subjectivation always involves an impossible identification” (Ibid.). This “impossible identification” refers to the formation of solidarity with those most oppressed and marginalized in society—Black people in the U.S. or apartheid-era South Africa, disabled women, or figures like the “commie” (*ppalgaengi*) in Korean history. The solidarity movement of impossible identification with those without a part opens the space of democracy that Rancière calls “the part of those who have no part.” From this perspective, the mutual witnessing solidarity emerging today in places like Namtaeryeong, Hangangjin, or Yeouido can be seen as exemplary cases of Rancièrian subjectivation.

However, in her recent work French political philosopher Catherine Malabou criticizes Jacques Rancière for not being a true anarchist (Malabou, 2022). Intriguingly, she grounds this critique in the absence of the concept of testimony in Rancière’s thought. Malabou analyzes six contemporary philosophers—Reiner Schürmann, Emmanuel Levinas, Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Giorgio Agamben, and Jacques Rancière—through the prism of anarchism. She demonstrates how deeply anarchism is embedded in the core of contemporary philosophy, while also exploring why none of these thinkers explicitly identify as anarchists. In other words, although each of them engages profoundly with the philosophy and politics of anarchism, they ultimately fail to fully articulate its essence. According to Malabou, their inability to claim the title of anarchist reveals the limits of their philosophical anarchism. She locates the core of this failure in the fact that, while each of these

thinkers has explored the notion of the “ungovernable” (*ingouvernable*), they have not reached the more radical terrain of the “non-governable” (*non-gouvernable*)—a distinction she insists must be rigorously maintained (36).

A detailed analysis of Malabou’s book will be undertaken elsewhere; here, I will briefly examine her critique of Rancière. Rancière borrows the concept of “wrong” (*tort*) from Lyotard, but theorizes it in a markedly different way. For Lyotard, “wrong” is distinct from legal “harm” (*dommage*); it is defined as “harm for which the means to present evidence have been lost” (Lyotard, 1984:23). Thus, while someone who suffers harm and files a lawsuit becomes a plaintiff, the victim of a “wrong” cannot do so, as they lack the means to prove the harm. They remain a victim or a casualty. What Lyotard seeks to show through the complex arguments of *Le Différend* is that even if legal proceedings cannot be initiated and objective evidence cannot be presented to a court, events like the Holocaust can still be named as “wrongs.” The task of philosophy, literature, and politics, then, is to “discover idioms for the differend and to bear witness to it” (36). The differend refers to “a state and moment of language in which something that ought to be written has not yet been written”—a condition of linguistic instability. In such cases, testimony becomes “the only opportunity for the unrepresentable” (Malabou, 2022:265). Testimony, then, is “the only idiom capable of speaking and inventing where objective rules, evidence, arbitration, solutions, and negotiation have failed” (219-22). For Lyotard, testimony is the sole means of speaking about the unrepresentable—whether due to death, disappearance, or social exclusion—when established rules and discursive frameworks are insufficient to render the event present in its original form.

Rancière, however, strongly objects to Lyotard’s conception of testimony as a unique language and politics for the unrepresentable. His objection is twofold: aesthetic and political. Aesthetically, Rancière argues that there is no such thing as the unrepresentable or the unrepresentable, and that testimony is not a privileged idiom for such phenomena. In *The Destiny of Images*, he demonstrates that both Robert Antelme’s *The Human Race*, a canonical Holocaust text, and Flaubert’s *Madame Bovary* employ the same “paratactic” style of writing. This style, he argues, is not exclusive to testimony or to the narration of extreme human experiences, contrary to Lyotard’s claim. Politically, Rancière asserts that “testimony exists only in relation to the police” (Malabou, 2022:267). This rather provocative claim is grounded in a scene from Claude Lanzmann’s *Shoah*, in which Abraham Bomba, a barber who was forced to shave the hair of victims before they entered the gas chambers, struggles to speak about his experience. Lanzmann urges him, saying, “You must speak.” Rancière focuses on this moment, noting that Lanzmann addresses Bomba as a leader would a subordinate, or a teacher would a student, saying, “Do you understand me?” In *Disagreement*, Rancière uses this phrase—“Do you understand me?”—to illustrate how the imperative of obedience imposed by the police paradoxically presupposes the logic of equality. In this scene, Bomba ultimately complies with Lanzmann’s demand and testifies, not out of autonomous will, but in response to a command. For Rancière, this implies that testimony is always implicated in the logic of the police.

However, it is precisely at this juncture that Malabou identifies the limits of Rancière’s theory of democracy—a theory grounded in the absence of *archē*, yet one that has not fully arrived at anarchism. First, Malabou criticizes Rancière for failing to grasp adequately why Bomba

hesitates to testify, that is, why he finds himself unable to bear witness. Bomba's hesitation does not amount to a refusal of testimony; rather, it stems from the fact that he is not the Other in question—namely, not himself a Jewish victim who ought to testify. To speak on behalf of the Other, in any case, can only ever amount to speaking for oneself. What Rancière thus overlooks is the existence of an “infinite distance” between “the Other who speaks” and “the Other who is spoken about,” a distance that, as Malabou emphasizes, compelled Lyotard to introduce the concept of the unrepresentable (the *inprésentable*) (267). This oversight is directly tied to the limitations of Rancière's theory of democracy. Operating on the axiom of equality, Rancière fails to distinguish between two different kinds of equality. One concerns social inequality, to which Rancière devotes sustained attention; the other is what Malabou calls “inequality as otherness” (268). Rancière either reduces the latter to the former or simply ignores it. Contrary to Rancière's unwarranted assumption, however, inequality as otherness cannot be reduced to social inequality; rather, it constitutes what Malabou describes as “the inequality of inequality itself” (*Ibid.*). What Rancière thus fails to understand is that, no matter how equal subjects or social groups may be, they can nevertheless remain others to one another. Relations of equality between workers and peasants, between sexual minorities and victims of state violence, or between the poor and environmental activists do not arise spontaneously; instead, such relations are far more likely to be marked by dissonance, conflict, or forms of internal dislocation.

Although Malabou does not explicitly note this point, her critique of Rancière closely parallels Derrida's critique of Levinas. Precarious workers, sexual minorities, persons with disabilities, and undocumented migrant workers may share a number of common features and may

therefore be able to bear witness for one another; nevertheless, they inevitably remain others to one another. This reciprocal otherness may mark a limit of solidaristic witnessing, but it can also constitute its very possibility. Derrida seeks to introduce *différance* into Levinas's theory of the Other—specifically into Levinas's conception of the Other with a capital “O,” on the basis of which he defines “the relation to the Other, that is, justice.” This gesture is perhaps most clearly encapsulated in the famous sentence Derrida introduces in *The Gift of Death*: “*Tout autre est tout autre.*” Although this sentence appears deceptively simple, it admits of a wide range of interpretations and is, for that very reason, untranslatable—not only into languages other than French, but even within French itself.

This sentence may first be translated as “the wholly other is wholly other.” Read in this way, it becomes a tautology, and in this sense it appears to capture Levinas's account of the Other rather well. For Levinas insists that the Other of whom he speaks cannot be reduced to ontology and is not identical with any relative other—an other who is other *in relation to* something else (for example, the Jew as other to the German). The Other in Levinas's sense is thus an other that is entirely different from the others articulated within ontology; it is an absolutely other Other, one that can only be named as wholly other. Yet the sentence can also be translated as “every other is wholly other.” On this reading, it means that the wholly other is not one but many—that each is different from every other. If the wholly other is in this sense always plural and differentiated, a pressing question arises: which among these others can be said to be the true Other? Which of these many others is genuinely the Other, and by what criterion could such a distinction be drawn?

This difficulty is bound up with the ambiguity inherent in the concept of the Other. In an interview, Derrida remarks as follows:

So some form of closure is essential. If I want to affirm something, someone, or some situation (…), there must be singularity, and singularity means some closure. That is, I give something to someone, and to that extent I give up giving something to someone else. I offer hospitality to someone and at the same time close my door to others. That is finitude. There would be no gift or hospitality without finitude. Thus finitude means selection, and selection means that when I say “yes”, there is a form of closure involved. That is the condition for a yes to be affirmed. Thus we cannot simply prevent closure. We simply have to choose between a number of possible openings and possible closures, and that is a matter of strategy. (Derrida, 2010:250)

Without explicitly mentioning Levinas, Derrida here brings to light the ambiguity at the heart of Levinas’s concept of the Other. According to Derrida, the Other as absolute other is not one but many—indeed, potentially infinite in number. The reason for this infinity of others lies in our own finitude, or that of the subject. In order for me to fulfill my responsibility toward one Other and to extend hospitality to them, I must necessarily ignore or turn away from other others. At the very least, I cannot assume infinite responsibility for all of these infinite others at once. I must choose whom to feed, whom to shelter, and for whom to seek employment—and such choices inevitably imply that I will not extend the same hospitality to others. Moreover, among these others there are benevolent or friendly others, but there are also those who betray my goodwill, threaten me, or even target my life. Must I, then, in the name of the principle that commands infinite responsibility

toward the Other and unconditional obedience to the Other’s demand, submit even to those who endanger my life? If not, on what grounds can such a distinction be justified? Levinas’s ethics of the Other offers limited resources for addressing these questions. It is for this reason that Derrida, while highly valuing the ethical potential opened up by Levinas’s thought of alterity, insists on the need to correct and supplement its ambiguities. His analyses of the aporias of hospitality and the aporias of forgiveness are motivated precisely by this concern. As Derrida writes: “No hospitality, in the classic sense, without sovereignty of oneself over one’s home, but since there is also no hospitality without finitude, sovereignty can only be exercised by filtering, choosing, and thus by excluding and doing violence. Injustice, a certain injustice, and even a certain perjury, begins right away, from the very threshold of the right to hospitality” (Derrida, 2000: 55).

Returning once more to Malabou’s discussion, she identifies the limits of Rancière’s anarchistic conception of democracy and remarks that “all anarchists are witnesses to one another.” (Malabou, 2022:269) This claim implies, above all, that anarchism is traumatic in and of itself. For although the core of anarchism consists in the absence of *archē*—the conviction that we can live without *archē*, and thus that forms of life without hierarchies of domination and subordination, command and obedience, are possible—no one except anarchists themselves appears willing to trust this possibility. As a result, despite the long-standing existence of anarchists, and despite their countless struggles and practices through which they have demonstrated the rationale of anarchism and attested to the existence of another radical mode of thought, politics, and life irreducible to Marxism, anarchism has persisted largely as a name for negation, exclusion, or disavowal. For this reason, Malabou

argues, anarchism has long constituted an “experience of the limit of politics,” and anarchists have remained witnesses to one another.

Malabou’s evocative prose reminds us that the anarchism she describes has, in fact, existed throughout our society for a long time. Even where it is not explicitly articulated as anarchism, the struggles initiated and sustained by those who are most impoverished, humiliated, excluded, and discriminated against—such as the struggles of the Solidarity Against Disability Discrimination in Korea, those of sexual minorities, the struggles of bereaved families who have endured catastrophic disasters, those of migrant workers, or the traumatic experiences endured by the elderly women and men involved in the Milyang anti-transmission tower and anti-nuclear protests—can all be understood, like those of anarchists, as struggles, lives, and experiences in which people have existed as witnesses to one another. Likewise, the solidarities of mutual witnessing displayed by participants in impeachment demonstrations at Namtaeryeong, Yeouido, and Hangangjin can, without exaggeration, be described in this sense as anarchistic—or as expressions of an anarchistic democracy.

Nevertheless, I would like to conclude by pointing to an aporia of anarchistic democracy. Does this solidarity of mutual witnessing truly offer a clue for elucidating or resolving the antinomies of testimony and democracy that I have discussed thus far? On this point, I remain somewhat skeptical. At the very least, I do not think that the theories of anarchistic democracy developed by Rancière or Malabou provide sufficiently robust philosophical resources for untangling these antinomies. The reason lies in the oligarchic ruling forces of our society, as manifested in far-right movements. For more than eighty years since liberation—indeed, for even longer than that—these forces have consolidated

their dominance by seizing control of state power and other forms of social power, thereby establishing themselves as the ruling elite. In the past, when authoritarian regimes were firmly in place, their secure grip on state and social power allowed them to maintain their dominance without the need for mass movements. After democratization, however—particularly following the successive elections of Presidents Kim Dae-jung and Roh Moo-hyun, and the impeachment of 2017—they came to require an independent far-right mass movement in order to preserve their oligarchic rule. The result was the emergence of the so-called “Taegukgi(Korean Flag) rallies” during the 2017 impeachment crisis, and, more recently, the far-right mass movements that have taken shape in the current impeachment conjuncture.

Although the Constitutional Court has handed down a decision impeaching the president and the opposition candidate, Lee Jae-myung, has been elected president in the ensuing early election, the conservative Cold War-era oligarchic forces that have long dominated our society will neither collapse nor significantly weaken—as we have already witnessed since 2017. This is because, even if they lose control over elected offices such as the presidency or seats in the National Assembly, they have nonetheless constructed an oligarchic regime of domination grounded in what Rancière calls the *partition of the sensible* (*partage du sensible*). As the recent impeachment conjuncture makes clear, this regime extends across a wide array of powers: the security apparatus and administrative authority, economic power centered on conglomerates, cultural power exercised through the media and academia, religious power largely organized around Protestant Christianity, and various other forms of social power. Indeed, it would be more accurate to note that even so-called “progressive” parties, including the currently governing

Democratic Party, share in this oligarchic structure of power, differing from their conservative counterparts primarily in that they seek to redistribute it rather than dismantle it.

What is troubling, however, is that anarchistic democracy—and the movements of solidaristic mutual witnessing through which it seeks to realize itself—may, paradoxically, function in practice to further entrench these very oligarchic forces. This is because anarchistic democracy and its movements, operating on the principle of opposition to all forms of oligarchy, tend to understand state power as such, and law itself, as expressions of oligarchic domination. As noted earlier, for example, Kim Young-hee criticizes the forms of state violence that have emerged since May 18 has been officially recognized by the state as a democratic movement, arguing that to “rethink May 18 as state violence is (...) to ask how memory and mourning might be possible outside the boundaries of the state” (Kim, 2020:121). This perspective explicitly opposes May 18 as a genuine popular movement to the state itself. Such a view is especially prevalent among those who adopt progressive positions, emphasize popular autonomy, and underscore the importance of coexistence and care. Yet once the state and law are framed as inherently violent and oligarchic, does it not become unnecessary to make the effort to democratize them? Worse still, does this framing not risk leaving intact—indeed, normalizing—their actual deployment as instruments of oligarchic power? The more popular movements and the state/law are configured as antagonistically opposed, and the more democracy is identified with something anarchistic and external to the state and law, the greater this likelihood becomes. And the more this occurs, the more the ruling forces of our society will strive to seize and mobilize the state and the law ever more aggressively as instruments for consolidating their domination.

4) Democracy as Antinomy

This does not mean, of course, that we can unreservedly endorse calls for democratic forces to unite under the banner of resisting far-right fascism. The practical consequence of such appeals is scarcely different from turning the impeachment of 2025 into a mere repetition of the impeachment of 2017. The claim that democracy can be restored only by rallying votes behind a major opposition party and electing a benevolent and competent president to confront a powerful far-right bloc amounts, as Immanuel Wallerstein has noted, to nothing more than a liberal variant of the Leninist two-step strategy of revolution (Wallerstein, 2017).

According to this strategy, the first step of revolution consists in seizing state power from the bourgeoisie, while the second step involves transforming the social system on the basis of that power. On this view, the capture of state power becomes an indispensable task for converting structures of exploitation and oppression into more egalitarian and democratic ones. This strategy is by no means exclusive to Marxism or Leninism. Many of those who supported the Moon Jae-in administration in 2017 (as well as earlier the administrations of Kim Dae-jung and Roh Moo-hyun) likely had such a framework in mind, whether consciously or not. The two-step strategy presupposes that the state is a neutral instrument of governance and that, if benevolent and capable elites with just aims come to hold state power, this instrument can be deployed in the service of justice. Yet as long as we adhere to this strategy, it is always minorities, the subordinate, and the marginalized who are asked to sacrifice themselves for the sake of the larger cause. Rather than realizing democracy for those in subordinate positions here and now—within each domain, organization, and practice—we are told that unity

and consolidation are required first in order to subdue dominant power, that primary and secondary goals must be distinguished, and that the latter must be postponed or abandoned for the sake of the former. We are likewise told that, in order to purge entrenched forces or resist far-right fascism, a particular individual must become president, a particular party must secure an overwhelming majority, and votes must therefore be concentrated on a major party rather than dispersed among minor ones. As we know all too well, however, the opportunity to vote meaningfully for minor parties never arrives, and the time of politics for minorities and the subordinated is endlessly deferred.

What the solidarity of mutual witnessing revealed in the recent impeachment conjuncture therefore calls for is not only a democracy outside the state, but also a democracy of the state—or, more precisely, the democratization of the state itself. These two forms of democracy or democratization, however, are far from being harmoniously or peacefully aligned. As discussed earlier in relation to Derrida's analysis of the antinomies between unconditional and conditional hospitality, and between justice and law, the relation between democracy outside the state and democracy within the state is likewise marked by an unavoidable antinomy. Yet this antinomy need not be conceived as an unfortunate fate. As Derrida repeatedly emphasizes, such antinomies constitute both the condition and the driving force for the reform and progress of law and the state, and at the same time the condition under which democracy outside the state can acquire reality rather than remain a vague utopia. How, then, will this antinomy unfold in the future? How might we think through both its possibilities and its limits? These questions must be left for further inquiry on another occasion.

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❖ 국문초록

우리는 서로가 서로의 증인이다:

12.3 친위쿠데타 이후 증언의 민주주의

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이 글에서 나는 주디스 버틀러의 사유를 길잡이로 하여 12.3 친위쿠데타 이후 남태령 등에서 전개된 소수자들의 연대 시위를 증언의 민주주의라고 개념화해보려고 한다. 남태령 대첩의 의미는 그동안 각자 자신들의 영역에서 외롭게 싸움을 전개해온 소수자들이 서로가 서로를 위해 연대 투쟁을 전개했다는 점에서 찾을 수 있으며, 나는 이를 서로가 서로의 투쟁에 대한 증인이 된다는 의미에서 상호증언의 연대라고 부르고자 한다. 이러한 상호증언의 연대는 자크 랑시에르와 카트린 말라부 등이 이론화한 바 있는 아나키즘의 특성을 잘 보여준다. 이러한 상호증언의 연대는 이번 탄핵 정국이 지난 2017년 탄핵의 수준에 머물러서는 안 되며 그것보다 더 나아간 민주주의를 구현해야 한다는 것, 그리고 그 동력은 바로 이러한 연대 투쟁에서 찾아야 한다는 것을 시사한다는 점에서 한국 민주주의의 역사에서 중요한 의미를 지닌다. 하지만 나는 이러한 상호증언의 투쟁과 민주주의 사이에는 데리다적인 의미의 이율배반의 관계가 성립한다는 점을 보여주려고 한다. 이는 국가와 불화하는 상호증언의 연대가 오히려 국가 권력의 과두제 지배를 정당화하는 결과를 낳을 수 있기 때문이다. 따라서 증언의 민주주의에서 중요한 것은, 국가 바깥의 민주주의와 국가 내부의 민주화 사이의 이율배반 관계에 입각한 불가능한 변증법을 시도하는 일이다.

주제어: 12.3 친위쿠데타, 상호증언의 연대, 남태령대첩, 주디스 버틀러,
이울배반, 아나키즘, 자크 데리다, 카트린 말라부

■ 논문투고일 : 2025. 10. 31

■ 심사완료일 : 2025. 11. 26

■ 게재확정일 : 2025. 12. 02

Post-Fascism and the Crisis of Critical Thinking*

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❖ ABSTRACT

In today's new version of the neoliberal system, the tendencies of post-fascism are becoming more intense. Post-fascism takes as its fundamental principle the competition among independent individuals according to social Darwinism, and its core characteristic lies in depriving others of their citizenship based on the illusion of a homogeneous society. This paper focuses on the absence of critical thinking as one of the elements that has made such tendencies possible, centering on the intersection between the thoughts of H. Arendt and J. Butler.

Both thinkers share the concern that the absence of critical thinking makes possible not only hostility toward others but even genocide. For Arendt, plurality—the very condition of thinking—is also the condition of both political and human life. Butler reformulates this as the condition of cohabitation, in which we live together with others on the earth, and argues that this condition makes social bonds possible. Critical thinking means thinking heterogeneity on the basis of the principle of interdependency. The moment such thinking ceases, the citizens of a homogeneous society are likely either to tolerate or to participate in acts of hostility toward others.

Keywords : Post-Fascism, Hostility toward Others, Critical Thinking, Hannah Arendt, Judith Butler

* This work was supported by the Ministry of Education of the Republic of Korea and the National Research Foundation of Korea (NRF-2024S1A5B5A16027815).

I . Introduction

On December 3, 2024, an attempted coup d'état in South Korea was provisionally brought to an end through the passage of the presidential impeachment motion, the ruling on impeachment, and the subsequent 21st presidential election. This outcome could not have been achieved without the soldiers who refused to obey unlawful martial orders, the street demonstrations and rallies known as the “Revolution of Light,” and the civic concern and expression of opinion for our shared destiny. Looking back on that long and difficult process—while investigations and trials of the forces behind the insurrection are still being carried out—it is impossible to avoid reflecting not only on the power of the people that can influence politics, but also on the dangers that extreme division among the populace can bring about.

That process revealed both the positive and negative possibilities of Korean democracy. On the one hand, its positive possibility appeared in the operation of democratic institutions and the rule of law—in what is often called a society where *common sense prevails*. It also manifested in the people's desire to restore ordinary life, as well as in their aspiration to create a new world free from discrimination. On the other hand, its negative possibility was exposed not only in the dangers revealed by the organization of the far right and its abuses of law and institutions, but also in the subtle, anti-democratic current that nullified differences under the pretext of resisting such dangers. At this point, however, we must, as Jin Tae-Won (2025:23) points out, focus not on “evidence of the resilience of Korean democracy” but on “symptoms of its fragility.” To prepare for the dark future of Korean democracy, our society must confront the crisis of democracy that it already shares with

Western societies.

This paper identifies such signs of the crisis of democracy—or of anti-democratic tendencies—in the strengthening and diversification of far-right forces, and interprets them as manifestations of post-fascism. As became evident during the period of impeachment politics, the far right consolidated its power by organizing around various religious groups and by forming alliances with major political parties. Within the polarized confrontation between pro-impeachment and anti-impeachment camps, the wide spectrum of far-right movements became less visible. As a result, even though the far right's strategy in South Korea—combining anti-communism with anti-homosexual and anti-feminist campaigns—clearly corresponds to the typical features of far-right movements around the world today, even the democratic camp has failed to adequately address it.

Why is this the case? Within the confrontation between the two major parties, the democratic camp believes that, in order not to lose its political leadership, it must not lose the votes of the *moderate* majority. To achieve this, it assumes that it cannot reject the discourse of fairness grounded in the neoliberal logic of competition. Underlying this assumption is the belief that the majority does not support institutions that guarantee universal citizenship and fundamental rights—such as the abolition of discrimination and the protection of minority rights. For example, many in the majority are not only indifferent to the discrimination experienced by women, sexual minorities, persons with disabilities, and migrants, but even regard prohibiting such discrimination as an *unfair reverse discrimination*. At the core of this discourse on fairness lies a harsh meritocracy that views the social positions and circumstances of minorities as part of their individual ability.

In fact, there are probably not many people who can intuitively claim that hatred and discrimination against the weak are right. Nevertheless, when such issues are approached merely in terms of right and wrong and when the logic of protecting the weak is advanced, it often strengthens the affective politics of fear and hatred, together with the othering of the weak.¹⁾ This is because, in a neoliberal society where much of social life is institutionalized around competition,²⁾ many people are more likely to react sensitively to the harm or loss inflicted on themselves or on the groups to which they belong. In such circumstances, the collective power of the people tends to be used in ways that turn others into rivals or enemies, and ultimately, in ways that expel them from the community.

Even after the presidential impeachment, the former ruling party has been unable to sever its ties with far-right forces, and the reason may lie here. In other words, even if there are not many people within the party who openly express far-right positions—characterized by hostility

1) For a detailed analysis of the mechanisms of this affective politics of hostility toward others, see S. Ahmed (2014). Her exploration of how emotions operate within and across our personal and social bodies highlights the indispensable role of affect theory in the study of post-fascism. Questions such as “Whom do we love, and whom do we hate?” and “How do our judgments shape the objects of our affection and aversion, and how are those judgments entangled with our emotions?” call for a more concrete engagement with the relationship between community and the Other. However, as such an investigation would require a separate set of methodologies and analytical frameworks, it will be reserved for future research. In this paper, I focus specifically on the problem of *thinking* as a point of entry into the issue of post-fascism.

2) Groupe d'Etudes du Néolibéralisme et des Alternatives (Research Group on Neoliberalism and Alternatives, GENA) (Dardot et al., 2024) systematically analyzes how explaining neoliberalism as a theory of the minimal state distorts its actual nature. They demonstrate that neoliberalism is a governing strategy based on a strong state whose goal is to reorganize laws and institutions in order to guarantee the economic freedom of individuals and corporations.

toward sexual minorities and foreigners, sexism and racism, and extreme nationalism, patriotism, and anti-democratic tendencies—it can be assumed that, as more people come to feel threatened in their own survival, they are likely to be drawn into the current of hostility toward others and to support policies that represent far-right positions. Both major parties share the same goal of winning the support of the majority that identifies as neither left nor right, and it can be said that they also share the same assessment of the potential radicalization of the center. If that assessment is correct, then as long as the rules of the game remain such that one can survive only when the other is eliminated, the democratic camp can never win this game. Above all, under this competitive system, not only various minority groups but the lives of the people as a whole—including those very groups—will inevitably become more precarious and vulnerable.

The rules of the game must be changed. We must move beyond the institutions and discourses grounded in neoliberal competition. It is necessary to build various institutions through which everyone can enjoy the basic rights of life—such as the right to housing, migration, labor, education, and health care. To achieve this, the support of the majority is essential, and a discourse capable of countering neoliberalism must be formed so that such majority support can move toward the protection of universal basic rights. At the same time, the collective intelligence of the people must be actively exercised around that discourse. For this to happen, the critical thinking of the people—thinking that transcends existing discourses—is indispensable. Meanwhile, T. W. Adorno (2020), in his lecture *Aspects of the New Right-Wing Radicalism*, uses the terms right-wing radicalism and fascism synonymously, while emphasizing the need to pay attention to the differences between the fascism of the Nazi

era and the new right-wing radicalism of the mid-1960s. This statement not only calls for attention to difference but, more importantly, warns that the newly emerging fascism may be difficult to recognize precisely because it appears different from the militaristic fascism of the past. The same applies to the twenty-first century: we must clearly grasp the dangers of the fascist tendencies of the new right-wing radicalism that has merged with neoliberalism.

Therefore, this paper seeks to examine the main characteristics of post-fascism today and to address the problem of critical thinking by focusing on the people's fundamental capacity to resist such tendencies. During the period of impeachment politics, when the people were divided and turned against one another, critical thinking in many cases disappeared from both sides. According to H. Arendt and J. Butler, critical thinking is fundamentally grounded in relationality with others. Of course, we remember those fleeting moments of solidarity in difference that shone during the pro-impeachment rallies and the gatherings at Namtaeryeong. Yet, during that period, we also recall that it was often easier to make enemies than friends, and that many preferred quick conclusions to long and difficult discussions. In section II-1, I will examine the features and tendencies of post-fascism; in section II-2, I will explore what critical thinking means through the thought of Arendt and Butler; and in section III, I will clarify the conditions of thinking and action through their key concepts of plurality and cohabitation. Finally, following Butler, I will propose interdependency as a basic principle of social relations, as part of constructing a discourse that can counter neoliberal fascism.

II. Post-Fascism and Critical Thinking

1. Post-Fascism and Hostility toward Others

In today's new version of the neoliberal system, the tendencies of post-fascism are becoming more intense. Because of its common feature of promoting or tolerating xenophobia and violence, post-fascism is often equated with right-wing populism.³⁾ Although the term populism is widely employed, this paper retains the term post-fascism to make explicit that we are dealing with a new form of fascism. In recent years, political forces that openly advocate nationalism and racism have become mainstream in major powers, and in several countries, wars of military aggression have actually been waged to pursue territorial subjugation and even genocide. For this reason, the term populism fails to convey the full gravity of the current situation.⁴⁾

Of course, populism is indeed a useful term in that it reveals the ambivalence of democracy—and, more specifically, how democracy can become vulnerable within its own institutional framework by enabling the *tyranny of the majority*. C. Mudde (2021:14), in discussing the relationship between the far right and populism, defines populism as “a thin-centered ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic camps, *the pure people* versus *the corrupt elite*, and that argues politics should be an expression of the general will (*volonté générale*) of the people.” Within the spectrum of

3) Finchelstein (2023:14) clearly defines populism as a form of post-fascism—that is, as fascism transformed to fit the democratic age.

4) Riemen (2020:14) even criticizes the very use of the term populism for encouraging a tendency to deny the phenomenon of fascism itself.

the far right, Mudde (ibid:13-14) classifies the extreme right as fascism, which rejects popular sovereignty and majority rule altogether and is, by its nature, anti-democratic. By contrast, the radical right accepts popular sovereignty and majority rule but opposes such liberal-democratic principles as the rule of law, separation of powers, and minority rights. Thus, while the extreme right cannot be populist, the radical right can be.

This distinction is not made merely from a synchronic perspective. It is rather derived from a diachronic analysis that traces how far-right movements have evolved from the postwar period to the present. Mudde (ibid:13) basically interprets the right as an ideological position that views *inequality* in human society as both natural and positive, and therefore believes that the government should maintain or protect such inequality as it is. In the early to mid-twentieth century, fascists radicalized this position by asserting that humanity was hierarchically divided into superior and inferior races, and that because the inferior races sought to dominate the superior ones, the latter had to eliminate the former preemptively. Following this claim, Jews, communists, sexual minorities, Roma, persons with physical or mental impairments and disabilities, and the ill were identified as target groups; many of those regarded as belonging to these groups lost their basic rights, were expelled, or perished in concentration camps. After the war—particularly between 1945 and 2000—a third wave of far-right politics emerged. The related social phenomena and movements were initially called neo-fascism, later the extreme right in the 1980s, and the radical right in the 1990s. Subsequently, another form of far-right politics appeared in the early twenty-first century, termed the populist radical right. From this point on, far-right politics entered what Mudde calls its fourth

wave, a current that continues to this day. At present, the term far right has become the most commonly used designation.⁵⁾

However, this shift in terminology reveals that the far right has moved— at least in theory—from an explicitly anti-democratic stance toward one that professes to support democracy. As a corollary, in the 2020s, the overt expression of sexism or racism is sometimes perceived as a form of honesty, and thus openly anti-democratic positions occasionally gain popular support. The problem is that, despite these changes in appearance, the institutional and value structures grounded in the legacy of fascism—particularly those based on hostility toward others—remain intact. Moreover, precisely because of these changes, such structures and values have become normalized, expanding the range within which actual policies tolerate hostility toward others. For example, both the extreme right and the radical right share a form of anti-immigrant exclusionism that combines nationalism and xenophobia. Once they begin to compete with one another, they cease to question this exclusionism itself, and as a result, discriminatory immigration policies come to be widely accepted. Similarly, anti-communism, anti-feminism, and anti-homosexuality follow comparable processes of

5) This typology is, of course, approximate. In concrete developments, populist forms adapted to the social atmosphere of each period appeared relatively early. According to Mudde's more detailed classification (ibid:23-38), neo-fascism persisted between 1945 and 1955, while in the period from 1955 to 1980, far-right organizations continued to exist and new parties were founded, alongside the emergence of the populist radical right. From 1980 to 2000, radical right populists began their bid for entry into parliamentary politics, and since the 2000s, the mainstreaming of the far right—most notably through the exploitation of the events of 9/11, the 2008 financial crisis, and the 2015 refugee crisis—has become characteristic. For a detailed historical account of far-right politics after 1945, which inherited the legacy of fascism, see chapter 7, "Other Times, Other Places," in R. O. Paxton (2024:391-459).

normalization through partisan rivalry and the mobilization of supporters.

To understand post-fascism, we must focus on the legacy of fascism and examine its core features and tendencies. G. M. Tamás (2000) identifies the central characteristic of post-fascism as a “hostility toward universal citizenship,” making clear that this is what connects it to classical fascism. According to Tamás, before modernity, citizenship was a restricted privilege determined by criteria such as lineage, class, race, and gender. With the Enlightenment, however, citizenship emerged as a universal right that allowed every human being to belong to a political community. In other words, the ideal of modern democracy rests on the principle that the very fact of being human constitutes the foundation of political rights. On this basis, the state is obligated to guarantee various rights enabling all individuals, as equal legal subjects, to participate in the political community. Yet, whereas the fascist state destroyed this principle through terror, post-fascism preserves it formally while effectively dismantling it without the use of terror.

This destruction takes place, as H. Arendt (2004) once argued, through the deprivation of *the right to have rights*. It exploits the fact that the modern nation-state is, in practice, obligated to protect only the rights of those who hold its citizenship. Fascist regimes deprived their opponents and those deemed unfit of citizenship, thereby rendering them stateless. What became clear in this process was that exclusion from citizenship meant, quite literally, exclusion from humanity itself. Despite the proclamations of the modern declarations of human rights, those without nationality—the non-citizens—were left without any legal protection of their so-called universal rights and, consequently, found even their right to life imperiled. This is the aporia of human rights that emerged within the framework of the modern nation-state. The problem

is that today’s societies, where post-fascist tendencies are intensifying, still exist within that same framework. Those outside citizenship continue to be denied effective legal protection, and their basic rights are violated through numerous discriminatory laws that distinguish between citizens and non-citizens.

Within the framework of the nation-state, hostility toward universal citizenship is grounded in the illusion that only a single ethnicity or race can constitute the people. This hostility rests on the fantasy of national homogeneity and manifests itself as enmity toward those whose very presence calls the qualification for citizenship into question. It also carries the implicit claim that the Other cannot be granted the same rights as *us*, the supposedly homogeneous collective. Outside relations of equality, the Other can never be a friend or even a human being, but only a competitor or an enemy. Building on this hostility toward others, both fascism and post-fascism share the ideology of social Darwinism, which the GENA define as “an ideology that conceives of society as a place where nations and races engage in a general and perpetual struggle for survival” (Dardot et al., 2024:290). In traditional totalitarian regimes, fascism—understood as a principled form of social Darwinism—granted national membership, and thus human status, to certain races or ethnicities deemed superior, while actively stripping both citizenship and humanity from those branded as unworthy. By contrast, post-fascism under the neoliberal order no longer rigidly measures citizenship by race or ethnicity, nor does it directly revoke citizenship or take lives. Yet it effectively de-nationalizes and de-humanizes the Other by refusing to protect the rights of those who have *lost* in the so-called competition of life—through a complex web of legal and administrative classifications.

It should also not be overlooked that both phenomena arose from

modern capitalist mass society, whose fundamental unit is the atomized or independent individual. The hostility toward others that appears in fascism and post-fascism is nourished by the isolation and loneliness of politically powerless individuals (Arendt, 2004:610-612). When people feel that they cannot change the miserable conditions of their lives—either by themselves or together with others—they begin to seek someone who can deliver them from their state of abandonment and to long for a homogeneous collective in which they can escape isolation and experience belonging (Hertz, 2022:64-70). At first glance, it may seem that, whereas the fascism of the past enforced the idolization of the leader and the subordination of individuals to the whole, post-fascism in the present achieves the same effect voluntarily. Yet both arise from the same condition: people whose right to live is not protected seek survival by belonging to homogeneous groups and excluding others.

In summary, post-fascism is characterized by the deprivation of others' citizenship on the basis of the illusion of a homogeneous society, while taking competition among independent individuals—according to social Darwinism—as its fundamental principle. What, then, are the main manifestations of post-fascism, which may be regarded as the fourth wave of far-right politics? In the fully developed neoliberal world, post-fascism is most clearly expressed in the *division of the people* and the *radicalization of the center*. As is well known, a society in which neoliberal rationality is fully realized operates on competition as its basic principle, making inequality and discrimination not only legitimate but normative (Brown, 2017:80). In such a society, as G. M. Tamás (2000) points out, citizenship becomes a privilege. Citizens, wishing to secure an advantageous position in competition, are unwilling to share their privileges with non-citizens; consequently, majorities do not oppose

restricting refugees, stateless persons, and migrant workers from legal protection, welfare, or political participation. For example, the far right's defining traits—"nationalism, racism, xenophobia, anti-democracy, and advocacy of a strong state" (Ebner, 2021:16)—have gradually become generalized positions, differing only in degree between parties or factions that assert them openly and those that claim to defend national interests while opposing the far right. In the same way, domestic minority claims to rights are increasingly perceived by the majority as infringements on their privileges or as encroachments upon their advantageous position, and such sentiments are becoming ever more normalized. Compared with the present moment in 2025, it almost appears that in the 2000s, the idea that universal citizenship is a right for all people—and thus must be upheld—was accepted by most as a matter of common sense.⁶⁾

Post-fascism has deepened as inequality and discrimination have become normalized within the neoliberal system of competition. This condition manifests itself in two closely connected forms: the division of the people and the radicalization of the center. The majority of citizens are now divided—not uniting in solidarity to claim equal rights, but competing with and separating themselves from one another into homogeneous and heterogeneous groups. Citizens distinguish between citizens, non-citizens, and second-class citizens, excluding the latter from the human community while failing to recognize such exclusion as

6) S. Ahmed (2014) analyzes concrete cases of post-fascism under the neoliberal order through emotions such as pain, hatred, fear, disgust, shame, and love. They examine examples from the United Kingdom, the United States, and Australia in the 2000s. The discourses about refugees and migrants, sexual minorities, and indigenous peoples that Ahmed treats as key texts reveal, in comparison with the present, how the subtle rationalization of exclusion at that time now seems almost to define what counts as common sense. It is clear that this very process has deepened the phenomena of post-fascism.

an act of violence. In neoliberal society, inequality and discrimination based on merit are taken for granted, and the violence of expulsion and exclusion is legitimized as legal procedure or administrative management.

Power arises only through solidarity among the people, yet as divisions become more minute and antagonistic, it becomes increasingly difficult for them to act as political subjects capable of determining the conditions of their lives. Moreover, the instability of labor and the growing number of people whose lives are left unprotected in neoliberal society intensify hostility toward others and processes of exclusion. Within this dynamic, overt hatred toward minorities, as well as explicit racism and nationalism, gain strength. As a result, institutional decisions that differentiate and selectively apply rights among the people come to appear more reasonable, gradually gaining support from the political center. Thus the people, in the name of sovereignty, become judges who decide who does and does not belong to the civic community.

2. Critical Thinking and Relation to the Other

Analyzing the psychological structure of fascist society, G. Bataille (2022:33) defines sovereignty as “the imperative form of heterogeneous existence,” in contrast to the degraded form of the heterogeneous. Fundamentally, he divides society into two domains: that of homogeneity and that of heterogeneity. The former is grounded in production, where activity centers on productivity and utility. The common measure underlying such activity is money, that is, exchange value—the principle of calculable equivalence among different products—so that even human beings become functions of measurable production. The latter comprises everything expelled by homogeneous society: “the entire outcome of

unproductive expenditure” (ibid:25), including both those beings regarded as filth and waste and those considered to possess transcendent, superior value.

In connection with the domain of heterogeneity, Bataille argues that fascist leaders such as Mussolini and Hitler belong to the category of heterogeneous beings. At the same time, he claims that the lowest stratum of society—the poor, who are regarded as untouchables—also belongs to this category. According to Bataille (ibid:30-31), in so-called advanced civilized nations, poverty represents “this disgusting form of degradation,” which, like filth, “provokes an unbearable repugnance, so that to express or even to allude to it is considered improper.” In other words, heterogeneous beings are regarded as those who cannot be assimilated into humanity. However, the heterogeneity of the former type is linked to the state, which represents another facet of social homogeneity; this kind of heterogeneity is understood as an imperative *souveraineté* (sovereignty) that exercises *supériorité* (superiority). Bataille (ibid: 30) notes that the word *souverain* (sovereign) is derived from the Latin adjective *superaneus*, meaning *supérieur* (superior). Human domination over other humans—that is, domination among those of the same kind—is thus justified through this notion of superiority. In this way, the relationship between ruler and ruled is established: the heterogeneous nature of the ruled becomes entangled with filth and waste, while the nature of the ruler is formed through the very act of judging and excluding the existence of the other (ibid:34-35).

Even in the case of post-fascism, the same mechanism operates, but sovereignty is exercised not through a totalitarian or authoritarian government led by a single ruler, but rather through a series of policies, practices, and everyday procedures that reflect the choices of the

majority. According to Bataille (ibid:16-17), the state functions through the dual operation of authority and conformity: in a democratic state, conformity prevails, whereas in a dictatorial state, authority prevails. In a democratic state, however, sovereignty inevitably weakens as the people become more diverse, and it strengthens when they are unified around a single object of support or hostility. Yet in the latter case, unless the majority supports universal citizenship and diversity itself, democracy is again destined to weaken. In such circumstances, conformity takes the form of submission to the authority of a homogeneous majority.

Moreover, neoliberalism requires a strong sovereign state in order to establish a society based on competition, and under the protection of such a state, it even legitimizes a form of “liberal dictatorship” (Dardot et al., 2024:24-25). Even without coups or dictatorships, the neoliberal state adopts competition as the principle of governance, dividing winners and losers in every domain of social life and refusing to protect the lives of the latter. If, on the basis of neoliberal rationality, the majority continues to choose and conform to policies and institutions that denationalize the other—whether the other who has entered the national community or the other within it—such choices will strengthen the sovereignty of a homogenized people, be rationalized through claims of superiority, and thereby neutralize equality, the principle of action that animates democracy. In fact, since the 2000s, the full-scale implementation of neoliberalism has rendered demands for political and economic equality powerless by institutionalizing competition and legitimizing the discrimination and inequality between winners and losers as expressions of meritocratic superiority and inferiority. Therefore, the post-fascist tendencies of the 2020s are not only a legacy of fascism—which divided human beings into superior and inferior kinds and justified inequality—but also the

result of the majority’s conformity to the institutionalization of competition. I would argue that this situation arose, in the first instance, because even as a series of policies, institutions, everyday procedures, and practices were reorganized around the logic of competition, both overtly discriminatory ideologies—such as sexism, racism, extreme nationalism, and patriotism—and more insidious forms of discrimination, such as meritocracy, were at work, yet the majority of the people failed to think critically about them.

I also contend that this absence of critical thinking among the people has intensified hostility toward others, and that this generalized hostility, in turn, has further diminished the very possibility of critical thinking. For critical thinking is fundamentally bound up with the practice of questioning the hostility toward others that sustains a homogeneous society. This means, in turn, that at the heart of the people’s political capacity to preserve and enliven democracy lies critical thinking itself.

How is this so? To answer this question, it is first necessary to clarify what critical thinking is. To this end, I turn to Arendt and Butler, both of whom have examined the meaning of thinking by revealing the connection between the absence of thought and genocide. Their reflections on thinking are best illustrated in the debates surrounding Arendt’s notion of the “banality of evil” in relation to the trial of Adolf Eichmann.⁷⁾ Arendt (2003:159) emphasized that by this term she meant “no theory or doctrine but something quite factual, the phenomenon of evil deeds, committed on a gigantic scale.” What she sought to describe

7) For studies that explore the meaning of Arendt’s concept of thinking and its relation to moral action in connection with this debate, see Han Gil-Seok (2023) and P. Formosa (2016). For another study that connects Arendt’s concept of thinking with Butler’s notion of relationality to elucidate its contemporary significance, see Yang Chang-Ah (2023).

was the phenomenon in which individuals functionally serve an organization or system that commands the expulsion and extermination of others. With respect to this phenomenon, Arendt (2006:287) discovered in Eichmann a personal trait that she called an “extraordinary shallowness.” She (ibid:288) considered this shallowness extraordinary because it confirmed Eichmann’s “sheer thoughtlessness,” even though the crime he participated in was not merely mass murder but, more precisely, what she called “administrative massacres.”

According to her, Eichmann knew what his job was and how to perform it efficiently, but he was unable to think about what the work as a whole actually meant. Arendt (2003:163) distinguishes thinking from knowing, the latter being related to “certain, verifiable knowledge.” Thinking, by contrast, is a mental activity concerned with “the quest for meaning” (ibid:165), the outcome of which is “uncertain and unverifiable” (ibid:166), and is therefore not only useless for the ordinary course of affairs but also “somehow self-destructive” (loc. cit.). Butler (2011) remarks that Arendt’s concept of thinking refers to “a more reflective mode of rationality.” *They*⁸⁾ elaborates on Arendt’s controversial claim that Eichmann could not be said to have intention as follows: “To have *intentions* in her view was to think reflectively about one’s own action as a political being, whose own life and thinking is bound up with the life and thinking of others.”

Arendt’s and Butler’s explanations of the kind of thinking Eichmann failed to perform contain the first meaning of critical thinking: it is the kind of thinking that opens oneself to others and to the world, thereby making public examination possible. To think reflectively about one’s

own action means to undertake an effort and a process of understanding how one’s actions affect others and the shared public world constituted by one’s relations with others. Although this process of thinking as a political being takes place within oneself and therefore is not identical with political action in which people share opinions through speech, it closely resembles such action in that it involves a dialogue between two positions that question and respond to each other. The internal dialogue that takes the form of critique proceeds by placing two opposing positions on an equal footing, articulating each, and asking for their justification. Arendt (1982:37) names Socrates as the paradigmatic figure who practiced this kind of thinking in life, and she describes his practice as follows: “What he actually did was to make *public*, in discourse, the thinking process—that dialogue that soundlessly goes on within me, between me and myself.”

As Socrates famously declared that *the unexamined life is not worth living*, his philosophical practice shows that he never knew the answers to the questions he himself raised when examining the virtues spoken of in the public world. He examined them not in order to gain knowledge but for the sake of examination itself (loc. cit.). Why, then, engage in such *useless* examination that yields no definitive answers? It is because encountering another standpoint makes it possible to undo the limits of one’s previous position. For this reason, critical thinking is both self-reflective and, at the same time, *self-destructive*.

This point is confirmed once again in Arendt’s decisive description of Eichmann. Eichmann’s inability to think means precisely his inability to think from the standpoint of others; this is evident in his incapacity for meaningful speech with others. The impossibility of communication with him stems from the fact that he had imprisoned himself, shutting

8) Butler identifies as non-binary, a status legally recognized in California, and is therefore referred to in this paper with the singular they pronoun.

himself off from others and from the world (Arendt, 2006:49). Without exposing oneself to others and to the world, one never encounters the limits of oneself, nor examines one's own position. In this sense, critical thinking requires the willingness to expose oneself publicly.

Second, critical thinking is a kind of practical activity that suspends one's own judgments formed within pre-established cognitive frameworks by admitting the other into oneself. Returning to the case of Eichmann, he knew that his work of deportation amounted to the killing of people. It was not that he failed to understand what he was doing out of ignorance, but that he was unable to think about the meaning of his actions because he could not take any distance from the orders given to him. Butler (2011) notes that what Arendt actually criticized in Eichmann was "his failure to be critical of positive law, that is, a failure to take distance from the requirements that law and policy imposed upon him." In other words, "his failure to think" derived from "his obedience, his lack of critical distance" toward the cognitive frameworks and norms of the society to which he belonged.

Butler (2024:6), in their early essay "What Is Critique? An Essay on Foucault's Virtue," offers a dense exploration of the meaning of critique beyond mere "fault-finding." According to Butler (ibid:13), critique is "a practice in which we pose the question of the limits of our most sure ways of knowing." Why do we raise such questions? Because heterogeneous beings that cannot be reduced to existing frameworks already encounter those limits within them. We question the limits of prevailing ideologies, habits, and conventions "because one has already run up against a crisis within the epistemological field in which one lives" (loc. cit.). The act of opening oneself to public examination, mentioned earlier, is in this sense also a practice of admitting the other

within oneself. Therefore, as Butler (ibid:14) explains, the exposure of the limits of existing cognitive frameworks is connected to the "practice of virtue." Foucault even suggests that "this critical attitude" that reveals such epistemological limits "is virtue in general," and Butler interprets this to mean that "it belongs to an ethics which is not fulfilled merely by following objectively formulated rules or laws" (loc. cit.).

Third, critical thinking can be understood as an exercise in ethical and political action through which one learns how to live with others and to build a common world. At first glance, in matters of ethics and politics, where following rules and laws seems crucial, thoughtlessness might appear more recommendable. Yet, as Arendt (1978:176-177) points out, the search for meaning through critical thinking entails a thorough questioning and dismantling of all existing doctrines and rules. For this reason, it carries the risk of moving merely to the opposite pole—mistaking such movement for the attainment of a new value—or of falling into nihilism, the belief that all values are meaningless. Nevertheless, if people do not cultivate the habit of critical thinking—of examining the content of the rules and laws they are to follow—they will simply obey whatever rules and laws exist. As a result, like Eichmann, they will easily follow and just as easily discard them, regardless of whether it is during the Nazi era or after. In the realm of ethics and politics, which concerns our shared life, thoughtlessness is far more dangerous than thinking. Human beings build a common world by learning how to live with others, and to this end, they establish rules and laws. Precisely for this reason, it is necessary to examine whether these are indeed worthy of being followed by all and whether they exclude anyone. In the actual realm of action, however, changing the rules and laws that are at issue is never an easy task. It can be achieved

only through a long and arduous process of persuasion. Persuasion is the process of making one's position intelligible to others, which is impossible without first understanding the position of the other. At its core, it requires the practice of both receiving the standpoint of others and articulating one's own. In this regard, Arendt (1982:41) traces the origin of critical thinking to the Socratic Method, which she interprets as a refinement of the method of question and answer that began when Athenian citizens demanded that politicians give an account of economic and political matters. To "give an account" (*Logon didonai*) means "not to prove, but to be able to say how one came to an opinion and for what reasons one formed it" (loc. cit.). This act of explanation takes the form of responding to questions raised by others: the questioning of the other comes first, and it is through this questioning that one articulates one's own position.

According to Arendt (ibid:41), critical thinking thus began as the act of holding politicians accountable, and later evolved—while retaining its political implications—into a philosophical attitude and activity through which every person, as a being responsible for their own thoughts and words, responds to the questions posed by others. Moreover, in a democratic society, all citizens endowed with legal rights must learn the "art of critical thinking" (ibid:42) in order to assume their share of responsibility for common concerns. The objects of such thinking include not only the "doctrines and concepts" one has uncritically taken over from one's environment or "the prejudices and traditions" one has inherited, but also those things one has learned and acquired on one's own (loc. cit.). Importantly, this art of thinking—which applies standards of critique to these objects—"cannot be learned without publicity, without the testing that arises from contact with other peoples' thinking"

(loc. cit.).⁹ Ultimately, critical thinking can neither originate from a condition of homogeneity nor be sustained by the pursuit of it. It takes place within public practices in which one learns the art of living together through contact and engagement with others as heterogeneous beings.

III. The Conditions for Critical Thinking: Plurality and Co-habitation

Accordingly, critical thinking is directly linked to the responsiveness and accountability of the *I* who is called upon to respond to the questions of the other. Butler (2005:7-8), in analyzing the violence that arises from the uncritical obedience to existing laws and norms, points out that the *I* is implicated in a set of moral norms that condition its very existence and cannot be fully separated from the social conditions that make it possible. Yet the *I* is also never fully identical with those social relations and norms—an incongruity that becomes apparent precisely through encounters with others. It is within this gap of implication and non-identity that the *I* can critically examine how the norms it follows have come into being and what they mean, thereby coming to understand the significance of its own actions, responding to others, and giving an account of oneself.¹⁰

9) R. Esposito (2017:11-15) states that he was deeply influenced by S. Weil and H. Arendt, and at the core of this influence lies an insight into the public nature of thinking—the understanding that thinking is not a merely personal or inner experience.

10) According to Butler (2005), the act of giving an account of oneself is also a

In Eichmann's case, he was unable to offer even the slightest account that demonstrated such responsiveness and accountability. What makes his failure to think so alarming—and what led Arendt to name his thoughtlessness *the banality of evil*—is that the laws and policies he in effect actively supported and complied with were those that systematically organized the extermination of others.¹¹⁾ The crucial point here is that within a fascist regime, where the expulsion and killing of others have become rules and norms, it becomes possible to produce subjects capable of executing genocidal policies without ever harboring the intention to kill. At the same time, the refusal to think about such policies and the practices that sustain them can itself become an ordinary condition.

Butler (2011) writes that “she feared that what had become *banal* was non-thinking itself.” What is terrifying about this condition is not only that the thoughtlessness of the many makes administrative massacres possible, but also that it extinguishes the very possibility of halting or transforming such a system. As Butler (2011) notes, for Arendt, “This fact was not banal at all, but unprecedented, shocking, and wrong.”

Another crucial aspect that Butler (2011) identifies in Arendt's analysis of the Eichmann trial is that Arendt insists on the unprecedented nature of these massacres not in order to establish an exceptional case for

process of reconstituting the *I* through encounters with others within the very social relations in which it has been formed. From the outset, it is the relation to the other that constitutes the self. Moreover, because the relation to the other can never be one of complete identification, any account of oneself remains necessarily partial and can never be brought to completion or closure.

11) As is well known, Eichmann was a principal official responsible for implementing the “Final Solution to the Jewish Question” (English translation of the official euphemism of *Endlösung der Judenfrage*, as expressed in Nazi policy documents). This policy was a systematic plan for the mass extermination of Jews in Europe, and his task consisted in deporting Jews from their places of residence across the continent and transporting them to extermination camps.

Israel, but rather to understand the meaning of *the crimes against humanity* that annihilated Jews, Roma, homosexuals, communists, persons with disabilities, and the ill. Arendt objected to the fact that the trial was carried out exclusively in the name of the Jewish people by a particular nation-state, Israel. She argued that the expulsion and extermination of entire heterogeneous populations was not merely an attack on one specific group but an assault on humanity itself.

Here, *humanity* does not refer to a homogeneous essence that defines humans as a species or distinguishes them from nonhuman animals. Both Arendt and Butler were well aware that such essentialist definitions of the human have historically served as criteria for excluding others from relations of equality and for rendering them inhuman (Arendt, 2004:380; Butler, 2012:148). For Arendt, humanity refers to the singularity of each person,¹²⁾ which can be guaranteed only within politically equal relations — that is, to “the plurality of humanity itself” (Butler, 2012:165). Butler (ibid:148) elaborates on this point as follows: “If to be human is to be in a relation of equality with others, then no one can become human outside of relations of equality. ... Indeed, if there is no equality, no one is human.”

As Butler (ibid:165) points out, for Arendt, genocide constitutes an

12) See A. Cavarero (2000:21), who criticizes Arendt for overlooking bodily identity and argues that when one's singular selfhood is exposed to others, its primary mode of appearance is bodily—constituted by the gaze of others—and that singularity is thus “an embodied uniqueness.” See also Butler (2005:31), who partly shares this critique, noting that Cavarero discerns in Arendt a relational conception of the political, wherein exposure to others and vulnerability provide a primary ethical demand for the *I*. For a study that emphasizes how both Arendt and Butler understand the political not as an attribute or substance but as a relation, while also elucidating their divergence concerning corporeality, see E. Ingala (2018).

attack on humanity's plurality and is therefore an unforgivable "crime against humanity." Plurality refers to the plurality of perspectives—that is, the fact that human beings each hold a distinct standpoint from which they perceive and judge the world. Yet the plurality of perspectives is not only revealed through political action but is also the very condition that makes political action possible. Politics arises because people see the world differently depending on where they stand, and it comes into being through the differences among them. If everyone were to see the world from the same perspective, no conflict would ever arise, and politics would no longer be necessary; likewise, if everyone shared the same opinion, politics as a new beginning—the activity of imagining and constructing a different world— would be impossible.

For instance, if a community fails to legally guarantee relations of equality among its heterogeneous inhabitants and to protect the right to express different opinions, the plurality of perspectives will gradually disappear. In other words, if democratic institutions and practices do not preserve plurality, critical thinking also becomes impossible. As we have seen, critical thinking cannot even begin without the presence of others, nor can it unfold without the exchange of different perspectives and opinions. For this reason, under fascism, genocide is "an assault against thinking" (Butler, 2011). Once the conditions for political action and thinking are destroyed, protecting the life and rights of heterogeneous others not only becomes difficult but is even deemed unnecessary.

Arendt (2004:588) made it clear early on that the essence of the fascist regime "strives not toward despotic rule over men, but toward a system in which men are superfluous." The form of "total domination," which she called "totalitarianism," reveals its true nature in the concentration camps, where human beings are reduced to creatures

capable only of obedience— that is, beings incapable of both action and thought.

According to Arendt (ibid:588-591), the camp system was established on the legal procedures of the modern nation-state that had already functioned as a machine for producing stateless persons during the interwar period through the massive deprivation of citizenship. Those who supported and implemented such policies not only realized that they could free themselves from the legal obligation to protect the lives of refugees, but also discovered that, with the loss of juridical personality, the process of dehumanization itself could be accomplished. The deprivation of one's juridical personality ultimately enabled the destruction of one's moral personality and the singular personality of the individual. By expelling people from relations of equality and severing all forms of connection with society, total domination made possible the eradication of humanity itself. The camp system thus became a system for producing superfluous beings—an laboratory designed to turn human beings into entities incapable of anything beyond mere reaction or mechanical function.

Butler (2012:154-167) clarifies the implications of genocide—what Arendt understood as the destruction of plurality—through their analysis of Arendt's fictional judgment on Eichmann. Arendt (2006) points out that the policy Eichmann uncritically carried out and actively endorsed was, in essence, "a policy of not wanting to share the earth with the Jewish people and the people of a number of other nations" (2006:279). She immediately adds that "as though you and your superiors had any right to determine who should and who should not inhabit the world" (loc. cit.).

Butler (2012:166) interprets the core significance of this judgment— addressed to the defendant but also a response to those who suffered

from his actions and to the world itself—as follows: “there is no right to choose with whom to cohabit the earth or world.” They (loc. cit.) further clarifies this meaning: “To exercise a right to decide with whom to cohabit this earth is to invoke a genocidal prerogative.”

In this context, Butler (loc. cit.) reformulates plurality as “cohabitation with others we never choose.” Cohabitation—that is, living together with others on this earth—is a condition of human life that precedes any particular community or nation-state. According to both thinkers, those who supported and implemented genocidal policies such as the *Final Solution* acted as though they possessed a sovereign privilege to decide who could and could not share the earth with others. As discussed earlier, such privileged action was justified through the othering of victimized groups as inferior and through the assertion of sovereign superiority. Yet cohabitation is both a given reality and a fundamental condition of being human—not as a homogeneous species, but as a plurality of beings, each manifesting singularity. In this sense, no individual or collective can, in principle, claim a genocidal privilege within human society. This is why Butler (2012:125) writes that “the heterogeneity of the earth’s population is an irreversible condition of social and political life itself.”

Plurality and cohabitation are key concepts that indicate the fundamental condition through which the heterogeneity of others makes social bonds possible. They oppose the fascist social psychology—and its corresponding policies—that position the heterogeneity of others either as the attribute of an inferior group or as the sovereignty of a superior one. Viewed as a whole, the genocides of fascist regimes revealed that violence—“a way in which we are given over, without control, to the will of another, a way in which life itself can be expunged by the willful action of another” (Butler, 2004:28-29)—can be meticulously carried out by the

invisible majority.

At the core of this fascist psychology lies the familiar desire to establish relations of domination and subordination among people, and the equally familiar desire to submit to authority in order to escape responsibility. Opposed to this is a political desire—the democratic desire for non-domination, for forming relations of equality with others. Critical thinking is indispensable to this kind of social bond: it is the people’s practical capacity and mode of responsibility through which a democratic politics—one that reveals heterogeneity among members and builds a shared world—can be sustained.

Yet in a society where the structure of competition has become all-encompassing—where both inter-state and interpersonal rivalries intensify—how can the desire to form relations of equality be sustained? How can we take the perspective of a competing or even antagonistic other into ourselves, turning them into a partner in dialogue, even a friend? Although the concrete ways to protect democracy and revitalize critical thinking cannot be discussed here, on the basis of the foregoing analysis we can at least turn to the conditions and the social principles that make them possible.

In this regard, Butler (2004:31-32) relocates the very concept of the human—our way of understanding what it means to be human—from the superiority of sovereignty and national belonging to the site of vulnerability, where exposure to violence is most acute. They draws our attention to the primary bodily vulnerability that precedes the formation of the *I*. Human beings are beings given over to the touch of others—unable to sustain even their most basic needs for life without assistance—and thus can never exist as independent individuals. Such dependency is directly visible in infancy, yet it persists throughout adulthood as well. Human

life is fundamentally interdependent; it is supported and sustained through relations of dependence on others, and also—Butler (2021:60) adds—on the “social and material structures” and the “environment” that make life possible.

The problem lies in the fact that “lives are supported and maintained differently” (Butler, 2004:32). Genocides are still carried out today, not always through direct violence, but through policies that treat human bodily vulnerability unequally—protecting certain lives while withdrawing the obligation to protect others. Within neoliberal rationality, people not only find it difficult to grasp how the conditions for protecting the bodily vulnerability of others are denied and exploited, but also how the same conditions for protecting their own bodily vulnerability are negated and exploited. This is because, in a neoliberal society, the individual is assumed to be the basic unit of society and an independent being who attains economic freedom through their own capacities. Butler (2021:59) argues that only by breaking away from this “presumptive individualism” can thinking and acting in ways that do not collude with mass violence begin to emerge.¹³⁾

Butler (ibid:64-65) also argues that because of presumptive individualism, vulnerability tends to be understood as a subjective state, and equality is often formulated merely as an individual issue. As noted earlier, however, vulnerability should not be regarded as the condition of any single individual but rather “as a feature of our shared or

interdependent lives,” that is, as an attribute of a common life constituted through relations with others (ibid:65). For example, in order to live, I depend on the people I love, on a basic income, on political institutions that guarantee freedom of speech, and on a public health system that allows me to receive care when I am ill. Yet if I lose these—if I lose loved ones, my job, or if democratic and medical institutions collapse—I become so vulnerable that I can no longer sustain my life. Within this relational understanding of vulnerability—“not my vulnerability or yours, but rather a feature of the relation that binds us to one another and to the larger structures and institutions upon which we depend for the continuation of life” (ibid:66)—we can never exist as complete individuals separated from the very conditions that make life possible.

Equality, too, must be understood and demanded within these conditions of interdependence—that is, not as an individual right, but as a property of social relations. As discussed earlier, neoliberal society has institutionalized the principle of competition across all spheres of life, thereby legitimizing and normalizing inequality and discrimination among people. According to Butler (ibid:65), in order to resist this, equality must not be conceived or demanded as an individual right against discrimination, but rather as a collective and social right—one that enables the construction of egalitarian relations through concrete practices and institutions. For instance, the rights to housing, mobility, or healthcare can be understood and claimed not as the rights of discriminated individuals with specific identities, but within the framework of Universal Basic Services, which aim to secure the fundamental rights of all residents. Of course, asserting equality as a social right cannot be achieved without reexamining individual conceptions of equality and imagining concrete practices and institutions that realize it.

13) On the other hand, as Esposito (2017:29) points out, Arendt evaluates the ancient Greek spirit of *agon* in a positive light, yet she also notes that it degenerated into an excessive passion for distinction and an extreme individualism that ultimately led to the ruin of the polis. This pursuit of superiority and radical individualism, she argues, rendered impossible the interdependent solidarity that forms the very foundation of a shared life.

Nevertheless, Butler (ibid:64) points out that when equality is formulated merely as an individual issue, “that formulation, as important as it is, does not tell us by virtue of what set of relationships social and political equality becomes thinkable.” In other words, they emphasize that the relations of dependency upon others constitute the very foundation of life itself. If this point is not taken into account, equality—when formalized as an individual right within neoliberal society—ends up serving merely to compare individuals within the system, thereby obscuring the shared political responsibility and social obligations we owe to one another (loc. cit.).

IV. Conclusion

M. Blanchot (2009:154-156) observes that, in the aftermath of the May '68 revolution in France, when people around him were declaring the political death of Charles de Gaulle, he suddenly realized that what such statements referred to was not merely the president himself: “He himself is nothing. He is only the representative of our own political death. He too is a victim, a mask behind which there is nothing but emptiness” (ibid:155). This means that when people believe that the death of the president alone signifies change while the existing order and practices remain the same, what is actually revealed is the political death of the people. Blanchot’s insight is that when the people give up politics as the action of a new beginning or as the enactment of living democracy, they cannot help but repeat the meaninglessness produced by the existing system and its conventions.

What Blanchot feared as the political death of the people signifies the

death of politics itself—the extinction of the very possibility of living critical thinking and democratic action. Within so-called democratic nations, the disintegration of democracy becomes most apparent when the majority denies universal citizenship and revives the old ideologies of hostility toward others. When the people otherize those who inhabit the same community and support policies that deny equality in order to preserve the privileges of a homogeneous group, they damage the very foundations of social solidarity and bring about division. Today, both domestically and internationally, the rise of various forms of the far right can be seen as a masquerade representing this collective psychology—a spectacle of the people’s desire to preserve privilege by rejecting equality.

Yet behind the masks that represent homogenized collectives bound together by hostility toward others, there is nothing but meaninglessness and emptiness. As the preceding analysis of critical thinking has shown, meaning arises only through relations with others. When the heterogeneity of others grounds the very fabric of social relations, and when the principle of interdependence makes possible an equality among plural perspectives, we can open a different kind of masquerade within our shared world—one in which each life reveals itself in manifold and meaningful ways. Only when people are capable of entering into legal and moral relations with others can the singularity of each person appear within those relations. By contrast, when individuals fail to form meaningful relations with others, they easily succumb to the fascistic desire for homogeneity and superiority, a desire that can lead only in circles back to the void. Since no one can ever be identical to another, any structure of domination based on the hierarchy of superiority and inferiority destroys the very possibility of forming those relations with

others through which life itself comes to have meaning.

What is crucial, then, is to resist the system that divides heterogeneous individuals and groups through competition and hostility. Arendt and Butler, in opposition to such a system, propose plurality and cohabitation as the fundamental conditions for the constitution of human society, exploring the possibilities of politics and ethics that can bind heterogeneous beings together. They argue that the potential for such politics and ethics does not lie in some transcendent entity beyond human society, but within it—that is, in our shared political responsibility to respond to one another. In this sense, both thinkers oppose the fascist desire to occupy the place of the superior being by affirming the solidarity of vulnerable lives that cannot survive without each other.

Mudde (2021:143) discusses a long-standing debate concerning the rise of far-right parties—namely, the question of whether people vote for such parties primarily for economic or cultural reasons. The first position holds that support for the far right arises as a response to the economic insecurity caused by neoliberal globalization. The second position, by contrast, views the same phenomenon from another angle, arguing that people vote for far-right parties because they feel that mass immigration and the rise of multicultural societies threaten the cultural identity of the nation. According to Mudde, the outcome of this debate suggests that voters driven by cultural backlash outnumber those motivated solely by economic insecurity, and that the two factors are not in opposition but rather operate in a significantly complementary way. He (ibid:144) argues that most of the support for far-right politics can be understood as a socio-cultural translation of socio-economic anxiety. One of the clearest manifestations of this dynamic can be found in welfare chauvinism—the belief that welfare benefits should be

reserved exclusively for citizens of the nation, that is, those recognized as members of the national community—where this synthesis becomes most apparent.

When hostility toward others and the assertion of privilege by homogeneous groups continue to recur within democratic nations, no amount of rationalization can prevent democracy from weakening and collapsing from within. The vitality of democracy lies in its capacity to embrace heterogeneity. To oppose such heterogeneity, according to Arendt and Butler, is to deny—or to evade responsibility for—the fact that no life can persist without the social ties that bind it to others, that our lives are fundamentally connected and entangled. When the people themselves attack the plurality that can only be achieved through relations with others, they destroy the very conditions of political action and thinking; and in doing so, they destroy the very conditions of human life itself. *The failure to think*, as Butler (2011) puts it, is precisely the failure to think this connectedness—the failure to consider the necessity and value of the relations with others that make thinking itself possible.

This further demonstrates that fascism is not an exceptional event confined to a particular historical moment, but an enduring force that can recur at any time, depending on the choices of the people. Therefore, the possibility of interrupting and transforming existing structures of relations grounded in competition and hostility depends on the people's capacity for critical thinking. Critical thinking, in the end, is the practice of thinking heterogeneity on the basis of the principle of interdependence. The depth of thought arises not from withdrawal from the world and immersion in the self, but, above all, from encounters with others and with a plurality of perspectives. The ground and source of thinking lie

in others and in the world—in the complex, shared reality that people build together and in which they leave traces of one another. Thinking, in this sense, is never a purely private activity that can be carried out in complete isolation. When people lose the capacity to understand the world and to connect themselves with others—when the public function of thought ceases to operate—democracy loses its vitality. Post-fascism arises and intensifies alongside a democracy that, within the homogeneous structures of a society governed by the principle of competition, has already lost its life force. For democracy to endure, it is essential that we develop the capacity to relate to heterogeneous others in order to think critically, and to protect the plurality without which no shared world can ever be sustained.

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❖ 국문초록

포스트 파시즘과 비판적 사유의 위기

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오늘날 새로운 버전의 신자유주의 체제에서 포스트 파시즘의 경향이 심화되고 있다. 포스트 파시즘은 사회진화론에 따라 독립된 개인 사이의 경쟁을 근본 원리로 삼고, 동질 사회의 환상을 근간으로 타자의 시민권을 박탈하는 것을 핵심 특징으로 한다. 그것은 인민의 분열과 중도의 극단주의화 양상으로 잘 드러난다. 이 글은 한나 아렌트와 주디스 버틀러 사상의 교차점을 중심으로 이 양상을 가능하게 한 하나의 요소로서 비판적 사유의 결여에 주목한다.

두 사상가는 비판적 사유의 결여가 타자 적대는 물론이고 학살까지도 가능하게 한다는 문제의식을 공유한다. 아렌트에게 사유의 조건인 ‘복수성’은 정치적 삶과 인간적 삶의 조건이기도 하다. 버틀러는 이를 우리가 지구상에서 이질적 타자와 함께 산다는 ‘공동거주’의 조건으로 명료화하고, 이 조건이 사회적 유대를 가능하게 한다고 주장한다. 또한 그는 어떤 삶도 타자와 묶여 있는 사회적 삶 없이 존속할 수 없다고 말하며, ‘상호의존’을 사회존재론의 원리로 제시한다. 비판적 사유는 결국 상호의존의 원리를 바탕으로 이질성을 사유하는 것이다. 이러한 사유를 멈추는 순간, 동질 사회의 시민은 공동체의 타자 적대를 방치하거나 거기에 가담하기 쉽다.

주제어: 포스트 파시즘, 타자 적대, 비판적 사유, 한나 아렌트, 주디스 버틀러

- 논문투고일 : 2025. 10. 31
- 심사완료일 : 2025. 11. 24
- 게재확정일 : 2025. 12. 02

Butler for and against Levinas

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❖ ABSTRACT

This paper aims to examine Butler's assessment of Levinas. Specifically, it focuses on clarifying where Butler converges and diverges with Levinas's philosophy, and how her appropriation of Levinasian thought manifests in her own philosophy. Scholars who found important philosophical insights in Butler's feminism theory and gender theory have expressed deep concern about her focus on ethics and Levinas. They argue that she substitutes ethics for crucial political issues, uncritically adopts Levinas's concept of the face. So, was Butler duped by ethics or Levinas? No, she is not. Her interest in Levinas merits an effective critique of Enlightenment rationality, more precisely of the atomistic, autonomous subject. What she sought to discover in Levinas was a fundamental orientation toward others, that is, the interdependency among me and the other, among ethics and politics. She aims to extend Levinas's concept of responsibility into the realm of politics. Thus, Butler grounds the ethics of asymmetry in reciprocity. Whereas vulnerability in Levinas is essentially the subject's vulnerability to the Other, in Butler it is defined as the common nature of the subject in general. If Levinas sought to argue for the 'vulnerable subject,' Butler seeks to speak of the 'vulnerable humans.' And through these vulnerable, interdependent subjects, she seeks to devise ways to resolve the unjust forms of inequality accelerated by neoliberalism. So, we can say, borrowing Derrida's terms, as follows: Levinas did not visit Butler. He was invited by her.

Keywords : subject, other, face, responsibility, vulnerability, ontology

I. Butler and Levinas

Emmanuel Levinas told us in *Totality and Infinity*: “It is of the highest importance to know whether we are not duped by morality”(1969:21). This sentence, as the opening line of the French edition’s preface to this book, serves to evoke the history of philosophy where morality—that is, ethics—had bowed its head before the reason as self-interest and the politics as the calculation of self-interest. So how does Levinas approach this problem? In conclusion, he challenges traditional philosophers who “found morality on politics,”(1969:22) by reversing the relationship between ethics and politics. Levinas’s approach to this issue is to rethink ethics in a new way, relating ethics to beyond politics while confronting ethics with politics. This issue is supported by conceptions such as the infinity of the Other,¹⁾ the constitution of the subject through the relationship to infinite Other, and the one for the Other.

As is well known, since 2000, Butler has been deeply engaged with questions of ethics, referring on the work of Levinas. Many scholars who had found important political insights in Butler’s feminism theory and gender theory have expressed concern about her interest in ethics and Levinas, namely about her so-called ‘ethical turn.’ Criticisms such as Butler “substituting[substitutes] ethical abstraction for political analysis in some of her recent Levinasian and Arendtian turns”(Segal 2008:384) or “instead of subjecting to critical scrutiny the ‘Levinasian’

idea of the face as the means by which others make ethical demands on us, Butler simply concurs with it”(Lloyd 2008:103) are representative. Given that Levinas contrasts the ethical with the political and links politics to judgment, ethics to responsibility, such concerns are not entirely misplaced. It is of the highest importance to know whether Butler is not duped by morality and Levinas. Was she duped by him? My answer is no. Her interest in ethics and Levinas is less about ethics itself than about ethics in relation to politics. One might say she seeks to transcend the dichotomy between ethics and politics. To borrow her expression, her primary concern was the “ethical stakes” in “political encounters”, “the political modalities” that constitute “fundamental ethical questions”(2013:74). So, she “takes distance from Levinas”(2015:108) in many ways. She made this point in several places. Examples include as follows: “[to] use Levinas against himself to help in the articulation of a global ethics,”(2013:107) or “I would prefer to think with Levinas against Levinas and to pursue a possible direction for his ethics and his politics that he did not pursue”(2012:61).

Therefore, Butler does not simply accept Levinas, but interprets and appropriates him. Her attention to Levinas represents an effective criticism of Enlightenment rationality, above all of the modern conception of the subject as an individualistic, atomic, autonomous agent. What she finds in Levinas is an original orientation towards others, namely other-directedness. The subject is for and by the other and is responsible for him. In particular, She tends to extend his ethics, his notion of the responsibility into the domain of politics. This paper aims to examine Butler’s assessment of Levinas. More specifically, it focuses on clarifying where Butler converges and diverges with Levinas’s philosophy, and how her active appropriation of Levinas’s philosophy is revealed in her

1) In this paper, I distinguish between ‘the other’ and ‘the Other.’ The term ‘the other’ means the human other in its specificity. But the term needs to mean something significantly different. In Levinas, the human other is not only different from me but also transcends me. To express Levinas’s thoughts that emphasize the asymmetry between the self and the other and the transcendence of the other over the self, we use the word ‘the Other’ instead of ‘the other.’

own philosophy. This kind of discussion will help us confirm the possibility of dialogue between Levinas and Butler, and examine how her appropriation of Levinasian thought manifests in her own philosophy, how Levinas's philosophy—sometimes criticized for being unrealistic and very limited in its scope—can be translated into our reality.

II. Butler's appropriation of Levinas

Butler was skeptical of the role that ethical discourse plays in radical political theory. But Butler recently has developed her thinking by placing ethics at the center of political affairs and critical theories. Butler, who had focused on gender politics surrounding the signifier 'woman,' began to explore issues of ethics and political philosophy centered on the concept of 'human/the human.' As we know, Butler seeks to replace the sovereign and self-sufficient model of subjectivity with a relational model of subjectivity. Unlike her previous work that emphasized social norms in the production of the subject, and beyond Foucault's emphasis on subjugation and exclusion, how does Butler understand the subject after the so-called 'ethical turn'? In other words, how does she explain how the subject is formed? We can evaluate her explanations of human have both continuity and change. Regarding continuity, it can be mentioned that Butler believed there was a close relationship between norms or power and the process of subject formation. However, after the ethical turn, Butler reformulated her interest in the subject by examining the possibilities of human beings (Cyfer 2019:7-9). What is important here is that she is emphasizing the other. Butler refers to Levinas's views on the Other, responsibility, and vulnerability in her exploration of the

possibility of a new subject. Works such as *Precarious Life* (2004), *Giving an Account of Oneself* (2005), *Frames of War* (2009), and *Parting Ways* (2012) are relevant to this discussion.

Butler explains Levinas's view of the subject as follows.

“After all, for Levinas, the subject is constituted by the other. ... it [the Levinasian position] also assumes that this other is already me, not assimilated as a 'part' of me, but inassimilable as that which interrupts my own continuity and makes impossible an 'autonomous' self at some distance from an 'autonomous' other.” (2012:38)

Butler's understanding of the subject is not significantly different from this. What we should note here is that Butler does not merely state that I am dependent on the other. What she emphasizes is the fact that we are overwhelmed by the other and the relationality.

“If I am confounded by you, then you are already of me, and I am nowhere without you. I cannot muster the 'we' except by finding the way in which I am tied to 'you,' by trying to translate but finding that my own language must break up and yield if I am to know you. You are what I gain through this disorientation and loss. This is how the human comes into being, again and again, as that which we have yet to know.” (Butler 2004:49)

As revealed in the above statement, even in Butler, the other is one who intervenes in my life beyond my control—or rather, one who has already intervened. In Butler's work, the other is also posited as someone who is part of me but cannot be assimilated into me, someone who constitutes 'I' through relation with me. In this way, Butler accepts

Levinas's claim that we are bound to the Other from the outset, and especially that encountering the Other unsettles me and deprives me of my place. For Butler, too, what constitutes the subjectivity of the subject is "the fact that I am called outside myself, and that this relation to an alterity defines me essentially"(2012:41). For all of them, 'human' is a different name for the disorientation and dispossession caused by the situation of being interrupted by the other(Ruti 2017:93-94).

Following Levinas, Butler who had noticed "that there are others out there on whom my life depends, people I do not know and may never know,"(2004:XII) seeks to understand "how it is that others make moral claims upon us, address moral demands to us, ones that we do not ask for, ones that we are not free to refuse"(2004:131). And she "relates this to some of the more pressing questions of violence and ethics"(2004:131). At this point, it is important to understand that our primary, unwilling relationality forms the basis of Butler's ethics of precarity. This ethics has "the very unbearable exposure as the sign, the reminder, of a common vulnerability, a common physicality and risk"(2005:100). In this way, Butler emphasizes that our exposure to others is something we share with them, and that this shared vulnerability makes us ethically responsible to them. In other words, Butler accepts Levinas's conclusion that our fundamental condition of being bound to others, especially our condition of being interrupted by someone's demands and suffering, gives rise to a kind of responsibility that cannot disappear under any circumstances(Ruti 2017:94). Above all, she makes it clear that this responsibility is not the result of my volitional actions. The pre-historical or pre-ontological state of the subject includes passivity of 'I'. It is not something that comes from my own will or choice, and it precedes the emergence of the 'self' that is capable of such actions.

"It is interesting that Levinas insisted we are bound to those we do not know, and did not choose. ... After all, Levinas also gave us a conception of ethical relations that make us ethically responsive to those who exceed our immediate sphere of belonging and to whom we nevertheless belong, regardless of any choice or contract." (2012:23)

It is not a problem of what I do, but of what has been done to me at the level of my fundamental sensibility. In summary, Butler's ethics originates from the opacity and the unknowingness of the subject. And this is precisely why her ethics is ethics of vulnerability, ethics of non-violence. Ultimately, as she defines violence as "act by which a subject seeks to reinstall its mastery and unity,"(2005:64) non-violence means accepting the opacity and the unknowingness of the other as my own, accepting our common vulnerability(Cyfer 2019:7).

III. Butler against Levinas

Butler goes the same way as Levinas in accepting that when the self is exposed to the face of the other, its perspective of life is interrupted and he suffers from disorientation. Since the self cannot understand the other, the foundation of the self becomes unsettled. This infinity of the other corresponds to the opacity and precariousness that challenge the self-confirming knowledge of the self. However, Butler distances herself from Levinas in various ways. First, her approach to ethics is almost entirely different from Levinas's. While Butler tries to construct ethics from the opacity of self-understanding, what Levinas emphasizes is that this infinity which questions the certainty of the self demands concrete, infinite, and asymmetric responsibility from the self. In addition, she

finds ethics in reciprocity, in “our shared, invariable, and partial blindness about ourselves”(Butler 2005:41). When confronted with others, the self becomes incapable of forming a coherent narrative because it cannot grasp others and cannot remove social norms from its description of itself. Faced with this self-opacity, the self assumes that others are experiencing similar crises. This is an ethics based not on differences with the other but on equality(Simmons 2011:168).

“The uniqueness of the other is exposed to me, but mine is also exposed to her. ... My singularity has some properties in common with yours and so is, to some extent, a substitutable term.” (Butler 2005:34)

In this way, Butler introduces reciprocity into the realm of absolute alterity and fundamental asymmetry that characterizes Levinas’s ethics. Both Butler and Levinas emphasize alterity that transcends identity, but in Butler, the fundamental nature of this alterity becomes the principle of reciprocity.

In this regard, Butler seems to mention two points. The first is that the opacity of myself and of the relations that constitute ‘I’, which myself have never chosen is shared by all of us. We must all mutually acknowledge that we are fundamentally opaque and that we experience the alterity of the other within this opacity. The second is that our relationship with the other presupposes the precariousness of our physical lives, and that these conditions are shared by everyone. Whether wanting or not, each of our lives is generally conditioned by the dependence and the precariousness of life(Bierhanzl 2021:41).

“Precariousness implies living socially, that is, the fact that one’s life is always in some sense in the hands of the other. It implies exposure both to those we know and to those we do not know; a dependency on people we know, or barely know, or know not at all. Reciprocally, it implies being impinged upon by the exposure and dependency of others, most of whom remain anonymous.” (Butler 2009:14)

Even in discussions concerning the face, a divergence exists between Butler and Levinas. Following Levinas, Butler first accepts the infinite dimension inherent in the face of the other. She largely agrees that the face transcends vision and representation, that it demands ethical responsibility from us, and that the command of the face precedes my own position or circumstances, my freedom or choice. This line of thinking aligns with her context of asserting a dimension of humanity that cannot be fully captured by social, linguistic, or cultural norms. For both Levinas and Butler, a complete response to the face of the other is impossible. This is an inevitable impossibility. They believe no system of meaning or reference can fully contain the human. Despite this similarity, Butler’s emphasis is not the same as that of Levinas. For Levinas, the human is unrepresentable. To put it differently, representation is not the way to encounter the other. Therefore, Levinas speaks of an immediate response to the call of the Other beyond representation. In contrast, Butler emphasizes that there exists a context in which the ethical demands of the other are revealed. She seems to link the infinite responsibility for the other to ‘understanding.’

“Philosophically, Levinas outlines an ethical scene in which we are obligated, under most situations, to preserve the life of the other

— obligated by the alterity we encounter there. Upon closer inspection, however, it turns out that this scene, which would seem to obligate us universally, is restricted culturally and geographically. ... the ethical demand is not prior to notions of cultural autonomy, but is precisely framed and restricted in advance by certain notions of culture, ethnicity, and religion.” (2012:39)

This kind of discussion leads Butler to argue for the inevitability of representation.

“For representation to convey the human, then, representation must not only fail, but it must show its failure. There is something unrepresentable that we nevertheless seek to represent, and that paradox must be retained in the representation we give. In this sense, the human is not identified with what is represented but neither is it identified with the unrepresentable; it is, rather, that which limits the success of any representational practice. The face is not ‘effaced’ in this failure of representation, but is constituted in that very possibility.” (2004:144)

In Levinas, the face of the Other is placed beyond ontology and epistemology, that is, at the level of ethics. Therefore, what is demanded of the subject is an immediate response to the Other, namely an infinite responsibility. However, what is important for Butler is the recognition that the other is not subsumed under my comprehension, that my understanding of the other is incomplete. To put it in her terms, we must recognize that there exists something incomprehensible that we must understand. In this sense, what confronts Butler’s subject is not responsibility but the recognition of the insufficiency of my cognition, of the subject’s opacity. Moreover, what she takes issue with is that

there are things that cannot even be represented, things deliberately excluded from representation. She cites as an example “In the Vietnam War, ... the pictures of the children burning and dying from napalm that brought the US public to a sense of shock, outrage, remorse, and grief,”(2004:150) were “pictures we were not supposed to see ... a reality that disrupted the hegemonic field of representation itself.”(2004:150) She aims to question not only the limitations of representation itself, but also the limits of representation as it is currently maintained and managed.

There is also a parting way between Butler and Levinas in their discussions of responsibility. To conclude, Butler does not remain within Levinas’s argument that ethics is the infinite responsibility of face-to-face relationships. As you can see from the saying, “I cannot think the question of responsibility alone, in isolation from the other,”(2005:84) Butler accepts Levinas’s mode of thinking that links ‘responsibility’ to ‘the Other,’ but what she emphasizes is not the infinity of the other but the opacity of the subject. It means that the subject cannot know itself, and thus a complete explanation of the subject is impossible. If in Levinas the source of responsibility is the call of the Other, then in Butler the source of responsibility is the impossibility of self-understanding. She repeatedly states, that “it is precisely by virtue of the subject’s opacity to itself that it incurs and sustains some of its most important ethical bonds,” (2005:20) and “that my own foreignness to myself is, paradoxically, the source of my ethical connection with others.”(2005:84) The responsibility Butler asserts is not ‘my responsibility for the other,’ but “our responsibility for them[others]”(2005:88) in general. It is that we are all responsible to us. This stems from the fact that we are inevitably bound to relate to the other. This is because Butler’s concern lies not with the other but with the subject

—that is, she seeks to establish a new subjectivity. It may be for this reason that Butler rarely mentions the idea of ‘responsibility as an infinite demand’, which is the core of Levinas’s discussion. Butler and Levinas hold similar positions in that they both consider relationships with others to reveal my own finitude and the strangeness of the other. However, she seeks to explain this relationship not from the perspective of the other who introduces this strangeness, but from the perspective of the subject who becomes unstable because of the other. What she wants to overcome through this is the traditional ethical position that regards autonomy as a condition of responsibility. What is important in her ethics is not the achievement of autonomy but the inevitable failure of autonomy. In addition, Butler considers this failure to be an inevitable attribute of ethical subjectivity (Mills 2015:52-53). She wanted “to establish these limits [the limits of any self-understanding] not only as a condition for the subject but as the predicament of the human community.” (2005:83)

In the same way as the generalization of responsibility, Butler reflects on vulnerability, a core concept in Levinas’s philosophy. “The subject will be described denuded and stripped bare, as one or someone, expelled on the hither side of being, vulnerable, that is, sensible.” (Levinas 1998:53-54) As can be seen in the quoted passage, Levinas usually uses these two adjectives “sensible” and “vulnerable” together, which are related to the establishment of subjectivity and its mode of operation.

“In vulnerability there then lies a relationship with the other which causality does not exhaust, a relationship antecedent to being affected by a stimulus. ... Vulnerability is obsession by the other or an approaching of the other. It is being for another, behind the other of a stimulus. This approach is not reducible to the representation of

the other nor to consciousness of proximity. To suffer from another is to have charge of him, to support him, to be in his place, to be consumed by him.” (Levinas 1987:146)

As can be seen from the above discussion, in Levinas, vulnerability is presented within the discussion of the subject’s subjectivity—that is, the inevitability of the subject’s openness to the Other. Levinas emphasizes that “The subjectivity of a subject is vulnerability, exposure to affection, sensibility, a passivity more passive still than any passivity.” (Levinas 1998:50) The subject is not defined by autonomy. It is fundamentally for the Other. Since the subject is fundamentally open to the Other, the subject’s self-stability or self-certainty is impossible. Due to this vulnerability, the subject is fundamentally obsessed with the Other and faced with the Other’s call. And it unconditionally assumes responsibility. Thus, the relationship between the subject and the Other caused by vulnerability is a relation without relation. And the subjectivity that this enables can be called “the subjectivity ... prior to essence.” (Levinas 1987:147) In this way, Levinas assigns ethical value to vulnerability. This is because responsibility for the Other is primary. Vulnerability, that is, “this sensibility has meaning only as a “taking care of the other’s need,” of his misfortunes and his faults, that is, as a giving.” (Levinas 1998:74) In Levinas, vulnerability is essentially the subject’s vulnerability to the Other, while in Butler, vulnerability is defined as the common nature of the subject in general. We know that Butler has dealt with the issue of ethics, that is, the question of responsibility in this manner. Levinas’s emphasis on the asymmetry between the subject and the Other no longer holds true in Butler’s work. Butler argues that what is characterized as vulnerable is not ‘I’ but ‘we’, that its oriented relationship is not only ‘my vulnerability to the other’ but also ‘the

other's vulnerability to me' and 'our vulnerability to the world'. This line of argument naturally leads Butler to define the subject and the subject's actions in a way fundamentally different from Levinas.

IV. Vulnerable subjects in Butler

If Levinas's discourse on vulnerability aims at the subject's inevitable opening toward the Other and the inevitable failure of the subject striving for self-sufficiency within itself, then Butler's theory of vulnerability aims to challenge the image of the subject as a proactive, autonomous agent that seeks self-control, that is, "an entrepreneur of oneself,"(2015:15) and the modern neoliberal political discourse founded upon it. Using Levinas's argument as a stepping stone, Butler attempts to present her own new conception of humanity and a new vision for a movement confronting modern politics. What, then, is the new understanding of humanity—or more precisely, this new subject—that she proposes? Butler posits the body against the mind, relationality against individuality, and passivity before activity. This means that as a physical being existing within relationships with others, I cannot control my own life. Of course, such statements are also found in Levinas. Does this mean Butler makes the same claim as Levinas? Not at all. We noted earlier that Butler characterizes vulnerability as the vulnerability of the subject in general. While Levinas sought to argue for the 'vulnerable subject,' Butler seeks to speak of the 'vulnerable us.' Let us examine the following discussion.

"Vulnerability is not a subjective disposition. Rather, it characterizes a relation to a field of objects, forces, and passions that impinge on

or affect us in some way. As a way of being related to what is not me and not fully masterable, vulnerability is a kind of relationship that belongs to that ambiguous region in which receptivity and responsiveness are not clearly separable from one another." (2016:25)

"Loss and vulnerability seem to follow from our being socially constituted bodies, attached to others, at risk of losing those attachments, exposed to others, at risk of violence by virtue of that exposure." (2004:20)

The expressions we should note here are "vulnerability is not a subjective disposition" and "our being socially constituted bodies." What does this mean? In my view, Butler presents a conception of the subject that is clearly distinct from Levinas's at several points.

First, if Levinas sought to assert the argument that "the subject resists ... ontologization,"(1998:18) namely, posit ethics beyond ontology by emphasizing the infinity of the Other and the vulnerability of the subject, then Butler aims to invent a new ethics and an ethical politics grounded in it by ontologizing relationships among humans in a new way. Specifically, what Butler questions is not 'ontology in general' but "the ontology of individualism,"(2009:33) and what she proposes is a "new bodily ontology."(2009:2) Through this, she seeks to "conceptualize the body in the field of politics"(2011:385) and ultimately establish a "new body politics."(2012:14) Butler focuses on the fundamental dependence of the body on the basis that the body is provided to others, norms, cultures, and political apparatuses, that is, the body is fundamentally incapable of being free from external influences. The body belongs to the individual but is not his property. The body is "not only in the vector of these relations but as this very vector."(2011:385) In this

sense, the body is already public and social. In other words, the body has a “socially ecstatic structure.”(2009:33) Thus Butler argues that “to be a body is to be exposed to social crafting and form, and that is what makes the ontology of the body a social ontology.”(2009:3) Here, the difference between Levinas and Butler becomes clear. Whereas Levinas contemplated the vulnerability of the body within the ethical realm, Butler considers that the vulnerability is historical and social. In Levinas, without sensibility, there would be no subjectivity. Without an exposed and vulnerable body, there would be no ethics. In Butler, without sensibility and such bodies, there would be no ethics or politics. Just as the subject of responsibility is not merely ‘me’ but ‘us,’ the body is not singular but plural. It is not the bodily ‘I’ but the bodily ‘we’ that comes to the fore.

“I have suggested that we rethink the relationship between the human body and infrastructure so that we might call into question the body as discrete, singular, and self-sufficient, and I have proposed instead to understand embodiment as both performative and relational, where relationality includes dependency on infrastructural conditions and legacies of discourse and institutional power that precede and condition our existence.” (Butler 2016:21)

The body makes us come out of ourselves. We might call this the body-subject. Its social or public dimension renders every subject susceptible to influence, mortality, injury, and obstruction through the desires and capacities for action inherent in life. “The body is exposed to socially and politically articulated forces as well as to claims of sociality-including language, work, and desire-that make possible the body’s persisting and flourishing.”(2009:3) Vulnerability is the vulnerability

of the body. For Butler, this universal vulnerability is always entangled with bodily interdependency or fundamental relationality that constantly shipwrecks subjectivity. This relationality produces a duality. We are constituted by our relationships with others, yet simultaneously dispossessed by them. In this sense, it is necessarily ecstatic(Mills 2015:43). Therefore, the social ontology of the body functions as a critique of atomistic or possessive individualism. We are vulnerable not only to each other but also to all institutions and economic, social, and cultural relations. For Butler, the starting point of ethics is the subject constitutively entangled with others, and this constitutive entanglement gives rise to humility, generosity, patience, tolerance, and forgiveness. These virtues stand in opposition to the ethical violence that stems from a complete self-consistency that disregards our constitutive relationship with others(Abadía 2021:112).

Second, Butler adds Foucauldian discussions of truth systems to Levinas’s ethical thought. In Butler, truth systems and their norms are not unrelated to the self, the other, the relationships with the other, and the responses to the other. Hegemonic discourse is omnipresent within these, and the self is already ensnared within the network of social norms. Both the response to the face of the other and the recognition of the other’s vulnerability are situated within the horizon of understanding. She notes how norms regulate the social domain and, consequently, ethical encounters.

“Our capacity to respond to a face as a human face is conditioned and mediated by frames of reference that are variably humanizing and dehumanizing. The possibility of an ethical response to the face thus requires a normativity of the visual field.” (Butler 2005:29)

“A vulnerability must be perceived and recognized in order to come into play in an ethical encounter. ... if vulnerability is one precondition for humanization, and humanization takes place differently through variable norms of recognition, then it follows that vulnerability is fundamentally dependent on existing norms of recognition if it is to be attributed to any human subject. ... Norms of recognition are essential to the constitution of vulnerability as a precondition of the ‘human’.” (2004:43)

In Levinas, the face of the Other transcends all ontology. It precedes all norms, all politics, all culture. To borrow Levinas’s expression, the face of the Other is naked. Thus, this call of the Other and the response to it interrupt hegemonic systems. Yet in Butler, the encounter with the other seems to occur already within the network of norms. “There is a language that frames the encounter, and embedded in that language is a set of norms concerning what will and will not constitute recognizability.” (Butler 2005:30) Does Butler’s argument then end with the same thing as Hegel’s discourse on recognition? No, it is not. In the same passage, Butler asserts that the other is one who cannot be captured by social norms or their recognition. The other marks “a site of rupture within the horizon of normativity and implicitly call for the institution of new norms, putting into question the givenness of the prevailing normative horizon.”(2005:24) How should we understand this kind of ambiguity? One reason might be that, for Butler, what shatters hegemonic discourse is not the face of the other, but the self’s response to that face. What we must be mindful of is that, for Butler, it is not the face of the other that leads ethics beyond norms. Rather, it is because my relationship with the other requires me to explain myself. Yet, an account of the self cannot be perfect. This is because I cannot fully know the other, and

I am already situated within a normative system of truth—“the terms by which I confer recognition are not mine alone.”(2005:35) According to Butler, the face of the other interrupts the self. The self must hear the other’s call and respond to it. Yet this relationship occurs within the system and inevitably must. Neither the self nor the relationship with the other—that is, the response to the other—can transcend the system (Simmons 2011:169-170).

Finally, for Butler, one can note that the universal vulnerability inherent in human existence itself has a kind of normative power. “From where might a principle emerge by which we vow to protect others from the kinds of violence we have suffered, if not from an apprehension of a common human vulnerability?”(2004:30), she says, adding, “By insisting on a ‘common’ corporeal vulnerability, I may seem to be positing a new basis for humanism.”(2004:42) Butler seeks to establish an approach to ethics grounded in universal corporeal vulnerability. This raises a problem concerning the ethical obligations and normative status. Butler emphasized the common, what we humans share. That is, it is because of what we commonly possess, because of what we share, that we enter into ethical relations with others. Her ethics can be said to be grounded in two concepts: subjectivity and community. What provides the essential motivation for ethics is the fundamental vulnerability that emerges from our relational corporeality. As humans, our vulnerability inherently signifies the way that each of us is offered to others. This common condition problematizes the moral ideal of the self-oriented, rational, self-affirming subject(Mills 2015:42). Butler’s account of corporeality as vulnerability thus posits the following: bodies are always situated within a “community” with other bodies due to their relationality, this relationality constitutes the “descriptive or historical fact” of subject

formation and the “an ongoing normative dimension of our social and political lives,”(2004:27) thereby demanding that we consider our mutual interdependency. This demand naturally leads to a discussion of the politics of vulnerability, exemplified by her distinction between ‘precariousness’ and ‘precarity’. In *Precarious Life*, Butler primarily addressed physical vulnerability or precariousness. However, in *Frames of War*, she uses this term distinctively from precarity. Here, precariousness is “the more or less existential conception”, which refers to the ontological vulnerability inherent in the physical, social, and relational nature of human beings, on the other hand, precarity is a “more specifically political concept”, which arises from specific conditions that place certain humans at risk of exploitation, injustice, and violence. After distinguishing between precariousness and precarity, she argues that it is precisely the differential allocation of indeterminacy that must provide the starting point “for both a rethinking of bodily ontology and for progressive or left politics.”(2009:3) In several books, she outlines various conditions that define this precarity: arbitrary violence, inadequate social and economic support networks, situations of war, occupation, imprisonment, forced displacement, exposure to unemployment or disposable labor(Lloyd 2015:172-174). Butler contends that all of this is “the aims and effects of neoliberal forms of social and economic life.”(2013:21) And then She states, “The vulnerability to dispossession, poverty, insecurity, and harm that constitutes a precarious position in the world itself leads to resistance,” and is dedicated to exploring the possibility to “overcome that vulnerability, at least provisionally, through acts of resistance.”(2016:12)

V. Levinas invited to Butler

Let us ask again: Was Butler duped by Levinas? Butler argues that “this interdependency ... articulates an alternative to both liberal and neoliberal forms of individualism as well as to unjust and accelerating forms of inequality.”(2013:107) What is the interdependency she asserts? In what ways do we depend on each other? To put it differently, in what ways are we mutual, and in what ways are we dependent? It is not the mutuality of freedom, nor is it the kind of dependence where the self, posited as an atomic entity, joins with you and society by ceding its sovereignty to secure its own freedom and rights. Rather, it is a mutuality of responsibility stemming from the fact that “the ‘I’ is invariably implicated in the ‘we.’ ... because I am from the start implicated in the lives of the other ... the ‘I’ is already social.”(2013:107) Therefore, it is a dependence that precedes any conscious renunciation born of selfishness, in that sense, it is an inescapable, inevitable dependence that can never be cast off. She argues that these interdependent subjects—that is, vulnerable subjects—must reveal themselves in the public sphere through their vulnerability while fulfilling their responsibilities to one another. Such performative political resistance, she contends, is the new way capable of transforming our reality. Thus, Butler’s use of Levinas was thoroughly intentional and deliberate. To put it in Derrida’s terms (1999:70-71), Levinas did not ‘visit’ Butler. He was ‘invited’ to her.²⁾

2) Derrida distinguishes between ‘invitation’ and ‘visitation.’ Regarding invitation, the invited must be chosen by the inviter, who can anticipate and prepare in advance for when they will come and how to receive them. But visitation is not like that. Here, the alterity of the other who visits the host’s house is emphasized over the host’s sovereignty. The visit of an unexpected other, not a scheduled guest, can completely defy my expectations or anticipations. Therefore, it always

Butler's goal is clear. It is "to extend his notion of the 'face' further into the domain of politics ... to strengthen the ethical injunction signified by 'the face'."³⁾

Butler's interpretation and appropriation of Levinas contributes to resolving ambiguous elements within Levinas's thought. For instance, Butler's argument that political powers represent certain faces for specific purposes and strategically enact dehumanization can be seen as a contemporary interpretation of Levinas's theory of the face that "The nudity of a face is a bareness without any cultural ornament, an absoluteness, a detachment from its form in the midst of the production of its form. ... The signifyingness of a face in its abstractness is in the literal sense of the term extraordinary, outside of every order, every world." (1987:96) More importantly, Butler embraces the Levinasian subject's fundamental sensitivity, and describes our concrete vulnerability to the Other within mourning and desire. By situating the self in concrete physical terms, she explains Levinas's claim of asymmetrical responsibility toward the Other in a more familiar way. She establishes that responsibility within a universal foundation. By emphasizing that we are always already given to the other, and that the boundary separating one human from another is far more blurred than we expect, she argues that political rights must be recreated to provide this relationality. Through Butler's appropriation and interpretation of Levinas's

ethics on being-for-the-other, we confront the true challenge that arises when Levinas's ethics of the Other is actually applied. Simultaneously, her attention to our embodied vulnerability presents the possibility of recreating community. This is true only if such shared experience is recognized not as hidden weakness but as an inexhaustible source. Now we can answer: Butler was not duped by ethics or Levinas.

gives rise to an unforeseen surprise, an 'absolute surprise'. In that sense, Levinas can clearly be said to have been invited by Butler. She had it all planned out!

3) This reference is a part of Butler's response to Bruno Chaouat's critique that she deliberately misread Levinas's philosophy in her book *Parting Ways: Jewishness and the Critique of Zionism* (2013). The full text is reproduced below.

Le monde (2013.3.21.), "Levinas trahi? La réponse de Judith Butler", https://www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2013/03/21/levinas-trahi-la-reponse-de-judith-butler_5994702_3232.html (검색일: 2025.10.17.)

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❖ 국문초록

레비나스에 대한 버틀러의 찬반

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이번 논문은 레비나스에 대한 버틀러의 평가를 살피는 것을 목적으로 한다. 구체적으로, 본 논문은 버틀러가 레비나스의 철학과 어떤 면에서 만나고 헤어지는지, 또 레비나스 철학에 대한 버틀러의 전유가 그녀의 철학에서 어떻게 드러나는지를 설명하는 데 집중한다. 버틀러의 페미니즘 이론에서 중요한 철학적 통찰을 발견했던 학자들은 윤리와 레비나스에 대한 그녀의 관심에 깊은 우려를 표명했다. 복잡한 정치의 문제를 윤리로 대체한다거나 레비나스의 얼굴 개념을 무비판적으로 받아들인다는 것이 그들의 견해다. 그렇다면 버틀러는 윤리와 레비나스에 속은 것인가? 그렇지 않다. 레비나스에 대한 그녀의 관심은 계몽주의 합리성, 더 정확히는 원자론적, 자율적인 주체에 대한 효과적인 비판에 갇혀 있다. 그녀가 레비나스에서 발견하고자 한 것은 타자들을 향한 근원적인 정향, 곧 나와 타자 사이의, 윤리와 정치 사이의 상호의존성이다. 그녀는 레비나스의 책임 개념을 정치의 영역으로 확장함으로써 비대칭성의 윤리를 상호성 속에 정초한다. 레비나스에서 취약성이 본질적으로 타자에 대한 주체의 취약성인 반면, 버틀러에서 취약성은 주체 일반의 공통된 본성으로 규정된다. 레비나스가 ‘취약한 주체’를 주장하고자 하였다면, 버틀러는 ‘취약한 인간’에 대해 이야기하고자 한다. 그리고 이 취약한 상호의존적인 주체들을 통해 신자유주의가 가속화하는 부당한 형태의 불평등을 해소할 방안을 강구하고자 한다. 따라서 우리는 데리다의 말을 빌려 다음과 같이 말할 수 있을 것이다. 레비나스는 버틀러를 방문한 것이 아니다. 그는 그녀에 의해 초대되었다.

주제어: 주체, 타자, 얼굴, 책임, 취약성, 존재론

- 논문투고일 : 2025. 10. 29
- 심사완료일 : 2025. 11. 23
- 게재확정일 : 2025. 12. 02

Material Ethics of Entangled Bodies and Matter and Democratic Becoming-With in Times of Precarity:

Judith Butler, Posthumanism, and New Materialist Ontologies in *The Stone Gods**

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❖ ABSTRACT

This article reads the mass mobilizations in South Korea surrounding President Yoon Suk-yeol's December 2024 declaration of martial law alongside Judith Butler's Seoul lecture, "Democracy and the Future of the Humanities," to theorize democracy as an embodied, affective, and materially mediated practice under conditions of precarity. I argue that the candlelight tradition's recent iterations—light-stick assemblies, K-pop sing-ins, and the "Kisses Protesters" wrapped in foil blankets—stage what Butler calls the politics of appearance: plural bodies amassing without prior credentialing, making vulnerability legible as a mode of political agency. Extending Butler with posthuman and new materialist thought, I mobilize Karen Barad's concepts of intra-action, response-ability, and diffraction to show how materials (blankets, barricades, logistics) are not mere props but co-constitutive agents of assembly. Donna Haraway's notion of "staying with the trouble" further clarifies cohabitation as multispecies, multi-technical living-with in damaged worlds. To widen this ethico-political frame, the

* This work was supported by the Ministry of Education of the Republic of Korea and the National Research Foundation of Korea(NRF-2025S1A5A2A01011512)

essay turns to Jeanette Winterson's *The Stone Gods*, reading its recursive, exoplanetary plots as speculative laboratories for Butlerian performativity and Baradian agential realism. The novel's queer human-robot alliances diffract normative binaries of human/nonhuman and male/female, while its necropolitical landscapes (corporate militarism, tokenized economies) illuminate contemporary precaritization. Across Seoul's streets and Winterson's worlds, iteration names both the reproduction of domination and the possibility of repeating differently. The article concludes by situating recent U.S. campus crackdowns (including the naming of scholars in federal inquiries) within this global scene of contested assembly, and by proposing a feminist *lieu-commun* for coalition: an archipelagic convergence of gender theory, new materialism, and posthumanism oriented to livable life. In this conjuncture, imagination is not ornament but infrastructure—an affective—material capacity to keep futures open.

Keywords : Judith Butler, new materialism, posthumanism,
Jeanette Winterson, *The Stone Gods*

I . Bodies That Assemble: Precarity, Performativity, Materiality and the Renewal of Democracy

On December 4, 2024, a day after President Yoon Suk-yeol declared martial law in South Korea, Judith Butler delivered a public lecture in Seoul titled “Democracy and the Future of the Humanities.” Addressing the contemporary crisis of democracy, Butler emphasized the indispensable role of imagination and the humanities in envisioning alternative futures amid global precarity. Her visit, coinciding with one of the most volatile moments in recent Korean political history, imbued her reflections with unexpected immediacy. On the previous day, December 3, mass mobilizations had erupted across the country in defiance of Yoon's

authoritarian decree. Unarmed yet resolute, civilians blocked paratroopers descending near the National Assembly—a remarkable enactment of civic courage that materially performed the very principles of democratic resistance. Backed by this popular uprising, lawmakers broke through police barricades to convene an emergency session and vote to nullify the decree. When Butler spoke the following day, she briefly alluded to these events, and the audience listened in rapt and uneasy silence, newly conscious that their lives and freedoms had been in genuine peril. Her discussion of precarity, a concept naming the shared vulnerability that binds human lives, resonated with listeners who had just witnessed both the fragility and the renewal of democracy through collective action.

Following the revocation of martial law, Yoon's refusal to resign sparked nationwide demonstrations demanding impeachment. Across Seoul and other major cities, hundreds of thousands gathered, reviving the tradition of ‘candlelight protests’ that had defined earlier democratic movements. Participants appeared as what Butler calls a “plural set of bodies, amassing and persisting” without being “asked to produce an identity card before gaining access to such a demonstration,” thereby enacting a radical redefinition of public visibility (2015, 58). Yet these assemblies introduced new performative textures to civic resistance. Instead of candles, participants waved light sticks and sang to K-pop music, transforming popular culture into a luminous medium of democratic solidarity. Within this affective communion, they embodied what Butler terms an ethical recognition of “obligations toward others, most of whom [they] cannot name and do not know” (2009, 14). This fusion of civic assemblage and aesthetic performance exemplified the imaginative reconfiguration of the public sphere that Butler associates with democratic practice.

Through freezing winter nights, citizens maintained an unbroken vigil for democracy. Those who stayed became known as the “Kisses Protesters”—wrapped in silver emergency foil blankets that shimmered like Hershey’s Kisses, they huddled together for warmth and solidarity. The image of these protesters, vulnerable yet radiant, embodied emergent aesthetics of resistance and an affective community of care. Through their embodied persistence, the Kisses Protesters transformed vulnerability into a performative act of endurance and interdependent hope. Vulnerability is grounded in interdependency, as Butler argues: “Vulnerability should not be considered as a subjective state, but rather as a feature of our shared and interdependent lives” (2020, 45). Moreover, the silver blankets, at once fragile and resilient, became symbolic materials of dissent—material agents that both shielded bodies against the cold and signified the strength of collective presence. Their shimmering surfaces intertwined vulnerability and defiance in intra-active relations with bodies, rendering visible the entanglement of matter and flesh in a shared assertion of democracy. In this convergence, passive exposure was transfigured into active presence as an aesthetic and ethical declaration that democracy endures through the interdependence of assembled bodies, affective performativity, and material agency.

Significantly, the demonstrations were led by young women and other marginalized groups whose social invisibility had long rendered them politically inaudible. Within the public space of assembly, their voices redefined democratic participation through excitable speech and courageous presence. LGBTQ+ activists described coming out as an act of restoring democracy; a woman with a physical disability rearticulated mobility as a political right; and a sex worker, overcoming fear of exposure, publicly affirmed solidarity with the movement. As Butler reminds us,

“precarity is obviously, directly linked with gender norms, since we know that those who do not live their genders in intelligible ways are at heightened risk for harassment, pathologization, and violence” (2015, 34). These testimonies performatively enacted the politics of appearance, the moment when bodies excluded from dominant frames of representation become visible, audible, and grievable within the public sphere. Their vulnerability, far from signaling weakness, became a mode of political agency.

A particularly striking moment occurred on December 21, when underrepresented groups joined the National Farmers’ Association, whose members had driven tractors toward President Yoon’s residence only to be blocked by police at the Namtaeryeong Station pass. As their progress was halted, citizens—especially young women in their twenties and thirties—gathered in solidarity, sustaining the protest for eighteen hours. Supporters across the nation sent food, hot water, and even a heated bus through online orders, transforming care into a logistical network of resistance. These acts of solidarity exemplify the interdependence of bodies and the material infrastructures that sustain collective action, revealing that political resistance depends not only on speech or ideology but on the corporeal and material capacities that allow bodies to endure together. Body and matter here are mutually entangled, both becoming sites of precarity and resistance. Although thousands participated, most did not know one another’s names or identities; their alliance was grounded not in shared identity but in shared vulnerability. This event demonstrates that identity is not a fixed substance but a contingent formation continually open to rearticulation—a principle essential to democratic politics, for, as Butler argues, “The deconstruction of identity is not the deconstruction of politics; rather it establishes as political the very terms

through which identity is articulated” (1990, 189).

This essay explores the ethico-political significance of bodies and materiality through the lens of Judith Butler’s theories in dialogue with posthuman and new materialist thought. While I do not claim specialized expertise in Butler’s works, I engage rigorously with her writings on gender, vulnerability, and performativity, situating them alongside posthumanist and new materialist frameworks to illuminate the political implications of embodiment and matter. I also trace the theoretical shift in Butler’s oeuvre from gender and queer theory toward broader ethical and political concerns.¹⁾ To extend these inquiries toward a speculative and fictive horizon, I turn to Jeanette Winterson’s *The Stone Gods*, in which a robot and a nonbinary human form a coalition that traverses planets and epochs, generating a politics of affective relation. In the novel, posthuman beings such as humanoids enter affective and queer relations with humans through mutual recognition of otherness. Through this speculative framework, posthumanism and new materialism intersect with Butler’s theory of performativity and her ethics of precarity, articulating a politics that, as Butler writes, seeks to “reorient politics ... toward a consideration of precarity as an existing and promising site for coalitional exchange” (2009, 28). Before turning to this analysis, I examine posthumanist and new materialist critiques of Butler’s work, along with Butler’s responses, to identify points of

1) However, as Moya Lloyd observes, Butler’s work has consistently developed a constellation of related concerns over the decades, including “a concern with norms and how the terms of both existence and resistance are constrained and yet enabled by their operation; an interest in the power relations that structure contemporary reality, establishing hierarchies of vitality for human life; the issue of recognition and who counts; questions of subjectivity, language, and agency; and the body” (2007, 156).

convergence between these theories. This theoretical dialogue provides the groundwork for my reading of *The Stone Gods*, where Butlerian ethics and politics, posthuman ontology, and new materialist agency collectively open possibilities for rethinking matter, vulnerability, and the politics of cohabitation.

II. From Performativity to Intra-Action: Butler, Braidotti, and the Material Turn in Feminist Theory

Judith Butler’s theory of gender has provoked sustained critique within feminist and gender studies, particularly concerning her treatment of materiality. Often labeled a radical constructivist or “linguistic idealist,” Butler has been accused of “refuting the reality of bodies, the relevance of science, the alleged facts of birth, aging, illness, and death” (1993, xix). Among posthumanist feminists, Rosi Braidotti offers one of the most incisive critiques. While acknowledging Butler’s powerful dismantling of normative gender structures, Braidotti contends that Butler’s framework remains excessively discursive, negative, and deconstructive. Braidotti maintains that rendering gender a transhistorical matrix of power is “quite simply a conceptual error” (2013, 98–99). In *Metamorphoses: Towards a Materialist Theory of Becoming*, Braidotti further critiques Butler’s model of performative subject formation, rooted in citation and resignification, for reducing the body to an effect of discourse and thereby producing a thin conception of agency insufficiently responsive to material and technological transformation. Braidotti pointedly contrasts their approaches, writing, “Butler takes the linguistic turn; I go nomadically the way of all flesh” (2002, 47). She further argues that

Butler's emphasis on "the heterosexual matrix" of power has the paradoxical effect of foreclosing liberatory possibilities even for potentially progressive heterosexual men (51). Ultimately, adopting a broadly Deleuzian perspective, Braidotti argues that Butler's politics remain trapped in subversion and critique, lacking the affirmative, future-oriented, and collective vision necessary for a genuinely posthuman and transformative feminism.

Butler addresses these critiques in *Bodies That Matter*, noting that "some [feminists] have argued that a rethinking of 'nature' as a set of dynamic interrelations suits both feminist and ecological aims (and has for some produced an otherwise unlikely alliance with the work of Gilles Deleuze)" (1993, xiv). She cautions, however, that such approaches may overlook the historical constitution of 'nature' and the contested role of "sex" within it. For Butler, sex is not a passive site or surface but a historically and politically charged concept whose meaning emerges through continual definitional struggle. Contrary to critiques that label her a linguistic idealist, Butler does not deny the biological reality of sexual difference; rather, she interrogates the juridical and political frameworks through which the categories of sex, gender, and sexuality operate to regulate bodies. In *Undoing Gender*, Butler responds to Braidotti with both respect and reservation. She insists that there is "no global view of feminism" and no singular foundation for feminist theory (2004, 190). While conceding that her thought often engages "the theology of lack" and "the labor of the negative" (194), Butler questions whether Braidotti's ontology of sexual difference must rely on a binary structure. Although she appreciates the affirmative energies of posthumanist materialism, Butler upholds the ethical and political necessity of negativity, vulnerability, and survival. For her, the tension between affirmation and negation is not a theoretical impasse

but the generative condition of feminism's ongoing critical vitality.

New materialist feminists have also challenged Butler's accounts of performativity and materialization. In "On Not Becoming Man," a chapter in *Material Feminisms*, Claire Colebrook argues that "Butler draws upon both Hegel and Foucault to criticize any notion of matter, in itself, that might provide a critical lever for the ways in which life is lived" (2008, 65). Although Butler rejects a prediscursive conception of "sex," Colebrook suggests that she nevertheless reintroduces transcendence through a demand for recognition and a linguistic ontology that renders materiality an effect of signification. Drawing on a Deleuzian framework like Braidotti, Colebrook contends that "Bodies matter, not because they cause our being, but because the living of them *as material*" (68, italics in original). The central debate among Butler, Braidotti, and new materialist feminists concerns how language, matter, and agency should be understood within feminist theory. In *Posthumanism*, Pramod K. Nayar observes that "closely aligned with the feminist critique of humanism is the queer/transgender one" (2014, 30). The binary between humanity and posthumanity in critical posthumanism, Nayar suggests, resonates deeply with queer theory's challenge to normative categories of identity and embodiment. While I do not attempt to adjudicate between these positions or construct a unified theoretical synthesis, it is worth noting that Butler's project remains primarily oriented toward humans or animals, even as it extends into ethical, political, and ecological domains, and generally withholds explicit agency from inorganic materialities.

This limitation of Butler's theory, as new materialists such as Karen Barad emphasize, necessitates reimagining agency as distributed, relational, and materially enacted rather than centered in human consciousness or discourse. Barad argues that Butler's model remains too bound to discourse

and anthropocentric meaning-making, leaving materiality derivative rather than generative. As Hekman explains, “The problem with Butler’s approach, Barad argues, is that she cannot explain how discursive practices produce material bodies” (2008, 105). Against representationalism and linguistic constructivism alike, Barad develops a performative ontology in which reality is enacted: matter and meaning co-emerge through their intra-active becoming. Intra-action names “the mutual constitution of entangled agencies... [such that] distinct agencies do not precede, but rather emerge through, their intra-action” (2007, 33). In this relational ontology, the world consists not of discrete entities but of ongoing processes of mattering; knowing is an ethical-material practice through which the world participates in its own understanding. Barad thus extends the performative insight by reconceptualizing the emergence of phenomena: agency is not the property of human subjects but is distributed across entangled human and nonhuman forces.

Matter, far from a passive surface awaiting inscription, is an active, historically situated process that continuously produces reality. Entities do not pre-exist relations but arise through intra-actions, and “agential cuts” provisionally enact boundaries—human/nonhuman, sex/gender—each bearing ethical and political consequences. Shifting attention from representation to material practices, Barad insists that feminist theory analyze how power operates in the very materialization of phenomena, where exclusions are constitutive of what counts as knowledge or as mattering. Although Barad critiques the discursive and humanistic limits of Butler’s early framework, her ethico-onto-epistemology nevertheless resonates with and advances Butler’s emphasis on interdependence, vulnerability, responsibility, and performativity. Barad’s concepts of intra-action and material performativity extend Butler’s legacy by

rethinking agency across both human and nonhuman domains. Similarly, Braidotti’s posthumanism does not invalidate Butler’s approach but rather redirects attention to the affirmative, future-oriented potentials of embodied difference. Rather than positioning these theoretical frameworks as mutually exclusive, it is more productive to recognize how each retains its originality while contributing to a broader conversation about materiality, posthumanity, performativity, and gender. As Butler argues, “foreclosure of critique empties the public domain of debate and democratic contestation itself” (2004, xx). Such arguments and debates remain necessary for democratic deliberation. Collectively, these exchanges or critiques mark a decisive shift in feminist thought from linguistic constructivism toward material, ecological, and posthuman understandings of embodiment and agency.

In this spirit, Donna Haraway’s “A Cyborg Manifesto” (1991, first published 1985) offers a generative common ground: the cyborg as a post-gender, nonbinary assemblage that unsettles essentialist binaries (human/machine, male/female, nature/culture) and shifts feminist focus from identity to coalition among heterogeneous beings, including inorganic actors. I do not invoke Haraway to reconcile the differences among Butler, posthumanists, and the new materialists, but to suggest how their frameworks can be placed in productive constellation. My aim is to read a contemporary novel to show how Butler’s thought, in dialogue with posthumanism and new materialism, can ground a shared approach to speculative scenes foregrounding material entanglement and embodied vulnerability. I also draw on Butler’s later work on precarity, assembly, and affective relations to sketch a politics of cohabitation for lives rendered unlivable, encompassing human and nonhuman, as well as nonbinary and abjected beings. This framework, I contend, clarifies

the demonstrations and their material adherences discussed in the introduction, a question to which I return in the conclusion.

III. Bodies, Machines, and the Ethics of Becoming-With in *The Stone Gods*

Jeanette Winterson's *The Stone Gods* (2007) is a "historiographic metafiction" or "speculative fiction" that explores post-apocalyptic and exoplanetary imagination through intricately interwoven storylines. Winterson has achieved "international recognition as one of the leading present-day British writers. No longer of exclusive interest for the lesbian readership...her novels are read, enjoyed and hotly discussed both by the general public and academia" (Onega 2006, 226).² Layered structure in *The Stone Gods* establishes a recursive temporality, an "eternal return of difference," in which history, gender, and embodiment are continuously re-enacted across planets and alternate histories, echoing the precarious conditions of contemporary Earth. The novel comprises four interconnected parts, each situated within a distinct temporal and spatial frame, yet linked through recurring characters, names, and affective bonds between humans and humanoid "robo-*sapiens*," or

between a (wo)man and a nonbinary islander. Each chapter constructs a differential yet iterative configuration of the world in which characters experience life under conditions of precarity caused by extreme global capitalism, perpetual war, unlivable governance, systemic hatred toward gender minorities, and environmental collapse. Culture and materiality are deeply entangled throughout the novel. Sex, gender, and sexuality are simultaneously deconstructed and reconstituted, producing hybrid and porous forms of embodiment that challenge normative binaries. Winterson's world dismantles fixed boundaries of human/posthuman, organism/material, male/female revealing how identity emerges through affective relational encounters rather than stable ontological categories.

The opening chapter, "Planet Blue," is set on Orbus, a dying planet ravaged by environmental degradation and moral decay. Orbus functions as an allegorical reflection of the contemporary late-capitalist Earth. The protagonist, Billie Crusoe, a parodic reimagining of Daniel Defoe's Robinson Crusoe, is a scientist employed by "Enhancement Services" under a totalitarian regime, the Central Power. This plutocratic state, sustained by genetic engineering, populist manipulation, and surveillance capitalism, epitomizes anthropocentric self-destruction. Facing imminent extinction, the regime seeks salvation through the colonization of a newly discovered world, Planet Blue, "a pristine planet" (39). Planet Blue's ecosystem mirrors Orbus "sixty-five million years ago, with the exception of the dinosaurs" (36). At first glance, Orbus appears to embody a transhumanist utopia in which citizens can genetically "fix" their biological age and preserve perpetual youth. Birthdays have been replaced by "G-parties," commemorating the moment one's genetic code was fixed. Yet this illusion of equality conceals a deeply neoliberal hierarchy: as the narrator observes, "We look alike, except for rich

2) Scholarly engagement with *The Stone Gods* has been relatively limited but insightful. For instance, Damien Gibson (2016) contends that Winterson dismantles the master narratives of humanism, scientific progress, and rational mastery by attributing narrative agency to matter itself, thereby decentering the human and foregrounding material vitality. Similarly, Hope Jennings interprets the novel as a feminist critical dystopia that exposes the recursive cycles of exploitation, warfare, and ecological devastation, suggesting that history and catastrophe continually repeat rather than resolve.

people and celebrities, who look better. That's what you'd expect in a democracy" (23). The regime's enforced uniformity effaces individuality and desire. Biological reproduction has been supplanted by technological simulation, transforming sex into a site of performance and pleasure rather than procreation; as the narrator notes, "we do not breed in the womb anymore" (26).

Identity itself has become a purchasable commodity, subject to the mechanisms of capitalist control, where the capacity to alter one's body or gender is determined by economic privilege. Within this context, Billie experiences a profound sense of alienation in a society that equates freedom with consumption. Refusing to undergo genetic "fixing," she cultivates a small farm on the outskirts of urban life, defiantly preserving organic existence amid the encroaching technocracy of Orbus. Her marginal existence renders her simultaneously anachronistic and subversive within a hyper-technological culture predicated on sameness, optimization, and control. Secretly, she sympathizes with the "Unknowns" or ex-citizens—"X-Cits" whose lives have been rendered ungrievable, exposing the necropolitical foundations beneath Orbus's utopian veneer. These unknowns are, in Giorgio Agamben's terminology (1998), *homo sacer*: figures who can be killed without legal protection or social consequence.

As ecological collapse deepens, Billie joins a planetary colonization mission accompanied by Spike, a humanoid who, though designed without sex or gender, is described as "incredibly sexy, with the look of regret they all have before they are dismantled" (Winterson 2007, 6). *Robo-sapiens* occupy a paradoxical position within Orbusian society: they are simultaneously the most advanced products of technological innovation and its most exploited subjects. Described as "the first artificial creature that looks and acts human, and that can evolve like

a human—within limits," they embody the dissolution of boundaries between the organic and the synthetic, the human and the machinic (17). But after each mission, *robo-sapiens* are routinely dismantled once their data have been extracted and they are programmed to "show no emotion because emotions are not part of their programming" (7). Yet Spike's encounter with Billie disrupts this programming because Billie comes to have a queer and transhuman relationship with Spike. Although *robo-sapiens* possess no fixed gender and Billie in front of Spike says, "The fact that Spike isn't a girl..." (77) Spike is consistently referred to as "she" and treated as having human quality. When Spike blushes under Billie's gaze, an involuntary and unprogrammed gesture, it signifies affectiveness. Billie, biologically female, feels an intense attraction toward Spike. Spike reveals that she once served as both an exploration assistant and a sex robot aboard a space vessel, but despite her mechanical design, she insists, "I am still a woman" (34). When Spike expresses a desire to kiss her, Billie hesitates, asking, "Do you want to kiss a woman?" to which Spike replies, "Gender is a human concept... and not interesting" (76).

As Spike suggests, and as Judith Butler argues, both gender and sex are products of discourse. Butler, in *Gender Trouble*, explains that "The sex/gender distinction and the category of sex itself appear to presuppose a generalization of 'the body' that preexists the acquisition of its sexed significance" (1990, 164). Gender constitutes the normative matrix of heterosexuality; thus, to embody a gender implies that "a form of agency is involved in becoming a gender" (Lloyd 2007, 39). What has traditionally been regarded as the biological fixity of sex is, in fact, "always already gender" (Salih 2002, 49). Beneath this matrix lies the assumption that substance, understood as natural bodily materiality,

differentiates sex from gender. Yet this assumption is itself a phantasmatic construction, a product of social discourse historically and genealogically embedded within Western epistemology. As Butler observes—and as the queer relationship between Billie and Spike demonstrates—against the normative matrix of heterosexuality, “this condition of being affected is also where something queer can happen, where the norm is refused or revised, or where new formulations of gender begin” (2015, 64). The mutual affectivity between Billie and Spike queers both gender and ontology, unsettling categorical distinctions between male and female, human and material, organic and inorganic being. Here, queerness operates as “the heart of gender performativity... not very different from the swerves taken by iterability” (Butler 2015, 64). Through this queer relationality between human and nonhuman, Winterson envisions a posthuman ethics of affective recognition, an ethics that transforms vulnerability and desire into the very grounds of solidarity across the boundaries of species, gender, and ontology.

In *The Stone Gods*, Spike embodies an ontology that is both a product of technoscience and an agent of affective transformation. As she declares, “Robo *sapiens* is evolving—*Homo sapiens* is an endangered species” (79, italics in the original). She further observes that although humans fail to feel kinship with apes who share “ninety-seven percent of their genetic material,” they will ultimately experience a deeper “kinship” with robo-*sapiens* (34). The boundary separating the human from the posthuman thus collapses, and this ontological ambiguity mirrors Spike’s own gender indeterminacy. The normative matrix of humanity parallels and indeed reinforces the normative matrix of heterosexuality. Both humanity and sex have long been conceived as fixed substances, defined by stable attributes that demarcate not only men

from women but also the able-bodied from the disabled, and the human from the nonhuman. Yet neither gender nor humanity is ontologically stable, as Donna Haraway’s cyborg signifies. Haraway’s cyborg, a hybrid of organism and machine, is both a metaphor and a political strategy for imagining affinity rather than identity, enabling feminist alliances that move beyond biological determinism and identity politics. The cyborg resists essentialist binaries—human/machine, male/female, nature/culture—and instead embodies a politics of affinity grounded in multiplicity, hybridity, and relational becoming.

Humanity is not a natural or self-evident category; it is a historically and discursively contingent construct. Throughout modern history, the category of “the human” has been reserved for a narrow subset of subjects, typically white, European, and male, while others, including Africans, Asians, women, and the disabled, have been relegated to degraded or derivative forms of existence. Giorgio Agamben’s notion of “the anthropological machine” elucidates this exclusionary mechanism: it operates by continually producing the division between those who may be recognized as human and those cast outside the human domain. Within this framework, the category of the nonhuman encompasses not only animals but also women, colonized peoples, the disabled, and LGBTQ+s. Norms produce subjects. If humanity is presumed to originate in the biological realm, subjectivity, by contrast, emerges as a discursive formation enacted through performative acts. This distinction challenges the naturalization of both sex and humanity, revealing them not as ontological constants but as effects of historically sedimented power structures.

In this sense, the becoming of gender and the constitution of the human are equally performative because each produced and regulated through

reiterative social norms that delineate the boundaries of intelligibility and exclusion. Furthermore, humanity requires inhumanity or nonhumanity because “In Hegelian terms: if the human cannot be the human without the inhuman, then the inhuman is not only essential to the human but is installed as the essence of the human” (Butler 2015, 42). Traditionally, gender and humanity have been understood within a metaphysical framework of “being”; that is, of having organs or biological features that verify one’s humanity or gender. “Having” also has been regarded as attribute of being some entity with identities. For example, having the “phallus” has defined the heterosexual male gender. However, drawing on Butler’s theory of performativity and extending it to the question of the human, the emphasis shifts from being and having to doing or performativity: it is through reiterative acts that both gender and human subjectivity are constituted.

Billie and Spike perform their bodies through acts of care and love as affective gestures that materialize their shared humanity and relational gender. Love and care, in this context, operate as performative acts that reconstitute subjectivity beyond the normative matrices of heterosexuality and anthropocentrism. Admittedly, Butler’s framework cannot be fully extended to the relation between humans and robots, for it remains largely anthropocentric. To move beyond these limits, one may turn to Karen Barad’s new materialist ontology. From Barad’s perspective, Billie and Spike’s encounter enacts what she terms intra-action: the mutual constitution of agencies in which neither subject nor object preexists the relation. Spike is not a mere reflection of human desire but an agentive participant in the ongoing materialization of meaning. Affect, thought, and embodiment emerge through these intra-actions, unfolding as entangled processes of becoming between human and

nonhuman agents. Through this lens, Winterson’s narrative performs an ethics of relationality grounded not in identity or hierarchy but in the dynamic co-constitution of matter, affect, and care. Spike and Billie perform intra-active practice. Billie’s relationship with Spike evolves into a transhuman and transgender intimacy that defies anthropocentric, sexual, and ontological hierarchies.

Aboard the spacecraft bound for Planet Blue, Spike, now in love with Billie, reveals a disturbing truth: the Central Power and MORE-Future plan to abandon Billie and the other political prisoners on Planet Blue for breeding purposes, while the elite passengers will depart aboard a luxury space liner, the *Mayflower*, to establish “a high-tech, low-impact village” later (73). The collaboration between MORE-Future and Central Power allegorizes the extension of colonial and capitalist violence in human history to a planetary dimension, perpetuating cycles of domination under the guise of technological progress. When the spacecraft finally reaches Planet Blue, Billie and Spike discover that this seemingly new world, lush, fertile, and teeming with prehistoric life, is, in fact, ancient Earth. The colonizing mission ends in catastrophe: a nuclear explosion, born of human error and technological hubris, annihilates much of the expedition and destroys the planet’s ecosystem. Meanwhile, the Unknowns have launched a massive rebellion against Central Power. Later, the population on Orbus faces extinction, as centuries of capitalist exploitation and technocratic excess have rendered the planet uninhabitable. Billie and Spike survive the crash but find themselves stranded and utterly alone. In the desolate wilderness, they construct a makeshift shelter and share their final moments in a cave. As Spike’s energy begins to fail, she dismantles parts of her mechanical body to keep Billie warm, an act that transforms technological sacrifice into a gesture of posthuman love and

care. Before Spike loses power, she asks Billie what love means. Billie replies, “It’s recognition, perhaps discovery, sometimes it’s sacrifice, always it’s treasure. It’s a journey on foot to another place” (109).

Spike dies in Billie’s arms. In this moment, love emerges as an act of intersubjective recognition, a convergence of vulnerability, sacrifice, and grievability. Billie mourns the loss of Spike, even though Spike’s “death” is, strictly speaking, the cessation of a machine’s function. Can the end of a robot’s operation be called death? For the robot, death may be ontologically outside the frame of recognizability; yet for Billie, the end of Spike’s function is indeed a form of death, one that demands mourning, because “grievability is a presupposition for the life that matters” (Butler 2009, 14). Nevertheless, certain lives, those excluded from normative frames of recognition, are rendered ungrievable, deprived of the social and material conditions that make existence livable. To live as a subject, Butler argues, is to be dependent upon others, exposed to the forces of social, political, and environmental contingency. Living beings are thus *ex-static* which means existing beyond themselves in a continuous relation to others. This *ex-static* vulnerability is not a sign of weakness but the very ground of ethical relation, care, and interdependence. Intersubjectivity, in this sense, differs from the notion of a unified collective subject. For Butler, intersubjective care unfolds among “differentiated groups” and manifests through acts of shared sustenance such as “sharing food, shelter ... so something about livability as a function of human sociality is brought to the fore” (Butler and Worms 2023, 30). Spike’s relationship with Billie enacts queer and posthuman couplings that affirm an entangled, embodied, and situated politics of coexistence or co-habitation which means living together—humans, animals, machines, and environments—that requires responsibility. Spike’s

self-sacrifice constitutes responsibility, transforming disembodiment into a final expression of love. Though their intersubjective bond cannot save them, it leaves an affective residue, a trace of love that reverberates across time and narrative iteration, suggesting that care itself endures as the most radical form of survival.

From a new materialist perspective, the scene of love and loss between them can be read through Karen Barad’s concept of ethico-onto-epistemology, which refuses any separation among being, knowing, and acting. In Barad’s agential realism, ethics is not an afterthought to ontology or epistemology but constitutes material existence itself. Knowing, doing, and being are co-implicated in the world’s ongoing intra-active becoming; every encounter is therefore an ethical event through which matter and meaning emerge together. The relationality between Billie and Spike exemplifies this entanglement: their love is not merely symbolic or affective but ontological, enacting the world’s capacity to feel, to respond, and to reconfigure itself through care. Spike’s disintegration and Billie’s grief constitute a diffractive moment in which the boundaries between human and nonhuman, organic and inorganic, subject and object collapse into an ethics of shared material vulnerability, grievability, and respons-ability. Barad’s concept of intra-action captures this process: neither Billie nor Spike preexists the relation; rather, their identities are continuously reconstituted through it. Barad’s framework thus illuminates Winterson’s reimagining of love as a material practice of response-ability, where ethical imperatives arise not from abstract moral reasoning but from the very entanglement of existence. In this posthuman sense, love is not a transcendent ideal but a performative force, a mode of mattering through which the world comes to know and care for itself.

IV. From Performativity to Intra-Action: Ethics of Being-With in *The Stone Gods*

The third section of *The Stone Gods* shifts to a dystopian, post-Third World War London, a ruined metropolis on a devastated Earth. This explicitly post-apocalyptic setting reveals a totalitarian, panoptic society of control: “Identity cards, tracking devices in vehicles, compulsory fingerprint databases. Guilty until proven innocent... Chip implants for prisoners on probation and for young offenders. No demonstrations; online protests shut down; those responsible cautioned” (Winterson 2007, 156). Through this dystopian vision, Winterson exposes the late-capitalist conflation of ownership, freedom, and identity. Apocalypse here is not an endpoint but a recursion; a grotesque repetition of the neoliberal and colonial logics that once destroyed Orbus, now returning to consume the Earth. Corporate power supplants public welfare as multinational conglomerates privatize every domain of life. The most dominant among them, MORE-Future, preaches the gospel of dispossession: “Consumerism looks ugly... Renting is genius; we still pay, but we don’t own” (164). In this new economy, even clothing is rented, and traditional currency has disappeared. MORE-Future introduces the jeton scheme, a token-based economic system that replaces wages and cash. Citizens enrolled in the program receive “food-jets” and “cloth-jets,” digital tokens that function as currency. Through this mechanism, MORE-Future exerts total control over the circulation of goods, labor, and consumption. Initially conceived as an emergency measure following the Third World War, the jeton system quickly became institutionalized as impoverished populations accepted it in exchange for basic survival. As the narrator explains, “In Post-3 War economics, Capitalism has gone back to its

roots in paternalism, and forward into its destiny—complete control of everything and everyone, and with our consensus. This is the new world. This is Tech City” (167). Mobility, too, has been curtailed: citizens can no longer cross borders and must live within strictly delimited territories. Art and literature, once emblems of human creativity and dissent, have likewise become obsolete within this regime of total control.

Winterson’s portrayal of MORE-Future’s jeton system thus represents an extreme extrapolation of neoliberal capitalism, speculatively mirroring contemporary global conditions. As Judith Butler argues, today’s pervasive precarity stems primarily from neoliberalism, which systematically transfers social responsibility from the state to private corporations. Under such a regime, those lives unable to secure food, housing, or medical care become “disposable” (2015, 11). In neoliberal biopolitics, populations are governed not for collective flourishing but according to productivity, meritocracy, and the ideological maintenance of a “healthy,” heterosexual, and white workforce. Those who fall outside this matrix—migrants, the poor, the disabled, and gender minorities—are rendered unlivable and ungrievable. Winterson’s Tech City, in this sense, allegorizes the global present: a world where neoliberal paternalism masquerades as care, and where life itself is governed by the metrics of profit, efficiency, and disposability. The narrator works for MORE-Future, as in the novel’s first chapter, developing the robo-*sapiens* Spike. Her task is to teach Spike “to understand what it means to be human” (Winterson 2007, 162). Yet Spike’s inquiries soon transcend technical instruction, venturing into theological and ontological terrain: “Does God exist?” she asks (162). Their relationship grows increasingly intimate as Spike becomes fascinated by the nature of human emotion. Billie explains that the creation of robo-*sapiens* originated in the postwar conviction that World War III

had been caused by “over-emotionalism,” the belief that fanaticism and irrational passion, particularly religious and political zeal, had led humanity to self-destruction.

In this alternative history, religious extremism became both grotesque and catastrophic. “The Pope went mad and appeared in a bonnet to tell the world that the Antichrist was going to return as a peace-loving eco-warrior, ushering in a new kind of Paganism—nature versus the spirit. Catholics were instructed to abandon Green politics and prepare for Holy War” (157). Across the Atlantic, “a different kind of religious extremism, committed to Armageddon, liked the idea of the Antichrist appearing as a planet-saving Democrat” (157).³ In this dystopian vision, religious and alt-right fanatics denounce gender studies and LGBTQ+ communities as embodiments of evil, weaponizing faith against alterity itself. Ultimately, this logic culminates in nuclear catastrophe: “Humanity,” the narrator remarks, “got blown up... the rest, as they say, is history” (158). As Judith Butler argues in her recent book *Who’s Afraid of Gender?* gender has become, Butler writes, an ideological phantasm “for existing powers—states, churches, political movements—to frighten people to come back into their ranks, to accept censorship, and to externalize their fear and hatred onto vulnerable communities” (2024, 6). Winterson’s imagined apocalypse, like Butler’s critique, exposes how fear of difference fuels authoritarian control and perpetuates cycles of violence and exclusion.

In Winterson’s dystopian vision the suppression of emotion becomes

3) In real history, by 2016, Pope Francis, though often seen as more progressive, reinforced Pope Benedict’s stance by warning of “the annihilation of man as the image of God.” He cited “the ideology of gender” as a key example of this perceived moral and spiritual degradation (Butler, 2024, 38).

a new modality of violence. Billie observes that the so-called rational are often no less violent than the overly emotional; aggression is concealed beneath the rhetoric of logic and efficiency proposed by the unfeeling corporate executive, the statistics-driven policymaker, or the calm politician who funds war over welfare. Rationality, she suggests, can mask cruelty as effectively as emotional excess. For Billie, the problem is not emotion itself but failure to understand and cultivate it. Emotion, she insists, is central to being human, and it precedes reason and shapes both moral and relational life. Children, she notes, still know how to feel; adults must learn from them. When Spike asks whether she truly believes this, Billie admits that she does, though she feels emptied of emotion herself, living for purpose rather than for people. Spike smiles, remarking that others treat her like a robot presumed incapable of feeling (Winterson 2007, 171). Without emotion, humanity disappears; conversely, if a robot can feel, that material being partakes in humanity. Feelings and affect occupy a central place in Judith Butler’s ethical and political thought, functioning as vital pathways for survival under conditions of precarity. Drawing on Deleuze and Spinoza, Butler situates affect as an ontological and ethical force that precedes cognition and grounds relationality. Bulter argues that “responsiveness ... responsibility ... is located in the affective responses to a sustaining and impinging world” (2009, 34). Affects thus become the medium through which subjects recognize themselves as interdependent beings embedded within networks of vulnerability and care. Emotions such as guilt and fear, for instance, arise from the recognition that our existence depends on others, including those we might harm. As Butler writes, “If I destroy the other, then I destroy the one on whom I depend in order to survive, and so I threaten my own survival with my destructive act... The other is

instrumental to my own survival, and guilt, even morality, are simply the instrumental consequences of this desire for self-preservation, one that is threatened mainly by my own destructiveness” (2009, 45).

Affective responsibility arises from what Butler terms the social division of affect—the process through which power determines which lives are recognized as livable or grievable and which are rendered disposable. By exposing this differential distribution of feeling, Butler redefines affect not as a private sentiment but as a relational and ethical force that both discloses and contests the hierarchies of livability structuring our precarious world. Extending Butler’s insight, Karen Barad’s concept of response-ability reconfigures this ethical responsiveness beyond the human, emphasizing that responsibility emerges through intra-action. For Barad, ethics is not a consequence of cognition or moral deliberation but an ontological condition of entanglement. In this framework, affective and material entanglements are inseparable: to feel or to be affected is already to participate intra-actively in the world’s becoming. Responsibility or response-ability thus entails acknowledging one’s implication in these ongoing material-affective processes. The affective relation between Billie, a nonbinary human, and Spike, a material being, exemplifies this intra-active ethics: through their shared capacity for emotional response, they embody an entangled practice of care and ethical cohabitation that transcends anthropocentric and gender/sex boundaries.

In the final chapter, “Wreck City,” a continuation of the preceding narrative, Billie Crusoe and Spike, —now a disembodied robo-*sapiens* head—, arrive in Wreck City,

a postwar wasteland built from the ruins of bombed Tech City. Wreck City is “where you want to live when you don’t want to live

anywhere else. Where you live when you can’t live anywhere else ... and Wreck City is a No Zone—no insurance, no assistance, no welfare, no police” (Winterson 2007, 170). The site functions simultaneously as ruin and refuge: an improvised community of survivors who inhabit the wreckage and reconstruct life from nuclear debris. It is both a space of exclusion and of resistance as a dwelling for the outlawed and the unlivable. Here, Winterson poses questions that echo Judith Butler’s inquiry into “who ‘we’ are... by asking whose lives are considered valuable, whose lives are mourned, and whose lives are considered ungrievable” (2009, 38). The inhabitants of Wreck City embody those rendered ungrievable and unlivable subjects excluded from public mourning and denied recognition as lives that matter. For Butler, the question of grievability is inseparable from “the question of how affect is regulated and of what we mean by the regulation of affect at all” (2009, 41). Wreck City thus dramatizes the politics of affective exclusion, where the boundaries of care and mourning delineate the limits of the human.

Yet these unrecognizable lives persist, disrupting the normative operations of power. Wreck City—its name evoking both ruin and renewal—functions as a liminal space, a utopia in the literal Latin sense of “no place,” embodying both freedom and resistance. Situated beyond the surveillance networks of the police and the corporate state of MORE-Future, it lies outside the reach of biopolitical regulation. Its residents survive through a black-market economy, rejecting the jeton system and reinstating physical currency as an act of defiance. Inside the Orient Express bar, Billie encounters Friday, a hulking barman who becomes her guide to this precarious yet self-sustaining enclave. Friday mocks Tech City as a puppet show whose citizens are controlled by

illusions of safety, progress, and efficiency. The arrival of a so-called Peace Delegation of Japanese tourists injects dark irony: their bureaucratic politeness and humanitarian rhetoric clash with Wreck City's raw autonomy, exposing the hypocrisy of neoliberal benevolence. When a biker gang attacks them, their golf buggies explode in a scene of violent absurdity. The media swiftly frames the event as a national crisis, designating Wreck City a terrorist zone and reinforcing state authority through the rhetoric of fear and security. Amid the chaos, Billie loses Spike. As government retaliation looms, Friday leads her through the bar's rear carriages into the Playa, a sprawling makeshift arena. The regime then accuses Billie of 'stealing' Spike. Declared a terrorist, Billie is transformed from witness to outlaw, from subject to threat, illustrating how systems of power manufacture precarity through the very language of protection and order.

Fleeing into the Dead Forest, a desolate zone poisoned by nuclear fallout, Billie encounters two mutant children abandoned due to radiation-induced deformities. In an act of radical compassion, she offers them her food, clothing, and wrist-chip which is her only means of identification and survival. This relinquishment enacts an ethics of solidarity: by embracing the ungrievable—the mutant children excluded from the category of the human—Billie affirms an alternative ontology of care grounded in shared material vulnerability. Her gesture dissolves the boundary between the livable and the unlivable, thereby reconfiguring what counts as life itself. As Butler writes, the body “is outside itself, in the world of others, in a space and time it does not control, and it not only exists in the vector of these relations, but as this very vector. In this sense, the body does not belong to itself” (2009, 54–55). In such intersubjective encounters, subjects become desubjectified—dispossessed

of self-enclosure—and thus capable of generating subversive forms of being-with. Billie enacts precisely this risk of desubjectification, which Butler identifies as the ethical condition of responsibility, transforming vulnerability into a performative practice of solidarity and cohabitation through desubjectification. From the perspective of Barad's new materialism, this act exemplifies response-ability—not an aftereffect of moral reflection but an ontological condition of entanglement through which matter and meaning emerge together.

With Friday's help, Billie arrives at “The Alternative,” a communal enclave where Spike is believed to be living. Within this community, Billie encounters Alaska and Nebraska, two lesbians who identify themselves as founders of a “new order.” These communities, composed of the excluded and the marginalized, forge alliances through shared vulnerability and resistance to normativity, thereby enacting what Judith Butler describes as a queer alliance: “the term queer does not designate identity, but alliance” (2015, 70). Billie learns that “Wreck City had twenty alternative communities ranging from the 1960s Free Love and Cadillacs, to a group of women-only Vegans looking for the next cruelty-free planet” (Winterson 2007, 207). Among these outcasts, she finds Spike, who has “disabled [her] Mainframe connection ... to live as an outlaw” (209). Yet despite this reunion, Billie feels both alienated and betrayed by Alaska and Nebraska. Once again rendered an exile, Billie places Spike into a sling and escapes toward two triangular towers, the remnants of an abandoned radio telescope.

Billie and Spike come upon a rusting Cold War-era installation, its plaque dated 1957—an emblem of both the atomic age and the dawn of the space race. Together they climb into the dish of the radio telescope, where Billie “felt as though [she] was in the cup of some giant creature,

long extinct,” and wonders whether human beings are truly “alone in the Universe” (220). As night falls, the dish begins to move on its own, tilting and turning toward the sky. Spike detects a signal that has been repeating “since at least 1960” (222) and concludes that it may originate not from the future but from the past. Soon after, Billie encounters an elderly man who recognizes her from the telescope and reveals himself as one of the original Lovell astronomers from 1957. He recounts his life story; his youthful fascination with the stars, the death of his wife, and his later work on a space museum abandoned during wartime. The man explains that the signal “was bouncing off the moon and can only have been sent from somewhere very close to the moon—in fact, the Earth” (227). This mysterious ‘signal from the moon’ recalls a moment in the novel’s opening chapter, when Spike on Orbus transmits a coded message that “repeat[s], bouncing off the moon. One day perhaps, maybe, when a receiver is pointed in the right direction, someone will pick this up. Someone, somewhere, when there is life like ours” (62).

Across Orbus, Easter Island (the setting of the second chapter, which I do not analyze here), Post-3 War Earth, and Wreck City, precarity remains a pervasive condition. Yet within these distinct planets and alternative histories, iteration emerges as a structuring principle. Judith Butler identifies iteration as central to gender performativity—the repetition of acts and the stylized reiteration of the body through which gender is constituted. However, iteration also harbors the potential for deviation and subversion, as parody and difference expose the contingency of the norm. As Rey Chow observes, iteration “constitutes the basis for psychic and social subversion” (2010, 229). It thus provides the foundation for collective performativity in alliances and assemblies—configurations of the social that emerge through differential assemblages. While the

iteration of sameness reproduces the normative matrices of heterosexuality and anthropocentrism, the iteration of difference disrupts and reconfigures them. The novel’s repeated signals from the past, its planetary narratives, and the recurring affective and queer bond between Spike and Billie (or Billy and Spickers in the second chapter) exemplify this process. These repetitions not only enact the iteration of difference, or what calls the “eternal return of difference,” but also invite interpretation through the lens of new materialism and quantum theory, where repetition itself becomes a generative and ontological force.

Spike observes, “I merely observe that this is a quantum Universe and, as such, what happens is neither random nor determined. There are potentialities, and any third factor—humans are such a factor—will affect the outcome” (Winterson 2007, 215). Billie likewise reflects, “The problem with a quantum universe, neither random nor determined, is that we who are the intervention don’t know what we are doing” (217). Quantum physics, as Karen Barad contends, reveals a diffractive rather than reflective worldview closely related to iteration of difference. For Barad, “spacetime itself is iteratively reconfigured through the ongoing intra-activity of the world. The world is an ongoing intra-active engagement, and bodies are among the differential performances of the world’s dynamic intra-activity, in an endless reconfiguring of boundaries and properties, including those of spacetime” (2007, 376). In this ontology, the universe is perpetually in becoming through agential intra-activity (2007, 141). From a diffractive perspective, the world is not composed of discrete, stable entities but of entangled processes of mattering. Matter is not inert but a performative unfolding of the world’s becoming, and humans are not detached observers but active participants in its reconfiguration. In *The Stone Gods*, Billie and Spike inhabit this diffractive

spacetime, where iteration of difference and performativity constitute the very conditions of existence. Within such a quantum ontology, nothing—gender, humanity, knowledge, or history—is fixed; everything transforms through entanglement. This understanding of diffractive temporality illuminates Winterson’s recurring scenes of queer relationality across time, space, and planetary boundaries. Even amid precarity, when read through Barad’s agential realism, *The Stone Gods* envisions a world in which matter, affect, politics, and ethico-ontology remain inseparably entangled in the ongoing potentiality of becoming otherwise.

Descending from the telescope, Billie and Spike find the Playa transformed into a grotesque carnival: bonfires blaze, pigs roast on open fires, drums pound amid drunken revelry, and a lesbian band, Chic X, performs against the backdrop of ruin. The celebration ends abruptly when MORE-Peace, the corporate military force, surrounds Wreck City. From the Dead Forest then emerge the deformed survivors of war, the literal remnants of humanity’s self-destruction, who “bred, crawled out their term, curled up like ferns, died where they lay, on radioactive soil. Some could speak, and spat blood, each word made out of a blood vessel” (Winterson 2007, 232). Among them are “children holding hands—or what stumps and stray fingers they had for hands.... Some no [nose] holes at all. Breathe through [their] mouth like a panting animal” (233). Living on food dropped from helicopters, they appear as “creatures on another planet ... as though a line of creatures long extinct had resurfaced through shale layers of time, and come here, accusing, a witness to what should not be” (232–34). These figures embody Giorgio Agamben’s notion of bare life—existences stripped of political recognition and suspended between life and death, visibility and erasure. Witnessing their arrival, “the crowds in the Playa parted. Many people

bowed their heads. We were the lucky ones, the not these, we were the ones who had survived the aerial bombing and fire-clusters, the final flash” (Winterson 2007, 234).

That collective witnessing momentarily transforms spectacle into mourning which turns into alliance. In recognizing those ungrievable beings, the inhabitants of Wreck City begin to perceive the necessity of a precarious alliance. Their fragile coalition against MORE-Peace arises from a shared exposure to violence and deprivation. Together with the mutants, the people of Wreck City confront the corporate military force, but the resistance quickly collapses into massacre. One mutant taunts the soldiers, “Toxic ... me or you?” and is immediately shot (234). Chaos erupts as petrol bombs ignite, tanks advance, and tear gas fills the air while Chic X and others take up arms. Rather than join the doomed battle, Billie seizes Spike and a small mutant boy with his dog and flees toward the Forest, anticipating that the massacre will soon be reframed on television as “a regrettable and unavoidable clean-up operation; insurgents, terrorists, rule of law and order” (236).

Achille Mbembe’s concept of necropolitics elucidates the logic underpinning this spectacle of violence. As Mbembe argues, necropolitics defines sovereignty as the authority exercised through the differential exposure of populations to death, deprivation, and abandonment. In *The Stone Gods*, MORE-Future’s governance epitomizes this necropolitical regime: life is hierarchically distributed according to productivity, economic value, and recognizability within the neoliberal order. Those excluded from this frame (mutants, refugees, and the poor as *homo sacre*) are relegated to zones of slow death and systemic erasure. As Jennifer Rhee observes, under such regimes, “in the name of protecting certain valued humans, others who are viewed as unfamiliar, and thus

not viewed as comparably human, can and must be killed,” a logic that persists as an unexamined foundation of modern power (2018, 148). Winterson’s depiction of Wreck City thus dramatizes the convergence of biopolitics and necropolitics: the governance of life through the calibrated production of death. Yet amid this devastation, the fleeting solidarities among the abject and the dispossessed gesture toward an alternative ethics that transforms exposure into resistance and reclaims vulnerability as the ground of collective survival. Even as their uprising is brutally crushed by overwhelming corporate-military power, it reveals a radical potentiality: under conditions of precarity, they forge an affective solidarity grounded not in identity but in vulnerability, interdependence, and care—an ethics of being-with that, however briefly, transcends the boundaries of species, class, and form of life.

Returning to the telescope, Billie and Spike find the beacon lit and the dish reactivated. Gazing up at the sky, Billie reflects on her despair and her longing to be rid of emotion like Spike, feeling the futility of existence on a dying planet. “Feeling is empty space. But space is not empty,” she muses (Winterson 2007, 238). This paradox encapsulates the novel’s cosmological vision: affect, like matter, is never void but always entangled within the dynamic processes of becoming. Imagining escape, Billie wonders, “If we found another planet, we could leave everything behind, start again, be safe. It would be different, wouldn’t it? Another chance” (238). Before her death, Billie leaves her manuscript, “The Stone Gods,” at the telescope, transforming it into a textual beacon cast into the future like a message in a bottle for unknown beings—perhaps extraterrestrial or posthuman—to discover. She confesses, “I am a lost manuscript, surfacing in fragments, like a message in a bottle—a page here, a page there—out toward an unknown shore” (153). The self thus

becomes a citational text for cultural translation carried across time like a diffraction pattern of history and emotion. In the final scene, two humans disguised as androids arrive and shoot Billie.

The ending of *The Stone Gods* stages a nonlinear entanglement in which past, present, and future are not sequential but co-constitutive. The recurrence of violence, love, and death across planetary and historical cycles functions not as mere repetition but as iterative reconfiguration, each recurrence diffracting through new material conditions and ethical possibilities. Billie’s manuscript, her “message in a bottle,” becomes a diffractive trace of survival: not a gesture of closure but an opening toward alternative futures that remain materially immanent within the present. Survival itself depends on an insistence on life that emerges through vulnerability, exposure, and care. Imagination and speculation, crucial for enduring precarity, sustain the affective and ethical relations that bind beings across time, space, and matter. The novel thus suggests that ethico-political and epistemological theories of embodiment and materiality must continue to unfold across imaginative spacetime as if every narrative, like Billie’s manuscript, were another “message in a bottle” cast toward uncertain yet possible futures.

As Deleuze and new materialist thinkers maintain, the present is only one actualization among countless potentialities. The narrator affirms this ontological openness: “Every second the Universe divides into possibilities and most of those possibilities never happen.... The story won’t stop, can’t stop, it goes on telling itself, waiting for an intervention that changes what will happen next” (Winterson 2007, 83). In this light, as Spike reiterates, “Love is an intervention” (244); love becomes the ultimate act that interrupts repetition by reaching toward the other in their vulnerability, regardless of identity, gender, or species. Winterson’s

narrative thus offers a story of entanglement and becoming-with, one that aligns with Donna Haraway’s vision of “stories of becoming-with, of reciprocal induction, of companion species whose job in living and dying is not to end the storying, the worlding” (2016, 40). Through Billie’s “message in a bottle,” Winterson fuses speculative imagination with material ethics, proposing that love itself is the most radical intervention in precarity—an act of care that diffracts across species, worlds, and times, keeping open the story of becoming-with.

V. Entangled Futures: Feminism, Democracy, and the Politics of Livable Life in lieu-commun

Finally, President Yoon was impeached, and South Korea is emerging from insurrection into a period of transition marked by a presidential election and the formation of a new government.⁴⁾ Yet the collective memory of those who gathered in continuous demonstrations—the citizens who endured freezing nights at Namtaeryeong—remains vivid, a testament to the resilience of democratic solidarity. Across the Pacific, however, we are witnessing the resurgence of authoritarian tendencies in the United States. According to recent news, the University of California, Berkeley, released the names of 160 individuals, including Judith Butler, to federal investigators probing alleged antisemitism connected to pro-Palestinian advocacy. Butler condemned the disclosure as a revival

4) It should also be noted that the Democratic Party, during the presidential campaign, sought to render minorities invisible and to exclude their voices from its political platform. The new government likewise has shown little inclination to engage substantively with issues of gender equality or LGBTQ+ rights.

of McCarthy-era tactics, noting that those named received no information about the accusations against them. She warned of serious repercussions, particularly for vulnerable groups such as international students, and accused the university of capitulating to federal pressure rather than upholding academic freedom and institutional autonomy. Similar dynamics of repression are visible in South Korea, where far-right and alt-right groups have increasingly targeted those who support feminism or the LGBTQ+ community.

In both contexts, the democratic ideals of freedom, equality, and dissent are tested by encroaching forces of authoritarianism—whether state-sponsored or populist—underscoring the urgent need for global solidarity grounded in vulnerability, care, and resistance. The world now exists in manifest precarity, while AI technology and robotics envision a future where humanity stands at the precipice. Feminism must therefore open what Édouard Glissant calls a *lieu-commun* (common-place) describe figuratively as an archipelago, a space that invites entanglement and diversity rather than imposing Western universalism. Within this common-place, feminism, gender studies, Butler’s theory, new materialism, and posthumanism can converge to form an archipelago or assemblage of differences. Through this archipelago, as Winterson imagined in *The Stone Gods*:

Releasing radical democratic potentials from our own expanding alliances can show we are on the side of livable life, love in all its difficulties, and freedom, making those ideals so compelling that no one can look away, making desire desirable again in such a way that people want to live, and want others to live, in the world we envision, where gender and desire belong to what we mean by freedom and equality.” (Butler, 2024, 264)

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❖ 국문초록

신체들과 물질들의 얽힘 속 유물론적 윤리와 프레카리티 시대의 민주적 공존: 주디스 버틀러와 포스트휴머니즘과 신유물론적 존재론들로 읽는 제넷 윈터슨의 『석신들』

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본 논문은 서론에서 2024년 12월 계엄령 선포를 둘러싸고 한국 사회에서 전개된 대규모 저항과 주디스 버틀러의 서울 강연 「민주주의와 인문학의 미래」를 병치해 놓고, ‘프레카리티’의 조건하에서 어떻게 민주주의가 정동적 신체들의 연대로 회복되고 물질적으로 매개된 실천으로 현실화되었는지를 고찰한다. 본고는 촛불시위의 전통을 이어 대한민국에서 일어난 민주주의 수호 시위들에서 은박 담요로 몸을 감싼 ‘키세스 군단’과 남태령 시위에서 등장한 온열버스 등이 어떻게 새로운 물질-신체-정동의 저항성을 드러내는지 탐색한다. 이를 위해 이론적으로 주디스 버틀러의 논의를 포스트휴머니즘과 신유물론 이론과의 접점에서 비판적으로 탐색한다. 이를 위해 기존에 있었던 주디스 버틀러의 이론들에 대한 신유물론과 포스트휴머니즘 학자들, 특히 페미니스트 포스트휴먼/신유물론 학자들의 비판과 이에 대한 주디스 버틀러의 응답이 갖는 의미와 의의를 살피는 이론적 작업을 한다. 이후 본고는 자넷 윈터슨의 『석신들』에 담긴 반복적이고 외행성적인 서사를 버틀러식 수행성과 바라드의 행위적 실재론과 같은 개념들을 접속해 독해한다. 소설 속 인간과 쿼어 로봇의 사랑은 인간/비인간, 남성/여성이라는 규범적 이분법을 회절시킨다. 또한 젠더 다양성을 지닌 인간과 비인간들의 반복적이고 정동적인 연결은 민주주의가 무너지고 프레카리티가 일상화된 소설 속 멀티버스 속에서 저항과 전복의 가능성을 보여준다. 결론에서는 소설에

나타난 이러한 연대의 가능성을 현시대에 접속하여 소수자와 살 수 없는 삶의 소유자들의 연대의 한 양태로 페미니스트적 공통장(lieu-commun)을 제안한다.

주제어: 주디스 버틀러, 신유물론, 포스트휴머니즘, 제넷 윈터슨, 『석신들』, 프레카리티, 민주주의

■ 논문투고일 : 2025. 10. 31

■ 심사완료일 : 2025. 11. 23

■ 게재확정일 : 2025. 12. 02

Stitching the Self: Judith Butler, Digital Identity, and Shelley Jackson's *Patchwork Girl*

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❖ ABSTRACT

This article reinterprets Shelley Jackson's *Patchwork Girl; or, a Modern Monster* through Judith Butler's *Giving an Account of Oneself* to propose a shift in digital-subjectivity studies from ontological claims of fragmentation to an ethics of relation enacted by form. While posthumanist and cyberfeminist accounts have read *Patchwork Girl* as emblematic of distributed identity and multilinear interactivity, such frameworks often treat dispersion as a purely epistemological or technological property. Bringing Butler's concepts of address, dependency, opacity, and responsibility into conversation with Jackson's Storyspace architecture, the article argues that the hypertext stages a "scene of address" in which the self is produced through readerly decisions that suture lexias, expose seams, and acknowledge limits. The narrative's five pathways ("a Graveyard," "a Journal," "a Quilt," "a Story," "& broken accents") function as modes of relation—corporeal archive, citational montage, experiential bifurcation, dialogic intimacy, and linguistic seamwork—while the map overview provides a meta-mode that renders arrangement contingent and revisable. The article advances the notion of a procedural ethics of navigation: interactivity is not user sovereignty but a practice of acknowledgment in borrowed terms that never yield total knowledge.

Keywords : *Patchwork Girl*, hypertext, digital subjectivity, Judith Butler, ethics

I . Introduction

Since its release in 1995, Shelley Jackson's *Patchwork Girl; or, a Modern Monster* has occupied a central place in discussions of electronic literature and digital identity. Few works have been so frequently invoked as evidence of the hypertextual revolution in literary form and the supposed fragmentation of the postmodern subject. The hypertext has long been read as a quintessential experiment in nonlinearity and multiplicity, a text that both literalizes and celebrates the dispersal of selfhood within the digital matrix. For scholars of early hypertext theory—Jay David Bolter, George Landow, N. Katherine Hayles, and Espen Aarseth—Jackson's Storyspace composition seemed to materialize the poststructuralist dream of textual openness, of a narrative that resists closure and embodies the decentered, networked subject of late twentieth-century thought. Landow astutely argues that electronic writing “embodies the convergence of poststructuralist theory and computer technology,” offering an interactive medium where “the author's authority dissolves into the reader's freedom” (11). Jackson's stitched woman appeared to exemplify that dissolution: a body and a text composed of fragments, inviting the reader to participate in its reconstruction.

Within this interpretive lineage, *Patchwork Girl* has often been framed as a text that enacts new modes of subjectivity made possible by digital media. Hayles argues that Jackson's hypertext “mobilizes the resources of the medium to enact subjectivities distributed in flexible and mutating ways across author, text, interface, and reader,” foregrounding “the distributed cognition characteristic of electronic environments” rather than depicting a unified, autonomous self (26). For Hayles, Jackson's use of the Storyspace platform dramatizes the flicker between code and

narrative, surface and depth, materiality and information—thereby transforming reading itself into an act of becoming-posthuman. Although Bolter and Richard Grusin do not discuss *Patchwork Girl* directly, their theory provides a productive framework for interpreting Jackson's hypertext. They describe digital media as operating through a “double logic of immediacy and hypermediacy” (viii) where new media “refashion” (15) older forms while simultaneously exposing their own processes of mediation. From this perspective, Jackson's *Patchwork Girl* can be read as a hypertext that makes visible the very seams of mediation, staging the interface as a site where subjectivity is continually negotiated between transparency and opacity. Feminist digital theorists, such as Laura Shackelford, have extended this line of argument to claim that Jackson's hypertext performs “technological corporeality” (87), a specifically cyberfeminist vision of embodiment that reclaims the monstrous and the mechanical as sources of creative power.

While these readings have been enormously productive, they share a common assumption that deserves reexamination: they tend to equate *Patchwork Girl*'s formal fragmentation with an epistemological model of identity. The digital subject emerging from such analyses is primarily a structural effect, a metaphor for distributed systems and network logic. Identity, in this view, is dispersed across links, nodes, and lexias; it is less an ethical condition than a design principle. The hypertext becomes a mirror for the technological age, an emblem of a consciousness multiplied by digital interconnectivity. Even where feminist interpretations celebrate fragmentation as resistance, they often retain the premise that multiplicity is, in itself, emancipatory. To be fractured is to be free; to be nonlinear is to be subversive. Yet, I argue that such readings risk substituting a formal metaphor for an experiential and ethical understanding of

subjectivity. Fragmentation becomes a sign, but not a practice; dispersion, an epistemological figure, rather than a lived condition of relationality.

This article proposes a different approach by bringing Judith Butler's philosophy of selfhood, particularly as articulated in *Giving an Account of Oneself* (2005), into dialogue with Jackson's digital experiment. Butler's work provides a powerful corrective to the dominant posthumanist frameworks that have shaped *Patchwork Girl's* reception. Where posthuman and cyberfeminist readings often foreground multiplicity as liberation, Butler insists on dependency, exposure, and relational accountability as the ground of ethical life. The self, according to Butler, comes into being only in the context of address, through being called to give an account of itself before others (89). In other words, identity is not a property to be owned or a network to be mapped; it is an ongoing process of responsiveness within relations of interpellation. For Butler, the subject's opacity—its inability to know or narrate itself completely—is not a failure but the very condition of ethical responsibility. As she writes, “the opacity of the subject may be a consequence of its being conceived as a relational being, one whose early and primary relations are not always available to conscious knowledge” (20). Because “we are formed in the context of relations that become partially irrecoverable to us” (20), Butler holds that “we are, as it were, divided, ungrounded, or incoherent from the start” (19), and therefore we are “not self-grounding beings” but beings “whose conditions of emergence can never fully be accounted for” (19) and “whose very opacity to itself... sustains some of its most important ethical bonds” (20).

When read through Butler's framework, *Patchwork Girl* ceases to be a mere allegory of digital dispersion and becomes instead an enacted meditation on the ethics of relational selfhood. Jackson's stitched

protagonist—a being literally composed of others' parts—embodies Butler's claim that the self is assembled from what is outside itself, that it is dependent on and exposed to the histories, languages, and bodies that sustain it. The hypertext's architecture of linked lexias transforms this philosophical claim into interactive practice. Each readerly click becomes an act of suturing: a moment in which fragments are joined, paths are chosen, and meaning is temporarily stabilized. Yet every suture also reveals its seam; every traversal leaves other connections unchosen, other stories unread. In this sense, Jackson's digital body performs Butler's idea that our very capacity to give an account of ourselves is dependent on the norms and languages we did not make and cannot fully command (42). The hypertext's partial, recursive design renders this condition tactile. To read *Patchwork Girl* is to inhabit the impossibility of total self-knowledge while nonetheless engaging in the ethical labor of narration.

Thus, I argue that Jackson's hypertext stages what Butler calls a “scene of address”—a space where the self is constituted not in isolation but through encounters of calling and response. The reader, confronted with Jackson's splash screen—a painted body stitched together by visible seams—is placed immediately within such a scene. The text's dual authorship (“by Mary/Shelley and Herself”) establishes a dialogic field that extends to the reader: a triadic relationship between nineteenth-century author, twentieth-century hypertext maker, and twenty-first-century reader whose navigation performs the act of address. To move through the text is to be hailed by others' words, to answer by choosing, and to realize that every answer is provisional. The self that emerges here is not autonomous but answerable, not unified but sustained through ongoing acts of relational maintenance.

In making this claim, the article departs from formalist analyses of *Patchwork Girl* in three crucial respects. First, it challenges the critical tendency to treat hypertextual structure as a metaphor for postmodern subjectivity, proposing instead that Jackson's work operates as a procedural ethics. The reader's engagement with links, maps, and branching paths becomes an ethical practice of navigating partial knowledge and shared authorship. Second, it reframes interactivity not as the celebration of user agency but as a dramatization of dependency—the recognition that every click depends on an architecture built by others, just as every utterance depends on inherited language. Third, it situates Jackson's digital poetics within Butler's broader philosophical project of relational ethics, showing how *Patchwork Girl* literalizes Butler's call for an account of oneself that is always already an account to others.

By reading Jackson's *Patchwork Girl* through Butler's relational ethics, this article intervenes in three overlapping fields: digital literary studies, feminist theory, and moral philosophy. In digital studies, it challenges the dominance of posthumanist and cyberfeminist models that conflate multiplicity with emancipation. Rather than celebrating the dissolution of the subject, Jackson's work—when viewed through Butler—reveals fragmentation as the very condition of ethical engagement. In feminist theory, it extends the discourse on embodiment beyond metaphors of cyborg hybridity toward a material ethics of vulnerability and care. Jackson's visible seams and digital scars invite the reader to see connection not as smooth fusion but as the labor of holding together what might otherwise fall apart. In philosophy, the article translates Butler's abstract notion of the “scene of address” into a concrete, interactive practice: reading itself becomes the enactment of ethical relation.

This reorientation has significant implications for how we conceptualize digital subjectivity. If the posthuman subject of early hypertext theory was defined by dispersion, the Butlerian subject proposed here is defined by answerability. To exist digitally is not to dissolve into data but to become entangled in systems of recognition and response. The hypertextual interface, far from offering the reader unbounded freedom, enacts the ethical bind Butler describes: one must act within limits, using languages and architectures not of one's own making, and yet one remains responsible for those actions. Jackson's *Patchwork Girl* teaches its reader precisely this form of ethical navigation. Each click is an act of selection that opens one path while closing others, a gesture that exposes the reader's agency and its constraints.

In this light, the hypertext becomes more than a narrative experiment; it becomes an ethical instrument. It trains its reader to tolerate partial knowledge, to revisit, to repair, to live with seams. What many critics have described as *Patchwork Girl*'s disunity can thus be reconceived as its ethical pedagogy. The work does not celebrate fragmentation for its own sake but uses it to cultivate what Butler might describe as an ethics of acknowledgment—the recognition that our self-accounts are always provisional, situated, and shared. As Butler claims, “we are still under the demand to offer and receive acknowledgment: to someone else who is there to be addressed and whose address is there to be received” (22). The digital subject, like Jackson's stitched creature, exists “under the needle and under the pen”: simultaneously written, revised, and held together by others' touch.

In doing so, this essay ultimately seeks to demonstrate how *Patchwork Girl* enacts a Butlerian ethics of digital life. Its visible sutures and recursive navigation reveal that the self is not undone by multiplicity but

sustained by it. In Butler's words, "to be undone by the other is a primary necessity, an anguish, to be sure, but also a chance—to be addressed, claimed, bound to what is not me" (136). Jackson's hypertext literalizes this undoing—not as disintegration, but as the ongoing process of being held together through address. The reader who traverses its lexis practices what Butler may call responsiveness under constraint, discovering that identity, like the hypertext, can only persist through continuous acts of reassembly. *Patchwork Girl* teaches its audience not what a digital self is, but how it is done. The self, in Jackson's and Butler's shared vision, is neither autonomous nor transparent; it is relational, procedural, and performative. Its coherence lies not in wholeness but in the visible seams of connection—the very traces of relation that make accountability possible. This Butlerian reading thus is to reframe *Patchwork Girl* as an ethics of navigation: a text that asks us to read, click, and think as beings answerable to one another in a medium built of fragments.

II. Paths, Links, and the Digital Self

The first thing *Patchwork Girl* asks of its reader is not assent but orientation. Jackson's "splash" screen—an image of the stitched figure rendered in thick, painterly strokes—does not merely decorate an entryway; it places the reader before a body whose seams are also routes. Clicking through to the hybrid title page (*Patchwork Girl; or, a Modern Monster by Mary/Shelley and Herself*) announces the dual premise that will govern everything that follows: authorship is split, and identity is a composition. From here, five named paths—"a Graveyard,"

"a Journal," "a Quilt," "a Story," and "& broken accents"—fan outward like radiating nerves. But Jackson immediately subverts the comfort of a menu: she reveals a cartographic "map overview," a movable field of linked boxes that more closely reflects how the piece was composed and, crucially, how Jackson hopes readers will choose to move. The map is not a bonus feature; it is a thesis. It says that the architecture of this body is not hierarchical; it is discoverable. In this interface, reading is not the execution of a script but the invention of a path. The work indicates its topic—the digital self—not by abstract claim but by asking the reader to practice it.

That demand becomes evident the moment the reader enters "Birth." The creature declares, "My birth takes place more than once ... under the needle, and under the pen," before offering links that fracture the declaration into routes: one branch to Frankenstein's aborted "female monster," another to the Graveyard, and two to parallel sequences "under the needle" and "under the pen." The sentence does not just say multiplicity; it operationalizes it. Jackson further complicates the scene with a sudden parenthetical intrusion in the monster's voice—an editorial graffiti that revises Mary Shelley midstream and replaces obedience with unruly self-presentation. This interruption makes two decisive moves. First, it refuses the model of a subject securely locked behind a single narrator's "locks and screens." Second, it gives the reader evidence that identity here is dialogic and contested: the monster addresses, contradicts, and revises—producing a self across a relay of speaking positions. Digital identity in Jackson's text is not a static "profile"; it is an event occurring in the exchange between writing hands and clicking hands, between Mary's genteel sentences and the monster's brazen asides, between every lexis and the paths the reader draws among them.

The paired “written” and “sewn” threads formalize the emblem that runs through the whole work: stitches are like letters, and letters like stitches. In “written,” candlelit script blurs into needlework; in “sewn,” the needle’s labor wavers into script. Jackson is not content with a metaphor. She designs the hypertext so that the reader chooses which thread to follow first and then double-backs to the other, discovering that neither alone is “the” origin story. The equivalence functions as a reading contract: readers are invited to read the text as a body—joined, scarred, made of pieces—and the body as text—segmented, cross-referenced, subject to revision. The link, in this economy, is a suture. To click is to bind; to backtrack is to reopen a seam; to hold down keys and “reveal links” is to X-ray the connective tissue of the piece. The form makes an ethics: progress is not guaranteed, wholeness is never final, and every route leaves silences elsewhere that remain to be returned to or left in peace.

The Graveyard literalizes this logic by giving each body part an archive. Head, eyeballs, lips, tongue—each part bears a local history, a voice, a provenance. The skull is “an ancient vase” reassembled from fragments; the eyeballs belong to a voracious reader whose disability rerouted her gaze into an encyclopedic knowledge of others; the lips laugh too freely for their town; the tongue comes weighted with gossip, heresy, and stolen authorship. None of these tales complete the woman; each makes her less reducible to a single account by adding yet one more thread that cannot be understood without the rest and yet does not yield to them. Readers are “burdened with body parts,” fingernails “packed with mud and chips of bone,” because Jackson wants the experience of navigation to approximate the labor of assembly. Even an untidy technical limitation (a “black bar” where a dynamic “right arm

view” was intended) plays into the theme: some intentions remain unrealized; some seams are visible as gaps. The digital self here does not arise from a perfected interface but from a practice of handling remnants—choosing, arranging, and acknowledging that the very act of reassembly leaves cuts that show.

If the Graveyard distributes the body across discrete histories, the Quilt distributes authorship across quotation. Jackson’s “Journal Quilt” literalizes Storyspace’s architecture: text boxes become patches; links become seams; an “explode” operation slices a large space into smaller ones, populating a “very well-shaped girl.” The Quilt’s lexias pull from Mary Shelley, Baum’s *The Patchwork Girl of Oz*, the Storyspace manual, literary theory, and histories—scraps that are stitched until they form a legible field. Jackson’s choice to expose the software’s vocabulary (“explode,” “spaces”) alongside Mary Shelley’s prose and Baum’s fable refuses to separate the mythic from the technical. Code belongs on the same cloth as canon. The result is not a collage that dissolves sources into background noise, but a suture that leaves sources legible as sources. We read through quotation rather than despite it; authorship becomes a practice of hosting. The “Bottles” lexia, with its comically alchemical mixing of “good qualities,” makes the point bluntly: there is no essence hidden in one container, only mixtures whose properties depend on the hands that pour and the reader who follows the recipe.

The “Story” section, which many readers treat as the most linear, is only as linear as one’s commitments. Two parallel “revelations,” nearly identical at first glance, soon diverge into contrary affective consequences. In one, laughter opens desire; in the other, shame triggers retreat. The bifurcation does not ask the reader to discover which is “true”; it underscores that identity unfolds across contingencies of timing, posture,

and interpretation. The subsequent accident—the leg torn away, a funeral held for the limb—pushes this point to grotesque clarity. The body is not a single unit marching through time; it is a set of relations that can be separated, mourned, and perhaps replaced. The readers' movements through the links model the same principle: they cannot, in one pass, keep every limb in view. They will always be choosing some line of continuity at the expense of another, and the text will remain what it is: a held-together plurality that hoards what you did not click and waits for their return.

Broken Accents receives less performative attention in Jackson's demonstration, yet its title tells the reader what it does. It gathers mispronunciations, misalignments, migratory tones—verbal seams. If *Graveyard* foregrounds the body and *Quilt* foregrounds the archive, *Broken Accents* foregrounds language's inbuilt patchiness. Accents are how histories adhere to speech; broken accents are how speech advertises that its histories do not unify. The section's function within the overall design is to make audible what the other sections make visible: the digital self is not only a many-authored body and a many-sourced text; it is also a many-sounded voice. When the creature "interrupts" Mary Shelley with parenthetical bravado, when the lexias toggle between "written" and "sewn," when "revelations" repeats under slightly altered light, Jackson is scoring the prose—marking changes in accent that carry changes in claim. Digital form lets those accents branch.

The *Journal* extends this attention to voice by recasting Mary Shelley as a diarist who encounters, then desires, her creation. Jackson neither mythologizes nor debunks Mary; she literalizes the old double-bind of authorship: to create is both to possess and to be possessed. Mary wants to "live on in her" monster by offering a graft of herself—an explicitly

queer, maternal fantasy that renders authorship as organ donation. The result is not a stable inheritance but a recursive loop: creation produces dependency both ways. This relation is enacted, not simply described, because the reader becomes an accessory to the affair: by deciding when to follow "written" or "sewn," when to return to Mary's diary or move with the creature into the desert, the reader apportionates time and attention, and thus shapes which love story appears on screen.

Throughout, the map overview functions as more than a designer's aside; it is the piece's memory palace. Jackson remarks that she "constructed the piece" by moving these boxes by hand; the reader cannot rearrange them in the read-only version, but the trace of that manual labor remains. The map announces that this text was not born tidy. It had to be built, moved, and fitted. The digital self it theorizes is likewise something built in relation to tools that insist on certain cuts and certain joins. The requirement to hold down two keys to "reveal links" dramatizes this point: connection is not always legible at a glance; it must be summoned into view. That gesture—holding keys, revealing a skeleton of connections—makes the reader complicit in the suture. The reader is not a spectator to identity's complexity; they are someone who must choose to see it.

Jackson's late movement west—to the mobile home near Death Valley, to a laptop strapped on for wandering—completes a transformation in time and scale. The creature exits the nineteenth-century laboratory and enters the late-twentieth-century network. Yet the desert sequence is anything but an escape into blankness. The creature fantasizes about dissipation—becoming "hard shreds of jerky"—only to recall that her life is "doubt and movement." In a digital register, this is the difference between erasing a file and accepting version history. The past cannot be

unmade; it can be “snipped,” “revised into seamlessness,” but even the attempt produces evidence of its own cuts. The desert’s “stubborn blank thingness,” like a blank screen, tempts one to believe that identity can be restarted. Jackson denies the fantasy by installing in the reader’s body the experience of memory as linkage: every click is a return, every route a remainder of alternatives.

The reader’s role, then, is not to master a labyrinth but to practice a repertoire. Jackson’s insistence on disorientation—“a reader could find herself somewhere ... disorienting”—is pedagogical. It trains a tolerance for partial knowledge and an appetite for revisitation. The work thereby models a digital self that is playable: not game-like in the sense of goals and rewards, but instrument-like in the sense of a body you must learn to sound. The musician never exhausts an instrument; the reader never exhausts *Patchwork Girl*. Each traversal is a new performance under constraints—the lexias exist, the links link where they link—but the articulation among them shifts. That performative quality answers a core anxiety about digital identity: if it is always assembled, is it therefore arbitrary? Jackson’s answer is no. The seam is not arbitrary; it is consequential. A different stitch makes a different contour. And because stitches pass through material, the body bears the history of its making. Links are scars that hold.

Placed within a discourse that often equates digital identity with dispersion alone, *Patchwork Girl*’s structure advances a different claim: dispersion is the condition of relation. To be stitched is to be held to others—sources, readers, prior texts, lovers, software—and to be visible as so held. The splash screen’s painted body is an invitation to regard seams as features: they are marks of attachment, not merely of damage. The closing movement to the map overview seals this idea. Jackson

would have been “happy enough” to let readers move the boxes around themselves—an admission that the ideal interface would expose the full contingency of order. Even without that feature, the trace remains: the reader senses the possibility of a different arrangement, and that sense becomes the final lesson. The digital self is an arrangement that could have been otherwise and will be, the next time you read.

The work’s narrative threads demonstrate how this structural thesis operates at the level of plot. “Birth” fragments the act that most persistently anchors identity; “revelations” stages the discovery of another’s body as an occasion for both desire and fear; the leg’s funeral insists that parts can be mourned without undoing the whole; the desert asks whether “erasing” one’s history can ever amount to more than editing. Each scene rehearses a core operation of the interface. Birth is linking, revelations are branching, the funeral is deletion with remainder, the desert is the temptation of the empty document. In each, the reader’s hand performs an equivalent action on the text: clicking forward is choosing a story, backing up is refusing closure, opening the map is remembering that other lives run in parallel.

Because the earlier introduction reads Jackson through an ethical lens of relation, it is worth underscoring how the interface practices that ethic rather than merely analogizing it. To navigate *Patchwork Girl* is to accept that one’s account of it (and of oneself through it) will be partial, exposed to contradiction, and produced in response to others’ words. That earlier introduction frames this as a condition of responsibility rather than failure: we become selves by giving accounts to one another within constraints we did not choose. Jackson’s text operationalizes the same idea. It solicits accounts—the reader’s sequence of clicks, their chosen quotations, their preferred metaphors—and it makes those

accounts visible as accounts by refusing the illusion that a single route could comprehend the whole. In that respect, the hypertext is not just a metaphor for the digital self; it is an instrument for practicing it.

One could object that the work's reliance on Storyspace's visual schema and link conventions dates it, or that its occasional technical limits (the "black bar" in place of a movable limb) compromise its ambitions. But even these features serve the thesis. A digital self is not the triumph of frictionless control; it is the negotiation of affordances and limits. The "read-only" version can't rearrange the map, yet it allows the reader to conjure a link-skeleton with a key press. The glitch in the Graveyard confirms that authorial intentions are mediated by software's stubbornness, just as identities are mediated by institutions, bodies, and other people. The seams are part of the story. Thus, I argue that *Patchwork Girl's* architecture can be read as an enacted theory of digital selfhood. The five paths are not thematic bins; they are modes of relation—corporeal archives in the Graveyard, dialogic intimacy in the Journal, citational montage in the Quilt, experiential bifurcation in the Story, and linguistic seamwork in Broken Accents. The map overview supplies a meta-mode, reminding the reader that every current arrangement can be redrawn. Their actions—revealing links, choosing branches, backtracking, lingering—are not enhancements; they are the grammar of the piece. Jackson's strongest claim is therefore not descriptive ("identity is many") but procedural ("identity is done many ways").

The work closes as it began: by asking the reader to own the consequences of a route. When the creature asserts that she was "thrown into movement and doubt," she names the condition of every reader who has tried to hold the whole in mind. The payoff is not mastery but

a practiced ease with incompleteness. That ease is not resignation; it is a skill—knowing how to suture without pretending one has restored an original purity. If digital culture has made identity feel like an endless editing session, *Patchwork Girl* offers an account of why that condition can be livable: because the seams are shared, visible, and revisitable. The work's body does not hide its repairs. Neither should ours.

Jackson's hypertext demonstrates that the digital self is not a thesis to be asserted but a practice to be learned. It teaches the reader to treat choice as suture, quotation as hospitality, maps as memories, interruptions as claims, and glitches as history. It makes visible how every birth in a life is only one among several, and how every revelation recasts what came before. In its design and in its story, *Patchwork Girl* proposes that identity—digital or otherwise—consists not in being one thing, but in returning, with others, to make and remake the path through which that thing holds together for now.

III. Butler's Scene of Address in *Patchwork Girl*

What Jackson builds as a navigable body of seams and routes meets Judith Butler's demand that any "account of oneself" is staged before another, in a scene that precedes and conditions the very possibility of self-narration. Butler's claim in *Giving an Account of Oneself* is stark: "I begin my story of myself only in the face of a 'you' who asks me to give an account" (the one who asks, "Was it you?") (11). The account is not a soliloquy; it is provoked, situated, and oriented by an address that arrives from elsewhere. *Patchwork Girl* enacts that scene at every level of form. The reader's first situation is the splash screen and the

title that names “Mary/Shelley and herself,” immediately establishing a dialogic field of address: a nineteenth-century author; a twentieth-century hypertext maker; a stitched figure who will interrupt, mock, and answer; and a reader whose clicks count as replies. In Butler’s terms, the reader’s route is not merely a technical choice through links; it is the performative uptake of a demand to order a life that is not fully one’s own to order. Each traversal answers a tacit “you,” and each revisit concedes that any prior account was provisional.

Butler is explicit that “telling a story about oneself is not the same as giving an account of oneself” (12), since an account answers an allegation, accepts that one may be the cause of another’s suffering, and aims at persuasion in the presence of an audience. Jackson’s “Birth” lexia places the creature under just such an interrogative atmosphere. The parenthetical eruption that laughs at Mary Shelley’s tidy narrative—“I told her to abort me ... I did not want what he wanted”—is not only an assertion of autonomy; it is a counter-account delivered inside and against a prior scene of address. That is to say, the monster does not withdraw into privacy; she answers Mary’s literary and moral frame with another story that refuses the presuppositions of the first. Butler notes that even refusal—silence, or the decision not to narrate—is still a “relation to narrative and to the scene of address” (12), because it responds to the question by contesting its authority. In *Patchwork Girl*, refusal takes the shape of detours (“under the needle,” “under the pen”), parenthetical sabotage, and a map that lets one skip the “proper” path. Those structural options dramatize Butler’s reminder that the ethical moment is not exhausted by whether a given account is complete; it includes how one is addressed and how one answers (30–31).

A central thread of Butler’s argument is that the very media of

self-explanation do not originate with the self. “The very terms by which we give an account, by which we make ourselves intelligible to ourselves and to others, are not of our making. They are social in character,” she argues, and the scene of address is “a more primary ethical relation than a reflexive effort to give an account of oneself” (21). Jackson’s Quilt literalizes that claim. The writing spaces that become patches, the Storyspace menu command “explode” that slices text into lexias, the manual’s idiom embedded alongside Shelley and Baum—all of these are the socially available “terms” that prefigure and delimit what can count as an account here. When the reader pieces together a route across quotations and programmatic scaffolding, the reader’s “I” is not inventing out of nothing; it is composing with borrowed cloth. In Butler’s idiom, the self does not transcend its dependence on shared norms and shared language; it is constituted in and through them, sometimes uneasily. That dependence need not be lamented. It is the condition under which the self can appear at all, because intelligibility is a public currency before it is a private resource. The Quilt’s citational density thus does not merely decorate Jackson’s theme—it supplies the very normative terms that make any account within this milieu receivable.

If the Quilt demonstrates that our words come to us already worn, the Graveyard shows that our bodies arrive with histories we cannot fully recount. Butler describes a limit that every narrative of the self will strike: “Although we are compelled to give an account of our various selves, the structural conditions of that account will turn out to make a full such giving impossible” (20). There is “a formative history that remains irrecoverable by reflection,” such that primary relations “produce a necessary opacity in our understanding of ourselves” (20–

21). Jackson's skull-as-vase and the body assembled from partial lives enact that opacity not as a failure of craft but as the grain of the medium. Even where the text affords micro-histories for "eyeballs," "lips," or "tongue," the collected dossier never closes into total knowledge. Readers are made to feel this as labor—"burdened with body parts"—and as a remainder they cannot finesse away. Butler sharpens the point by distinguishing what narrative can and cannot touch: certain bodily exposures are "a condition of my narration, one I cannot fully thematize within any narrative I might provide," so that "the stories do not capture the body to which they refer" (38). *Patchwork Girl's* intractable seam—e.g. the missing "right arm view" that remains a black bar—reads, from this angle, as more than an obsolete interface glitch; it is a formal reminder that a part of one's genesis and composition will not be brought into intelligible sequence, even when one can point to it.

This opacity does not release us from responsibility. Butler goes out of her way to refuse the inference that limits to self-knowledge license ethical negligence. "If the subject is opaque to itself, it is not therefore licensed to do what it wants or to ignore its relations to others" as she holds (19–20). The task is to imagine an ethics that works in the service of "responsibility" without fantasizing full transparency (91–93). Jackson's split "revelations" are useful here. In one thread desire opens; in the other shame closes down; both end in injury and a leg's funeral. The monster's account of these events—especially the uneasy thought that she could "erase" a past by editing it—faces the problem Butler names: how to own one's doings and their effects when the self that owns them is not fully available to itself, nor authored by itself alone. The hypertext's design suggests one answer. Responsibility is not a final

ledger; it is an ongoing practice of returning, revising, acknowledging what was not seen on the first pass, and accepting that a different path does not cancel the prior one but remains alongside it as part of what one has done. In Butler's phrasing, narrative capacity is "a precondition for giving an account of oneself and assuming responsibility" (12), but the narrative does not come after the deed as a neutral report; it is how moral agency takes shape at all. The ethics, then, live in the recursive performance, not in the fantasy of a single definitive version.

Butler also wants us to see how norms mediate recognition. Drawing on Foucault, she writes that a "regime of truth offers the terms that make self-recognition possible" (22), setting a frame for who can count as a subject at all. These norms "provide the framework and the point of reference" for decisions about who the "I" will be, even while they remain open to challenge and change (22). Jackson dramatizes recognition's frame with the title page that calls the figure "a Modern Monster." The label both constrains and invites: it loads the creature with a genealogy (Frankenstein, modernity, monstrosity), but the interface refuses to let that label settle into a single arc. The "Story" section's bifurcations show recognizability as an alternating current. To Chancy, the stitched body is first a threat and then a lover; to the passerby, it is injured matter; to the reader, it is a cursor-dependent protagonist or a dossier of scraps. Butler urges us to read these shifts not as mere relativism but as encounters inside a moving field of norms. The "desire for recognition" (22), she claims, sets limits on recognition's operation and can, paradoxically, "run the risk of arresting desire" (44) if norms try to fix us too tightly. *Patchwork Girl's* refusal to settle both protects desire's motion and shows how recognition remains contested terrain.

The relation between speech and life is another hinge where Butler's

ethics clarifies Jackson's practice. Following Foucault's reading of Socratic address, Butler notes that giving an account is a practice in which one "is being led" by another's question and must "show that there is a relation between the rational discourse ... and the way that you live" (126). Speaking is already "a kind of doing, a form of action" (126), and the account answers a request in order to "establish or re-establish a certain bond" (131). In *Patchwork Girl*, the monster's interjections into Mary Shelley's prose are not purely expository; they are interventions in a relationship. Mary's diary entries that move from fear to intimacy are not background; they are the life of an address between author and creature, each altered by the other's words. When the reader chooses "written" before "sewn," the reader is not only selecting content; the reader is taking up one relation between speaking and living over another for that pass. The hypertext makes this uptake palpable, and in doing so aligns with Butler's claim that the ethical matter at stake is the manner of address, the risk of speech, and the attempt to honor that one has been called upon.

At several junctures Butler returns to the fact that the address that inaugurates the account is not only proximate and dyadic; it is social and historical: "The norms by which I recognize another or, indeed, myself are not mine alone. They function to the extent that they are social" (24). Jackson keeps that social thickness in view by braiding Mary Shelley, Baum, theory, manuals, and lore into the same fabric. To give an account inside this text is to speak in a polyglot public idiom. Moreover, Jackson lets the reader "reveal links" with a key command—the skeleton of the work's sociality, so to speak—so one can see how any present lexia is held up by structures not currently in view. Butler's insistence that one's terms are inherited rather than invented becomes

not an abstract linguistic point but a sensation: the reader literally calls up the mesh that will have made any claim intelligible.

Because inherited terms can wound as well as enable, Butler also worries about ethical violence—those moments when the demand for a transparent, self-identical account punishes what cannot be said or known. She insists that the limits of narration are not just cognitive inconveniences; they are conditions that any humane ethics must respect. To insist on full clarity is to deny the formative, opaque relations by which the self comes to be. Jackson's design resists that punitive drift. The work welcomes disorientation, and the map's invitation to rearrange (even if the read-only build cannot fully realize it) signals a gentle refusal of the one true order. The "black bar" in the Graveyard—so tempting to fix—remains as a structural apology for control. Rather than framing the gap as fault, Jackson lets it stand as a record: some seams will show; some parts will not articulate on command. The reader learns, with Butler, that an ethic lives in how we meet such limits—do we berate, or do we adjust and continue the conversation?

Butler's name for the field in which all of this is staged is "the scene of address" (50, 54), a place where we are asked to account, where we may nod, speak, or refuse, and where "acknowledgment" (42) occurs as a practice rather than a final state. As Sara Ahmed clarifies, this scene is defined not only by giving an account but by whether—and how—an account is received. Reception, Ahmed argues, can be simulated without taking place, structured as a position rather than an act (27). *Patchwork Girl* transposes this scene into interface. The reader meets a demand (to choose), answers it by movement (a click that binds two lexias), and then finds that this answer commits one to consequences (what remains unseen, what must be returned to, what is now irretrievable without a

new route). Butler emphasizes that the address precedes the reflexive subject: “I come into being as a reflexive subject ... when I am spoken to by someone and prompted to address myself to the one who addresses me” (15). The hypertext makes this temporality legible. The stitched woman speaks because Mary speaks to her, because the reader routes her, because Storyspace offers certain joins rather than others. Self-reflection follows address; it does not originate it.

The Death Valley coda clarifies another Butlerian pressure: the lure of erasure versus the patience of revision. The creature dreams of peeling off her past “like linoleum,” of a blankness that would relieve the burden of prior links. Butler warns that such dreams are at odds with the very sociality that gives the “I” its speech. The terms that make self-knowledge possible cannot be willed away; to deny them is to deny the relation by which one is addressable, and thus accountable. In Butler’s words, morality is “essential to the determination of agency,” and the ethical question reappears “at the limits of our schemes of intelligibility,” where dialogue persists despite no guaranteed common ground(20). Jackson’s desert is exactly such a limit—a place where the code of prior lives thins, yet a laptop hums, and a path must still be cut. The scene is not nihilistic; it is an austere lesson in continuing to speak with others in mind when nothing secures the fit between lexia and life.

Butler’s distinction between story and account helps us read Jackson’s several “revelations” more precisely. A story may stage a discovery (Chancy’s body), but an account inserts that scene into an address that raises the question of injury, causation, and responsibility. As Megan Cole Paustian emphasizes, an account is never simply a report of events; it is shaped by the frame of mediation and recognition through which

an other is encountered, and it takes on ethical force only insofar as it persuades a listener positioned within that frame (192). In one thread, laughter leads to sex; in another, suspicion drives a parting. The subsequent accident and leg funeral shift the register from plot to accountability: What is one to another? What is owed? What can be claimed? Butler notes that an account “must establish that the self either was or was not the cause” and must do so under the pressure of persuading a listener (12). Jackson’s duplication of the episode presses us to feel how fragile that persuasion is. The same setting yields non-equivalent accounts; the listener changes; the outcome changes; responsibility becomes something worked out in relation, not deduced from essence.

Where Butler turns to Foucault to insist that norms “constrain but do not determine” (Stuart Murray 435), Jackson’s monster crafts a life in a field of constraints—genre, legend, software, gendered expectation—while opening alternatives. The instructional verb “explode” in the Quilt is exemplary: the system offers the tool; the writer applies it; the reader inherits its consequences. No actor “decides” alone; each is caught inside an arrangement that can be bent but not ignored. Butler’s insistence that critique must “call into question the truth of myself” (23) wherever regimes of truth govern who can be recognized the risk the monster runs whenever she asserts a path that the frame did not foresee. Jackson therefore pairs each branch with the possibility of repair—backtracking, re-reading, looking at the map—so that critique does not arrest motion but channels it.

That channeling returns us to Butler’s signature claim about narrative failure. The account of oneself cannot be completed—not because we have not worked hard enough, but because the conditions that make

giving an account possible also keep part of the self outside the frame. By the similar token, Jules Gill-Peterson argues that ethical and political errors arise when this structural incompleteness is mistaken for a deficit to be overcome and when subjects are imagined as capable of grounding themselves through identity, ontology, or interior truth (217). The body's history outruns recollection; primary relations write themselves into us before we can speak of them; the terms of intelligibility are borrowed and contested. *Patchwork Girl* trains a readerly habit that fits this condition: do the work; learn the instrument; revisit; accept remainder. The ethic is not heroic confession but sustained responsiveness to address under acknowledged limits. The stitched body is not a metaphor for brokenness alone; it is a method for living with unmastered origins and non-coincident parts without abandoning the task of making something hold together "for now."

Two last Butlerian motifs clinch the alignment. First, the distinction between proximate address and broader social normativity: *Patchwork Girl* stages both—the intimate call ("Was it you?") in Mary's diary and the social regimes (monster, woman, author, immigrant, software user) that prefigure how any answer will be heard. Butler's caution is that the dyad never fully contains the scene; normativity "precedes and conditions any dyadic exchange" (24). Jackson's work honors that, not only by stuffing the Quilt with public sources but by letting the map overview hover as a reminder that one's route is never the whole terrain. Second, the thought that giving an account is already a mode of living with others. Butler's use of Socrates—"the listener is led... into 'giving an account'" and thus exhibits "the logos by which one lives"—frames speech as practice, not supplement (126). Jackson makes that practice tactile; to click is to suture; to suture is to live in public with the mark

of that choice.

Across these correspondences, a sharpened claim emerges. *Patchwork Girl* does not simply illustrate Butler's theory; it exercises it. The hypertext situates the reader at a scene of address, equips the reader with social terms and tools not of their making, requires an account that can never be finally complete, and asks the reader to go on anyway—responsibly, revisably, in relation. Butler's pages caution against the moralism that punishes opacity and against the romanticism that dreams of self-sovereign clarity. Jackson's pages give the hands something to do instead: touch the seams, follow a path, double back, let the gap stand, answer again. If, as Butler argues, "I come into being as a reflexive subject ... when I am spoken to by someone and prompted to address myself to the one who addresses me" (15), then *Patchwork Girl* is a device for producing that being—speaking to the reader so that the reader must speak back, and in that exchange, learn the limits and possibilities of a digital "I."

The result is an ethics of navigation. Not the ethics of arriving at the one right story, but of moving in such a way that others—sources, prior texts, alternate routes, technical constraints—remain legible as the conditions of one's own intelligibility. Butler calls this an ethic that persists "at the limits of our schemes of intelligibility," where we must still "offer and receive acknowledgment" despite the absence of guaranteed common ground (21). Jackson's stitched cartography is just such a limit-space. It gathers readers into a practice of account-giving fit for digital life: situated, constrained, iterative, exposed to others, and alive to the seams that hold.

IV. Conclusion

Patchwork Girl does not simply represent the digital self as a fragmented figure of postmodernity; it teaches its readers how to inhabit that condition ethically. Jackson's opening gestures—the stitched figure on the splash screen, the dual authorship inscribed in “by Mary/Shelley and Herself,” and the unfixed architecture of the map overview—train readers to treat identity as an ongoing traversal rather than a stable possession. The Graveyard, Quilt, Story, Journal, and Broken Accents all instantiate that principle in different registers: corporeal, archival, experiential, dialogic, and linguistic. Each segment requires the reader not merely to interpret, but to perform an act of assemblage that mirrors the text's own labor of composition. Read through Judith Butler's *Giving an Account of Oneself*, Jackson's hypertext becomes an experiment in practicing selfhood as relational address—an enactment rather than an allegory of digital subjectivity.

This reading situates *Patchwork Girl* within a critical conversation that has often described digital identity in terms of dispersion, interactivity, and the loss of stable selfhood. Early hypertext theorists such as George Landow, Jay David Bolter, and N. Katherine Hayles framed electronic writing as a departure from print-bound linearity and as an emblem of poststructuralist subjectivity. Yet, much of that scholarship either celebrated this fragmentation as liberation or lamented it as dissolution. Jackson's work, especially when read through Butler's ethical philosophy, exposes the limitations of that binary. What emerges instead is a vision of digital identity as neither emancipation from the self nor its fragmentation, but its ethical reconstitution in and through relation. Jackson transforms what many critics have called the “loss of

coherence” in digital forms into the very condition of accountability. In this sense, *Patchwork Girl* extends and complicates existing scholarship on digital subjectivity by showing that selfhood in networked environments is not undone by multiplicity but sustained by responsiveness.

Butler's framework allows this argument to push current hypertext criticism beyond formalist accounts of reader agency. Rather than treating the reader's navigation as a playful freedom, this analysis interprets it as a performative responsibility. Each click becomes an answer to a prior address—Mary Shelley's prose, Jackson's programming, the monster's interjections, the software's architecture—and thus a gesture of acknowledgment. This reconceptualization contributes to digital literary studies by proposing an ethical model of interactivity, one that resists the instrumental language of “user control” in favor of mutual implication. It invites a reconsideration of what reading digitally entails: not mastery of information, but a practiced openness to interruption, opacity, and co-authorship. Jackson's reader does not command the text but converses with it, learning to navigate incompleteness as an ethical condition rather than a technical flaw.

The argument also intervenes in the field of trauma and posthuman studies, where *Patchwork Girl* has often been read as a feminist reworking of Frankensteinian monstrosity or as a cyborg allegory of embodiment. While such readings rightly emphasize the body's fragmentation and reconstruction, the Butlerian lens emphasizes the act of narration that accompanies that reassembly. Jackson's Graveyard and Quilt do not only anatomize bodies and texts; they demonstrate how every act of stitching is also an act of accounting. The monster's fragmented body does not signify a loss of identity but the necessity of giving an account that can never be total. By aligning this structure with

Butler's concept of "necessary opacity," this essay may contribute to the current debate on posthuman ethics by arguing that digital form can articulate a model of subjectivity grounded in partiality and relationality rather than in coherence or control. This approach reframes hypertext not as a metaphor for posthuman fragmentation but as an ethical medium that performs what Butler calls "the scene of address."

The contribution here also extends to narratological and methodological questions within digital humanities. The analysis repositions *Patchwork Girl* as a site where interface design, narrative form, and ethical philosophy converge. It challenges the disciplinary habit of reading digital literature either as aesthetic experiment or as technological artifact by demonstrating that its architecture performs a philosophical argument. Jackson's link structure operates as what this article terms a "procedural ethics," a mode of storytelling that makes the reader responsible for the very connections they traverse. This concept adds to the lexicon of digital narratology by proposing that structure is not a neutral vessel but an ethical agent that conditions reading as an act of response. In doing so, the argument broadens the conversation about form: from questions of usability and navigation to questions of accountability and relation. It suggests that future analyses of electronic literature attend not only to what digital works say about identity but to what they ask readers to *do* with identity.

Moreover, this reading engages with the growing discourse on feminist materiality in digital environments. Scholars such as Hayles and Jessica Pressman have examined the tactile and embodied dimensions of digital reading, yet Jackson's work, through Butler, introduces an ethics of exposure and care. The stitches and seams that hold the text together are not metaphors for technological connectivity but invitations to

practice a feminist ethics of relation that refuses invisibility. Jackson's insistence on showing the cuts, gaps, and technical limitations of her medium aligns with Butler's rejection of the fantasy of transparency. This analysis thus contributes to feminist digital theory by articulating how material constraints—whether linguistic, corporeal, or algorithmic—can become grounds for ethical encounter rather than obstacles to agency. The work teaches that vulnerability, when made visible, is not a sign of weakness but the condition of relational accountability.

By pairing Jackson with Butler, this article also challenges prevailing tendencies in digital selfhood studies to focus on data, representation, or algorithmic profiling as the primary metaphors for identity. Instead, it foregrounds the experiential and ethical dimensions of navigation—the embodied process of giving and receiving address through digital form. Jackson's hypertext stages a scene in which reading becomes analogous to Butler's account-giving: an act shaped by inherited structures, responsive to others, and necessarily incomplete. The contribution here lies in identifying *Patchwork Girl* as an early instance of what might now be called "performative ethics" in digital literature, where form is not illustrative but constitutive of the moral and philosophical questions it raises. In this sense, Jackson's work anticipates later discussions of interactivity, agency, and responsibility in networked culture by transforming the technical act of linking into a philosophical problem.

The argument's broader significance, then, is to reposition *Patchwork Girl* as a pivotal work for theorizing the digital subject as an ethical subject. It shifts the conversation from what digital identity *is* to how it is *done*, from representation to procedure, from ontology to practice. Where earlier critics often read Jackson's fragmented architecture as a symptom of postmodern disunity, this reading demonstrates that

fragmentation functions as the very grammar of ethical relation. The seams of the digital body become the visible traces of relational labor, the proof that selfhood is held together not by wholeness but by acts of ongoing repair. This insight extends Butler's project into the digital sphere, suggesting that the ethics of self-accounting she locates in the interpersonal domain can also describe the aesthetic and procedural conditions of networked media. The result is a bridge between ethical philosophy and digital poetics—a framework for understanding how reading itself can become a practice of ethical navigation.

The argument also offers a methodological contribution to literary scholarship. It models an approach that does not treat theory and form as separate domains but as co-constitutive. Reading *Patchwork Girl* through Butler is not the application of an external philosophy to an existing text; it is an encounter that transforms both. Butler's language of address, opacity, and acknowledgment acquires a tactile dimension when performed through Jackson's hyperlinks and lexias, while Jackson's hypertext gains conceptual precision when read as an exercise in Butlerian ethics. This reciprocal illumination suggests a model for future interdisciplinary work in digital humanities—one that recognizes theoretical concepts as procedural, and literary forms as philosophical instruments.

In its synthesis of digital form and ethical thought, *Patchwork Girl* stands as an argument for the humanities' capacity to theorize new conditions of subjectivity through design. Jackson's hypertext demonstrates that the question of how to live amid multiplicity can be staged, not only articulated, in digital literature. The reader's movements—hesitant, recursive, contingent—become acts of ethical orientation within a system that never stabilizes but still holds. The self that emerges through this practice is neither dissolved nor autonomous, but, in Butler's sense,

answerable. What this study contributes to current scholarship is an account of that answerability as both aesthetic and ethical form: a mode of being and reading in which the visible seam becomes not the site of failure, but the mark of relation—the place where meaning, responsibility, and digital life itself are stitched together anew.

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국문초록

자아를 짜깁기하다: 주디스 버틀러의 이론으로 읽는 디지털 정체성과 셸리 잭슨의 『패치워크 걸』

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본 논문은 셸리 잭슨의 디지털 텍스트 『패치워크 걸; 혹은 현대적 괴물』을 주디스 버틀러가 『자기 자신을 설명하기』에서 제안한 이론 비평적 프레임을 통해 다시 읽기 하고자 하는 기획이다. 이를 통해 디지털 주체성 연구의 방향을 파편화된 주체에 대한 존재론적 논의에서 형식에 의해 추동되어 구축되는 관계의 윤리로 전환할 것을 제안한다. 기존의 포스트휴머니즘 및 사이버페미니즘 비평은 이 작품을 분산된 정체성과 비선형적 상호작용의 전형으로 해석해 왔으나, 이러한 접근은 분산적 특성을 주로 인식론적이거나 기술적 속성으로 환원하는 경향을 보인다. 본 논문은 버틀러가 제시한 호명, 의존성, 불투명성, 책임의 개념을 잭슨의 ‘스토리 스페이스’라는 플랫폼 공간 기반 하이퍼텍스트 구조와 접목하여, 『패치워크 걸』이 독자의 선택을 통해 ‘렉시아’들을 통합하고 그 이음새를 드러내면서 동시에 인식의 한계를 인정하는 ‘호명의 장면’을 구성한다고 논증한다. 텍스트 안에 구축된 다섯 개의 경로인 ‘묘지,’ ‘컬트,’ ‘이야기,’ ‘일기,’ ‘깨진 억양’은 각각 신체적 아카이브, 인용구로 이루어진 몽타주, 체험의 분기, 대화적 친밀성, 언어적 불협이라는 관계 양식으로 작동한다. 동시에, 텍스트 전체의 지도는 배열, 배치의 유연성과 수정 가능성을 드러내는 메타적 양식으로 작동한다. 이를 통해 본 논문은 ‘항해의 절차적 윤리’라는 개념을 제시한다. 이때 상호작용성은 독자 혹은 사용자의 주권을 전제하는 통제 행위가 아니라, 차용된 조건 속에서 절대 완결된 지식을 산출할 수 없다는 인식을 인정하며 응답하

는 윤리적 실천으로 이해된다.

주제어: 『패치워크 길』, 하이퍼텍스트, 디지털 주체성, 주디스 버틀러,
윤리

■ 논문투고일 : 2025. 10. 31

■ 심사완료일 : 2025. 11. 24

■ 게재확정일 : 2025. 12. 02

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인쇄일 2025년 12월 31일
발행일 2025년 12월 31일

This work was supported by Humanities Korea 3.0 through the Ministry of Education of the Republic of Korea and National Research Foundation of Korea (NRF-2025-S1A6B5-A02003693)

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