

**[Introduction]**

## Butler in South Korea

Alex Taek-Gwang Lee

(Kyung Hee University)

Haеook Jeong

(Pukyung National University)

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, Nantaeryeong, 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.

