

Judith Butler, *Precarious Life and Undoing Gender*

Judith Butler's status as a leading thinker in the hermeneutics of gender is solidified in the dual publication of *Undoing Gender* and *Precarious Life: Powers of Violence and Mourning*.

These texts extended the genealogical and critical implications of her earlier writings on gender. *Undoing Gender*, specifically, calls into question the dominant notions of personhood as such. In other words, if gender and sexuality are a set of performances instead of biological characteristics, then they essentially belong to who we are, what we are doing, and how we are feeling. Gender is one facet of life, among many, that displays our indebtedness to the other, as a condition for the possibility of learning to create the self, along with being a source for limitations we may ultimately reject. One of her most potent insights is that if gender is truly a performance of one's being, of interpreting and responding to social norms, then it always implies a potential for a subversion of the norm. The fulfillment of one's being through interpretation is thus an inherently radical act.

Judith Butler's *Precarious Life: Powers of Violence and Mourning* inverts the phenomenological locus of her early period. It marks a transition from studying how individual subjects relate to social norms to exposing how current events are predicated by problematic policies and cultural values. In *Precarious Life*, Butler focuses on the existence of Guantanamo Bay, anti-intellectual censorship as a wartime practice in the United States, and anti-Semitism charges leveled against critics of the Israeli state. Through these events, Butler astutely studies how modern states designate certain lives as worthy or unworthy of being grieved. Such practices arise from our collective inability to respond to loss. Her claim is that a new comportment towards violence and mourning would alter our collective interpretation of history and social policy. This new comportment can provoke fresh forms of solidarity and global political action.