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Review essay

Building shelter: A praxis of hope against abandonment

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Jennifer Jihye Chun and Ju Hui Judy Han, *Against Abandonment: Repertoires of Solidarity in South Korea Protest*, Stanford University Press: Stanford, CA, 2025; 322 pp., $32.00: ISBN: 9781503642256 (paperback).

Introduction

Under what conditions may we hope? It is not a concept deeply theorized in Chun and Han's analysis of minoritized workers enduring life-or-death struggles (*t'ujaeng*). In fact, as they state in the conclusion, "the book is about failure and the specter of failure that looms over so many protests" (Chun and Han, 2025: 224). They do not romanticize workers' sacrifice and suffering. They do not intimate at a messianic future, a promised victory to come. Their portrayals of hunger strikes, long-term protest encampments, high-altitude occupations, and slow grueling ritualized processions are sobering. There's considerable loss, not only of campaigns but also of health and lives. Yet, against daunting odds, some of the most vulnerable workers in society continue to fight back and persist, sometimes for years or decades. This begs the question, why "in the face of misrecognition, abjection, and failure, do protesters continue to protest and in ever more desperate registers" (p. 7)?

As Chun and Han state, protests are paradoxical, "simultaneously life-threatening and life-sustaining" (p. 226). Protests may appear as desperate dramatizations of social death, activists using their own bodies for visceral performances of what is at stake, but what may not be readily visible is the work of sustaining *tangsaja* protest actors. They are able to endure due to the work of care, and care, Chun and Han argue, is more than offering material and affective support. It is a relational praxis, building social relations and communities across space and time and thereby "conjuring" solidarity. It is this infrastructural work of care that I argue constitutes the conditions for hope, and hence, hope, too, looms over the protests they so carefully describe. Rather than failure, it is the question of persistence that is the through line of *Against Abandonment*.

In the following, I elaborate upon a praxis of hope. By praxis, I mean, the actions both visible and invisible that create social-structural conditions whereby protesters, activists and their supporters may endure. Chun and Han's analysis of the "interior life" of protest reveals the emergence of

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"alternative projects of embodied sociality" (Povinelli, 2011: 6). Drawing upon my own ethnographic study of laid-off Daewoo Motors (now defunct) autoworkers' nearly 2-year *nongsŏng* (2000–2002), I demonstrate the making of alternative socialities can be understood to create conditions for hope. In doing so, my hope is that my own ethnographic work contributes to their analytic efforts. I conclude with a brief meditation on the significance of this kind of hope in these precarious times. To endure may not seem much, but in the face of social and state abandonment, it is enough to hold out hope.

Hope without an end

Not many books jolt the reader awake to sudden clarity, like a solution to a long troubling puzzle unexpectedly coming to light days or weeks later. Reading Chun and Han's *Against Abandonment*, I saw my own research experience through new eyes. I left the field in late 2002 racked by feelings of guilt for leaving the men; I felt I had also abandoned them. The laid-off autoworkers had been fighting for nearly two years, during which they experienced considerable family strain, near financial ruin, social alienation, state brutality, and chronic bodily aches and pains (Kwon, 2015). By the time I left, many men had already left the struggle (*t'ujaeng*). Of the four hundred workers who started the fight by occupying part of the factory, less than half remained and even fewer actively participated. But those remaining continued to endure.

I couldn't see an end to their fight; there wasn't the slightest sign of possible victory or redemption. After meeting with some of the men at the local billiard hall several months before I left, I let slip my doubts to one of the worker leaders. Realizing what I had done, but overcome by shame and frustration, I turned to him and demanded to know how they could continue such a hopeless struggle. The union leadership was fragmenting, I argued. Management and creditors didn't even deign to negotiate with the union. Other labor organizations had begun to withhold support and resources. They were alone, and the men were suffering. He calmly responded there was hope; he said, "Hope is something that we make." I still didn't understand why they persisted.

His statement resonates deeply with Chun and Han's depictions of protesters' persistence. This review is in part my deciphering his meaning. It is also my attempt to contribute to current efforts in social theory to reclaim hope as a category of cultural critique (Hage, 2003; Miyazaki, 2004; Zournazi, 2003). Anthropologist of finance Miyazaki (2004), in his theoretical overview of the concept of hope, observed that these efforts were responses to the apparent decline of progressive politics and the appropriation of the language of hope by the right-wing – a social condition complexly entangled with the current phase of capitalism (p. 1). He also opined they were also reactions to deeply felt malaise in contemporary cultural critique, a practice that has provided increasingly sophisticated analyses of the macro- and micro-politics of neoliberalism but has failed to imagine an alternative (Miyazaki, 2006: 163).

I propose that *Against Abandonment* offers an alternative. It is an imagining of hope that defies conventional expectations of an end goal in sight. Bloch (1995), in his *The Principle of Hope*, argued that hope is defined by its prospective orientation, not by an end itself. Miyazaki, following Bloch, argued that hope is a method, an orientation of knowledge towards an imagined possibility, a future, rather than an imagined end (Miyazaki, 2004).

Like the many protesters highlighted in their book, many of the men in my study also persisted. In fact, they did not offer the possibility of success; they often quietly confided that their struggle was already a failure. Yet, these same men continued to fight. The men did indeed make hope – not with an expectation of victory, but with a sense of possibility of a future made in the present.

The men's hope is made by collective endurance, of waiting out against state violence, bodily attrition, public inattention, and diminishing support. Waiting, of course, foregrounds the problematic

of agency (Hage, 2009). Is waiting (endurance) a demonstration of agency or lack of it? Does waiting not induce feelings of powerlessness and of temporal suspension (Crapanzano, 1985)? The Daewoo labor struggle, itself, was at an impasse. No decision on the fate of the men was forthcoming. The demonstrations appeared ineffective. The labor union was ineffectual. And the management and state creditors, as divulged by union leadership, were waiting the men out. The struggle became a battle of attrition. It was exhausting, the toll shown on their haggard faces and bent bodies. In this regard, waiting could be understood as indicating a clear imbalance of power, their subjugation to another's time. But, the men did wait; they returned each day, without anticipation of success or reprieve.

Waiting together, I propose, is a kind of "lateral agency." Berlant (2011: 261), in her reflections on "cruel optimism," suggested alternative modes of the political. In a neoliberal present experienced as an impasse, dense with feeling and fantasy but without a sense of a defining future, without a way forward, the political may not take the shape of "heroic agency," but stubborn refusal (Kwon, 2020). By refusal, she argues against conventional notions of resistance, as anthropologists often are at pains to find (Abu-Lughod, 1990). She challenges the idea of the sovereign individual implicit in liberalism, and the conceptualization of agency as defined by intention and effect. Refusal may be just showing up, or persisting through exhaustion, or taking small, momentary comforts, such as eating, drinking, sex, while beset by unrelenting pressures to submit and disappear (Berlant, 2011: 261).

Similarly, Chun and Han describe protests as labors of refusal. Protests dramatize aggrieved workers' refusal of the devaluation of their lives, their refusal to submit to a legal and economic system that preys on the vulnerable, and their refusal to just go away. Referencing Badiou, they assert refusal is a declaration of workers' existence (Chun and Han, 2025: 234). And refusal manifests through the "forms and practices of political belonging . . . [in] everyday social relations" (p. 13). Like Berlant, they describe a politics not of concrete ends but the embodied processes of making solidarity itself, which, I interpret as not the formation of collective interests, identities, and goals, but as a "kind of affective consonance" of being together (Berlant, 2011: 261; Kwon, 2020, 214). Berlant states that it is "a dense sensual activity of performative belonging to the now in which potentiality is affirmed" (p. 261).

Potentiality, or the possibility of a future, whatever form it may take, emerges in solidarity. What is significant (or I daresay hopeful) about protests, according to Chun and Han, is not only about end goals. They shouldn't be evaluated simply by their success or failure to achieve stated goals. They state protests "have effects that exceed the goals and intentions of . . . [protestors'] individual grievances" (Chun and Han, 2025: 70). Even hunger strikes, which may seem to be desperate escalation, they argue, "might be more aptly understood as performative world-making practices, suggesting alternative socialities and possibilities" (p. 96). That nice turn of phrase, world-making, highlights the contradictions of contemporary protest repertoires, the coupling of a politics of grief and death and the life-sustaining labor of refusal.

Building shelter

Chun and Han keenly observed that protests persist because of the usually unsung, invisible, and highly gendered work of care. It is not necessarily, as many would expect when considering extreme protests, the force of political ideology or unity of collective identity (p. 14). The labor of refusal, as they put it, is the vital work of care that sustains the lives of *tangsaja* who've decided to stake their lives. It is the work that provides the affective, material, and spatial supports that both enable and assemble the diverse bodies that then conjure solidarity. As their portrayals of Ryu Eunsook and Sister Maria clearly show, caring for others exceeds their immediate and utilitarian purpose.

Caring work centers human needs, human vulnerability, and mutual dependency. In less abstract terms, it is the careful, reflexive attention to the needs of others shown through the mundane activities of cooking, serving food and drinks, cleaning, and the like, that enable people to come and return to each other. Hence, care necessarily entails bodily and spatial practice. Through Sister's Maria's reflections on her experiences, Chun and Han emphasize the significance of "corporeal copresence," the affective impact of repeatedly just showing up (p. 163). They state, "presence was the foundation upon which other solidaristic relations were staged" (p. 167). Accordingly, the building of "social relations, community, and modes of relationality" (caring infrastructure) materialize in shared spaces, be it the streets and squares of mass demonstrations or tent encampments.

Their analysis of building "spaces of collective care" (p. 141) immediately evoked for me Daewoo workers' small, nearly abandoned tent encampment. In December 2001, nearly one year into the labor struggle, the men, with reluctant approval from union officials, erected three protest tents in front of the main factory gates. Two were demolished by factory guards and riot police only one week after. The last stood in the midst of torn nylon and mangled posts. When the tents were raised, union leadership declared that they symbolized the men's resolve to fight to the bitter end and men's transformation from merely workers to militant working-class vanguards. According to the men, however, the tents stood less for worker militancy than their sense of displacement and homelessness.

Repeatedly, I heard the men state, "I have nowhere to go." "We were thrown out into the streets." "People who are laid-off," one worker explained, "are truly miserable and wretched. When you're laid-off, you wander (*hemaeda*) around confused and angry." For the laid-off Daewoo workers, the factory had set the pace and patterning of their lives both inside and outside the factory gates, affecting their bodily rhythms – their sense of being in place and on time. Furthermore, as many critical geographers have elaborated, space is constituted through social practice, and resultant spatialities (lived social space) may be understood as assemblages of social relationships (Massey, 2005; Schatzki, 2009: 36). When laid-off, thrown out of the factory, they experienced "the destructing of existence, which is deprived of among other things of its temporal structures and the ensuing deterioration of the whole relationship to the world, time and space" (Bourdieu, 1998: 82). Accordingly, they felt homeless and abandoned by former co-workers, friends, family, and sometimes their wives.

When I visited the tent early one evening, several men had gathered to patch up the tent. An elder worker directed my attention to a tall lanky man who was busy assembling a makeshift urinal stall several yards away with thick Styrofoam slabs, twine and discarded pieces of wood. The slabs would shield the men as they urinated through the factory gates. Later he would fabricate a swinging door to replace the fabric flap and ventilation hole. Then, I turned to listen to one of the men regale a small crowd. "*Yŏboseyo, yŏboseyo* (hello, hello)," he yelled out. He was mimicking the call of an entering customer. Laughing he remarked that two women came by last night. "They thought it was a *p'ojangmach'a* (a food and alcohol vending stall)!" The lone tent among the pile of refuse was less a symbol of union strength than their diminishing social and political relevance – their abandonment.

I often visited the tent in the evenings, sometimes staying with the men throughout the night. I saw men curled up in blankets and sleeping bags, as they tried to muffle the sound of traffic and sleep. Some laid reading newspapers and even comic books – a stack sat in a corner. There was usually drinking and eating. In my visits, I usually brought a couple of boxes of *t'ongdak* (roasted chicken). With the arrival of chicken or other food, men brought out bottles of *soju*. We sat in a circle sharing food and drink. They joked around but also engaged in serious conversation regarding their experiences of the Struggle – complaints toward the leadership and the hardship of

unemployment. Alcohol and food soon loosened their tongues, and they lowered their guard. During these times, a few men confided that all was lost; they didn't have enough power. But even with such pessimism, they were there. As one said, "But, we do what we can."

At the time, I didn't appreciate the importance of the tent. To be frank, I didn't understand these men's behavior in general. From the start they claimed they were not labor activists. They adamantly denied prior involvement with the union. In fact, quite a few revealed lingering aversion to labor and union politics, which they still associated with communism and radicalism. Even as they participated in demonstrations and violently fought against riot police, they continued to disavow militant labor activism and distanced themselves from union leadership.

I thought I saw them fill their days with distraction. Before and after demonstrations men sat, talked, and chain-smoked in the union yard, sharing cups of insipid "milk coffee" and instant noodles; they played Korean chess, cards, and sometimes took naps together in the union building. When demonstrations and union meetings weren't scheduled, men gathered at local billiard halls, playing for hours, with intermittent breaks for shots of *soju* [a clear vodka-like alcohol] or to eat bowls of noodles (*tchajangmyŏn*). And routinely, in the evening, when the day's schedule of events was completed, they went out to drink. And on many evenings, they found themselves at the tent.

But rather than extraneous ways to stave off boredom and feelings of homelessness, I've come to understand these kinds of activities as vital to workers' commitment to the struggle. In fact, I've come to see them as forms of care work. While in the field, I couldn't think about care. Upon reflection, I realized my gender bias. Like many others, I associated care with so-called women's work. In addition, these men were rough, often communicated in gruff tones, and seemed to epitomize stereotypical masculinity. They were after all tough factory workers. But in doing so, I ignored their moments of vulnerability, their acts of tenderness towards each other, and their careful attention to the mood and affective needs of each other. They often held each other's hands, put their arms around each other's shoulders, and at times cried in front of each other. They drank together, played billiards together, and sought each other out to offer comfort and to be present for each other.

"Presence," as Chun and Han (2025: 65) argued, "was the foundation upon which other solidaristic relations and practice were staged. Presence, in many ways, is the opposite of ideology." Similarly, these men emphasized mutual feeling over ideology. As one young worker explained,

> Struggle is not something that is done with theory [*iron*]. You have to experience it with your body and feel it with your *maŭm* [heart], and our *maŭm* have to be connected, [shared]. Thought, that is for later; only later do you think of conditions and qualifications [*jokkŏn*]. If you think that you have to think first, then struggle is impossible. Our *maŭm* have to be connected first.

The basis upon which their *maŭm* could connect was the sharing of each other's presence. During an interview, another worker elaborated,

> . . . to shape the minds of workers, it isn't that you go up to them and say, "let's fight". Rather . . . what I think is . . . in the beginning [of a struggle] people feel uncomfortable, unfamiliar with each other. So, while drinking together, you unburden your deepest thoughts and feelings [*hoep'o*] . . . but it's not like suddenly that the relationship between union members and others become close. But rather, slowly, gradually, as we work together . . . like I said before . . . as we come to laugh and cry together, help each other, comfort each other's pain, we come to feel affection, love [*ae*], and loyalty [*ŭiri*] for each other, then we can raise workers' awareness of all the things that are wrong.

His words are reminiscent of Chun and Han's interview with *pijŏnggyujik* workers' leader Oh Min-gyu, who explained *nongsŏng* enabled protesters to "cultivate a shared sense of purpose" because they were forced to spend so much time together (p. 57).

The men from my study were not necessarily forced to be together. Rather, they sought each other out. Even without being assigned to protect the lone tent from police raids, they walked to the pitiable encampment. Over the months it became clear that part of the motivation for men to return was that they sought others with whom they can comfortably be themselves without feeling scrutinized and in which others understood each other's predicament. It was commonly said at the tent that this is the only place in which they felt that others understood them, felt what they felt. It was also a space of mutual enjoyment, the sharing of each other's company. One worker stated it this way: *t'ujaeng* (struggle) is also joyful (*jŭlgyŏpta*). When I looked at him incredulously, he explained, "because I can be with the people that I like, with the people that have the same *maŭm*, and, share together our difficulties; because of that it can be said that *t'ujaeng* is joyful."

Even as the tent came to represent "homelessness," loss, and defeat, invoking at times laughter, if not outright disdain, it remained a site of sociality, an emergent, if transient, place of belonging. It was a place they built with their own hands; it was a place they shared. It was a refuge from the accusing looks of their families and from the condescending gaze of an unsympathetic public. The tent was suffused with the smell of tired men, the spicy steam of instant noodles, the slightly intoxicating smell of kerosene burners, and the sound of laughter and crying. The tent was a "shelter of hope." At the tent, the men made hope.

Conclusion

Chun and Han begin their final chapter with an epigraph by Miriame Kaba, who wrote about hope, "It isn't a thing I possess. Rather, I have to remake it daily. I don't have hope, I do hope" (p. 233). Throughout their incisive and most welcome ethnographic study of contemporary Korean labor activism, they offer moving as well as alarming descriptions and explanations of protesters' persistence. They illustrate clearly the labor of refusal, and I'd add, the labor of hope. While hope may not be at the forefront of their analysis, it is certainly present.

My aim in this review is to highlight hope and contribute to an understanding of how hope is something made through acts of care and collective persistence. The ethnographic case of laid-off Daewoo autoworkers affirm their argument about political possibilities emerging from "spatial praxis of relational power" that open the potential for "connections yet to be made" (p. 118). I've described the building of alternative socialities that create conditions to endure as a kind of hope.

This formulation of hope may not be satisfying; there isn't a clear end, and a political objective seems unattainable. Many workers in South Korea may feel their future foreclosed. They are burdened by extreme wealth inequality, high rates of unemployment (for people in their 20s and 30s), and abuse of authority (*gapjil*). It isn't a surprise to learn Korea has one of the world's highest rates of suicide. Furthermore, in this post-ideological context, there isn't available narrative closure, an idea, a myth, a perspective to hold onto, be it Marxism, capitalism, or nationalism for example. Berlant (2011) described the contemporary as "cruel optimism." The promised "good life" is out of reach, and the historical present is felt not as a succession of events, as individual progress, but as "elongated" and without a future. The present feels hopeless.

But isn't it even more "hopeful" that we see such persistence among some of the most vulnerable, and in that persistence, possibilities? The word abandon is powerfully emotive. It can recall pitiable scenes of loneliness and hopelessness. However, the protests portrayed by Chun and Han show people coming together. I found it intriguing that neither of us in our analysis dwelt on political ideologies or collective identities. Diverse people, regardless of ideological or political inclination, were affectively drawn. They assembled for disparate reasons and feelings. And when drawn together they conjured solidarity. Through solidarity, they publicly displayed their fragile and vulnerable bodies harmed by precarity and refused the imposed terms of the present (Butler, 2015).

We, as cultural critics and academics, should learn from those performances of solidarity. In "a world full of gross injustice and genocidal violence," what is our obligation? Clearly it can't be to put down our pens and remain silent (Povinelli, 2011: 190). I'd persist that it is vital to come together (perhaps like for this collection), and theorize "otherwise," even if for our own hope.

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