

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.

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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, crowns, 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 ungrivable.

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:

Liotard, 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 Nantaeryeong, 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 Nantaeryeong, 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 과도제 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, 남태평양대첩, 주디스 버틀러,
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