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

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

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ABSTRACT

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

In Winterson's dystopian vision the suppression of emotion becomes

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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국문초록

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

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

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

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

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