

Panel 15
Ethics and Care

**Reconfiguring Care: Ethics, Ekphrasis, and the Limits of Imagination in
Han Kang's *The Vegetarian* (2007)**

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Through the intricate interplay of textual, visual, and embodied elements, Han Kang's *The Vegetarian* (2007) reconfigures how readers understand care not as sentiment or obligation, but as imaginative and ethical praxis. Central to the narrative is Yeong-hye's radical refusal to consume meat, the result of psychological trauma and visceral rebellion against societal violence and normative expectations. Initially, Yeong-hye's video artist brother-in-law appears uniquely attuned to her deep distress, seemingly offering care through his artistic vision and experimentation with intermedial forms. However, his desire to artistically inscribe and visually consume her body via video art soon reveals an impoverished imagination that lacks ethical insight and relational responsibility. Drawing on Gaston Bachelard's concept of the dynamic imagination, which emphasises creative, transformative, and ethically informed acts of imagination, I argue that Han employs ekphrastic techniques to critically interrogate and reconfigure textual, visual, and social boundaries as porous, mutable, and politically charged. Specifically, the recorded sexual encounter, positioned as intermedial ekphrasis in the novel, underscores how aesthetic acts devoid of ethical imagination can perpetuate harm rather than offer genuine care for a subject. Ultimately, Han's sophisticated intermedial approach advocates for a praxis of care that insists on the inseparability of a carer's imagination and their ethical responsibility, enriching critical discourse on care ethics in contemporary literature and visual culture.

Biography

Michelle Chiang is Assistant Professor of English at Nanyang Technological University. Her interdisciplinary research lies at the intersection of literature, philosophy, and care ethics, with a focus on modern and contemporary fiction and illness narratives. She is currently completing a monograph on mothering care and the dynamic imagination in the contemporary novel.