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Thought and World Transform at the Same Time: Judith Butler's Dissenting Hermeneutics

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In their 2002 essay "Can the 'Other' of Philosophy Speak?," Judith Butler relates an anecdote from their youth. *"When I was twelve, I was interviewed by a doctoral candidate in education and asked what I wanted to be when I grew up."*[1] Even from today's perspective, the response of the twelve-year-old sounds both mature and elegant. For the way Butler then answered the seemingly simple question "What do you want to be when you grow up?" reveals what in some ways was to become a hallmark of their thinking: that there are no simple answers, only conditional ones. Moreover, since we are interdependent, that is, necessarily social, interpretive, linguistic beings, equipped with the capacity for self-reflection, it is our task not only to unravel, interpret, and understand that conditionality, but also to make our answers accountable towards others. Butler answered as follows: *"I said that I wanted to be a philosopher or a clown, and I understood then, I think, that much depended on whether or not I found the world worth philosophizing about, and what the price of seriousness might be."*[2]

At first glance, Butler here seems to oppose being a philosopher to being a clown, suggesting these might be alternative or even mutually exclusive, contradictory options. You either make people laugh by making fun of the world, or you seriously try to make sense of the world, they seem to be saying. Yet as a reader of Walter

[1] "Can the 'Other' of Philosophy Speak?", Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender*, New York and London: Routledge, 2004, pp. 232-250, p. 234.
[2] Butler, "Can the 'Other' of Philosophy Speak?", p. 234.

Benjamin and Franz Kafka—but also of Hans-Georg Gadamer, Søren Kierkegaard, and, of course, Friedrich-Wilhelm Hegel—Butler wouldn't be the dissident hermeneuticist they are if this were really what they had wanted to imply. To the contrary. Making sense of the world is not and should not be the exclusive domain of academic philosophy.

This is a credo Butler would surely be willing to both foster and adhere to. *"Theory is an activity that does not remain restricted to the academy,"* they comment accordingly in an earlier essay titled "The End of Sexual Difference?"[3] *"It takes place every time a possibility is imagined, a collective self-reflection takes place, a dispute over values, priorities, and language emerges."*[4] Conversely, what is generally considered the proper domain of clowning—making people laugh and cry, but also exploring the ways in which we find comfort, consolation, and joy in the world—is not and should not be limited to that domain. Certainly, there is a lot more to clowning than making people laugh and bringing them enjoyment. For clowns have plenty to say not only about laughter and joy, grief and sorrow, rage and fury, but also on how all of this is intricately linked to the life of the body, its vulnerability to and manifold dependencies on other bodies, its needs and affects, and its complex and multifaceted desires, including the desire to persist in its existence.

So if Judith Butler is right—and I think they very much are—that the world *"is given to us in part through the senses,"*[5] and if this is what we seek to and need to understand, it seems to me a more than excellent idea to turn not only to philosophy but also to the clowns. To borrow a somewhat enigmatic comment by Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer in their seminal *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, at this moment in time, we might, perhaps more than ever, need the "stubbornly purposeless expertise of riders, acrobats, and clowns."[6] Not for the sake of laughter itself, or simply to confirm our affects and affirm the world as we have come to know it, but to critically understand when and how laughter becomes an echo of power and what it takes to disentangle the two.

Given that it is our task to attend to the world, make ourselves accountable to it, and care for it by seeing "the radiance in all things," as the Italian poet Mariangela

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[3] Judith Butler, "The End of Sexual Difference", *Undoing Gender*, pp. 174-203, p. 175-6.
[4] Butler, "The End of Sexual Difference," p. 176.
[5] Judith Butler, *What World Is This? A Pandemic Phenomenology,* Stanford: Stanford UP 2022, p. 17.
[6] "Traces of something better persist in those features of the culture industry by which it resembles the circus – in the stubbornly purposeless expertise of riders, acrobats, and clowns, in the 'defense and justification of physical as against intellectual art'." Max Horkheimer & Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment. Philosophical Fragment*s, Stanford: Stanford UP 2002 [1944], p. 114.

Gualtieri has written,[7] we should thus never have to choose between philosophy and clownery. If we seek to not only interpret and understand—and interpret and understand we must—but also to repair the world, we will need every tool we can get hold of. We need to engage with the world both critically and compassionately; we need to stimulate conversations between word and touch; we need *"to answer to the call, to be engaged by differences that risk a new relationship and a transformation,"*[8] and, last but not least, we need to persistently scrutinize the gap between the real and the possible, constantly asking *"What world is this?"* Crafting such an art of living together, imagining possibilities and collectively reflecting upon the common world; asking who belongs to it and what is or should be common to all of us;[9] questioning who the "we" is that we evoke and call upon—all this indeed requires a range of practical knowledge, including that which Hans-Georg Gadamer might have called *wisdom.* Perhaps the twelve-year-old Butler already understood that this is not to be found in philosophy alone, but that clowns possess it and can thus contribute much to the art of living together and building a truly common world.

After all, clowns have been around for more or less as long as philosophers. As early as the fifth century before our era, the Greeks deployed the comic figure, for example at festivals in honor of the god Dionysus. One could even say that Socrates, the forefather of Western philosophy, was a kind of clown, sitting all day long in the Athenian marketplace and engaging all sorts of people in conversation over ethics, truth, and how to live a good life. More than that, similarly to a philosopher, the clown examines the conditions by which something becomes real and thus enables something else to potentially become real–only using slightly different means than a philosopher does. In short, I do not think it is too far-fetched to argue that the essence of clownery and philosophy alike is to undo what has been said about the world, again not for the sake of undoing alone, but in order to expose the "violence before violence" regulating whose lives are worth living and whose are not. It is also quintessential to both clownery and philosophy to shed new light on the world, a light that will enable us to imagine possibilities and imagine the world anew. Accordingly, charade and seriousness, humor and *parrhesia* are not opposites—and *parrhesia* is bound

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7 Mariangela Gualtieri, *Paessaggio con fratello rotto,* Rom 2007.

8 Judith Butler, "From the Critique of Identity to an Ethics of Plurality", Hannah Fitsch, Inka Greusing, Ina Kerner, Hanna Meißner, Aline Oloff (eds.), *Der Welt eine neue Wirklichkeit geben. Feministische und queertheoretische Interventionen,* Bielefeld: transcript 2022, pp. 45-54, p. 52.

9 In *What World Is This?* Butler asks whether a common world to which we all belong and which we all share already exists. "I am not sure I would say that this is a *common world* we share since, as much as we might wish to dwell in a common world, it does not seem that we do. The common has not yet been achieved." Butler, *What World Is This?* p. 3.

neither to academic philosophy nor, for that matter, to science. In a hermeneutical sense, one could say that clownery and philosophy are both about reaching out for understanding in an attempt to open "a new horizon into the unknown," thus changing or expanding one's own position, as Gadamer argues in *Truth and Method*.[10] Here, the task of hermeneutics would, of course, be first and foremost to "clarify the conditions in which understanding takes place."[11] Again, something the twelve-year-old Butler already knew, if only intuitively.

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Let us at this point return once more to Butler's particular quandary with the clown and the philosopher. Anyone who has ever attended or organized a lecture or other public event with Judith Butler knows that they never fail to make people think hard while at the same time making them laugh from the bottom of their heart and in the sincerest way. I have had the immense privilege of experiencing this many times and in many different places; in venerable academic lecture halls, hip art galleries, theaters, and museums; in Zoom conferences, libraries, and bookstores; at assemblies, rallies, and demonstrations; in autonomous queer and feminist activist spaces and seminars; in bars and at private dinner tables. The intense and powerful concentration, as much as the condensed and electrifying energy, felt in each and every space where Butler speaks can only be compared to the absorbed and focused attention in a concert hall, as when John Cage's *4:33*, Johann Sebastian Bach's *Art of Fugue*, or Galina Ustvolskaya's *Octet for 2 Oboes, 4 Violins, Timpani and Piano* are performed. And those who have studied Butler's oeuvre have long understood that rigid boundaries and clearly demarcated, flagged-out domains, *proper objects*[12] and accordingly proper behavior are not and never have been their thing–even though Kierkegaard's remark that *"one could make out of philosophy a queer comedy if it were actually to occur to a person to act according to its teaching"*[13] once troubled, almost disturbed them mightily. Those are demands that always come at a cost. In the case of supposedly having to choose between clownery and philosophy, it seems to have been the *"price of seriousness"*—a price whose nature Butler, at the age of twelve, was not sure of fully apprehending and

[10] Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method,* New York: Continuum, 2004, p. 27.
[11] Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, p. 295.
[12] Judith Butler, "Against Proper Objects", *differences. A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies,* Vol. 6, No. 2+3 (Summer-Fall 1994), pp. 1-26.
[13] Butler, "Can the 'Other' of Philosophy Speak", p. 239.

which they were thus not convinced they would be willing to pay. *"I was not sure I wanted to be a philosopher, and I confess that I have never quite overcome that doubt."*[14]

Reading these words again in 2023, I am inclined to say "lucky us." For more than twenty years after "Can the 'Other' of Philosophy Speak?" was written and almost a lifetime after Butler confronted those ostensibly conflicting options, there is ample reason to believe that Butler found ways to avoid ever really having to choose between clownery and philosophy. Instead, they have managed to navigate a clear, if often winding, path between the two and to integrate the best of both worlds. Yes, Butler is fun to be around, and at times even hilariously funny. Yet most of all, they are one of the most thought-provoking, horizon-expanding, and challenging philosophers of our times, combining rigorous thinking with the beauty of an epistemology that engages with the world both critically and caringly. In consequence of the way they have traversed the terrain of philosophy, reappropriated, reread and rearticulated its fundamental claims, Butler has also profoundly altered what it means to do philosophy—aka contemplating the world at large. *"What makes for a livable world is no idle question. It is not merely a question for philosophers. It is posed in various idioms all the time by people in various walks of life. If that makes them all philosophers, then that is a conclusion I am happy to embrace."*[15]

In the wake of such statements, doing philosophy occurs in many places and in many occupations, clowning among them, and it is no hyperbole to say that this is in no small part thanks to Judith Butler. To be convinced of this, again, it is enough to look around at the audience of any of Judith Butler's numerous lectures throughout the world. You will most certainly find political activists sitting next to highbrow academic philosophers; queer folk next to straights; computer engineers next to performance artists and, yes, also next to clowns; a homeless person who found one of their books in a public giveaway box next to an academic physicist who has spent their life contemplating quantum physics; a trans* person on the verge of coming out next to a Catholic theologian working on performative political theology; a school librarian fighting to keep Butler's books available next to a nurse who reads from these very books to people on their last journey; a conversation analyst specialized in humor next to a tennis pro teaching tennis to marginalized and disenfranchised kids; a scholar of Judaism studying the Torah next to a Gezi Park activist working on reproductive justice; a lawyer defending asylum seekers next to a filmmaker working on a documentary about the occupation of the West Bank and a journalist simply reporting

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[14] Butler, "Can the 'Other' of Philosophy Speak", p. 234.

[15] Judith Butler, "Beside Oneself: On the Limits of Sexual Autonomy", *Undoing Gender,* pp. 17-39, p. 17.

on the event. Without a doubt, all of them will return to their home or shelter perhaps only intuitively knowing that they have been moved to a different place in the world, but surely thoroughly appreciating that they have been addressed, inspired, engaged, and intellectually challenged as much as emotionally touched.

> *"If I seek to show myself to another, I am already in some relation to another. I ask the other to see, or hear, or read. And so, although it seems that I am involved in a purely reflexive activity—I name and show myself—I am actually involved in a scene of address. I seek to show you something and, if that is true, I am trying to reach you, or asking you to reach me. There is minimally a dyad within this scene of address, but what if we broaden the idea of the addressee to anyone who will listen or see or read? To show one's identity through such a scene of address is also a petition to enter into a new kind of relationship, one in which reciprocal recognition proves to be centrally defining*."[16]

Butler's public appearances thus truly secure moments in which philosophy finds *"itself outside itself, lost itself in the 'Other.'"*[17] A space emerges in which *"the term 'philosophy' [ceases] to be in control of those who would define and protect its institutional parameters*," as Butler declared somewhat prophetically in that same essay.[18] Now, I am aware that this might be worrying to some in academic philosophy, making them wonder whether philosophy will be able to *"retrieve itself from the scandalous reflection of itself that it finds traveling under its own name."*[19] In this tribute, clowning has only served me as a very humble metaphor to capture Butler's unrivaled wisdom, the magnitude and acuity of their spirit, their warmth, considerateness, and generosity, and, yes, their sense of humor as well as their love of food, play, and good wine. I am sure, however, I am not alone in saying we can deem ourselves more than fortunate that Judith Butler did find ingenious ways to pay the price of seriousness while still retaining characteristics of the work of clowns. Ways that all of us are now able to travel with more ease, good fortune, and success.

Having unlocked multiple doors and created new spaces, having continuously crossed boundaries and opened different, even divergent worlds to each other, having ruthlessly questioned their own intellectual assertions and accomplishments, and having persisted to this very day in asking *"Can the Other of philosophy speak?*," Butler has indeed radically democratized what it means to do philosophy and theory. They have laid out for us that we have the right to pose questions, even the right to put the world

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[16] Judith Butler, "From the Critique of Identity to an Ethics of Plurality", p. 51.
[17] Butler, "Can the 'Other' of Philosophy Speak", p. 233.
[18] Butler, "Can the 'Other' of Philosophy Speak", p. 233.
[19] Butler, "Can the 'Other' of Philosophy Speak", p. 233.

in question. That we deserve to be listened to and receive an answer. And they have reminded us, time and again, that theory is about imagining the world anew, for *"possibility is not a luxury";* no, *"it is as crucial as bread."*[20] Moreover, they have taught us that hermeneutics must be deconstruction and that deconstruction is just another way of doing hermeneutics; that we must interpret, but in dissenting ways, never forgetting that thought and world belong to the same matrix of power.

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Gadamer's hermeneutics, in particular his idea that understanding—assuming we are capable of understanding at all—not only mediates between what is known to us and what we take to be other, but potentially opens a horizon into the unknown, has found abundant though deviant and resistant resonance in Butler's writing. "*For quite some time,"* Butler explained in an interview with Gary Olson and Lynn Worsham in 2000, with regard to the project of deconstructing grammatical structures, *"I was very much seduced by what I think was a high modernist notion that some newness of the world was going to be opened up through messing with grammar as it has been received."*[21] Despite later acknowledging the limitations of such a project, Butler would continue to uphold the idea that

> *"there is a lot in ordinary language and in received grammar that constrains our thinking—indeed, about what a person is, what a subject is, what gender is, what sexuality is, what politics can be—and that I'm not sure we're going to be able to struggle effectively against those constraints or work within them in a productive way unless we see the ways in which grammar is both producing and constraining our sense of what the world is."*[22]

Although over the decades Butler has expanded their perspective far beyond the structures of grammar, I think this stance still characterizes Butler's dissident hermeneutics best. They relentlessly question the powers that make real, then read that real otherwise, turn it upside down and inside out, thus bringing its hidden

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[20] Butler, "Beside Oneself", p. 29.
[21] "Changing the Subject: Judith Butler's Politics of Radical Resignification", Gary A. Olson, Lynn Worsham, JACConst, Vol. 20, No. 4 (Fall 2000), pp. 727-765, p. 732-3; { HYPERLINK "https://www.jstor.org/stable/20866363" }
[22] "Changing the Subject," p. 733.

assumptions to front of stage and pinpointing its *"contingent foundations."*[23] All the while knowing that thought, though it appears to be *"the newer version of the world,"* does not *"bring that world into being, but thought and world transform at the same time,"* as Butler argues in the 2016 essay "Philosophy Has Become Worldly: Marx on Ruthless Critique."[24] Transformation, in other words, is not a divine activity, creating the new out of nothing; it is the result of continuously working through what has already been thought and said about the world in incomplete or even distorted ways. This work of undoing the *"principles of the past, articulating a contradictory ideal,"* will eventually give rise to *"a new way of organizing the world"* that *"seeks to realize reason without contradiction."*[25] *"But what we call new,"* Butler warns again, *"is only the now-conscious realization of work that began in the past."*[26] Recalling Marx's famous phrase in his letter to Arnold Ruge, Butler thus reminds us that *"the new is what happens when the world wakes from its dreams about itself."*[27]

In Butler's 2007 essay on Monique Wittig, "Wittig's Material Practice: Universalizing a Minority Point of View," in which they critically examine Wittig's poetics, they describe the unsettling force inherent in the potentially profound, world-changing power of such work. After listening to Wittig, *"the room in which I sat became a palpably new space,"* as Butler recalls their first encounter with the French philosopher, novelist, and poet on the occasion of the 1979 conference for the fortieth anniversary of Simone de Beauvoir's landmark book *The Second Sex* in New York City.[28] It seems as if Butler is suggesting that Wittig's words quite literally changed the world at that very moment, if only for a split second. Of course, we know that even back then, Butler—with Wittig—knew that *"neither gods nor goddesses; neither masters nor mistresses,"* any more than Monique Wittig herself, are strictly speaking responsible for shaking

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[23] Judith Butler, "Contingent Foundations: Feminism and the Question of 'Postmodernism,'" Judith Butler and Joan W. Scott (eds.), *Feminists Theorize the Political, London/New York: Routledge 1992, pp. 3-21.*

[24] Judith Butler, "Philosophy Has Become Worldly: Marx on Ruthless Critique," PMLA, Vol. 131, No. 2 (March 2016), pp. 460-468, p. 464; { https://www.jstor.org/stable/26158829 }

[25] Butler, "Philosophy Has Become Worldly," p. 464.

[26] Butler, "Philosophy Has Become Worldly," p. 464.

[27] Butler, "Philosophy Has Become Worldly," p. 464.

[28] "In 1979 I heard "One Is Not Born a Woman" at the Simone de Beauvoir conference in New York City. It was, in fact, the first conference I ever attended. I think it is fair to say that the room in which I sat became a palpably new space after I heard her. It was all the more disorienting, since I also heard, on that same panel, Hélène Cixous (she and Wittig sat at opposite ends of the table); Audre Lorde, who delivered "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House," and Charlotte Bunch, who gave one of those exuberant fivepoint plans about the future of feminism. I had just graduated from college. I did not know where I was." Judith Butler, "Wittig's Material Practice. Universalizing a Minority Point of View," *GLQ* 13, 2007 (4), pp. 519-533, p. 528.

the place.[29] But there is another way to comprehend this scene. It is not that the sovereign word uttered by Wittig created a new space, much like when G* said "Let there be light" and there was light; rather, thought and world have changed here at the same time. And this transformation occurred because Wittig had already done the work of undoing the "principles of the past," thus had begun to waken the world from one of its dreams about itself, namely that mind is straight by nature.[30] This, in turn, Wittig owed to being situated in the queer life-worlds of Paris and New York. Neither the occupation of positions of power—that is, the assumption of a sovereign position suggesting that world can be brought into being through utterances—nor the mere reversal of power relations will suffice, Butler warns us a quarter century later in their analysis of Wittig's writing. Improbable and ultimately impossible as such a mission already is, one should go even further, Butler urges. It is "*the framework that configures power relations themselves"* that needs to be radically changed. *"Something fracturing, if not brutal, must happen to the framework itself."*[31] To universalize a minority point of view, Butler concludes, thus necessitates

> *"a* material *action, an action on the body, an exposure that shows that the theories of sexuality and the theories of culture that act upon us were never merely formal; they are modes of knowing, but modes of impingement as well, and their effect is to constrain our bodily lives. In this respect, then, the relation between theory and the body is inextricable and insurmountable. Theory does not constitute an abstraction from the body but is, rather, what acts upon the body, articulating its contour, morphology, and legible categorization."*[32]

It is important not to underestimate the unsettling, groundbreaking challenge inherent in Butler's considerations. Theory is not an abstraction derived from a given—and opaque—materiality; on the contrary, theory *is* materiality. It articulates the contour of bodies, their morphology, their intelligibility; it articulates them as male or female; queer or straight, with or without disabilities. In short, theory is an integral part of our ontology; it constitutes us, but it also subjects and restrains us. Now, it would seem easy to jump from here to the conclusion that we should abandon or even reject theory altogether. But this is not what Butler proposes. We should not *"assault theory in general,"* they caution, but instead *"devise a theoretical action of a politically consequential sort. This would*

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[29] Butler, "Wittig's Material Practice," p. 520.
[30] Monique Wittig, *The Straight Mind and Other Essays, Boston: Beacon Press 1992.*
[31] Butler, "Wittig's Material Practice," p. 528.
[32] Butler, "Wittig's Material Practice," p. 522.

be the simultaneously theoretical and material action of words that assault the dominant order (it is important to remember that materialism is a theory)."[33]

The room became a palpably new space. Recall that these were the words Butler used to describe the effect of Monique Wittig's speech on a September day in 1979 in New York City. They faintly echo a famous phrase in the history of philosophy. In the first volume of *Das Kapital,* Karl Marx calls for dialectics to be "turned right side up again." I venture to say that this is the most striking feature of Butler's multifaceted and exhilarating oeuvre. They have indeed turned things "off their heads," on which they were standing, and placed them upon their feet, as Friedrich Engels said about Feuerbach's reversal of Hegel's dialectic.[34] The room has become a palpably new space.

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Attentive readers may by now have noticed that in focusing on some of Butler's essays instead of their main monographs, I have entered this *laudatio* through the back door, so to speak. How else would it be possible to laud this oeuvre and its producer? One can only try—and would always fail—to grasp its scope and depth. And what would it actually entail to write such *laudationes*? To applaud the many outstanding achievements of this author, philosopher, teacher, public intellectual, activist, institution-builder, and colleague, who is also a dear friend? Butler's CV alone is an almost book-length dossier. Besides publishing more than twenty monographs, which have been translated into numerous languages, Butler has received sixteen honorary degrees and about sixty other awards, including the title of an *Officier* of the Ordre des Arts et des Lettres of the French Cultural Ministry in 2021, the Gold Medal of the Circulo de Bellas Artes in Madrid, Spain, in 2022, and the Blue Diamond Hermes Award: An Outstanding Contribution to Phenomenological Hermeneutics from the International Institute for Hermeneutics in 2020—the last of these being the occasion of my tribute. Alongside their theoretical writing, Butler has served on numerous editorial and advisory boards, in selection committees and academic associations, and

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[33] Butler, "Wittig's Material Practice," p. 522.

[34] Dialectics, Marx writes, "steht bei ihm [Hegel] auf dem Kopf. Man muß sie umstülpen, um den rationellen Kern in der mystischen Hülle zu entdecken." Karl Marx, Das Kapital, Bd. I, *MEW* 23, p. 27. [Dialectics "is standing on its head. It must be turned right side up again, if you would discover the rational kernel within the mystical shell."] Friedrich Engels coined the phrase "from head to feet" in regard to Hegels dialectic: „und damit wurde die Hegelsche Dialektik auf den Kopf, oder vielmehr vom Kopf, auf dem sie stand, wieder auf die Füße gestellt." Friedrich Engels, „Ludwig Feuerbach und der Ausgang der klassischen deutschen Philosophie, *MEW* 21, p. 293.

they surely stand out for their political and public engagement. They have initiated petitions and open letters and spoken at rallies and assemblies; they never shy away from raising their voice against the illegitimate use of power or state and other forms of violence; they have been active in countless human rights organizations, including the Center for Constitutional Rights in New York and the advisory board of Jewish Voice for Peace. Butler is also a regular contributor to every major newspaper in the world and gives interviews to the press on an almost daily basis. They are a demanding thinker whose work requests patience and attentiveness from readers and listeners alike. But maybe more than any other contemporary thinker's, Butler's oeuvre itself is defined by the importance of listening, paying attention to others, and holding arguments accountable. In books such as *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (1993) and *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* (1997), they made it both an obligation and a virtue to respond to criticism, thus truly giving an account of how they proceeded in their attempt to awaken the world from its dreams about itself.

Clearly, even in an abbreviated form, praise for this work would go far beyond the space available to me—and would still not do justice to the theoretical scope of Butler's oeuvre. The only way left, it seemed to me, was to enter through the wings in an attempt to direct the spotlights true to this oeuvre. This is even more true when the oeuvre in question constitutes probably the most important "building block" in one's own thinking.[35] It is time to confess that Butler's thinking has without a doubt had the most lasting and formative influence on my own. Their words and ideas are constant companions, their books next to those of Michel Foucault and Hannah Arendt, always within reach of my desk. The triumvirate of my "family philosophers," as I like to call them. Yet ever since Butler first appeared on the international academic stage with *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990), their thinking has kept me on my toes like few others. Judith Butler's texts continue to stimulate and challenge; they encourage and take us to where we have not yet been; they are imaginative and rigorously composed; they unsettle and provoke controversy as much as they provide consolation and confidence. They are, in short and in the best possible sense, serious troublemakers. The ways in which we think about gender and sexuality, desire and identity, norms and power have been radically transformed by these texts.

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[35] In "From the Critique of Identity to an Ethics of Plurality: Sabine Hark's Collaborative Vision" Judith Butler describes their work as a "building block" in mine: "Sometimes I have had the sense that other authors are building blocks for what she makes. And I think of my own work as one such building block. Hence, this essay poses the question, can the building block speak? And, if so, what might it say? For I am somewhere in this work at the same time that I am transformed by the company that this work asks me to keep." Butler, "From the Critique of Identity to an Ethics of Plurality", p. 45.

While Butler's writing on gender and performativity is still deeply impactful, this is by no means the entirety of their philosophical project. Their thinking is also indispensable for contemporary political theory and moral philosophy. It has taught us how to conceptualize the psyche and its relation to power; it has changed our thinking about violence and the limits of the human by showing us how trajectories, which are designed to unleash violence are marked out in the social fabric. It lays out for us the contours of an ethics of interdependency, care, and vulnerability. Above all, it has provided an ethics of nonviolence, cohabitation, and solidarity so deeply needed in these times of war, terror, and boundless lethal violence. Butler's books—*Antigone's Claim: Kinship Between Life and Death* (2000), *Precarious Life: Powers of Violence and Mourning* (2004), *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* (2009), *Parting Ways: Jewishness and the Critique of Zionism* (2012), *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly* (2015), and, possibly their magnum opus, *The Force of Nonviolence: An Ethico-Political Bind* (2020), to name just a few—are always both timely and timeless interventions in our present. They echo the hermeneutic insight that we are always already in, between, and with the all-encompassing interpretations of our time. And perhaps more crucially, they continually raise anew the question of what we can be in the face of the present order of being, thus fracturing a violent closure against the future.

Before moving on to another complex that Butler has been working on intensively in recent years, namely questions of precarity, vulnerability, interdependence, alliance, solidarity, and the common good let me pause briefly to summarize what I consider to be key components in Butler's beautifully constructed theoretical architecture. That is, first of all—in the wake of Michel Foucault but also engaging with the Critical Theory of the Frankfurt School—a theory of the powerful nexus of knowledge, being, and doing and of the complex and often contradictory ways in which forms of society (*Weisen der Vergesellschaftung*) and forms of thought (*Denkweisen*) are tied into each other. Second, as I hope I have been able to show, it is the attempt to theoretically elaborate the impulse to resist what has been imposed on us and give a place to "*the thinking of the possible.*"[36] In their writings on precarity, vulnerability, and political alliances, with which they further elaborate their finely chiseled work, Butler strengthens an argument we have already encountered in their discussion of Wittig: that the given epistemic hegemony and social ontology cannot be accessed and reformulated at the level of interpretations alone. What is required in order to open those other possibilities is not an idealistic reinvention of the world, but the practical, material reorganization of the social. If what constitutes bodies is

[36] Butler, "Beside Oneself," p. 31.

precisely their dependence on other bodies and on supporting infrastructures and networks, we cannot think of bodies independently of the historically and economically specific networks and ties that constitute them. How to live a good life is thus not only—if at all—a question of morality but, again, a question of the conditions that enable us to live well—or prevent us from doing so. Against this background, in their Adorno Prize Lecture in 2012, Butler raised what may be the crucial urgency of our time, which breaks down into two related questions:

> "*[T]he first is how to live one's own life well, such that we might say that we are living a good life within a world in which the good life is structurally or systematically foreclosed for so many. The second problem is, what form does this question take for us now? Or, how does the historical time in which we live condition and permeate the form of the question itself?"*[37]

In posing the question of the good life, that is, asking what constitutes a world worth living in and whether and in what ways we want to relate to a common good, Butler also advocates for the need to collectively negotiate those issues, which are fundamental to our present. This is even more urgent at a time in which the common good is defined almost exclusively in terms of market dynamics, which seem to be beyond our reach and intervention, and in which an open and beneficial discourse about how we want to live is not only factually absent but widely discredited as superfluous. In such times, Butler's project indeed amounts to an *"insurrection at the level of ontology."*[38] However, bearing in mind the nexus of *Denkweisen* and *Vergesellschaftungsformen,* Butler also cautions that any answer to what a good life is will always imply a statement about what is human, thereby simultaneously defining what is not human:

> "*How, then, do we think about a livable life without positing a single or uniform ideal for that life? It is not a matter, in my view, of finding out what the human really is, or should be, since it has surely been made plain that humans are animals, too, and that their very bodily existence depends upon systems of support that are both human and non-human […] [W]e do not need any more ideal forms of the human; rather, we need to understand and attend to the complex set of relations without which we do not exist at all."*[39]

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[37] Judith Butler, "Can one lead a good life in a bad life?" Adorno Prize Lecture, Frankfurt/Main September 11, 2012; https://www.radicalphilosophy.com/article/can-one-lead-a-good-life-in-a-bad-life (last accessed April 14, 2023).
[38] Judith Butler, *Precarious Life. The Powers of Mourning and Violence*, London/New York: Verso, p.33.
[39] Butler, "Can one lead a good life in a bad life?"

Butler here manages to do two things at once. While they reappropriate the social, the sphere in which we must collectively come to terms with one another, as the space of political action, in the same breath they question the foundations of the hegemonic concept of agency. Instead of assuming an *a priori* sovereign subject as the precondition of agency, agency emerges precisely, and only allegedly paradoxically, where sovereignty fades. We act because we are *"social beings from the start, dependent on what is outside ourselves, on others, on institutions, and on sustained and sustainable environments."*[40]

It is important to keep in mind that Butler is pointing here to the instability and precarity inherent in *any* becoming a subject. That precarity results from the intimate bond between subjectivity and subjectification. We are brought into life through (linguistic) address; this is the condition of agency. But being addressed also means that we are always already in the hands of others, that we are in need of the touch that holds and subjects us. Vulnerability, Butler argues, is, after all, one of the primordial forms that social relations take. *"Precariousness has to be grasped not simply as a feature of* this *or* that *life, but as a generalized condition whose very generality can be denied only by denying precariousness itself."*[41]

With the premise of such fundamental and mutual interdependence, Butler offers a resolute counternarrative to the prevailing ontology of the individual and the common good. They formulate a social ontology that defines vulnerability, grounded in our fundamental exposure to others, as a human condition and conceptualize precariousness as a general characteristic of life. Butler thus offers an epoch-making change of perspective by not taking the desiring individual as their starting point, in order to then ask how its needs can be fulfilled as appropriately and justly as possible. That dyadic conception presupposes us as individuals with very specific dispositions to the social institutions and very specific characteristics worthy of protection or in need of protection. Butler, in contrast, conceives of our endangerment and need for protection as specifically produced in social-material apparatuses and in immediate relation to other people's endangerment and need for protection. Consequently, we need to understand politics as the constant formation of the social bond, a bond that we require in order to live our vulnerability under conditions that neither place us in competitive relationships with one another nor subject us to normalizing identity constraints. This, in turn, opens up new possibilities for alliances, where previously the focus was on opposing, potentially reified identities and the interests that supposedly naturally result from them. According to Butler, social movements that fight for a

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[40]Judith Butler, *Frames of War. When Is Life Grievable?* London/New York: Verso 2009, p. 23.
[41]Butler, *Frames of War.* p. 22.

livable life, for safe-guarding the vulnerability common to all of us, must always performatively express what they want to realize. In doing so, Butler argued in 2012 in the Frankfurter Paulskirche,

> *"such movements do not seek to overcome interdependency or even vulnerability as they struggle against precarity; rather, they seek to produce the conditions under which vulnerability and interdependency become livable. This is a politics in which performative action takes bodily and plural form, drawing critical attention to the conditions of bodily survival, persistence and flourishing with this in the framework of radical democracy. If I am to lead a good life, it will be a life lived with others, a live that is no life without those others. I will not lose this I that I am; whoever I am will be transformed by my connections with others since my dependency on another, and my dependability, are necessary in order to live and to live well. Our shared exposure to precarity is but one ground of our potential equality and our reciprocal obligations to produce together conditions of a liveable life. In avowing the need we have for one another, we avow as well basic principles that inform the social, democratic conditions of what we might still call 'the good life'. These are critical conditions of democratic life in the sense that they are part of an ongoing crisis, but also because they belong to a form of thinking and acting that responds to the urgencies of our time."*[42]

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I have crept into this *laudatio* through the wings by using Butler's own voice and their question *"Can the Other of philosophy speak?"* I will leave the stage through the wings again, sharing a reminiscence of my first encounter with a then-emerging oeuvre that helped me find a voice and would stay with me for life. Something that certainly escaped me at the time.

There are books, and there are weighty books. Among those of weight is most certainly Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, first published in 1990. A slim volume, barely 170 pages. To this day, I remember the moment I pulled it off the shelf at the San Francisco State University Bookstore in the spring of 1990. The author's name, Judith Butler, meant nothing to me. In my Women's Studies seminars at State the year before, Butler had not been part of the reading list. That spring, *Gender Trouble* was still a barely read book, let alone one that was discussed, debated, discarded, and defended. But for me personally, at that very

[42] Butler, "Can one lead a good life in a bad life?"

second, it was already a troublemaker. I had begun thinking about my dissertation topic. Using lesbian-feminist identity politics in West German feminism as a case study, I had a fundamental critique of identity in mind, a topic many had told me was not a topic at all. In German social sciences, social philosophy, and feminist theory at the time, identity issues were considered theoretically unproductive and politically irrelevant. Academically, it seemed that I would have nothing to gain from my choice. And here I was in a dusty aisle of a West Coast university bookstore with a book in my hands that had already dealt with this very question. *Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. My dissertation seemed to be at an end before it had even begun. Slightly troubled, I left the bookstore with *Gender Trouble* in my backpack.

From the book's cover, two pairs of serious-looking eyes gazed at me from an aged, sepia-toned photograph. Two children, not yet teenagers. Siblings, perhaps. At first glance it was undecidable whether of the same or different gender. The hand of the smaller child on the shoulder of the taller one. Connected by this gesture, but separated by an irregularly running fold in the middle of the photo. Both children in long-sleeved, richly frilled clothing. One in pants, the other in a dress. The younger one with a timeless short haircut, the older one wearing its hair long in the style of Emily Dickinson: parted in the middle, tied at the nape. Both look vulnerable in a touching, almost heartbreaking way. At the same time, they also radiate determination. The older child in the frilly dress seems to long for the moment when it will be able to tear the dress off its body. Briefly, I remembered the last time in my life that I had worn a dress. A very long time ago. I thought I knew what the child in that photo, from whom I was separated by more than the decades, had felt at the moment of being photographed in that dress. A lonely moment.

The book's back cover provides sparse clues about the photo. "Agnes and Inez Albright," it says. Sisters, then. But does this information make the photo legible? Do we now know more than we did before? Do the sisters Inez and Agnes, seemingly in a strangely representational fidelity to Butler's text, embody the intimate entanglement of rebellion and oppression that Butler talks about on the very first page of *Gender Trouble*? Are we to understand the photo as an illustration of the theory or even, in Butler's sense, as a performative iteration of gender? Does performance simply reflect performativity here? Somewhat hauntingly, the photo also speaks of the power of subversion to which every assertion of identity is exposed. The gaze of Agnes and Inez stays with us. In Butler's text, the photo plays no role. Did they choose it for the cover? In any case, it remains a silent yet telling paratext on the trouble that gender is able to cause. Many years later, in the preface to the second edition of *Gender Trouble*, published in 1999, Butler explained that they had wanted the book "*to open up the field of possibility*

for gender without dictating which kinds of possibilities ought to be realized."[43] Butler concedes that opening possibilities is not a goal in itself. Nevertheless, they continue, *"no one who has understood what it is to live in the social world as what is 'impossible,' illegible, unrealizable, unreal, and illegitimate is likely to pose that question."*[44] Agnes and Inez, gazing at us through time and circumstance, did ask for possibility. They knew back then, as much as Butler does today, that possibility is not a luxury; it is as crucial as bread. "*At the same time that I was ensconced in the academy, I was also living a life outside those walls, and though Gender Trouble is an academic book, it began, for me, with a crossing-over, sitting on Rehoboth Beach, wondering whether I could link the different sides of my life,"* Butler recalls the initiating moment of *Gender Trouble.*[45] Rehoboth Beach is a well-known queer beach in Delaware on the American East Coast, but it also bears a Hebrew name: *rechovot* is the Hebrew word for "ample space," "a place for all." This is Butler's gift to the world. Relentlessly searching for ways to think the possible and working toward a world that makes room for all.

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This *laudatio* has attempted to pay tribute to the dissident hermeneuticist Judith Butler for having risked the journey to explore ways in which thought and world will transform at the same time. In its humble words, it has sought to honor the brilliance and ingenuity of an oeuvre that stands as a solitaire in contemporary thinking. But most of all, it has tried to thank Judith Butler for their careful attention to "the radiance in all things" and the enduring tenderness with which they have turned to the world. It is the Polish novelist and Nobel Prize laureate Olga Tokarczuk who brought tenderness to us in the most compelling and astounding words—which both echo and speak directly to Butler's own words. So I will leave the floor to her to praise Butler's gift to the world. In her Nobel lecture, Tokarczuk describes tenderness as "the most modest form of love."[46] It is a "kind of love that does not appear in the scriptures or the gospels"; it is a love that "has no special emblems or symbols, nor does it lead to crime, or prompt envy." Rather, "it appears wherever we take a close and careful look

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[43] Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble. Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, London and New York: Routledge 1999, 2nd edition, pp. xvi-xvii, p. viii.
[44] Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p. xvii.
[45] Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p. xvii.
[46] Olga Tokarczuk, "The Tender Narrator." Nobel Lecture, December 7, 2019; https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/2018/tokarczuk/lecture/ (last accessed April 14, 2023)

at another being, at something that is not our 'self.'" Tokarczuk describes tenderness as a "spontaneous and disinterested" form of love. A love that "goes far beyond empathetic fellow feeling. Instead, it is the conscious, though perhaps slightly melancholy, common sharing of fate. Tenderness is deep emotional concern about another being, its fragility, its unique nature, and its lack of immunity to suffering and the effects of time. Tenderness perceives the bonds that connect us, the similarities and sameness between us. It is a way of looking that shows the world as being alive, living, interconnected, cooperating with, and codependent on itself."[47]

As a friend and companion, reader, interlocutor, and laudator, I offer Olga Tokarczuk's words as a gift and this *laudatio* as a contribution to the bonds that connect and hold us, gratefully awaiting a mercifuly open future brightened by what Judith Butler will continue to offer.

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[47] Tokarczuk, "The Tender Narrator".