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[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

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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

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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

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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

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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

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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

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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

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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-juridical 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

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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

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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

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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 bind 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.

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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

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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

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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

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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

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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

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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

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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

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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

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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

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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;

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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

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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

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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

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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

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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?

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