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Plurality, Precarity, Nos/Otras: Searching for a New Guarantee of Dignity in the Contemporary World

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by

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Dedication

Dedicated to Professor Daniel Berthold, my favorite rockstar.
I am frequently reminded of your courageous and kindred spirit.

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Lastly, thank you to Nora for inspiring me everyday. Du bist so ein Licht.

I have only love and gratitude for you all.

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El Otro México [Excerpt][1]

I walk through the hole in the fence
To the other side.
Under my fingers I feel the gritty wire.
Rusted by 139 years.
Of the salty breath of the sea.

Beneath the iron sky
Mexican children kick their soccer balls across,
Run after it, entering the US.

I press my hand to the steel curtain–
Chain link fence crowned with barbed wire–
Rippling from the sea where Tijuana touches San Diego
Unrolling over mountains
And plains
And deserts,
This "Tortilla Curtain" turning into *el rio Grande*
Flowing down to the flatlands
Of the Magic Valley of South Texas
Its mouth enters into the Gulf.

1,950 mile-long open wound
Dividing a *pueblo*, a culture,
Running down the length of my body,
Staking fence rods in my flesh
Splits me splits me
Me raja me raja

This is my home
This thin edge of
Barbed wire.

But the skin of the earth is seamless.
The sea cannot be fenced,
El mar does not stop at borders.
To show the white man what she thought of his
arrogance,
Yemaya[2] blew the wire fence down.

– Gloria E. Anzaldúa

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[1] Anzaldúa Gloria, "Chapter 1: The Homeland, Aztlán," in *Borderlands: La Frontera* (San Francisco, CA: Aunt Lute Book Company, 2016), 2-3.
[2] Goddess of the West African Yoruba people and Afro-Caribbean diaspora. Symbolizing motherhood, rivers (in West Africa), and the ocean (in the Caribbean).

Introduction

One cannot comprehend the topography of our contemporary globe without seeing the chain-link lines that fractalize sand, sea, and soil. Contemporary global politics is marked by a refugee crisis of colossal proportion. Just a few decades ago, the United States commenced the War on Terror, with the hopes of wreaking our own brand of terror on our enemy. And yet, the *civilian casualties* that surmounted reflected a particularly unredeemable period of vengeance. The War on Terror in turn perpetuated a wave of refugees, fleeing all types of violence, with nowhere to turn. Their faces resembled too closely Osama, Hussein, combatant, war criminal. They were branded 'enemy' and stripped of homeland. Today, we see another refugee crisis at the US-Mexico border where children and adults alike are forced into unimaginably dire situations just to survive whilst being vilified and exploited by the US. What we have done is leave our most vulnerable population out in the open, for the vortexes and sandstorms to claim their mortality. Without so much as a second glance, we plant our border hedges and block out the cry of the refugee.

At its core, the contemporary refugee crisis is perpetuated by the fact that there is no framework to apprehend the personhood of the refugee, let alone an organized and attentive global process for directing the flow of vulnerable persons towards safety. Border patrol and humanitarians alike have failed to address the scope of this crisis. Even policy makers and politicians, whether they are sympathetic or repulsed by refugees, jettison policies forward without taking the time to understand the moral implications of *what* the condition of the refugee actually is. By blindly spearheading our convictions, we inevitably come to a standstill, in

discovering we lack the frameworks to continue forward. In attempting to manage or solve the contemporary refugee crisis, we have become lost in the weeds, no longer able to see the path. I argue that in order to ease the burdens placed on vulnerable people we must return to philosophy and look at the refugee crisis for what it is: A political issue that affects the entire globe and all of humanity, requiring a new philosophical framework to confront it with.

The philosophical framework necessary to respond to the urgency of the contemporary refugee crisis lies in the restoration of refugee *dignity*. Dignity is the kingpin of refugeedom because it is exactly what is decimated as a person becomes branded as a refugee. I define dignity as the basis for the recognition of personhood. Dignity requires having both agency and worth in relation to others, and being valued without prejudice as a distinct and equal being. If we do not treat refugees with dignity, we cannot value, or even hear their voices. To lack dignity is to lack personhood. Only in finding a way to restore dignity to refugees can we adequately craft policy to tackle this crisis.

The denial of the dignity of refugees demands for a return to philosopher Hannah Arendt and her analysis of the failure of human rights. During the rise of the Nazi party Arendt was arrested by the Gestapo for investigating the antisemitism that was growing to horrific proportions in Germany. As soon as she was released, she fled as a refugee, first to Paris in 1933, and then to the US in 1941. Even upon fleeing the Nazis, Arendt was met in both France and the US with branding across her forehead: *Jew. Alien. Scum. Illegal.* Arendt stakes in the preface to *The Origins of Totalitarianism* that, "human dignity needs a new guarantee which can only be found in a new political principle."[3] Arendt's call for dignity arises out of the statelessness crisis

[3] Arendt, Hannah, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. (New York, NY: Harcourt Publishing Company, 1985), ix.

at the end of the Second World War and in reckoning with the Holocaust. Despite the fact that Arendt seldom uses the term 'dignity' after the preface, I will argue that this call for a new guarantee for dignity frames the entirety of her philosophical reckoning with the catalytic events of her lifetime. I argue that dignity is at the heart of Arendt's project precisely because it is what rights have failed to provide and furthermore, what we continue to aim for in progressive political remodeling. Arendt implores humanity to view the end of war as a beginning, a blank slate on which new political principles can be formulated. I am optimistic that with each new generation we will see rejuvenated swells of potential action and collective power to pull us closer to a new guarantee for the dignity of humanity.

Arendt's call for dignity leads me to inquire firstly, what would a new political principle for a universal allocation of dignity actually look like? And secondly, how does Arendt answer her own call for dignity and how have contemporary thinkers attempted to answer this call themselves? In efforts to answer my questions, I will excavate Arendt's theory of plurality, Judith Butler's theory of human precarity and Gloria E. Anzaldúa's theory of Nos/Otras to interrogate if they provide a grounded and sustainable philosophical principle for the guarantee of dignity. I chose these three writers on the basis of their unique positionality in the world which has inspired their novel philosophical frameworks. Arendt, Butler, and Anzaldúa each provide their own theory to answer the pressing call for a new guarantee of human dignity. Not only are Arendt, Butler, and Anzaldúa untraditional writers, they *look* untraditional. What could be better grounds for revolutionary philosophical thought?

My thesis will be structured in three chapters. The first chapter will be on Arendt, unpacking her two books, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, to understand why she feels dignity

needs a new guarantee, and *The Human Condition*, to understand her posited new guarantee for dignity. I argue that for Arendt, this guarantee is located in "the paradoxical plurality of unique beings." Arendt's plurality is defined as the twofold quality of equality and distinction, allowing for the human activities of action and speech. Dignity is acquired when one's actions and opinions are judged earnestly by another. Therefore, if we base our relations on the precept of plurality, this allows for a common world wherein we can recognize and affirm one another's dignity and formulate structures of collective power.

The second chapter will be on Butler, unpacking their two books *Precarious Life* and *Frames of War*, to understand their evolving theory of precarity in times of war and of the cultivation of non-violent global solidarity. I view Judith Butler as establishing a guarantee of dignity through a different avenue, but with a similar conclusion. I argue that for Butler, insofar as humanity is mortal, we are all precarious beings. I define Butler's sense of dignity as the paradoxical sacredness of **precarious life**. We can come together in a non-violent global solidarity on the basis of an empathetic understanding of precarity in relation to our own experiences of suffering and loss. This empathy enables us to form collective power and counter the systems that seek to divide us.

The final chapter will unpack Anzaldúa's book *Light in the Dark*, to investigate her complex imperative of collective healing and empowerment, informed by a fluid middle path and the desire to transform. Like Arendt and Butler, Anzaldúa is also focused on the development of the collective. Anzaldúa's new guarantee for dignity revolves around her theory of **Nos/Otras**. *Nosotras* in Spanish means we, with *nos* referring to *us*, and *otros* to *them*. Anzaldúa places a slash between them to visualize societal division. In efforts to become *nosotras* without the slash,

we must view the world from the perspective of the slash, in order to remove the slash and become whole. Therefore, Anzaldúa locates a new guarantee of dignity in the restored wholeness of humanity and a collective power wielded in the name of global equity and justice.

Ultimately, in this thesis, I will endeavor to prove once and for all that humanity is in fact more powerful together than we are apart. I argue that collective power is the only apparatus in which our dignity can be mutually recognized. We see that empathy is the backbone of revolution, not violence. It is only by seeking out the middle ground that exists between all of us that we can glide into a new world, one that we have created together and in the name of dignity. Arendt, Butler, and Anzaldúa were each compelled to write based on particular moments of crisis: Arendt by the two World Wars and Butler and Anzaldúa by 9/11 and the War on Terror. For Arendt, Butler, and Anzaldúa, these events have led each of them to interrogate humanity in the world, rather than retreating into intellectual solitude. By rescripting the geographies of humans living together, they are rescripting philosophy. This work begins with the urgent need for human dignity, something which each writer has the experience of being deprived of. They redefine and empower themselves, and look outward to redefine and empower humanity. Arendt, Butler, and Anzaldúa are the sculptors of geography and the midwives of revolution. In crafting new guarantees for dignity, each writer has come to implore humanity to reinhabit our originary state of togetherness and collective power.

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Chapter I: A Call for Dignity

Hannah Arendt's *The Origins of Totalitarianism*
& *The Human Condition*

Introduction

Hannah Arendt (1906-1975), in the Preface to *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951), makes the following call: "Anti Semitism (not merely the hatred of Jews), imperialism (not merely conquest), totalitarianism (not merely dictatorship)–one after the other, one more brutally than the other, have demonstrated that human dignity needs a new guarantee which can only be found in a new political principle."[4] This quotation leads me to ask, what is human dignity? And how does Arendt gesture towards a 'new guarantee'? In *The Origins of Totalitarianism* and later in *The Human Condition* (1958), Hannah Arendt grapples with the breakdown of dignity in the 20th century. For Arendt, the granting of dignity is a process wherein one is recognized by another as a distinct and equal individual on the basis of the earnest judgment of actions and opinions.

This chapter will unfold in two parts: PART I: Unraveling Rights, close reading of passages from *The Origins of Totalitarianism*–Chapter 9: The Decline of the Nation-State and the End of the Rights of Man, and Chapter 13: Ideology and Terror. PART I is divided into four sections: (1) Vergangenheitsbewältigung - a contextualizing of Arendt's call for dignity in the Preface to the First Edition, (2) Scum of the Earth - A deep dive into the historical backbone of Arendt's understanding of the failure of rights, (3) The Death of Rights - an analysis of Arendt's breakdown of the legitimacy of rights, revealing their incapability to account for statelessness,

[4] Arendt, Hannah, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. (New York, NY: Harcourt Publishing Company, 1985), ix.

and (4) Out of the Ashes - An unpacking of Arendt's theories of isolation, loneliness, and solitude, and her unequivocally sober call for an optimistic outlook on beginnings. The second part of this chapter: PART II: The Human Paradox is a close reading of *The Human Condition*–Chapter 5: Action. I have divided PART II into three sections: (1) Human Nature vs. Human Condition - A discussion of Arendt's nuanced understanding humanity as a plural and heterogenous species, (2) Plurality - An analysis of Arendt's human condition of plurality, which I argue is her new guarantee of dignity, (3) Redeeming Action - A detailing of Arendt's rebuttals against those who may suspect action to have its deficits. The redemption of action lies in the fact that it is the activity corresponding to plurality. Action thus allows for political freedom and collective power in the face of oppression.

I argue Hannah Arendt's new guarantee for dignity rests in the human condition of plurality and actions derived from. The acquisition of dignity is a process that stems from plurality, since dignity requires an unbiased judgment of one's actions and opinions, and plurality is the two-fold property of equality and distinction. Understanding humanity through the lens of plurality enables us to move away from the homogeneity of nationhood and the exclusivity of rights dialogue and towards a multiplicitous understanding of humanity. When we recognize the other on the basis of their equal and distinct positionality, we become an apparatus of collective power with the capacity to grant each other dignity and challenge oppressive global regimes.

PART I: Unraveling Rights

(1) Vergangenheitsbewältigung

To begin my excavation of *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, it will be critical to first interrogate the preface of this seminal text. Arendt begins by setting the scene: Two world wars have only just concluded, leaving behind an unprecedented scale of stateless persons–those left without home or homeland–in its wake. The aftermath of WWII severed a divide between two classes of humanity: On the one hand, those who believe in human omnipotence, i.e. domination over nature and humanity alike, and on the other hand those forced to reckon with a reality of utter impotence. This phenomenon, according to Arendt, rests against "a background of both reckless optimism and reckless despair. It holds that Progress and Doom are two sides of the same coin; that both are articles of superstition, not of faith." In other words, paranoia and a deep-rooted desire for control engulfed our understanding of and interaction with the world. Arendt had become equally wary of utopian and dystopian political visions alike. Even such pragmatic documents as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the formation of the United Nations High Commission for Refugees failed to address the scope of reality. Arendt aimed to cut between Progress and Doom like a subtle knife and beg of the world–and herself–to foster a new political principle for the sake of human dignity.

As dark as the end of World War II seems and as life-altering as it was for Arendt, she refuses to "yield to the mere process of disintegration."[5] Disintegration, which Arendt defines more extensively in Chapter 9, refers to an ambiguous proliferation of hatred and nationalistic

[5] Arendt, Hannah, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, viii.

division, spurred by totalitarian regimes during WWI and II. To resist the temptation of disintegration, Arendt implores us to *comprehend* reality. For Arendt this means, "examining and bearing consciously the burden which our century has placed on us–neither denying its existence nor submitting meekly to its weight. Comprehension, in short means the unpremeditated, attentive facing up to, and resisting of, reality–whatever it may be."[6] To me, this cathartic resistance brings to mind the German word *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*. This term translates literally to "coping with the past" and has come to define Germany's attempts to reckon with the Holocaust. I believe that Arendt's active process of comprehension is a kind of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* where three steps are evoked: Accepting reality, understanding reality, and resisting reality by creating new political frameworks.

This leads us to the final page of the Preface of *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, where Arendt states that, "human dignity needs a new guarantee which can only be found in a new political principle."[7] This call comes at the breaking point of humanity defined by the dire succession of antisemitism, imperialism, and totalitarianism. Human rights have failed to protect the victims of these historic atrocities and have failed to create a new political principle to secure current and future generations. What we are searching for–with clumsy hands as it were–is dignity: To be judged earnestly on the basis of one's presentation in the world. As apparent in Arendt's intensive and historical analysis of the Rights of Man in Chapter 9, it becomes painfully clear just how the failure of rights came about and why *dignity* remains the precious, yet uncracked geode of humanity's survival.

[6] Ibid, viii.
[7] Ibid, ix.

(2) The Scum of the Earth

My analysis of Chapter 9 of *The Origins of Totalitarianism* will trace Arendt's apparatus for understanding minorities and stateless persons after World War I and her critique of the Rights of Man. According to Arendt, minorities and stateless persons first came into the limelight with the Peace Treaties and Minority Treaties at the end of WWI. I find it critical to first highlight the history of this phenomenon as traced by Arendt, to give context to her later critique of the Rights of Man.

The Peace Treaties (most famously the Treaty of Versailles in 1919) formally reallocated territory, redrew national lines, and produced new states within the context of the winners and losers of WWI. Consequently, "there was hardly a country left on the continent that did not pass between the two wars some legislation which…was always phrased to allow for getting rid of a great number of its inhabitants at any opportune moment."[8] The victims of such exclusion were often minority groups who, deprived of home and homeland, found themselves welcomed nowhere. Such a class of people became seen everywhere as "the scum of the earth"[9] a title Arendt prescribes to their permeable and undefinable positionality.

The unprecedented issue of statelessness was that there was no legal process to handle the relocation of such unimaginable numbers Minorities and stateless people could not be repatriated, for they had no home to return to.[10] Naturalization and political asylum failed too, because, stateless people, being so numerous, lost entirely the eye-catching gleam of exceptional suffering. This is primarily because "the majority could hardly qualify for the right of asylum"

[8] Ibid, 278-9.
[9]
[10] Ibid, 283.

and "the new refugees were not persecuted for what they had done or thought, but because of what they unchangeably were."[11] Arriving en masse to a foreign country, as a culturally distant minority, the stateless garnered no sympathy.[12]

Arendt's description of this sudden influx of statelessness and the utter lack of international management highlights the removal of dignity from a class of people or in some cases, its utter impossibility. The capacity for dignity is earned by virtue of belonging to a nation state alone and is taken away when one no longer holds such status. If certain groups of people never had this type of belonging in the first place, they could only have their lack of dignity revealed–not instituted–by the Peace Treaties. Or, if their nationless position had gone under the wire before, it certainly could not now.

Therefore, it is precisely the need for the subsequent Minority Treaties to protect those left stateless after the passing of the Peace Treaties, that predetermined their failure. The Minority Treaties, by authority of the League of Nations, intended to grant unequivocal rights to the minority groups of newly formed nation states. However, this strategy was doomed from the beginning because, "The [Peace] Treaties lumped together many peoples in single states, called some of them 'state people' and entrusted them with the government, silently assumed that others…were equal partners in the government…and with equal arbitrariness created out of the remnant a third group of nationalities called 'minorities.'"[13] The subtle hierarchies established via the peace treaties stained the Minority Treaties with inequality, since they failed to amend the nation state structure. Eastern Europe for example, with its ethnicities upon ethnicities, was unable to conform itself to the arbitrarily drawn national borders of the peace treaties.

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[11] Ibid, 294.
[12] Ibid, 280-282
[13] Ibid, 270.

Nationality determined by natality requires homogeneity to function. With the heterogeneous reality of many new nation states, hegemonic nationhood became impossible to enforce without degrading, assimilating, expelling, or exterminating those who did not resemble the majority. Thus we see that for Arendt, the Minority Treaties ensured the damage done by the Peace Treaties rather than amending it, by continuing to essentialize nationality as something based on lineage.

Continuing my analysis of *Origins* Chapter 9, I will dissect two more critical issues concerning the minority treaties: The issue of law enforcement and the issue of nationalism among the minorities themselves. The issue of law enforcement arose from the sheer volume of stateless people. Arendt says that, "the stateless person, without right to residence and without the right to work, had of course constantly to transgress the law…Since he was the anomaly for whom the general law did not provide, it was better for him to become an anomaly for which it did provide, that of the criminal."[14] As long as criminals may be punished by the law for their actions, we can say they are legally recognized individuals. However, stateless people came to represent a class of humans *below* criminals. They are outside the law entirely, whether they have broken the law or not. Their legal status is viewed with utter indifference. Arendt goes on to state that, "the best criterion by which to decide whether someone has been forced outside the pale of the law is to ask if he would benefit by committing a crime."[15] While one might speculate the advantages of being on the outside of the law–as if to equate being shrouded in an invisibility cloak with freedom–the truth is that this puts said outsiders in a position where they are utterly

[14] Arendt, Hannah, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. 286.
[15] Ibid, 286.

naked and vulnerable in their mortality. Stateless people were met with suspicion wherever they went, and no matter the manner in which they fled.

I see the crisis of statelessness connecting directly to the contemporary context of asylum-seeking refugees crossing national borders via clandestine and risky methods. Their hope is that upon entering a new country, the government will have enough sympathy to accept their pleas for asylum despite their lack of proper documentation. Such refugees, fleeing precarious and life-threatening situations, have been left without alternatives. The stateless people emerging from the failings of post-WWI treaties were left in the impossible position of belonging nowhere. By refusing confinement in internment camps–or concentration camps–stateless people resisted their narrowly defined place in the world, and became as it were, illegal aliens.

The degradation of stateless people as a class below criminals exposes how nation states hold the supreme authority to allocate not just citizenship, but human dignity and therefore personhood itself. The removal of dignity, like a coat torn off of one's back, occurs the minute one can no longer claim their nationality. Once one is outside the law, they lack entirely the dignity required to defend oneself as worthy of belonging somewhere. To legitimize their statehood, newly rebranded national governments decided that minority groups would eventually need to be assimilated or eliminated; The latter, coinciding with the parasitic growth of totalitarianism, would prove more popular.

The second critical issue of the Minority Treaties concerns the minorities, who, whether recognized by the treaties or ignored into oblivion, maintained a strong sense of national identity. Arendt explains that such minorities "[were] firmly convinced…that true freedom, true emancipation, and true popular sovereignty could be attained only with full national

emancipation, that people without their own national government were deprived of human rights." This stance was inspired by the French Revolution, led by a people who rejected their rulers by drafting *Des droits de l'Homm*e in 1789 a declaration which legitimized inalienable rights and national government on the basis of their inseparability. In the post-WWI era, minorities suffering most directly from the deficiencies of the nation-state system became some of its greatest advocates.[16] Minorities desired deeply–perhaps more deeply than nationals themselves–to belong to a nation of their own. Thus, the population most clearly positioned to revolt against nationality, chose instead to make a play for it, even if their ambitions were destined for utter failure.

The significance of this phenomenon is that it perpetuates nationalism, which runs the risk of evolving into totalitarianism. If everyone, even minorities, unequivocally desires a nation of their own, there will be no one left to contest its fallacies. If by some slim chance a stateless group gains or regains nationhood there is no evidence to suggest that they will govern it any differently than their oppressors. The only way to ensure a more universal conception of dignity is to develop a system that is more accurately representative and accepting of the vast layers of heterogeneity that exist within humanity. This of course, would require the steady commitment of all permutations of cultures and ethnicities involved, something which even America (an indisputably heterogeneous nation) struggles to achieve. Therefore, we can go no further without addressing the deep failure not just of the structure of the nation state, but of rights themselves to ensure human dignity.

[16] For a post-WWII example, consider Israel. Arendt comments that Israel, while considered a victory by Zionists, produced a new class of stateless people–the Palestinians.

(3) The Death of Rights

In efforts to excavate a dialogue of rights in accordance with Arendt's perspective, I will proceed by defining rights, rightlessness, and the right to have rights. For Hannah Arendt, the modern notion of rights is intimately tied to a turning point in human history wherein, "Man and not God's command or the customs of history, should be the source of law."[17] This follows directly from Arendt's claim in the Preface of *Origins* that modernity produced a class of people who believe that humankind is the ruling force of the universe. Following congruent from religious law, *Des droits de l'Homm*e in 1789 and subsequent bills of rights were defined as inalienable and intrinsic to human nature. Therefore, their authority was in no need of external justification or other enforcement. Unfortunately, defining rights as sacrosanct in correspondence to a singular vision of human nature stands brittle in the face of a swelling and shifting sea of human history.

As long as rights remain attached at the hip to nationality, they lack the ability to be truly universal. As the 20th century had made painfully clear to Arendt, "The Rights of Man, supposedly inalienable, proved to be unenforceable… whenever people appeared who were no longer citizens of a state."[18] Thus even human rights, which intended to improve the Rights of Man, were unable to be justified without the presence of national sovereignty. No entity, neither the League of Nations nor the United Nations, could sincerely claim an authority higher than that of the nations themselves. The lived experience of national minorities or stateless people (like

[17] Arendt, Hannah, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. 290
[18] Ibid, 291.

Arendt herself) points towards a definitive correlation between the loss of national rights and the loss of human rights. Therefore, nation states hold the sole authority to allocate personhood.

As quickly as rights were defined in the modern era so too was rightlessness defined. In fact, it is nearly impossible to define rights without also defining their negation. The proceedings of the 20th century demonstrated to Arendt an unprecedented irreversibility of rightlessness: Stateless people and minorities started to lose and could not regain their rights. According to Arendt, this process manifested itself as a twofold experience of loss. The first loss is that of home, which necessarily indicates loss of community and one's entire social fabric. What is unprecedented about the loss of home in the 20th century is "the impossibility of finding a new one."[19] To be expelled from one nation was to be expelled from all. The second loss is that of government and legal status in *all* countries. With growing numbers of stateless persons, apathy and paranoia subdued any national tendencies towards accepting refugees and internment camps were erected instead. Furthermore, having committed no subversive political act, stateless persons could hardly fit the narrow criteria of political asylees.

Arendt sees two major consequences arise from rightlessness. The first is that humanness comes to lack in all sacredness whenever humans disintegrate into crude nationalistic factions. The second follows directly from the first, which is that, "we are not born equal: we become equal as members of a group."[20] In analyzing the arc of history, it becomes clear to Arendt that equality is neither intrinsic nor metaphysical. Since nationality can only function under exclusive ethnic and cultural homogeneity and rights are under the jurisdiction of the nation state, equality is a condition inalienable only to national citizens. The prerequisite of homogeneity to become a

[19] Ibid, 293.
[20] Ibid, 301.

national citizen runs counter to the heterogeneous nature of humanity. Thus, hegemonic nationhood proved impossible to implement without expulsion or bloodshed.

While I have dissected Arendt's interpretation of rights and rightlessness, there is a third concept that will prove to be the heart of Arendt's theory of human dignity: *the right to have rights*. Arendt says, "We became aware of the existence of a right to have rights (and that means to live in a framework where one is judged by one's actions and opinions) and a right to belong to some kind of organized community, only when millions of people emerged who had lost and could not regain these rights."[21] The judgment of one's actions and opinions acts as the prerequisite for gaining human dignity. The necessity of one's community to guarantee dignity is clear: To be judged is for one to be recognized by another as a distinct and equal individual. Dignity becomes increasingly essential when people are placed into vulnerable scenarios such as refugeedom, where a refugee's ability to have their pleas answered will determine their fate.

By conflating nationality with rights, we have conflated nationality with being human. One can only be judged by their actions and opinions if they belong to a nationality. The ultimate danger of the disintegration of humanity into exclusive and uniform nationalities, is that it renders us isolated from each other and vulnerable to tyranny and totalitarian rule. Under such conditions it becomes impossible to rise up as an empowered monsoon of togetherness and combat the detrimental impacts of the cycle of nationalism. What is at stake here is that we have developed a system of rights that operates counter to the heterogeneity of humanity held sacred in its reality of heterogeneity and furthermore disallows the possibility of global human dignity.

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[21] Ibid, 296-297.

(4) Out of the Ashes

Arendt concludes *Origins* with a harrowing account of the dangers of isolation and loneliness. Arendt sees isolation and loneliness as preconditions for tyranny and totalitarianism. For Arendt, isolation is when, "I cannot act, because there is nobody who will act with me."[22] Isolation leads to powerlessness, the precondition for tyranny, which connotes the destruction of the political and public spheres, predicated on the ability to communicate and act with others. Power on the other hand, comes from acting together "in concert."[23] Since acting together is impossible under conditions of isolation, power stands in opposition to tyranny.

For Arendt, loneliness sinks into something more sinister than isolation. Isolation transforms into loneliness when one is "deserted by all human companionship."[24] While isolation prevents one from acting with others, loneliness is indicative of losing all sense of belonging to the world. For example, while isolation is necessary for optimizing productive activities such as fabrication and labor, loneliness is realized when the ability to produce something *new* in the world is destroyed. This signifies that one is judged exclusively by their physical *use* to the world rather than by their actions and opinions. Fostering loneliness is what enables a government to become a totalitarian regime because it allows for the destruction of the social and private spheres.

If isolation and loneliness represent respectively the removal of the capacity to act in concert with others and the capacity for companionship with others, dignity itself is at stake. For example, for "The Final Solution" to be carried out, Jews had to first become lacking in all

[22] Ibid, 474.
[23] Ibid, 474. Arendt quotes Edmund Burke.
[24] Ibid, 474.

human character, so that the Nazis could ensure that no sympathy for the Jews could possibly be felt. The removal of sympathy relies on the systematic removal of dignity, that is, when one's opinions and actions are disregarded to the extent that one can no longer belong anywhere in the world. Once dignity is removed, one's right to life is left to rot. There is no force, no listening ear left to earnestly hear one's pleas for mercy. One is left entirely to their will to survive by whatever means–even if discarding all sense of decency previously valued–to prolong one's life, which has come to count for nothing.

In order to further persuade the reader that isolation and loneliness act to dismantle human dignity and life itself, Arendt introduces a third term: Solitude. Unlike loneliness, solitude has more positive connotations in philosophical thinking: *When one is by oneself, one can find and become one with oneself.* While the spiritual journey of solitude is admirable to Arendt, it cannot account for humanity's original state of interdependence. In other words, before we can be capable of solitude we must accept the fundamentality of interdependence. Arendt explains that, "the problem with solitude is that this two-in-one needs the others in order to become one again: one unchangeable individual whose identity can never be mistaken for that of another." One cannot be truly distinguished as an individual without first being recognized by another as such. It is therefore incorrect to assume that one can be sure of one's own existence by relying entirely on one's own intuition. We need others first because only a socially recognized individual can be judged on the basis of their actions and opinions.

The way to fight against the impending isolation and loneliness of tyranny and totalitarianism is to formulate a collective power to bring together heterogeneous peoples and

combat common experiences of oppression and subjugation. Arendt concludes *Origins* by determining an idealistic principle about endings and beginnings. Arendt states the following:

> "Every end in history necessarily contains a new beginning…the promise, the only 'message' which the end can ever produce. Beginning, before it becomes a historical event, is the supreme capacity of man; politically it is identical with man's freedom…This beginning is guaranteed by each new birth; it is indeed every man."[25]

One may be tempted to perceive Arendt's ending to *Origins* as unwarranted idealism. However, I interpret Arendt as making a radical claim about history. Even if we determine history to be a cyclical pattern, humans disrupt such an order with each new birth bringing something wholly unexpected and unique into the world. As humans, we have the two-fold capacity to destroy our creations and develop new ones. Furthermore, we have the assurance that if such patterns do not occur in our lifetime, they have the possibility to occur unexpectedly in the next generation. The possibilities for progress are infinite by the mere assurance that change is constant.

Arendt's confidence in beginnings leads us directly to *The Human Condition*, where she discusses this subject in depth, among other themes including action, speech, and plurality. I argue that the capacity to begin is among Arendt's most impactful claims. Arendt understands humanity not as homogenous, but rather in sublime and fluid permutations sparking beginnings of unpredictable fractalizations. Arendt's vision of beginnings encourages humanity to use turning points as wind to sail stout hearted towards a horizon where dignity is guaranteed. In *The Human Condition*, Arendt will attempt to formulate her own guarantee of dignity.

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[25] Ibid, 479.

PART II: The Human Paradox

(1) Human Nature vs. Human Condition

The Human Condition is one of Arendt's most theoretical projects. I interpret the goal of this book to be an attempt at a new philosophical framework of dignity, centering around her theory of plurality, and contextualized implicitly by the proceedings of the 20th century. *The Human Condition* begins with Arendt responding to the persistent "human nature" debate in philosophical thinking. According to Arendt, human nature cannot account for the complexities of humanity and instead distills humanity into something fixed and essentialized: Humans are naturally "good," humans are naturally "selfish," humans are naturally "violent." The list goes on. Human nature is a reductive formula reliant on metaphysical assumptions rather than a synthesizing and heterogenous understanding of human existence and experience. It can be inferred that if a sector of humanity seems to not fit into a narrowly crafted understanding, that they simply cannot or cease to exist as human beings. Under such a conception, human *dignity* can hardly be allocated universally, despite the proponents of human nature claiming to connote a universal conception of humanity. Before one can be judged by their actions and opinions, one must first be considered human.

In the face of the inadequacies of the concept of human nature, Arendt determines her own term: *the human condition*. Unlike human nature, the human condition is something which is fluid, plural, and even paradoxical, in its efforts to account for the unpredictable fluctuations of human experience. It also determines that humanity has created itself, rather than being omnipotently preordained.

Arendt sees a *condition* as something which makes something else possible. For Arendt, humanity is defined by three conditions: Life, worldliness, and plurality. In order to explain each condition, Arendt attaches to each one a corresponding human activity: Labor, work, and action respectively. For Arendt, action is the most significant activity and plurality is the most significant condition because combined they hold the potential for the collective power necessary to counter oppressive regimes.

Arendt explains that "plurality is the paradoxical plurality of unique beings,"[26] who are both distinct from one another and equalized by their capacity for distinction. We see that plurality makes a *common world* possible. The common world is the stage on which human conditions and activities develop. According to Arendt, this "worldly reality [can only] truly and reliably appear" when individuals "see sameness in utter diversity."[27] The assurance of one's existence by another's designation of it is predicated on the fact we each hold a different position in the world. Arendt provides a metaphor for this: Each one of us is seated at a single table. There is space between us, yet we have the table in common. If the table disappeared, there would be nothing separating us but there would also be nothing uniting us. Without this metaphoric table, reality cannot appear. Without reality, all human conditions and activities cannot be carried out because human beings would not appear to each other in a common world.

Arendt argues that the destruction of the common world comes about under conditions of political isolation. Arendt explains the destruction of the common world…

> "can happen under conditions of radical isolation, where nobody can any longer agree with anybody else, as is usually the case in tyrannies…or mass hysteria…The end of the common

[26] Arendt, Hannah, *The Human Condition*, 176.
[27] Ibid, 57.

> world has come when it is seen only under one aspect and is permitted to present itself in only one perspective."[28]

Consistent with Arendt's previous analysis of isolation in *Origins*, in this text, isolation refers to the splitting of the intricate web of humanity and its relations. Arendt suggests that isolation can also occur under mass hysteria, where all proceed to inhabit the same feelings and characteristics. When we are isolated the common world–or common table– is destroyed. We are separated from others to the point of believing our perspective to be the only one. Dignity is impossible under conditions of isolation because we depart from the experiences and perspectives of others, thereby dismantling the human condition of plurality. Without plurality, dignity is therefore impossible. Plurality, via the activities of action and speech is the only method by which we can bestow and receive dignity.

(2) Plurality & Action

The human condition of plurality is actualized through the human activity of action. *To act*, according to Arendt, "means to take initiative, to begin…This beginning is not the same as the beginning of the world; it is not the beginning of something but of somebody."[29] Action is characterized by its boundless scope of possibility and its unpredictability. Action is derived from plurality and its two facets: Equality and distinction. Equality accounts for an even ground on which we can assert ourselves and our needs to each other. Without equality, communication would become impossible because we would have no common grounds on which to communicate. Distinction accounts for the unique identity of each of us. If we were not distinct,

[28] Ibid, 58.
[29] Ibid, 177.

communication would become irrelevant because we would instantly know the thoughts of the other, as if they were our own.

Since equality and distinction require communication, action becomes necessarily enmeshed with speech. According to Arendt,

> "The primordial and specifically human act…contain[s] the answer to the question asked of every newcomer: 'Who are you?' This disclosure of who somebody is, is implicit in both his words and his deeds; yet obviously the affinity between speech and revelation is much closer…just as the affinity between action and beginning is closer." 178

In other words, the answer to the question "who are you?" requires the "who" to reveal themselves, something which can only be done through the twofold presentation of deed and word: Speech reveals an actor who can announce their deeds. Speech is the highest form of action because it allows one to disclose oneself to another who can thereby affirm one's humanity and dignity. Speechless action would no longer be action for Arendt, because there would no longer be an actor. Without a clear actor, we become alienated from our actions because they have become a discrete means to an end.

The disclosure of human actors in the common world connotes plurality insofar as it is a process that can occur only in the presence of equal and distinct others and only after dignity has been granted. Therefore, plurality relies upon dignity insofar as for one's actions and words to be judged earnestly, one must be recognized as a valid actor among others. Thus, when action and speech are suppressed, we can infer that plurality has disintegrated and dignity has been removed.

(3) Redeeming Action

Despite the pedestal Arendt appears to place action upon, she admits that action comes with its own list of frustrations: the anonymity of its author, the unpredictability of its outcome, and the irreversibility of its process. These frustrations have led humanity to abandon the principles and sacred capacity of action for more reliable systems such as monarchy, rather than amending the frustrations of action in order to preserve its virtues. However, these concerns can ultimately be redeemed in favor of the ability of action to provide for the critical human condition of plurality. I argue that the suppression of action is the suppression of plurality is the denial of dignity.

There is an underlying potential for chaos in unbridled action, feared by leaders who would prefer for their authority to be sacrosanct above the masses. However, "No man can be sovereign because not one man, but men, inhabit the Earth." The desire for sovereignty undermines the human condition of plurality because it is the selfish desire to identify oneself as the author of all action. In reality action has no identifiable author, only plural actors who attempt to negotiate its force. A sovereign under the condition of plurality is just as dependent on her subjects as they are dependent on her. Arendt explains that while followers rely on their leader for directions and the opportunity to act, the leader relies on her followers to carry out their vision and promote the functions of a common world.

It is true that action is unpredictable in its outcome and irreversible in its process. However, Arendt sees these frustrations as redeemable: The capacity of *promise* redeems unpredictability and the capacity of *forgiveness* redeems irreversibility. Promises, with modern roots in the political theory of contracts, cushion the consequences of deeds. For Arendt,

promises are like “islands" within a sea of unpredictable deeds. However, if the whole sea is covered in such promises, the freedom of the people would dissipate in an instant and promises would lose their relevance and authority. Promises depend on a pluralistic and free people insofar as promises are only binding when at least two people or parties voluntarily consent to the terms. Making a promise to oneself–or under the coercive conditions of tyranny--lacks the same binding power.

Forgiveness redeems the irreversibility of the action process by retrospectively exonerating wrongdoings. Arendt says, “without being forgiven, released from the consequences of what we have done, our capacity to act would, as it were, be confined to one single deed from which we would never recover; we would remain victims of its consequences forever.”[30] If we were not forgiven by others for our wrongdoings, we would be shunned as pariahs for the rest of our lives, or, we would become too fearful to ever act again. In raising children, parents can forgive their child for tracking mud into the house, because the child had not yet learned the norms of cleanliness. The same must be said as we get older, otherwise we will fear failure and never try anything new, never challenge ourselves, or simply quit. If all our wrongdoings accumulated like lead weights for us to strap to our backs, then transformation, innovation, and discovery would become impossible. Progress cannot be made without making some mistakes at first. Forgiveness is a virtue of plurality and interdependence as it requires respect and empathy to function.

However, as Arendt makes clear, there are situations wherein forgiveness becomes impossible. Arendt has found that humans, “are unable to forgive what they cannot punish and

[30] Ibid, 237.

that they are unable to forgive what has turned out to be unforgivable. This…since Kant, we call 'radical evil' and about whose nature so little is known, even to us who have been exposed to one of their rare outbursts on the public scene."[31] This is a biconditional statement: What is unforgivable is unpunishable, and visa versa. 'Radical evil' is important to Arendt because it signifies the incomprehensible and unredeemable events of the Third Reich and the Holocaust. For Arendt, such deeds represent the total destruction of plurality and human power. Dignity is bestowed only on the pretext of plurality, as participation requires that one's distinct identity be received and affirmed by the surrounding community. We must be seen as belonging to a community in order to access promises and forgiveness.

Ultimately, for Arendt, it is collective *power* that can overcome the catastrophic effects of tyranny and totalitarianism. Arendt reveals her definition of power jointly with her discussion of the common world. The common world is the stage upon which we become actors, disclosing ourselves through our actions and words. Disclosure of the self and the reception of others leads to togetherness and the potential for collective power. Arendt describes power as "life blood of the human artifice,"[32] manifested solely by virtue of communication to others. The power of the many is the primary source of revolution and of all historical catalysts.

Dignity must be granted for collective power to be possible at all. Without the granting of dignity, we lack recognition of our distinct identity and our role in progressing political visions. Without plurality, we lack the ability to communicate with each other at all. Without communication the recognition of dignity becomes impossible.

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[31] Ibid, 241.
[32] Ibid, 204.

The anonymity of the author of action allows human actors the freedom of action and speech necessary to disclose themselves in the hopes of being received by others. The human condition of plurality guarantees dignity insofar as it allows us to act as equal and distinct beings. Together, we can inhabit the power of an unstoppable tide, chomping at the beaches of failed politics and carving the way towards change and progress.

Conclusion

While nature may appear to be cyclical–inhaling and exhaling life into fruition and decay and moving evolution along at its incremental pace–humanity emerges as a tangent. For Arendt, the human capacity for action is "like an ever-present reminder that men, though they must die, are not born in order to die but in order to begin."[33] Our natality is our first act in the world–our original beginning–which designates, as it were, our capacity to begin *again*, many times in fact, throughout the course of our lives. This constitutes the "miracle-working faculty"[34] of humankind, enabling us to become a force of nature ourselves, steering–for better or worse–the course of history. With each new generation, there is renewed potentiality of charting a course that may scrape our common ship against the horizon of global dignity. While rights have failed to guarantee dignity this does not connote the impossibility of dignity. We still yet have each other, and we still yet flow, and grow, and give birth to the next generations of leaders. As long as we stay true to the human condition of plurality manifested by way of communication and recognition, I have confidence that we can create a world where dignity is guaranteed.

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[33] Ibid, 246
[34] Ibid, 246.

Chapter II: Languages of Personhood

Judith Butler's *Precarious Life* & *Frames of War*

Introduction

Judith Butler–in their[35] books *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (2004) and *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?* (2009)–strives to explore new modalities for ensuring human dignity. Written just 5 years apart, these books span Butler's rigorous and cathartic response to 9/11, when the suppression of American grief gave way to a war of unconditional justification. *Precarious Life* lays down a holistic account of mourning that grows into anti-war solidarity and *Frames of War* rethinks our way of seeing the world in relation to the actors of war. Readers will find at the center of these two books a compelling theory of dignity, understood as a profound account of precarious life. Precarious life is defined by the inescapability of human mortality.

To value the precarious life of another requires the apprehension of their personhood, that is, to apprehend that they have a life in the first place, that may be valued in accordance with precarity. Personhood, according to Butler, is acknowledged when one is mourned after death in the form of funeral rites; and yet, to be mourned after death, one must have been valued in life as precarious. In Precarious Life and Frames of War, Butler unpacks the way certain classes of people have been deprived of apprehended personhood. Such individuals are no longer held sacred to their precarious position in relation to mortality. This deprivation as described by Butler emerges upon close reading like the three prongs of a trident. I interpret the first prong as

[35] Judith Butler uses they/them pronouns.

the cycle: The cyclical trajectory of fear, rage, and violence, initiated by the suppression of grief which degrades and destroys a designated enemy. I interpret the second prong as *the frame*: The visual mechanism by which humanity and its outcasts are ruthlessly classified. I interpret the third prong as *the system*: The way rights, freedom, and division cultivate and justify national hegemony and state violence. I also argue that Butler offers three pathways to amend these problems. I interpret these pathways as follows: *the tangent*, where in the face of loss, one reckons with their impenetrable bond to others, *the lacuna*,[36] which seeks to usurp the notion of normative framing and reveal the hidden pocket of precarity in apprehending personhood, and *the bridge*, consisting of a unity built around interdependence and mutual understanding of precarious life. Ultimately, Butler provides a compelling answer to Arendt's call for dignity by positing an apparatus of personhood that goes beyond a reliance on rights to define and enforce our most sacred morals.

I argue that Butler's new guarantee for dignity lies in the paradoxical sacredness of their theory of precarious life. While precarity is maximized for some and minimized for others and experienced in different ways at different times, we are ultimately all precarious by virtue of our mortality. I see Butler as imploring us to be empathetic creatures, to reach out to each other when we are at our most vulnerable and find commonality in our precarity. By developing collective power from a recognition of precarious life we are able to break down the systems that exacerbate precarity and discover new grounds for non-violent global solidarity.

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[36] Butler, Judith. *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?* London: Verso, 2016, 94.

PART I: The Problems

(1) *The Cycle*

In wake of the terrors of 9/11, fear leaked into the grieving minds of Americans spawning a call to war. Thus began the controversial War on Terror, leading to a long list of war crimes. In Butler's analysis of the War on Terror, they identify a *cycle* that perpetuates war. This cycle is sparked by an act of violence, such as 9/11. Violence leads to national grief for the families of victims, which is morphed into fear, rage, and then back into violence. This cycle has become like a broken record, the same song playing over and over. War continues because the cycle of violence continues.

When it comes to deciding how we will live our lives and reorient politics after unprecedented loss, mourning emerges as a point of contention. I believe that we all respond to loss differently. We have different religious and cultural views about mourning and mourning can proceed as varying timelines. Ultimately, Butler ruminates that "[perhaps] one mourns when one accepts that by the loss one undergoes one will be changed, possibly forever. Perhaps mourning has to do with agreeing to undergo a transformation…the full result of which one cannot know in advance."[37] For Butler, mourning means accepting that one's life has been altered. To mourn is to cease paddling against the current and let the tides of change carry you where they will. Yet this destination cannot be reached if you attempt to control the journey. When we paddle against the tides of change, we suppress grief.

[37] Butler, Judith. *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence.* London: Verso, 2020, 21.

If mourning is the transformation after loss, grief is the formative emotion. However, grief is commonly feared and suppressed. Butler challenges this notion to suggest that "when grieving is something to be feared, our fears can give rise to the impulse to resolve it quickly, to banish it in the name of an action invested with the power to restore the loss or return the world to a former order."[38] The fear of grief leads us to attempt to regain control over life and return to a state of normality. However, when fear overtakes grief, it lacks productive directionality and is easily molded into rage.

Whereas fear arises from the fear of grief, rage is the fear of fear itself. Butler states that "the infinite paranoia that imagines the war against terrorism… justifies itself endlessly in relation to the spectral infinity of its enemy, regardless of whether or not there are established grounds [for suspicion of continued terrorist activity]."[39] In a synthesis of our fight-or-flight instinct, Butler suggests that we must be enraged as well as paranoid to initiate war. Authorities keen on maintaining their national reputation use rage as fuel to project strength in response to an act of violence. Thus, a dangerous enemy must be cultivated to dump our fear and rage upon. However, when we are desperate to designate an enemy to appease feelings of fear and rage, the enemy proves categorically unclear and undefinable. Through politics and propaganda, a once undefinable enemy is made definable, despite the reality of vagueness. We start to seek out the enemy to get our revenge, with the righteous impression that we are protecting ourselves and our kin.

This path, starting with the shift from grief to fear, then fear to rage, can only result in more violence. The irony of violence is that while we rely on each other for survival and

[38] Ibid, 30.
[39] Ibid, 34.

reproduction, we can also destroy each other. Butler defines violence as, "a way in which we are given over, without control, to the will of another, a way in which life itself can be expunged by the willful action of another."[40] It follows from the position of grief after violence, that to feel in control again one must simply enact revenge by enacting violence on others who committed the initial violent act. The truth is that grief, whether substituted for fear and rage or not, requires one to reckon with their innate vulnerability to violence committed by others.

For Butler, this is particularly relevant in the post-9/11 period. In the face of our newly realized vulnerability, Americans committed war crimes in the Middle East and racist hate crimes on the homefront towards anyone who looked Arab. This lashing out was the result of fear and rage. According to Butler, "The United States was supposed to be the place that could not be attacked…where the only violence we knew was the kind that we inflicted on others."[41] Beyond the magnitude of the loss, Butler uncovers something else at play after 9/11. This was the first time that the US had been attacked by a foreign terrorist force on such a colossal and spectacular scale.[42] It is frequently asked, especially on the political left, why 9/11 was 'such a big deal for Americans.' In my opinion, this question is categorically unuseful. It denies the mourning of American families with the consequence of obscuring how grief becomes violence. Americans were forced to reckon with their vulnerability in a way they never had before. There is a rawness to this state of mind that can channel non-violent solidarity as much as it can channel violent vengeance. While we can debate the deficits of American entitlement, it remains true that we have been protected. The impenetrable security of the US was suddenly called into

[40] Ibid, 28-29.
[41] Ibid, 39.
[42] The only exception would be the Attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7th, 1941 enacted by Japan. However, this has not been historically categorized as terrorism because it was a state-sanctioned attack during a time of war.

question, and in a state of immense grief, people became fearful, enraged, and violent. These emotions served as a false legitimization for violent bigotry and white supremacy among civilians and political leaders alike. Such feelings were exacerbated by the federal government, who, in being the 'leader of the free world,' could justify their own fear, rage, and thirst for violent vengeance on a global scale.

The cyclical relationship between grief and violence leads us inevitably to Butler's touchstone question of *who counts as a human* which can be further divided into two questions. The first question is, *who counts as one who can be mourned?* and the second question is, *who counts as one who can be justifiably harmed in a violent act?* The challenges posed by these questions poke at the core of the problem of apprehending personhood. Butler defines humanity as precarious in the face of mortality. According to Butler, "if a life is not grievable, it is not quite a life."[43] To mourn a death is to recognize that there once was a precarious life. When death is erased, it is because the life that proceeded was erased. Death in this case becomes unremarkable, unimportant, and unpunishable. Therefore, the apprehension of personhood, and furthermore dignity is reliant on the value of another's precarious existence and the ability to be mourned after death.

Butler relates a startling statistic in their reflection on the War on Terror: The US military killed around 200,000 Iraqi children in the 2003 invasion of Iraq.[44] Butler says, "There are no obituaries for the war casualties that the United States inflicts, and there cannot be. If there were to be an obituary, there would have had to have been a life." In other words, in constituting Iraqi and Afghani extremists as the enemy, the US had to find a way to not only justify waging war in

[43] *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence,* 34.
[44] There are inconsistent numbers concerning the number of children killed by the US during the 2003 invasion of Iraq. However, it is possible that more than 200,000 child casualties are an understatement.

these countries but to justify the magnitude of civilian casualties. As I have argued, fear and rage produce an ill-defined enemy. To have an obituary for 200,000 dead Iraqi children would be to say that they once had lived lives, which would sufficiently de-enemize Iraq. It is easiest to formulate an enemy from a group lacking in personhood. Obituaries and mourning at large are reserved for those who have earned the dignity of apprehended and valued precarious life.

As for who can be justifiably harmed, it follows that one who cannot be mourned can be justifiably harmed. Butler states that the "differential allocation of grief serves the derealizing aims of military violence."[45] Derealization for Butler refers to the breakdown of reality that such a denial of personhood insinuates. For violence to be justified we must be persuaded to depart into a realm of unreality. Disassociating from the death of 200,000 Iraqi children could only be achieved only through the total manipulation of American senses. Butler explains that the US government "decides unilaterally what will count as humane, and openly defies the stipulated definition of human treatment that the Geneva Convention states in print."[46] In other words, the US has the global power to reallocate personhood. America's status on the world stage continued to legitimize their violence, even as torture at Guantanamo Bay and Abu Ghraib was revealed. Such revision of reality brings the US closer and closer to Arendt's definition of a totalitarian regime, where mass killing becomes seamless and justified.

[45] *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence,* 37.
[46] Ibid, 40.

(2) *The Frame*

One of Butler's most intriguing theories is "the frame" developed in *Frames of War.* The frame uses the visual medium to dictate the public perception of war by defining how and when human experience is made visible or invisible, included or excluded, and displayed truthfully or untruthfully. Butler dictates that visual imagery is a precondition for war, insofar as it is relied upon to rally public support. To this end, "The frame does not simply exhibit reality, but actively participates in a strategy of containment, selectively producing and enforcing what will count as reality."[47] The actors behind media and political messaging paint war in a favorable light by isolating, curating, and even departing from reality. Ultimately, the frame determines when precarious personhood is apprehended and when it is not. As we know from the cycle of mourning, fear, and violence, rage is the necessary ingredient to spark the desire for violence, even if an act of indignant revenge. However, even when the frame is repurposed to expose human rights violations, "outrage is not transformed into a sustained political resistance."[48] The failure of humanitarian imagery is that, like war propaganda, it can only enrage us and rage has no direction. When we conform rage to a direction, we are led only to violence. Furthermore, 're-framing' reality even with a humanitarian lens still relies on framing. Reconciliation and justice will not be accomplished by using this same rusty and fallible frame. We must seek out a new apparatus entirely, one which does not seek to contain the human experience, but rather unify it.

[47] Butler, Judith. *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?* London: Verso, 2016, xiii.
[48] Ibid, xiv.

It is often supposed that breaking the frame may serve to break us out of an acceptance of war, bring justice to human rights atrocities, and restore personhood to the victims. This task has been attempted on the same platform it critiques–the media. For example, the New Yorker publication "Torture at Abu Ghraib" in 2004 exposed the torture of Iraqi prisoners of war at the hands of American soldiers. However, if we break the frame only to replace it with a new, more humanitarian frame, we are not escaping the frame itself. The insufficiencies of breaking the frame begin with the uncontrollability of public reception. Butler states, "uncontrolled circularity can work to scatter the effects of war, undermine the ability to focus on its costs, and even naturalize the effects of war as a presupposed background of everyday life."[49] To see the same horrific images of distant suffering over and over again leads to the desensitization of the public and extinguishes the ability to interpret what such images attempt to depict. Images of suffering can also sensationalize and aestheticize suffering, which only further erodes the personhood of the victims. Butler further suggests that "the Abu Ghraib photographs… [do] not determine a particular response."[50] The viewer can still compartmentalize these images by placing them in a reality separated from their own. Even if these photos shock or inspire us at first, they can not provide a path forward, because an image cannot form a unified response. A specific message may be forced through propaganda or humanitarian tactics, but ultimately, an image alone cannot tell us how to act.

[49] *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?*, xiv.
[50] Ibid, 78.

(3) *The System*

Butler goes on to excavate the political system responsible for the dismantling of personhood. In reading *Frames of War*, I interpret this system to be the systematic engineering of rights, freedom, and division to legitimize national hegemony and state violence. Firstly, much like Arendt, Butler finds it critical to recall how rights have failed since the moment they were written. I could trace extensively the instances in history where great leaders of democracy have written in ink lists of rights that all persons should be endowed with. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights is the most contemporary example, written in 1948. The aim of this declaration was for it to become universal, something unachieved by previous lists of rights. Progress can indeed be made by extending rights to those who do not have them. For example, take the 13th and 19th amendments of the US Bill of Rights which abolished slavery and legalized women's suffrage respectively. Even so, rights, preceded by the word 'human' or not, have fallen short. Spurred by pure self-interest, wealthy nations like the US continue to bypass and redefine what rights are and who deserves them. This can be seen, for example, in the acts of torture committed by the US during the War on Terror, the police brutality and senseless killings of Black Americans, and the inhumane detainment of migrants at the US-Mexico border.

Butler has a bone to pick with the word freedom. While Butler makes it clear that they do not seek to reject the modernized notion of freedom in its entirety, they do state that, "a certain conception of freedom is invoked precisely as a rationale and instrument for practices of coercion…[and] used as an instrument of bigotry."[51] Butler's connection between coercion and freedom is as concrete as it is paradoxical. Butler explains this claim by using the example of

[51] Ibid, 104.

immigrant screening in the Netherlands. This procedure includes 'detecting' homophobia by surveying how immigrants respond to photos displaying homosexuality. In the Netherlands, gay rights are synonymous with their national political agenda. However, this screening does not promote gay rights. Its purpose is to exclude *Muslim* immigrants, among others, from Dutch citizenship. The Netherlands immigration authorities care more about keeping Muslim immigrants out of their country and maintaining cultural homogeneity than about gay rights.

Butler is dismayed by the appropriation of the gay experience to validate xenophobic and racist practices. They ask, "whether these freedoms for which I have struggled, and continue to struggle, are being instrumentalized to establish a specific cultural grounding…that functions as a prerequisite for admission of the acceptable immigrant."[52] One's ability to gain citizenship is reliant upon hegemonic cultural norms. To address Butler's concern, I feel that we cannot formulate inter-minority solidarity if we decline to admit the atrocities that our respective nations and communities have committed. For example, oppression and state violence committed by Islamic states, particularly towards women and homosexuals, need not be overlooked in our efforts to defend the rights of Muslim immigrants and refugees. Likewise, the racism and transphobia of white, cisgender homosexuals need not be overlooked. Our liberatory fight is against state violence and oppression at large, not against religious and ethnic diversity. Blaming individuals for the crimes of their state or communities is not often unwarranted–that is unless communities actually represent monoliths of political opinion.

Our institutions of power orchestrate the opposition and conflict between selected groups, like Homosexuals and Muslims in the context of Dutch citizenship. An even more poignant

[52] Ibid, 106.

example comes to mind: The LA Riots of 1992, where amongst the uprising of Black residents in response to the beating of Rodney King at the hands of the police, a conflict emerged between Black protesters and Korean American shop owners, after one shot a Black customer. What followed was the utter destruction of Koreatown, including the many businesses run by working-class, first-generation Korean American families. According to Butler, inter-minority division "[deflects] critical attention from the operations of power itself, including the orchestrating effects of power in and on subject formation."[53] The larger arena on which this conflict emerged was heightened racism and economic inequity, bursting into indignation and anxiety. What the stories of inter-minority division miss are the underlying systems of oppression. National hegemony commands a sword to divide and differentiate groups of people. Differentiation ultimately creates a class of 'impossible subjects' ungrievable and extralegally permitted to be harmed or killed.

Ultimately, Butler draws us back to the hot-coal question of *who counts as human.* National hegemony and acts of state violence originate from the fundamental desire to belong within a faction, for the sake of security in life. From this desire arises hegemonic nationhood, national norms determining who is human. Butler speculates on "how power forms the field in which subjects become possible at all or, rather, how they become impossible."[54] For one to exist outside of citizenship and cultural norms – whether stipulated by outright bigotry or elite modernity – is to be an impossible subject. Like smoke from a fire, one inevitably and violently fades into invisibility and finally nothingness.

[53] Ibid, 148.
[54] Ibid, 163.

PART II: The Paths Forward

(1) *The Tangent*

Butler's development of a new guarantee of dignity is located in their efforts to amend the destruction of personhood and devaluing of precarious life. Butler's first step in amending these issues is *the tangent*, which directs grief out of the cycle of violence and towards the work of mourning. For Butler, mourning necessitates an internal confrontation of our critical bonds to others. Our bonds to others, like a child's laughter, cannot be suppressed for long. We may seek to walk the world as independent and self-made individuals. However, the fantasy of independence comes crashing down when those persons who constitute our lives and identities are lost to us. It is no longer possible to slip away from the truth of interdependence. For Butler, reckoning with precarity interdependence in the face of mortality constitutes the process of mourning. I interpret this process as three steps: (1) After a loss it is certain that one will be changed. (2) To mourn begins by accepting the certainty of this change and submitting to an unpredictable transformation of oneself. (3) Once this transformation is completed, one realizes that what they lost was *the tie* between them and the deceased loved one. These three steps lead us out of the cycle of violence. While the cycle molds grief into violence, the tangent allows for mourning to be a transformative process. The endpoint is the acceptance of the precarity of interdependency, which for Butler, constitutes grounds for non-violent solidarity.

Butler's first step in mourning is to accept the inevitability of change after loss. However, Butler makes it clear that they "do not think that successful grieving implies that one has forgotten another person or that something else has come along to take its place as if full

substitutability were something for which we might strive."[55] The work of mourning does not require forgetting the person lost nor does it require replacing them. Normative culture and politics oscillate between encouraging "forgetting" and "never-forgetting" as the endpoint of mourning. This confusion is exemplified by the post-9/11 rallying cry, "Never forget." "Never forget" is reactionary in its vagueness and too easily shifted away from the unimaginable loss that occurred on 9/11 towards a call to war. In other words, in our political slogans, we forget what we are mourning. We forget the loss itself. It remains unproven that this slogan served the subtle yet colossal work of mourning. What did follow was the unveiling of US propaganda, white supremacist scapegoating, and war crimes after 9/11. "Never forget" suggests a stagnated response to 9/11, one where there is no path forward for our nation or for grieving families.

While we need not forget our deceased loved ones, Butler implores us to face the uncertain transformation that loss insinuates. Mourning is accepting that loss is synonymous with change. Not the change of a season, but the irreversible singularity of death. Accepting that one will be transformed by such a paradigm shift means relinquishing one's perceived jurisdiction over the path of mourning. Butler says, "something is larger than one's own deliberate plan, one's own project, one's own knowing, and choosing."[56] For Butler, one cannot predict transformation because one does not yet understand what has been lost. In essence, "something is lost in the recesses of loss."[57] Mourning is like scanning the clouds to find a fractal of blue sky, previously overlooked, since one's eyes had insisted on looking downward. This fractal of blue sky can take a lifetime to finally see. This is the work, and this is the transformation.

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[55] *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence,* 21.
[56] Ibid, 21.
[57] Ibid, 21.

So what is revealed to us in that small rhombus of blue sky embedded in the clouds? In a critical unveiling, Butler dictates:

> "Something about who we are is revealed, something that delineates the ties we have to others, that shows us that these ties constitute what we are, ties or bonds that compose us. It is not as if an 'I' exists independently over here and then simply loses a 'you' over there, especially if the attachment to 'you' is part of what composes who 'I' am. If I lose you, under these conditions, then I not only mourn the loss, but I become inscrutable to myself. Who 'am' I, without you? …perhaps what I have lost 'in' you…is a relationality that is composed neither exclusively of myself nor you, but is to be conceived as *the tie* by which those terms are differentiated and related."

What is revealed to us once we have been transformed, is the loss of *the tie* between us and the one whom we have lost. That relationship, kept aglow by togetherness in life, is snuffed out in death. While this judgment has a sorrowful appearance, there is yet a grounded optimism to be claimed by Butler. According to Butler, the work of mourning, "furnishes a sense of political community of a complex order…by bringing to the fore the relational ties that have implications for theorizing fundamental dependency and ethical responsibility."[58] The fundamentality of our relations is revealed through the transformative process of mourning. We are defined by those we hold dear. We cannot presume to walk the world alone when we have the capacity to love and to mourn. For Butler, the unshakable interdependence of humanity gives way to an apparatus for global nonviolent solidarity. Only by embracing the quilted strength of unity will we find a way to end the violence that pervades our globe and inorganically increases the scale of loss.

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[58] Ibid, 22.

(2) *The Lacuna*

Similarly to *the tangent* that redirects grief towards transformative mourning, we must usurp the frame to discover *the lacuna*, located in the gap just beyond our periphery. The frame solidifies the boundaries of what political powers want us to see and do not want us to see. There are key aspects of the human experience that we are missing by limiting ourselves to such a normative doctrine. Butler says, "to call the frame into question is to show that the frame never quite contained the scene it was meant to limn, that something was already outside…that does not conform to our established understanding of things." The frame fails because in trying to contain and facilitate the human experience it misses the true essence of humanity. We must question and transvalue the function of the frame itself in order to see its borders. We must depart from the frame into that gap that cannot conform to the frame. Only then will the sunlight reveal the ungraspable flecks of the dust of personhood.

We must move away from the frame entirely. Butler explains that this task "is not only a question of finding new content [to frame] but also working with received renditions of reality to show how they can and do break with themselves. As frames break from themselves in order to install themselves, other possibilities for apprehension emerge." To me, this suggests a departure from a reliance on sight, in regards to media consumption. Our way of seeing images in the media cannot account for the whole scene or the whole narrative. When we call the frame into question we must also take stock of the way reality has been manipulated and search for more reliable methods of apprehending personhood.

Listening to the voice of the one experiencing atrocity firsthand may bring us closer to the deep internal tragedies manifested outside of apprehension. Butler describes how in the

photos taken at Abu Ghraib, the victims' faces are shrouded and no names are captioned. Yet, it is what we cannot see that reveals the missing pocket where true apprehension of precarious life resides. Butler states that "the humans who were tortured do not readily conform to a visual, corporeal, or socially recognizable identity…When we speak of humanity in such a context, we refer to that double or trace of what is human that confounds the norm of the human."[59] It is when life is violated to the extreme that we find the biological foundations of life. Raw suffering and the will to survive is the trace of humanity that cannot conform to the normative frame. For Butler, the essence of humanity is constituted by the universal precarity of human life. While we may sense the precarity of humanity when we lose a loved one, how can we extend this understanding to the distant other?

It has been made clear that journalistic photos, being framed by definition, are not sufficient to reveal essential precarity. I conclude that art takes us closer, because art reflects the artist's voice. Take, for example, the poems from Guantanamo Bay. Butler reminds us that these poems were considered a national security risk by the US and many were censored, confiscated, or destroyed. Despite the danger, prisoners carved verses into cups to pass between cells or smuggled them out of the prison camp. The poems became an act of resistance opposing the sovereignty and moral legitimacy of the US. One may be unconvinced by the power of the poetic, but the historical fact of US paranoia and prisoner perseverance surrounding the writing of poetry suggest otherwise. The question is what exactly makes these poems so powerful? For Butler, such poems maintain "proof of stubborn life, vulnerable, overwhelmed, their own and not their own, dispossessed, enraged, and perspicacious. As a network of transitive effects, the

[59] Ibid, 94-95.

poems…live through the violence they oppose." The poetry remains even if the life of the poet is destroyed. Such words cannot be redacted entirely, despite the efforts of the US to do so. Poetry permeates, and poems leak out. Poems do not conform to the normative frame, they roll out before conformity can be instated. If you take the time to read the words of the poems of Guantanamo Bay you cannot scroll past their meaning. This is the voice of precarious life pushed to the brink, but remaining stubborn nonetheless. In the face of such poetry, we must take stock of how the frames of media and society divide us and the role we and our countries have played in increasing precarity for some while minimizing it for others in framing personhood.

(3) *The Bridge*

Similarly to *the lacuna*, where Butler locates a hidden pocket of apprehension, *the bridge* amends systematic national hegemony and state violence by creating infrastructure to counter its methods of oppression and division. Only through "such a critique of state violence do we stand a chance of finding and acknowledging already existing alliances and sites of contact with other minorities to consider systematically how coercion seeks to divide us and to keep attention deflected from the critique of violence itself."[60] The system can only function when its power to divide is greater than the power of the people to unite. When precarity is maximized for some and minimized for others, we must reflect on our role as perpetrators, victims, or beneficiaries, in the systematic differentiation and dehumanization. When oppressed and extricated minorities bind themselves together, eyes pointed like lasers at their perpetrators, the unreality of division is revealed, as is the need for a bridge.

[60] Ibid, 135.

Conclusion

In California during the 1960's, Filipino and Mexican farm workers built a bridge of solidarity under the leadership of Larry Itliong and Ceaser Chavez to form the United Farm Workers . Their successes, including higher wages and improved working conditions, were born from something they could not have created if they had remained separate. Hegemonic norms and institutions seek to divide us, to turn us against each other so that we cannot unite. Larry Itliong and Ceaser Chavez overcame their ethnic and cultural differences to combat a common problem. Ultimately I argue that apprehending and valuing the precarity of personhood and embracing interdependence constitutes a new guarantee of dignity and a pathway towards non-violent solidarity.

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Chapter III: Geographies of Community

Gloria E. Anzaldúa's *Light in the Dark*

Introduction

Gloria E. Anzaldúa (1942-2004), in *Light in the Dark*, draws upon Aztec, Nahua, and Mesoamerican philosophies, to reveal the individual as the starting point of a trajectory–constituted by healing and aimed towards knowledge–which enables us to grasp the necessity of human unity and interdependence. Anzaldúa's impetus to her text *Light in the Dark* begins with her profound sense of horror and loss in the wake of 9/11. For Anzaldúa, this moment of utter shock compelled her to dive deep into her psychological wounding as a way of understanding the reality around her. The wound of 9/11 led some Americans towards healing and knowledge and others to fall back upon their own willed ignorance. Anzaldúa expresses her indignation at the US government for their failure to support a national process of mourning and healing after 9/11. The US government fed the fear and hatred of the masses, leading the country into war, like moths to a flame–to burn and be burned. Collective healing and knowledge–not war–is the necessary journey after loss. Our old methods and notions will no longer work in light of such a crisis. We must rely on the wisdom and experiences of each other to reveal the path forward.

Anzaldúa weaves a complex web in order to explore this trajectory of healing. In effort to synthesize and distill this web, I will argue that her theories can be sectioned into four sections, each intertwined together: (I) The *Coyolxauhqui imperative*, which represents Anzaldúa's theory of wounding and healing as a journey of self-acceptance and interdependence, (II) *Conocimiento*,

the Spanish word for knowledge, which I argue connotes the directionality and aim of Anzaldúa's Coyolxauhqui imperative, (III) *Nepantla*, the Nahua word for the space between dualities or states of being which constitutes the landscape on which the Coyolxauhqui imperative occurs and the trajectory towards conocimiento is charted, (IV) and finally we come to *Nos/otras*, a Spanish word which translates to *we*. Anzaldúa's addition to this word is placing a slash between nos (us) and otras (them). To remove the slash and become unified, we must first see the world through Conocimiento, born from Coyolxauhqui and manifested from within Nepantla.

I argue that Anzaldúa is developing a radical political imperative about human relationships, starting from the self and looking outward, like a sunflower opening towards the morning sun. When we undergo an individual process of healing we are forced to look outward, to find new ways of life when our olds ones have been destroyed. We can then choose to reach and affect those around us with our own sources of knowledge. In efforts to break through the walls that divide us, Anzaldúa implores us to come together in a multiplicity of languages and experiences, each of us combining our individual healing journeys together in an intricately braided rope. When we come together as not just "us" and "them" but as a unified entity, breathing and healing as one, we can pull higher and higher up this rope, towards a collective vision, not just of healing and knowledge, but also of global justice and equity.

PART I: The Coyolxauhqui Imperative

Dissecting the political framework of *Light in the Dark* begins with Coyolxauhqui, the moon goddess of Aztec mythology. According to legend, Coyolxauhqui led her 400 brothers and sisters in a plot to kill their mother Coatlicue.[61] After killing Coatlice, Coyolxauhqui was confronted by her brother, Huitzilopochtli,[62] newly born from Coatlicue's womb, who chopped off her head, dismembered her body, and killed the rest of their siblings. Coyolxauhqui's head became the moon and her body was dispersed underground. Coyolxauhqui is notably represented as an Aztec circular stone carving preserved to this day. According to Anzaldúa, "organizing the parts [of Coyolxauhqui] into a unified whole is…the act of putting Coyolxuahqui back together again."[63] Coyolxauhqui is Anzaldúa's light in the dark: a luminous figurehead symbolizing the process of wounding and healing. Coyolxauhqui as the moon is a point of inspiration for Anzaldúa, the potentiality of a path forward being illuminated when all hope seems lost. Moving forward, however, requires a desire to do so, a creative impulse to adapt to new ways of life and transform into something new. Transformation, even when painful, holds unforeseen consequences which may produce something unexpectedly profound. In my following analysis of the Coyolxauhqui imperative I will argue that individual healing can blossom into collective and even societal healing. I will begin by unpacking Anzaldúa's definition of wounding and healing respectively, and, what occurs on the path between.

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[61] Coatlicue is the Aztec goddess of the earth, and of life and death, known for her hideous appearance and skirt of serpents. Coatlicue is another important figure in Anzaldúa's philosophy. The 'Coatlicue State' is Anzaldúa's understanding of a universal 'writer's block', paralysis, or depression, that one may sink into on the path towards new knowledge.

[62] Huitzilopochtli is the Aztec god of the sun and the youngest son of Coatlicue.

[63] Anzaldúa, Gloria, and AnaLouise Keating. *Light in the Dark / Luz En Lo Oscuro: Rewriting Identity, Spirituality, Reality*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015, 107.

Anzaldúa's aim with the Coyolxauhqui imperative begins with the aim of making peace with *why* suffering occurs and understanding *what* we are supposed to do in its wake. According to Anzaldúa, when one had been dealt a wounding blow, "The world doesn't so much stop as it cracks. What cracked is our perception of the world, how we related to it, how we engage with it."[64] A wound is something that cracks you apart into fragments as if you were but a porcelain vase. Our previous way of life ceases to exist. We become like fallen angels, our wings crumpled upon impact. The moment of wounding Anzaldúa explores in *Light in the Dark* is her reaction to 9/11. She recalls, "Wounded, I fell back into shock, cold and clammy. The moment fragmented me, dissociating me from myself…I struggled to talk from the wound's gash, make sense of the deaths and destruction, and pull the pieces of my life back together."[65] Anzaldúa was wracked with the images of an unprecedented attack. Watching on the television from afar, she witnessed the senseless killing of a mass of individuals, each with their own names, and their own families.

All of us experience Coyolxauhqui moments many times over in our lifetimes in varying levels of intensity or impact: Leaving home for the first time, mourning the death of a loved one, being fired from a job, experiencing a life-altering injury or disease. That is not to say these moments cannot be joyful too: Experiencing the intensity of being in love, getting accepted into university, climbing to the peak of a mountain. These are all moments that can crack us open. To crack open is a profoundly common human experience, whether painful or joyful, and is simultaneously unlike anything else, since it is personal to every individual.

The political undercurrent of the Coyolxauhqui imperative comes with the change of one's perception of reality. According to Anzaldúa, "our habitual perspective changes when

[64] Ibid, 16.
[65] Ibid, 9-10.

something jars us loose…shocks us out of our habitual state…our ideological filters fall away, we realize that the walls are porous and we can 'see' through our belief system's fictions and fissures."[66] *Habit* for Anzaldúa represents the state of being prior to a wound, where one lives according to a set structure of norms and beliefs that become routine. Habit is an arrow, a touchstone, a heart beat. When we are cracked open, we can no longer rely on the rhythm of life we had once been so accustomed to. Our routines are thrown up in the air, like the pages of a writer's novel blown out the window on a blustery day. We must interrogate the dark parts of our souls–the ideologies and ignorance we may have once bathed in–and aim to start anew. It is such cracks that reveal the fallacies of our societal landscape and the oppressive hegemonies and stead-fast prejudices are revealed. With this rush of new information, one could attempt to ignore it, hide under a cracked piece of porcelain and pray things will go back to the way they were, or one could transform.

For Anzaldua, the process of healing is never-ending. Anzaldúa explains that, "the Coyolxauhqui imperative is to heal and achieve integration…[it] is an ongoing process of making and unmaking. There is never any resolution, just the process of healing."[67] To heal from an unprecedented wound or trauma, one must seek out new ways of interacting with the world and its inhabitants, since one's old methods and mentalities have been destroyed. Anzaldúa explains that Coyolxauhqui "gives us different ways of defining the self" and different ways "of defining group identity."[68] Like fractals, we are each distinct individuals undergoing our own journeys of wounding and healing. This process turns ever outwards as we let go of the conception that our life experiences constitute a monolithic perspective, and open ourselves up to

[66] Ibid, 86.
[67] Ibid, 19-20.
[68] Ibid, 84.

the perspectives of others. We must reach out to others, and their ways of life, to help us heal from our traumas and adapt to a new state of being. Without others, we have no role-models to guide us forward. By healing as a collective, we are able to finally see the larger structure that connects all of our fractalized selves together, in one contiguous spiral. Healing is grounds for solidarity, insofar as it requires that we reach to those around us, to view the world with a fresh pair of eyes.

The process of self-discovery and self-actualization informed by ancient mythology is not to be overlooked in the contemporary era as aimless wanderings. From my perspective, the urgency about the Coyolxauhqui imperative, in Anzaldúa's words, is that it "characterizes our times."[69] The contemporary United States, coming off of a pandemic of crippling losses, is struggling against a wave of armed violence and bigotry. The US needs Coyolxauhqui now more than ever. For Anzaldúa, the process of healing can be demonstrated by the spiritual role and journeying of shamans. She explains that, "the shaman acquires the power of healing and returns to help the community…The healing occurs in disintegration, in the demotion of the ego as the self's only authority."[70] Once healed, shamanic individuals find it imperative to teach others this new-found path forward. Furthermore, the Coyolxauhqui imperative allows for the humbling breakdown of individual identity, opening up our souls to receive a multiplicity of global perceptions. Collective healing may be the only thing truly capable of uniting us.

I am reminded of the cracks in the black top of my elementary school. *My friends and I used to say that the cracks were from the earthquake back in 2001, the year we were born. Everyday at recess we would go to the cracks and try to put the broken pieces back together. We*

[69] Ibid, 17.
[70] Ibid, 29.

would place flowers, twigs, and leaves between the cracks–so that the insects, sprites, and fairies would have somewhere to rest their weary wings. Cracks have a way of revealing something, creating mythology, and being repurposed. Cracking apart is not a definitive end, but rather a beginning, that is, an impetus for something novel and unknown. Everyday we return to our cracks, placing the broken parts back together like a child's game, celebrating our continued work by adorning repaired cracks with flowers.

PART II: Conocimiento

Anzaldúa locates a directionality for the process of healing in the spanish words *desconocimiento* (ignorance) and *conocimiento* (knowledge). Under the conditions of a catastrophic wounding, some individuals choose a path of willed desconocimiento while others choose a path of conocimiento. Only the path of conocimiento constitutes the aim of the work of healing. While Anzaldúa's focus is primarily on conocimiento, it will be critical to first define desconocimiento in efforts to understand what Anzaldúa is attempting to move away from.

According to Anzaldúa, there is a dark side to the Coyolxauhqui imperative wherein we succumb to our 'shadow beasts.' Anzaldúa explains that, "As we thrash about in our inner and external struggling grounds trying to get our bearings, we totter between two paths: The path of desconocimiento leads human consciousness into ignorance, fear, and hatred…this easier path uses force and violence to socially construct our nation."[71] Desconocimiento is the easier path insofar as it is devoid of the work of healing. It is the temptation we all have (and can perhaps not be blamed for)–to dwell in the despairing pit of our own horror and grief. While this pit is characterized by endless darkness, there is some comfort in it, for it does not require anything of

[71] Ibid, 19.

us–it does not require the sharp, screeching pain of stepping forward, as if taking one's first steps after breaking a femur. This initial pit is filled with endless danger, danger that led this country into a war on terror. This war proved only that our government was terrified and unequipped for the more difficult path of healing. All of our greatest vices can be found in the pit that is desconocimiento, as well as the impetus for some of the greatest crimes against humanity. We must pull ourselves out and forward. For the sake of humanity, there can be no other way.

Before jumping into *how* we may reach conocimiento, it is important to first define it. To heal from a wound, we must seek out the tools that only a directionality towards conocimiento can provide. Anzaldúa explains that, "Conocimiento, the more difficult path, leads to awakening, insights, understanding, realizations, courage, and the motivation to engage in concrete ways with the potential to bring us into compassionate interactions."[72] While the process of healing may never end in itself, we can discover conocimiento through it. Conocimiento draws us closer to each other, out of the newfound desire to learn new ways of life and to adapt to the change that resulted from the initial wound. We are humbled by novel perspectives and teachings and we can transform to meet them.

Anzaldúa understands there to be 7 steps to reaching a state of conocimiento. To this end, I have distilled Anzaldúa's 7 steps into a series of terms: *Rupture*: the initial moment of cracking open or wounding, *limbo*: the feeling of being torn between old ways and the necessity of moving forward, *desconocimiento*: the temptation to embrace one's 'shadow beasts' in the face of pain experienced on path to conocimiento, *compromise*: The early stages of discovering new forms of knowledge, primarily accomplished through conversing with and learning from others,

[72] Ibid, 19.

repair: putting Coyolxauhqui together again and formulating a collective of healing narratives, *clash*: Setbacks and conflicts in the path of coming together to perform collective healing, and *shift*: The ultimate transformation of realities and channeling collective healing to perform societal change.[73]

In efforts to synthesize these 7 steps, I argue that conocimiento begins internally with the self and leads outward towards others. One's first steps towards healing from a rupture must start within the self. Conocimiento can come from anywhere and can be found in anything. However, we have to be open to the fact that it might not be found where we expect it to–it certainly will not be located in our habitual attitudes and ideologies. Self-acceptance and self-discovery are essential to healing because part of healing is letting our ego fall away and embracing those around us. We come to see the world from their perspective. We grow as individuals by growing together. Only this path can truly lead to conocimiento. In my understanding, this is a concrete basis for suggesting that the endpoint of the coyolxauhqui imperative is conocimiento, much like a tree, the roots of healing coalesce as a trunk, branches, and then blossom into the flowers of conocimiento.

By finding ourselves and finding each other we can come to see more clearly the steps necessary to healing society itself. For Anzaldúa, the steps towards individual, collective, *and* societal healing are located in creative acts and spirituality. Anzaldúa explains that as "conocimiento is reached via creative acts…both mental and somatic…Through creative engagements, you embed your experiences in a larger frame of reference, connecting your personal struggles with those of other beings on the planet."[74] Creative acts provide for new ways

[73] Ibid, 121-156.
[74] Ibid, 119.

of understanding the self and the world. Anzaldúa's text in itself is a work of creative writing, flowing seamlessly between vignettes, poems, extended metaphors, allusions, and reflections.

To further explain conocimiento, Anzaldúa makes a strong claim for adopting spirituality into knowledge. For Anzaldúa, these two terms were never separated in the first place. She says, "Conocimiento urges us to respond not just within the traditional practice of spirituality…or with the technologies of political activism…but with the amalgam of the two: spiritual activism."[75] Anzaldúa's coined term 'spiritual activism' helps us understand the political connotations of conocimiento, and its unique position within the traditional philosophical cannon. For Anzaldúa, spiritual activism requires the intentional formation–artistic, cultural, spiritually, and political–of a collective to both heal from our wounds. Collective healing has the power to move society forward, towards a more unified and equitable world. True learning and knowledge commences when one reaches for the unknown and lacing fingers with the other. We are each our own seeds, yet we are born of the same soil and nurtured by the same rainfall. Like ivy, we must learn how to intertwine together, to reach higher and higher up the brick walls of society, to embrace the sky of collective healing and conocimiento.

PART III: Nepantla

Nepantla is the Nahuatl word for the cosmic realm in-between dualities or states of being. From the Nahuatl language group, nominally of Uto-Aztec and Mesoamerican cultural origins, scholars have extracted and studied Nahua philosophy.[76] Anzaldúa, highly influenced by the Nahua philosophers, defines nepantla in her own words:

[75] Ibid, 19.
[76] Practiced at the time of Colombian-contact in 1492.

> "Nepantla is the space in-between, the locus and sign of transition…Torn between ways, we seek to find some sort of harmony amid the remolinos (vortexes) of multiple and conflicting worldviews; we must learn to integrate all these perspectives. Transitions are a form of crisis…In nepantla we hang out between shifts, trying to make rational sense of this crisis, seeking…some kind of intimate connection." [77]

I argue that Anzaldua's definition of nepantla provides a landscape upon which the process of the Coyolxauhqui imperative is directed towards conocimiento. While Anzaldúa's interpretation of nepantla may include this directionality, that is not to say nepantla is purely a means to an end. Nepantla is a philosophy and way of seeing the world in itself. Only by sinking into and residing in this realm, will conocimiento come about. One must accept and learn from Nepantla if there is to be the choice of moving forward at all. I like to think of inhabiting nepantla as finding comfort in our positions of discomfort, as if training to walk across a tightrope. Like athletes, we must train within discomfort in order to advance in our form. Likewise, only by gaining familiarity with that which was once unknown, can we adapt to change. Humans must learn to operate from the realm of nepantla, to heal from trauma and discover the once clandestine pathways that will lead us towards a fulfilling life and just society.

Before diving deeper into Anzaldúa's political interpretation of nepantla, it is necessary to understand Nahua philosophy more clearly. The Nahua philosophers viewed the earth as an intrinsically dangerous place for humanity. In asking how to promote human flourishing in such a hazardous realm, the Nahua determined that equilibrium constitutes human purpose. Nepantla is a philosophy of equilibrium, reflecting the space between dualities, such as death and life, or light and dark, or past and future. For the Nahua philosophers, to view dualities as opposing entities would be highly detrimental to humanity and nature alike. insofar as prizing or fearing

[77] Ibid, 17.

one side above the other inevitably leads to disequilibrium and crisis. However, the Nahua do not oppose disequilibrium either. When disequilibrium does occur, it reflects a natural cosmic rhythm. We must approach a period of disequilibrium from within the realm of nepantla, instead of succumbing to ignorance or subjugation. Anzaldúa's Coyolxauhqui imperative can only commence by stepping over the threshold into nepantla.

The originary incarnation of nepantla is *teotl*: the life-force and building blocks of the cosmos, composed of intangible and irreducible particles. While Anzaldúa does not cite teotl directly, I feel that it is an essential piece of context for her theories. Teotl cannot be dominated, wielded, or ever truly understood. It cannot be pinned down and much like the waves that brush up against the shore it is constantly *becoming*. Teotl is a role-model for embracing a nepantla-informed lifestyle. Scholar James Maffie explains that Nahua philosophers implored "people to live their lives in a teotl-like, nepantla-balancing way, and based their respective claims regarding how human beings *ought* to conduct their lives upon teotl's example."[78] To find balance and fulfillment in one's life, it is essential to accept the ephemerality of teotl and seek to walk the equalizing 'middle-path' of nepantla. Furthermore, in Nahua philosophy, this 'middle-path' aims towards knowledge–*tlamatiliztli*–much like Anzaldúa's conocimiento. Tlamatiliztli is defined as the capacity for maintaining equilibrium in one's life and adapting to new positions of equilibrium in the face of disequilibrium. Nepantla is the ligaments of this process. We cannot rely exclusively on our skeletons, lest we topple in our rigidness when smacked by an unpredicted crisis. We must learn to glide and we must learn to adapt.

[78] Maffie, James. "Pre-Columbian Philosophies." *A Companion to Latin American Philosophy*, pp. 7–22, 18.

In efforts to develop a contemporary political understanding of nepantla, Anzaldúa coined her own term, *nepantleras*, that is, experts and guides in the way of nepantla. Nepantleras are those individuals among us, who, having mastered the way of nepantla in their own lives, may lead others along this path. Anzaldúa explains, nepantleras are "juggling several cultures or forces that clash…[they are] not quite at home here but also not quite at home over there."[79] Nepantleras live in the cracks between multiple worlds, providing them a shamanic perspective of humanity and the cosmos. Anzaldúa continues that from "this perspective from the cracks…las nepantleras construct alternative roads creating new topographies and geographies of hybrid selves who transcend binaries and de-polarize potential allies."[80] Existing between things, rather than *of* anything will prove necessary in constructing our individual identities, our relationships, and our societies, especially after periods of crisis. Those who never had to ask *who am I?* Or *How do I fit into all this?*, will have to turn to the Nepantleras for help when confronted with their own crises (that is, if they desire to heal). Nepantleras have had to ask these questions their whole lives and construct the answers on their own without any role-model except teotl. While identity differs depending on the individual, Nepantleras can show the path towards conocimiento, a directionality wherein identity can be reconstructed. Already liberated from hegemonic and didactic ideologies, Nepantleras are positioned not just to aid other individuals, but to build large-scale coalitions. Instead of rejecting potential allies out of self-interest, Nepantleras look to what commonalities exist between us.

Nepantleras are also able to aid the shifts of society itself. Nepantleras are ahead of their time, beginning the revolution before society even recognizes its own cracks. Anzaldúa explains,

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[79] Anzaldúa, *Light in the Dark*, 81.
[80] Ibid, 82.

"while working on spiritual transformations of self hoods…[Nepantleras] model the transitions our cultures will go through, carry visions for our cultures, preparing them for solutions to conflicts and the healing of wounds."[81] Nepantleras, out of their hard-earned wisdom are able to channel visions of past and future alike. Like midwives, humble and pure, nepantleras prepare for and aid the birth of a stronger, more peaceful future. They perhaps know best, since they once gave birth to themselves, out of pain and under the gentle eye of teotl. These are the generational leaders that will guide us towards each other out of a compassion that can only be gained by viewing the world from between the cracks.

Further still, nepantleras are able to bridge the gap between the imagination and reality. This is most clearly demonstrated by artists and the creative process. Anzaldúa declares, "Let's use art and imagination to discover how we feel and think and to help us respond to the world. It is in nepantla that we write and make art, bearing witness to the attempt to achieve resolution and balance where there may be none in real life."[82] Artists act as nepantleras, channeling imagination and actualizing visions. Artists are not to be written off as hopeless utopians. Anzaldúa understands artists as having a concrete role to play in the contemporary political landscape. It is reality, in fact, that is not as concrete as it appears. Anzaldúa explains, "each reality is only a description, a system of perception and language. When you learn to access other 'realities,' you undo one description or plane/level of reality and reconstruct another or others."[83] Anzaldúa thinks of reality along the lines of particular norms or hegemonies that society has agreed upon and lives according to. And yet, nepantleras, those existing between the cracks of such societal divisions, are able to access a different perspective–a different set of paints of you

[81] Ibid, 83.
[82] Ibid, 21.
[83] Ibid, 45.

will–wherein different possibilities for reality are imagined and visualized. But what exactly constitutes the bridge between imagination and reality? According to Anzaldúa,

> "To change or reinvent reality, you must engage in the facultad (faculty) of your imagination. You must interrupt or suspend the conscious 'i' that reminds you of your history and your beliefs…To invent this new reality. You cultivate a pretend reality and act as though you're already in that pretend reality. Eventually that reality becomes the real one." [84]

If we perform the collective play of revolution on the stage of reality, reality may begin to adapt and change accordingly as the actors inside each of us live according to our vision of the future. We come together and imagine a new script to live by. The acting out of such visions is the act of making an imagined-reality into a real-reality. Anzaldúa does not pretend that this is an immediate or easy process. Creating new realities requires the same force and energy that the Coyolxauhqui imperative and the directionality towards conocimiento require. It requires the force and energy of revolution.

We must allow ourselves to sink into the fluid realm of nepantla and open up to the endless perspectives of others. As artists and as humans, we have the capacity to let go of the desire for everything to align perfectly within neat ideological categories. We can choose to welcome the ethereal realm of Nepantla and we can seek out the middle-path that may unite us all. The firewood we need to build a collective hearth to heal us and keep us warm is located between us, and is to be shared if we are to counter the harsh blizzard of systematic hatred.

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[84] Ibid, 44.

PART IV: Nos/Otras

In synthesizing Nahua philosophy and Anzaldúa's theories, I have come to see that all forms of hatred, be it oppression or violence, can be described as originating from the divisions and disequilibrium between us. Anzaldúa theorizes that, "to bridge fissures among us, to connect with each other, to move beyond us/them binaries…we must dismantle the identity markers that promote divisions."[85] Consistent with the Nahua understanding of Nepantla, Anzaldúa implores us to break down divisions and build coalitions. We must come out from our caves and view the world in the sun to combat the systematic forces that push us down.

In efforts to develop a new political imperative to aid her quest in dissolving divisions, Anzaldúa introduces *nos/otras*. As Anzaldúa describes, the spanish word *nosotras* translates to *we*. Critical to Anzaldúa is that the prefix *nos* translates as *us* while the suffix *otros* translates to *others*. Essentially, creating a body of *we* requires the joining together of *us* and *others*. The slash between represents both the division itself, and also the crack from which we must view the world, in order to rejoin *nos* and *otros*. Anzaldúa explains, "La rajadura [the slash] gives us a third point of view, a perspective from the cracks…By disrupting binary oppositions that reinforce relations of subordination and dominance, nos/otras suggests a position of being simultaneously insider/outsider."[86] In essence, we are all insiders and outsiders. If we traverse enough geography or live through enough crises and changes, we will find somewhere we are no longer at home. When we see ourselves as *nos* and *otros*, we all have the potential to view life from the slash that divides the two. We all have the potential to become nepantleras, if we are

[85] Ibid, 77.
[86] Ibid, 79.

willing to drop our isolated perceptions of the self and the world and journey across the mud cracked landscape of nepantla towards conocimiento and towards each other.

On this journey, we will come to take shelter in the slash. The slash is a place where our insiderness and outsiderness coincide as one, "creating a hybrid consciousness."[87] This hybrid consciousness, the consciousness of nepantleras, is what is required to move humanity past divisions and disequilibrium. There exists a complex ebb and flow between identities and stories, perspectives and wisdoms, cultures and faiths, geographies and barriers. The world, much like our individual selves, is contradictory and fractalized. Ultimately, we can only transcend the slash and close the space between *nos* and *otros* by embracing intimacy and togetherness.

Conclusion

The planet is painted with the markings of a collective creature. According to Anzaldúa, humanity is a collection of geographies of the self. She says,

> "Our bodies are geographies of selves made up of diverse, bordering, and overlapping 'countries.' We're each composed of information, billions of bits of cultural knowledge superimposing many different categories of experience…Identity, as consciously and unconsciously created, is always in process--self interacting with different communities and worlds."[88]

We are all spinning and toppling over each other, fingers interlaced, shoulders pressed together. This is how we walk, this is how we breathe, and this is how we love. The slash of a border we once thought to exist between parts of ourselves, between us and them, evaporates to reveal the crocheted texture that weaves the nepantla landscape on which we traverse. We must reach out, with all our senses, to each other. This is the only path towards global justice and

[87] Ibid, 79.
[88] Ibid, 69.

equity. This can be the only way, because we must accept our interconnectedness and interdependence in order to awaken as one fractalized creature, lumbering over itself with a thousand limbs and speaking in endless dialects. We must take care of each other the way we take care of ourselves and reach out to others the way we once relied upon ourselves. Only then do we have any hope of putting Nos/Otras back together again.

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Conclusion

To answer the call for dignity, we must first change the way we understand and write about humanity. Only then can we address urgent global issues such as the contemporary refugee crisis. Hannah Arendt, Judith Butler, and Gloria E. Anzaldúa are philosophical visionaries, challenging the limits of what we consider philosophically legitimate. By widening the scope of philosophy, they are widening the scope of humanity. Each philosopher has devoted themselves to crafting novel frameworks in the name of reimagining dignity. They begin this quest not from a place of solitude, but rather from their personal life experiences and a commitment to understanding the experiences of others. Each of them can philosophize in no other way, because they have lived through the deprivation of dignity. The denial of dignity is the bane of each of these philosopher's lives, and they aim to counter it with vigor.

Arendt, Butler, and Anzaldúa each endeavor to aid humanity in creating an all-encompassing framework for a new guarantee of dignity. While Arendt poses the call for dignity directly in *Origins*, I argue that Butler and Anzaldúa have picked Arendt's call in their own contemporary life context. Ultimately, we see that Arendt's theory of plurality, Butler's theory of precarity, and Anzaldúa's theory of Nos/otras collectively implore humanity to return to their original state of interdependence and togetherness. We are distinct *and* social creatures. We need each other in order to affirm and preserve our distinctness and dignity, and our fellow humans need us to return the favor.

Addressing the contemporary refugee crisis requires direct communication with refugees on the basis of equality and distinction to understand their manifold circumstances. We must

approach border crossings and asylum with a simultaneously unbiased and case-by-case method, to prevent partiality and promote a discourse of individual needs. After asylum, refugees must be able to determine their own life course and be granted the tools to chart it as a granting of dignified livelihood. Only together and only through finding dignity within ourselves and each other are we able to manifest a collective power strong enough to counteract the systems of oppression that deny dignity in our societies. The call for dignity is answered by those among us who listen in the eye of the storm and write the words of wisdom that can turn the tides and become catalysts for change.

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