parrhesia 38 · 2023 · 288-309

a philosophy that keeps mattering

bodies that still matter: resonances of the work of judith butler , (eds.) annemie halsema, katja kwastek and roel van den oever (amsterdam university press, 2021)

kurt borg

This volume, *Bodies That Still Matter: Resonances of the Work of Judith Butler* (2021), is a welcome addition to scholarship about the work of Judith Butler, as well as extensions and applications of their work across various disciplines. Most of the contributions to this volume originated from a conference that was held on 5-7 April 2017 at Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, titled *Critical Theory in the Humanities: Resonances of the Work of Judith Butler*. The title of this volume is the title of Butler's keynote lecture on that occasion, and is both a nod to the title of Butler's 1993 *Bodies That Matter*, as well as a re-animation of the concern that Butler's work has with bodies, lives and identities that are rendered as not mattering. The 'still'

in the title can be read both as a suggestion that bodies will persist in calling our attention to critical issues that matter, as well as a reminder that while some bodies still matter, other bodies have fallen out of the scheme of mattering. This volume does not consist of commentaries that seek to establish a coherence or continuity in the ideas found in Butler's works—a task that Butler often resists when speaking in interviews[1]—but rather seeks to move Butler's work into new domains, namely, for the purposes of this volume, the arts, ethics, the study of identity and the social sciences. As the editors of the volume—Annemie Halsema, Katja Kwastek and Roel van den Oever—highlight in their introduction, some of the chapters critique or engage with aspects of Butler's thinking, while others use Butler's work as a springboard to novel thinking. The outcome of these different resonances with Butler's corpus is "multidisciplinary, intergenerational, and methodologically diverse, a testament to Butler's broad and continuing appeal."[2] The editors note that, despite their variety, the volume's contributions reveal a core theme in Butler's thinking, which is an interest in bodies. As a result, they group the chapters into four themes: "*performativity* (bodies that are performatively gendered), *speech* (bodies addressed and sometimes injured by language), *precarity* (bodies that are vulnerable to different degrees), and *assembly* (bodies that assemble and demonstrate)" (11; emphasis in original). This essay will review each chapter in the volume, outlining the authors' engagement and use of Butler's work. Moreover, in the final section, a more detailed engagement with Butler's own essay in this volume, and the contextualisation of this essay within their more recent work, will be pursued.

PERFORMATIVITY

Adriana Zaharijević's chapter on Butler's theory of agency opens the first section of this volume, titled 'Performativity'. Zaharijević suggests that while in both the 'analytic' and 'continental' traditions, the notion of agency has been used to reify a subject of mastery and autonomy, Butler moves beyond this impasse by emphasising that agency is always embodied and social. In this way, it echoes Simone de Beauvoir's notions of 'situation' and 'project' which, as Zaharijević

highlights, are notions with which Butler has engaged even in the pre-*Gender Trouble* articles.[3] It is out of these existential and phenomenological reflections that Butler developed a performative account of gender that is simultaneously a matter of choice and cultural construction; or, rather, as being *neither* free choice nor absolute determination. For Butler, such an approach to agency necessitated an account of gender as "an incessant project, a daily act of reconstitution and interpretation."[4] Zaharijević shows that Butler's more recent work turns to Hannah Arendt's understanding of agency as being amid constraints and the unexpected. For Zaharijević, Butler's views on agency emphasise the role of unfixedness, historicity, im/probability, im/possibility, susceptibility to reiterative and transformative articulation, inability to predict in advance, living with and in ambivalence. Zaharijević importantly clarifies that, contrary to what some critics have implied,[5] "there is nothing light-hearted or gamesome in this play[;] … none of these are matters of carefree play" (27). Ultimately, Zaharijević's point is that Butler's philosophy proposes a theory of agency that aims for beginning to think "of a radically democratic world where all bodies matter and all lives are livable" (28). Seeing how the notion of agency spans Butler's work from the 1980s till today, Zaharijević is right to regard it as key to the architectonics of Butler's work.

Eyo Ewara's chapter engages with Butler's use of the notion of abjection in thinking about race and racism in their earlier work.[6] Abjection is defined by Julia Kristeva as "the splitting off and repelling of some part of the self that cannot be then acknowledged, accepted or touched without bringing that self's constitution as subject in question" (32). Ewara notes that Butler was not the first to use Kristeva's notion of abjection for the purposes of social theorising. Indeed, Butler draws on Iris Marion Young's appropriation of Kristeva, whereby Young explained the 'expulsion' followed by a 'repulsion' at work in the social exclusion and domination of sexed and racialised others. Ewara highlights how Butler re-reads the 'language of interior/exterior' found in Kristeva and Young through a deconstructive lens and re-articulates it through the language of performativity. However, Ewara notes that in *Bodies That Matter*, Butler leaves the

notion of abjection behind and turns to another psychoanalytic term, this time of *foreclosure*, to explain the *disavowal* through which whiteness is constituted. This leaves 'black' to be seen as 'contagion', threat, the excremental other. Ewara's contention with Butler's account of racialisation is that it does not speak about the psychic life of those cast in the place of the abject and, instead, focuses on the constitution of 'proper' subjects. The excluded are presented as "rejection, privation, non-life" (33). Thus, Ewara argues that in Butler's account it is hard to see the abjected as anything more than an anti-subject whose experiences are imagined as simply the byproducts of white anxieties. Ewara's critique is that Butler does not address how people of colour come to see and relate to themselves through white abjection; or how the abjected others respond, take up or resist the ways in which they are formed as abject. Ewara importantly highlights that Butler may have theoretical and strategic reasons for being hesitant to develop descriptions of abjected and racialised senses of self, namely because Butler's philosophy has always been attentive to the ways in which identity categories can become normalising instruments of regulatory regimes. It has always been Butler's project to open up the realms of political and existential possibility, rather than pin people down to accounts that could risk misidentifying or constraining them.

This section closes with a short essay by the late Jean-Luc Nancy, titled 'Beyond Gender(s)'. The piece resonates with Butler's work insofar as it problematises the relation between sex and gender. "Sex is the play of genders," (44) holds Nancy, beyond preset poles, psychosocial types or configurations. For Nancy, the play of genders reveals itself in the engagement of "every kind—or genre—of disposition, tendency, leaning, and taste: masculine/feminine, homo/hetero, mono/trans, active/passive, dominating/dominated, arousing/aroused, erectile/malleable, dry/wet, soft/hard, genital/anal (oral, and so forth), feverish/indolent, mute/chattering, brief/stretched out, gentle/rough…" (44). This set of relations, which Nancy terms *sexistence*, "occupies the place or the role of an essential being-in-relation, which is constitutive of this animal" (45) that is the human. Like language, sex "is

completely in its difference from itself or within itself," moving Nancy to ask: "[w]hat would be left untinged by sex?" (45).

SPEECH

Julia Peetz's chapter initiates this volume's second section, titled 'Speech', with a reflection on the performative dimension of populist politicians in the United States. Peetz notes that in standard accounts of speech acts, such as those proposed by J.L. Austin and Pierre Bourdieu, a speech act is felicitous if it affirms a pre-existing authority. Those who operate outside the boundaries of ritual, convention and pre-established authority, therefore, should not be able to make felicitous utterances. Yet, Peetz's claim in this chapter is that utterances by contemporary populist politicians are troubling this relationship between authority and speech acts, revealing a paradoxical performativity of populism. Peetz argues that anti-establishment performatives seem to be successful *in spite of* the fact that they work through the disavowal of authority, rather than an affirmation of it. Following Austin's and Bourdieu's logic, politicians seeking election would attempt to court institutional affiliation and authority. However, according to Peetz, events such as the 2016 US presidential election suggest that this same proximity to established power has become a liability (not an asset) to politicians seeking election. Peetz draws on Butler's discussion of speech acts in *Excitable Speech* which emphasises that conventional formulae can be rehearsed in non-conventional ways, provoking a shift in the terms of legitimacy, and breaking open the possibility of future social and institutional forms. This chapter by Peetz is an interesting contribution to the flourishing field of 'populism studies', in which Butler's ideas can fruitfully be drawn upon.[7]

Tingting Hui's chapter reflects on how speech 'accent' presumes unstated norms of non-accented speech, which may result in acts of hostility and violence against the accented speaker. Taking her cue from Butler's notion of subversive resignification, Hui asks: is it possible to *talk back* with an accented foreign tongue? Hui notes that, for Butler, in linguistic vulnerability resides a potentiality for

resistance and openness for re-signification. Hui refers to Butler's characterisation of Bourdieu's account of speech acts as a conservative one since he overlooks instances when interpellation misses its target and may fail. In the case of hate speech, for example, the link between the hateful linguistic utterances, their target and their hurtful intentions is not a seamless one; the linguistic travel may be derailed, become confounded or even reversed. Hui suggests that, for Butler, the possibility of subversive resignification rests on an *excess* that is found within linguistic operations; a possibility which censorship and legislation risk blocking, despite their good intentions, by limiting the free openness of language and by over-estimating the success rate of hateful speech acts (while not downplaying the actual numerous instances where such speech acts are indeed hurtful). However, Hui is not completely convinced of this radical potential within language. She raises questions on how one can respond to the violence that exploits precisely the incongruity between body and speech in such a way that that incongruity is not a source of hope but of a heightened susceptibility to marginalisation. In such instances, vocalised speech is what places the speaker in a subaltern position, impacting their *survivability* and ability to feel 'at home' in the language and that society. Whereas Butler's analysis aims to deconstruct the presumed sovereignty of the speaker, Hui is highlighting the accentuation of the linguistic vulnerability of the accented speaker for whom the 'openness' of speech is not a source of possible resistance, but is yet another site of heightened oppression. For Hui, Butler disregards the fact that not everyone has equal access to any and all language; not everyone is socially and politically recognised as being 'entitled' to that language. This rich chapter may have been further illuminated by a discussion of Butler's conversation with Spivak in *Who Sings the Nation-State?* particularly the points made there on who has the right to sing the nation state, how, in what context and *in which accent*.[8] That 'case study' also highlighted the power of resignification possessed even by people marginalised, among other factors, on the basis of accent and language spoken.

Roel van den Oever's chapter takes its cue from Butler's views on language

and signification to provide a critical reading of the film *Private Romeo*, a 2011 reenactment of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* that puts at its centre a romantic relationship between two military cadets. The author's claims in this chapter are threefold. Firstly, despite the 'authorial intentions' of the film's creators, that is, of responding to the historical context (the 'Don't Ask, Don't Tell' legislation in the US military), no character in the film utters the word 'homosexuality'; thus, ultimately and unwittingly, fulfilling the aims of 'Don't Ask, Don't Tell'. Secondly, the visual narrative of the film is superseded by the primacy of the Shakespearean characters and their heterosexual romance. And, thirdly, taking *Private Romeo* as a homosexual representation is only possible by assuming a homophobic context and a heteronormative one, as per the original drama. According to van den Oever, *Private Romeo* ultimately fails to achieve its intended effects of presenting an affirmative gay love affair that is free from homophobic tones. Van den Oever refers to Butler's analysis of the 'Don't Ask, Don't Tell' legislation in *Excitable Speech* as showing that in order to install the homophobic injunction, the military had to speak the word itself. Moreover, the military conflates the stating of homosexuality with homosexual conduct and acts. Thus, the speech utterance becomes a sexual act, or is treated as such: "The statement, then, 'I am a homosexual,' is fabulously misconstrued as, 'I want you sexually'" (82), thus also evoking connotations of AIDS and the homophobic discourse of contagion. The author also points out strategic errors made by the film's creators, namely, why choose to recite a gay romance through a text "about a forbidden love that is doomed from the start?" (86). While van den Oever draws on Butler's analysis of how authorial intentions may fail, his analysis goes counter to some of the 'intentions' (if one may speak in this way) of Butler's analysis. This is because while it is true that *Excitable Speech* does highlight the possible thwarting of authorial intentions, Butler sought to exploit this ineffectuality in order to challenge power, particularly its harmful effects on oppressed groups. On the other hand, van den Oever's critique of *Private Romeo* seems to be emphasising its ineffectuality as a possible act of resistance. Such a reading may be interpreted as implying that power is even stronger than it may seem, echoing rigid interpretations of the Foucaultian view that strategies of

resistance can be recuperated or co-opted by power which may strip them of their subversive potential. This (im)balance between subversive resistance and the risk of co-optation by power could also have been explored in relation to a similar discussion that Butler puts forward in *Bodies That Matter* regarding drag practices in the 1990 documentary *Paris is Burning*.

PRECARITY

Carmen Schuhmann's chapter, initiating the volume's third section titled 'Precarity', reflects on how Butler's ideas can inform the practice of criminal justice counseling. Schuhmann shows how Butler's views on relationality and subjectivity present a critique that may re-orient current hegemonic practices in counseling. For Schuhmann, although the humanist tradition that underpins many counseling practices has noble intentions insofar as it challenges reductionism and recognises the uniqueness of each person, it is open to critique, particularly as it reinforces a 'walled' conception of the self that regards its relationships as secondary to its unitary configuration. Schuhmann turns to *Giving an Account of Oneself* to show how Butler's notion of subjectivity—critical as it is of humanist connotations of self-transparency—can illuminate counseling.[9] Schuhmann refers to Butler's claim that the posture of invulnerability actually amounts to 'becoming inhuman'. Contrary to this, 'becoming human' stands for a "willingness to become undone in relation to others,"[10] which can also be equated with a nonviolent disposition: "What might it mean to undergo violence, to insist upon *not* resolving grief and staunching vulnerability too quickly through a turn to violence, and to practice, as an experiment in living otherwise, nonviolence in an empathically nonreciprocal response?"[11] Through the reference to violence in this quotation from *Giving an Account of Oneself*, a thematic link with Butler's 2020 monograph, *The Force of Nonviolence*, can be seen. In fact, it would not be outrageous to suggest that the theme of violence and possibilities of nonviolent responses is a thread that runs through all of Butler's work. Schuhmann raises an important point when she asks how we can distinguish between the sort of injury that is constitutive of relationality, and injury that ought to be rejected

as intolerable. Linking this discussion with ethical issues that arise in criminal justice, the author notes that, in her own counseling practice, it can be observed that the divide between perpetrators and victims of crime may be murkier and more complicated than what the dominant paradigms in criminal justice imply. More of this work connecting theoretical exposition with empirical research is needed since while analyses such as Butler's are crucial in problematising and elaborating complex theoretical notions, it may not always be obvious or easy to determine how exactly these critiques can inform practitioners in their work.[12]

Simon van der Weele's chapter stages a dialogue between Eva Kittay's and Butler's work. Both philosophers have formulated an ethics centred around concepts of dependency and vulnerability, yet they take these concepts into different normative directions. Van der Weele argues that while Kittay takes the person with profound intellectual and multiple disabilities (such as her daughter Sesha) as the 'paradigm case' for dependency, Butler seems to take the refugee as theirs. This choice, then, goes on to determine their respective attitudes towards dependency and its overcoming. Van der Weele highlights that although both Kittay and Butler employ vocabularies of dependency to problematise the liberal-philosophical notions of equality, dependency plays a different role in their respective accounts of ethics. For Kittay, dependencies are principally rooted in human corporeality, and from this premise, she normatively concludes that dependents require care. On the other hand, Butler is reluctant to formulate an ethics in terms of a normative program or a set of virtues, even though it is not controversial to suggest that Butler's work is normatively inflected in a quite unambiguous way. Simply put, for Butler it is wrong that some lives are violently rendered unlivable. Rather than the presence or otherwise of any normative trace, what Butler's work draws our attention to is the tone and confidence we place in our normative commitments, with Butler's tone being hesitant, proceeding cautiously and ambivalently. Van der Weele's chapter opens up an important discussion on Butler's account of ethics, namely that any normative consequences found in Butler's account of ethics are not guaranteed, and dependency can easily be met with violence rather than care.

As Butler writes in *Frames of War*: "The postulation of a generalized precariousness that calls into question the ontology of individualism implies, although does not directly entail, certain normative consequences. It does not suffice to say that since life is precarious, therefore it must be preserved".[13] For Butler, therefore, neither vulnerability nor precariousness can serve as a foundation for thinking about ethics (an issue to which I return below). It is for this reason that Butler has never really embraced a feminist ethics of care or an ethico-politics of vulnerability.[14] Van der Weele's chapter interestingly articulates the theoretical differences between Kittay and Butler, and connects this implicit dialogue between these two philosophers with findings from his empirical studies. His conclusion highlights that the complexity of experiences of dependency hints at the philosophical limitations of thinking through a single paradigm case.

Noa Roei's chapter presents a reading of *Archive* (2014), an hour-long performance by Israeli dancer and choreographer Arkadi Zaides. In this performance, the artist conducts a corporeal dialogue with audio-visual documentation of human rights violations occurring in the Palestinian territories, videos of which were caught on cameras by Palestinian residents. The chapter analyses this performance through Butler's notions of risk, opaque subjectivity, complicity, the impossibility of forgiveness and the basis of collective ethical responsibility. Roei draws on Butler's foregrounding of vulnerability as a possible basis of claims for non-military political solutions, contrary to violent responses that reinforce fantasies of mastery. The author highlights how vulnerability allows one to be undone by others, throwing one into an opaqueness that opens up spaces of collective responsibility beyond notions of responsibility built on conceptions of sovereign subjects. In his performance, Zaides first adopts a position of spectator to the projected clips, but slowly becomes more absorbed and seamlessly blends into the movements on screen. Roei argues that there is an initial *disidentification* between the seer and the seen, with the artist being implicated by the footage yet also distanced from it. By showing only Israeli protagonists on screen, the footage highlights the politics of spectatorship, foregrounding Palestinians' *right to look* in

an attempt to transform the relations of the visible and the sayable. Roei considers these videos as a *countervisual* practice which (like counternarratives) opposes "the authority of a specific (always and already politically inflected) presentation and interpretation of the visual" (121n.8). Roei highlights how Zaides' *Archive* performance—an image from which serves as the cover illustration for this volume—is an emphatically corporeal response that offers an alternate, entangled mode of image consumption, not through the eye but through the body; through re-enactment not representation. This implies an opening up to alterity, not in order to redistribute blame, but to give an account of oneself from a position that is not comfortably located on a stable moral ground. In this gesture, there is a refusal to resolve vulnerability too quickly into violence and a refusal to locate violence as foreign to one's self, thus transforming one's outlook on *forgiveness*. This is not forgiveness as absolution, but as an act of acceptance of one's opaque, relational and collectively-formed identity. As Butler puts it in *Giving an Account of Oneself*: "If we speak and try to give an account from this place, we will not be irresponsible, or, if we are, we will surely be forgiven".[15]

Friederike Sigler's chapter takes its cue from a 2000 exhibition by the Spanish artist Santiago Sierra. For this exhibition, the artist recruited asylum seekers who were willing to sit inside closed cardboard boxes for four hours a day during the six-week exhibition period, paying them at a minimum wage. Some participants were 'workers who cannot be paid' (128) since their legal status did not allow them to work, and a violation of this law could result in deportation. Sigler indicates that the aim of the artist was not of representing but rather of *demonstrating precarity*.[16] The artistic strategy adopted was not without its critics, some of whom were skeptical of the opportunities for resistance that this exhibition opens up, seeing the exhibition as controversial, if not exploitative. Sigler notes that Sierra places labor and working conditions of the 21st century at the forefront, whereby the artist (as employer/exploited) *delegated* the work and artistic production. The art space itself becomes implicated in the exhibition, no longer being merely the site of artistic work, but becoming part of the global machinery of neoliberal

capitalism. Sigler reflects on how the exhibition attempts to make the audience feel complicit yet, at the same time, helpless; a feeling exacerbated by the frames of the artistic institution, which left the audience unable to intervene in the face of this ethically intolerable position on display. This apparent impossibility of the audience to improve the situation of the workers is provoked in order to invite them to seek ways to intervene, at least by forming psychological alliances with workers on a global scale. It is in this regard that Sigler reads this artistic exhibition as entailing possibilities of resistance.

ASSEMBLY

The final section of this volume, titled 'Assembly', opens with a chapter by Adriana Cavarero.[17] The works of Cavarero and Butler have long had great affinity with each other, and this chapter is a further addition to the important ongoing conversation between these two thinkers.[18] In this chapter, Cavarero takes her cue from Butler's reflections in *Notes Towards a Performative Theory of Assembly* on public assemblies and demonstrations (such as the ones in the Arab Springs, Gezi Park, Tahrir Square and the Occupy movements) to highlight that "by acting in concert, bodies enter a political space of appearance primarily constituted by their corporeal condition of plurality" (142). Cavarero follows Butler in widening the Arendtian vocabulary by insisting on the political centrality of bodily needs, such as "food, shelter, protection from injury and violence" (144). This emphasis is crucial in light of how Arendt (in)famously disregards these needs as not occupying the true realm of politics; these matters, for her, are "pre- and un-political" (144-145). Cavarero regards the uniqueness of the sound of one's voice as indicative of Arendt's notions of plurality and uniqueness. Cavarero notes that Arendt follows Aristotle in privileging speech as a defining characteristic of the human, yet, indicates that Butler further radicalises this notion by highlighting that speech itself is a bodily act; "vocalization requires a larynx".[19] Cavarero builds further on this vocal dimension of assembled pluralities in terms of what she regards as the politics of voices.[20] To be clear, Cavarero, like Arendt and Butler, does not simply place her blind faith in the power of crowds; after all, a crowd (or a 'mass') can

be a sign of conformity or an imposed homogeneity that prevents plurality from exhibiting itself. Cavarero points out that the disquieting dimension of assemblies is the "desire for blending into an amorphous collective body which expresses its unity with a single voice" (147). Cavarero notes that theorists that have explored the phenomenon of crowds, such as Sigmund Freud and Gustave Le Bon, have often emphasised this potentially dangerous aspect of plurality-gone-wrong. But Cavarero prefers to draw on two other writers to highlight other dimensions of crowds, namely the description of the soundscape of the masses in Elias Canetti's 1960 book *Crowds and Power* and a description of the sounds of a group of schoolchildren in Canetti's autobiographical novel *The Voices of Marrakesh*, as well as Roland Barthes' description in his 1984 *The Rustle of Language* of the depiction in a film of a group of children reading aloud from different books. For Cavarero, that the examples brought by both writers concern children is not incidental, and may help us to reimagine the *germinal* status of radical democracy as a site of *plurality* (rather than a single unity), *pluriphony* (rather than symphony, mere polyphony or cacophony) and *public happiness*.[21] A further commonality between the theme of this chapter and Butler's work can be found in the latter's dialogue with Spivak on *Who Sings the Nation State?* where, as summarised by Fiona Jenkins: "Singing as a plural act, merging voices that remain different, ruptures the mono-lingualism of the nation, putting in motion the task of translation".[22]

The chapter by Erika Fischer-Lichte draws on Butler's concepts of *assembly, appearance* and *precarity* to argue that aesthetic assembly in theatre is closely related to various forms of political assemblies. The author uses three periods in German theatre history as points of reference to read the power of assembly: 18th century theatre of the educated middle class; 1920s (Weimar Republic) workers' mass spectacles; and 1990s choric theatre and some of Christoph Schlingensief's productions. The author chooses these three exemplars to make the point that, in their different ways and in response to different historical contexts, they encourage a self-empowerment of its spectators. With regard to the first point of reference, the author refers to how theatrical performances in

18th century Germany promoted middle class values, leading the spectacle to have a transformative force that enabled this sector of society to experience their *togetherness* as an emotional community. Regarding the second point of reference, Fischer-Lichte refers to the early 20th century theatre works, such as those of Max Reinhard, which included mass spectacles (*Voltstheater*) held in open spaces drawing spectators from all social classes. Fischer-Lichte refers to the comments of one critic at the time, who said that "to become aware of themselves, large communities continuously require common rallies, joint celebrations, expressions of joy, sorrow, determination, of attack and defence with regard to things that affect all members of the community" (163). Fischer-Lichte notes that while the 18th century theatre enabled the middle class to set itself apart from the ruling class, in the 1920s the proletarian spectators reiterated their common hatred of class enemy and their will to change society. Theatre, therefore, was one of the weapons through which class consciousness and identity were articulated and expressed. With regard to the third point of reference, Fischer-Lichte argues that since the 1990s, German theatre was informed by social realities in such a way that productions confronted spectators with actors (though these did not necessarily 'play a part', but would be 'playing themselves') who usually remain invisible, such as the unemployed, the asylum seeker, the disabled or the ill. Thus, *appearance* understood in this sense means that "bodies must be viewed and their vocalized sounds must be heard: the body must enter the visual and audible field".[23] This concern with appearance raises questions on whether an exoticising attitude is being invited in the gaze of spectators; or whether this visibility grants agency and power to the actors, and whether spectators are able to 'include the others' in the assembly. What this chapter ultimately seeks to demonstrate is that the aesthetic assembly in and as theatre has the potential to turn into a political assembly that might lead to social changes. Thus, the chapter ends with a link back to the Occupy movement, with which the chapter opens. Political assemblies (such as, Fischer-Lichte argues, 'Silent Standstill' in Egypt in 2010 and 'Human Mic' in New York in 2011) make ample use of aesthetic devices that developed in performance art.

BUTLER ON 'BODIES THAT STILL MATTER'

The volume concludes with the eponymous essay by Judith Butler, "Bodies That Still Matter".[24] In one sense, this essay brings together some of the strands of Butler's thinking in this last decade, from the thematics opened up in *Dispossession*, the 2013 dialogue with Athena Athanasiou[25] to Butler's 2020 *The Force of Nonviolence*[26] through the 2015 *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly*.[27] It is also worth mentioning a number of essays and lectures Butler delivered in 2014 on the theme of vulnerability and resistance,[28] which later featured in the 2016 co-edited collection *Vulnerability in Resistance*. In another sense, this essay also connects ideas that Butler has been elaborating since the 2004 publication of *Precarious Life* and the 2009 *Frames of War*. An argument can be made, in fact, that these two books and *The Force of Nonviolence* constitute a trilogy of sorts that develops a philosophical vocabulary (rather than a unitary theoretical framework) revolving around notions of precariousness, vulnerability, relationality, interdependence, grievability, equality and nonviolence.[29] It could be said that such conceptual architecture has been developed through a spiral return by Butler to this constellation of concepts in their various works, each time introducing a new emphasis which further extends the remit and domain of the theorising. In yet another sense, it could also be argued that the development of this philosophical vocabulary can also be traced further back to a key concern of Butler's early works on gender, that is, the power (oftentimes violent) of norms to determine the intelligibility of identities and subjects or to reduce them to the abjected pits of unlivability. Although Butler is not fond of attempts that seek to trace a unifying thread in their works, one can refer to the 1999 preface to *Gender Trouble* to show how *livability* has been a guiding concern of Butler's corpus. There, Butler writes that a motivation for writing is "increasing the *possibilities for a livable life* for those who live, or try to live, on the sexual margins".[30]

More proximately, it suffices to say—as Butler does in the opening footnote to this essay—that the "Bodies That Still Matter" essay that features in this volume draws

from material that appeared in *The Force of Nonviolence*, specifically its Chapter 1 (on the relational body), Chapter 3 (on the biopolitics of grievability) and the Postscript[31] (on the critique of political discourses of 'vulnerable groups' and the ambivalence at the heart of social bonds). Butler's poignant essay opens with an arresting phrase: "We are living in a time of numerous atrocities and senseless death" (178). From there, Butler proceeds with a reflection on the politics of vulnerability, writing that it is an error to posit too quickly 'care' or 'vulnerability' as foundations for political discourses and practices. Of course, Butler's hesitance in this regard is not opposition to procedures that seek to identify and protect vulnerable groups. Rather, Butler's point is to note a number of problems that can exist in the framework of vulnerability; for example, its paternalistic overtones in positing a seemingly 'invulnerable' 'strong' agent coming to the aid of the 'vulnerable' and the 'helpless' who lack agency. Butler's past work has invited a rethinking of the relationship between agency, vulnerability and resistance, a conversation continued in this essay when arguing that "perhaps we have to rethink the act of demonstrating, and the logic of demonstration itself" (183). As Butler highlights in *Notes Towards a Performative Theory of Assembly*, a group of people protesting on the streets (for example, the 'standing man' in Taksim Square or the refugees in Würzburg who stitched their mouths shut in protest) do not necessarily signify an overcoming of vulnerability; to the contrary, through their precarious embodiment, they *demonstrate vulnerability as a mode of protest*.

Yet Butler is making a further critical point on discourses of vulnerability, namely that how we name the vulnerable matters; *discourse matters*. Butler argues that when we ascribe vulnerability uncritically, "we occlude the constellation of vulnerability, rage, persistence, and resistance that emerges under these same historical conditions" (181). Butler here is referring to the resilience (for want of a better word) that manifests itself in conditions of constrained agency and destitution, referring to the "efforts at action, forms of solidarity, networks of support, and means of resistance" (181) that risk being effaced in the dominant thinking about 'vulnerable groups'. Similarly, Butler contests the use of language

such as 'bare life' to describe the condition of those in precarious survival; "we do not recognize their suffering by further depriving them of all capacity" (182). Butler's reference to the work of Giorgio Agamben here is oblique; but it is more explicit in other works. In *The Force of Nonviolence*, for example, when discussing the same topic, Butler notes that "[t]hose amassed along the borders of Europe are not precisely what political philosopher Giorgio Agamben referred to as 'bare life'",[32] and that such terminology cannot articulate the efforts and micro-practices of developing networks, communicating timetable, plotting routes, squatting in vacated places, improvising forms of sociality, and so on. One of Butler's earliest engagements with Agamben is in *Precarious Life*, where Butler draws on his (and Michel Foucault's) notions of sovereign power, governmentality and biopower in order to study cases of indefinite detention in the context of Guantanamo Bay. But even there, Butler already points out insufficiencies in Agamben's account, noting that:

> "bare life" underwrites the actual political arrangements in which we live, posing as a contingency into which any political arrangement might dissolve. Yet such general claims do not yet tell us how this power functions differentially, to target and manage certain populations, to derealize the humanity of subjects who might potentially belong to a community bound by commonly recognized laws.[33]

In the second half of the essay, Butler turns to a discussion of what they term the *biopolitics of grievability*, calling our attention to the status of some lives as more or less 'killable' (179), such as cases of femicide and the institutional failures to respond to such cases. By connecting Foucault's notion of biopolitics as death-dealing with Achille Mbembe's notion of necropolitics, Butler outlines an ethico-politics of grievability. The central idea in this framework is that "some lives are regarded as if the prospective loss of that life would be a serious loss; they are the grievable. Others are regarded as if their loss would be no loss, or not much of a loss; they are in the category of the ungrievable" (185). While this emphasis on the political role of grief and mourning has been present in a number of Butler's

works, what is more explicit in Butler's recent work is the framing of the discussion in terms of radical equality, which is a crucial component of Butler's account of nonviolence. The links between grievability, equality and violence reveal the racist, misogynistic and transphobic character of the power that determines which lives matter and qualify as a life. Interestingly, Butler maintains that this discussion of grievability carries with it a committed normative dimension; namely, that what is at stake is not a descriptive statement that every life is grievable, but rather "we should perhaps go frankly normative, without shame or hesitation, and say that every life ought to be grievable, thus positing a utopic horizon within which theory and description is obliged to work" (187).[34] It is in this way that Butler's efforts are not to establish a foundation for ethico-political thinking, but instead posits a critical and utopic (future-driven) ideal of equal grievability. The consequences of such a claim are two-pronged: a *deconstructive* gesture that calls out measures and practices that are rendering lives ungrievable, and a *reconstructive* attempt to reimagine sociality and collectivities within the horizon of radical equality and democracy.

In the last part of the essay, Butler offers a powerful description of relationality upon which "the future of resistance movements" (190) should be built. Butler's reflections here rest on the idea that "no one body is self-subsisting" (191). Within such a formulation lies an implicit critique of liberal notions of distinct and bounded individuality. Butler instead insists on the materialist point that the possibility of life cannot be separated from the infrastructural conditions (physical, social, affective, etc.) that enable it to thrive. This condition of life captures within it an element of unchosen vulnerability and dependencies that cannot simply be ignored or disavowed, which is what the "liberal conceit" (191) does; to the contrary, these are the basis upon which we need to reimagine social bonds, and to evaluate the life-enabling nature of current political and economic structures. Thus, in Butler's essay we can see that the apprehension of life as precarious and vulnerable can powerfully result in direct calls for policy and institutional changes to foster "an infrastructure of sustenance" (192). In this way, as the title of this edited volume

demonstrates, Butler's philosophy is a crucial voice that persists in animating contemporary urgent questions on "whose bodies matter, and why" (192).

KURT BORG is a Lecturer in the Department of Public Policy at the University of Malta. His work draws on contemporary continental philosophy, particularly the work of Michel Foucault and Judith Butler, to analyse topics such as subjectivity, resistance and how power functions in contemporary societies, both in institutional politics as well as social movements. He has published articles and book chapters on various political and ethical aspects of the work of Foucault and Butler, as well as on the politics of trauma, narratives of illness and disability, and the essay.

NOTES

1. For example, in an interview where Butler is asked to explain how the ideas expressed in *Gender Trouble* reverberate in the more recent work, Butler replies: "I do not try to connect the earlier work with the more recent work. I accept that there are connections, and it seems that you just found one. I tend to start again and again, which does not mean that each time, I start *de novo*. Maybe the same issues get raised in different contexts—gender, war, precarity, censorship—and they get folded into new contexts. But it was never my intention to produce a systematic or internally coherent system of thought. I continue to think with the resources I have". See Adriana Zaharijević, "In conversation with Judith Butler: Binds yet to be settled," *Filozofija i Društvo* vol. 27, no. 1 (2016): 106.
2. Annemie Halsema, Katja Kwastek and Roel van den Oever, *Bodies That Still Matter: Resonances of the Work of Judith Butler* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2021), 10. All parenthetical references in the text are to this volume.
3. On Butler's early articles, see Jules Gleeson, "Judith Butler: The Early Years," *JSTOR Daily*, June 19, 2019, <daily.jstor.org/judith-butler-the-early-years/>
4. Judith Butler, "Variations on Sex and Gender in Beauvoir, Wittig and Foucault," *Praxis International* 5:4 (January 1986): 508, cited in ibid.
5. For such criticisms of Butler's work, see Martha C. Nussbaum, "The Professor of Parody: The hip defeatism of Judith Butler," *The New Republic*, February 22,1999, <newrepublic.com/article/150687/professor-parody> and Catharine A. MacKinnon, "Points against Postmodernism," *Chicago-Kent Law Review* 75, no. 3 (2000): 687-712.
6. For more on Butler and race, see Charlotte Chadderton, *Judith Butler, Race and Education* (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018).
7. For more by Butler on populism, see Massimo Filippi and Enrico Monacelli, "Populisms not Populism: A Conversation with Judith Butler," *Scenari: Rivista Semestrale di Filosofia Contemporanea* 11 (2019): 315-326.
8. See Judith Butler and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Who Sings the Nation-State? Language, Politics, Belonging* (London, New York and Calcutta: Seagull Books, 2007).
9. For more on how Butler's work, particularly on self-narration and selfhood, can inform a critique of hegemonic practices in the psychological sciences with regard to trauma survivors, see Kurt Borg, "Narrating Trauma: Judith Butler on Narrative Coherence and the Politics of Self-Narration," *Life Writing* 15, no. 3 (2018): 447-465.
10. Judith Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), 136.
11. Ibid., 100.
12. For a book-length analysis that complements some of the intentions of this chapter, but that adopts a feminist Foucaultian outlook to study therapeutic practices as swaying between practices of normalising self-policing and self-creative practices of the self, see Helen O'Grady, *Woman's Relationship with Herself: Gender, Foucault, and Therapy* (London & New York: Routledge, 2005).
13. Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?* (London and New York: Verso, 2009), 33.
14. For more on the blooming literature on the ethics and politics of care and vulnerability, see Victoria Browne, Jason Danely, and Doerthe Rosenow (eds.), *Vulnerability and the Politics of Care: Transdisciplinary Dialogues* (New York: Routledge, 2021), Estelle Ferrarese, *The Politics of Vulnerability* (New York: Routledge, 2018), Erinn C. Gilson, *The Ethics of Vulnerability: A Feminist Analysis of Social Life and Practice* (London: Routledge, 2014) and Maurice Hamington and Michael Flower (eds.), *Care Ethics in the Age of Precarity* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota

Press, 2021).
15. Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself*, 136, cited in this volume, 114.
16. This is the title of an interview Butler gave in 2015, recaping the themes found in *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly.* See Judith Butler, "Demonstrating Precarity: Vulnerability, Embodiment, and Resistance," *Los Angeles Review of Books*, March 23, 2015 <lareviewofbooks.org/av/demonstrating-precarity-vulnerability-embodiment-resistance/>
17. A book-length engagement with some of the themes explored in this chapter, centering on Arendt's political thought, is found in Cavarero's latest monograph. See Adriana Cavarero, *Surging Democracy: Notes on Hannah Arendt's Political Thought*, trans. Matthew Gervase (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2021 [2019]).
18. For Butler's direct engagement with Cavarero, see Butler, "'Who Are You?'" in *Giving an Account of Oneself*, 30-40 and especially Judith Butler, "Leaning Out, Caught in the Fall: Interdependency and Ethics in Cavarero," in *Toward a Feminist Ethics of Nonviolence: Adriana Cavarero, with Judith Butler, Bonnie Honig, and Other Voices*, eds. Timothy J. Huzar and Clare Woodford (New York: Fordham University Press, 2021), 46-62. For Cavarero on Butler, see Adriana Cavarero, "The Vulnerability of the Helpless," in *Horrorism: Naming Contemporary Violence*, trans. William McCuaig (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009 [2007]), 20-24 and Adriana Cavarero, "Judith Butler and the Belligerent Subject," trans. Anne Tordi, *Annali d'Italianistica* 29 (2011): 163-170. For scholarship on the relation between Butler and Cavarero, see Olivia Guaraldo, "Thinkers that Matter: On the Thought of Judith Butler and Adriana Cavarero," *AG About Gender: International Journal of Gender Studies* 1, no. 1 (2012): 92-117, Paul A. Kottman, "Translator's Introduction," in *Relating Narratives: Storytelling and Selfhood*, trans. Paul A. Kottman (London and New York: Routledge, 2000 [1997]), vii-xxxi, Tuija Pulkkinen, "Judith Butler's Politics of Philosophy in *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly*: Arendt, Cavarero, and Human 'Appearing' and 'Plurality,'" *Redescriptions: Political Thought, Conceptual History and Feminist Theory* 21, 2 (2018): 128-147 and Tuija Pulkkinen, "Vulnerability and the Human in Judith Butler's and Adriana Cavarero's Feminist Thought: A Politics of Philosophy Point of View," *Redescriptions: Political Thought, Conceptual History and Feminist Theory* 23, 2 (2020): 151-164.
19. Judith Butler, *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly* (Massachusetts and London: Harvard University Press, 2015), 207, cited in this volume, 145.
20. For more by Cavarero on voice, see Adriana Cavarero, *For More Than One Voice: Toward a Philosophy of Vocal Expression*, trans. Paul A. Kottman (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005 [2003]).
21. For more on the notion of public happiness, see Lynne Segal, *Radical Happiness: Moments of Collective Joy* (London and New York: Verso, 2017).
22. Fiona Jenkins, "Sensate Democracy and Grievable Life," in *Butler and Ethics*, ed. Moya Lloyd (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015), 118-140.
23. Butler, *Notes*, 86, cited in this volume, 168.
24. Apart from the one in this volume, Butler has published an essay with this title in *Vulnerability and the Politics of Care*. Moreover, this essay has also appeared in French as "Ces corps qui comptent encore," *Raisons Politiques* 76, 4 (2019): 15-26.
25. Judith Butler and Athena Athanasiou, *Dispossession: The Performative in the Political* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013).
26. Judith Butler, *The Force of Nonviolence: An Ethico-Political Bind* (London: Verso, 2020). This book is adapted from Butler's 2016 Tanner lectures, 2018 Gifford Lectures and 2019 Cuming Lectures, among other sources.

27. This book is based on Butler's 2011 Mary Flexner Lectures.
28. See Judith Butler, "Vulnerability and Resistance," *MLA Profession Journal*, March 2014 <https://profession.mla.org/vulnerability-and-resistance/>, Judith Butler, "Rethinking Vulnerability and Resistance," Madrid, June 2014 <http://bibacc.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/Rethinking-Vulnerability-and-Resistance-Judith-Butler.pdf> and Judith Butler, "Rethinking Vulnerability and Resistance," in *Vulnerability in Resistance*, eds. Judith Butler, Zeynep Gambetti and Leticia Sabsay (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2016), 12-27.
29. An early synopsis from the publisher, in fact, suggested a continuity between these three books, as it described *The Force of Nonviolence* as being geared "[t]owards a form of aggressive non-violence—following on from Butler's *Precarious Life* and *Frames of War*." <www.giffordlectures.org/news/books/force-non-violence-ethico-political-bind> Another commonality between the three books is their publisher, *Verso*.
30. Judith Butler, "Preface (1999)," in *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York and London: Routledge, 1999 [1990]), xxvi [emphasis added].
31. This postscript appeared as an online blog post at the end the book was published. See "Judith Butler on Rethinking Vulnerability, Violence, Resistance," *Verso blog*, March 6, 2020 <https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/4583-judith-butler-on-rethinking-vulnerability-violence-resistance>. This postscript draws on (and cites) some of the 'vulnerability and resistance' material which Butler had been exploring in 2014, cited above.
32. Butler, *The Force of Nonviolence,* 193.
33. Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London and New York: Verso, 2004), 68. In a number of publications and lectures over the years, Butler has expressed further disagreements with Agamben's theorising, especially with his notion of 'bare life' to describe people living in destitution and in extreme precarity. See Butler, *Frames of War*, 29, Butler, "Vulnerability and Resistance" and Butler, "Rethinking Vulnerability and Resistance," 26. For more discussions on Butler's disagreements with Agamben, see Elena Loizidou, *Judith Butler: Ethics, Law, Politics* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 109, Ariadni Polychroniou, "Towards a Critical Reconstruction of Modern Refugee Subjectivity: Overcoming the Threat-Victim Bipolarity with Judith Butler and Giorgio Agamben," *Open Philosophy* 4, no. 1 (2021): 252-268, Birgit Schippers, *The Political Philosophy of Judith Butler* (New York and London: Routledge, 2014), 114 and James Stanescu, "Species Trouble: Judith Butler, Mourning, and the Precarious Lives of Animals," *Hypatia: A Journal of Feminist Philosophy* 27, no. 3 (2012): 567-582. For an essay that refers to how Butler and Spivak articulate their disagreements with Agamben's notions of bare life and sovereignty, see Thomas F. Thierney, "Book Review: *Who Sings the Nation-State? Language, Politics, Belonging* by Judith Butler and Gayatri Spivak," *Administrative Theory and Praxis* 30, no. 2 (2008): 269-278. Stephen Ross' 2017 article is a notable exception in this literature, since rather than a disagreement between Butler's notions and Agamben's, it bewilderingly claims that the notions of precarity and dispossession that Butler develops with Athanasiou in their dialogue "[emerge] directly out of" and "are firmly anchored in Agamben's account of *homo sacer*." See Stephen Ross, "The Secret Agency of Dispossession," Études britanniques contemporaines (online), 53 (2017) <journals.openedition.org/ebc/3739>.
34. Butler had made a similar argument on precariousness in *Frames of War*: "Normatively construed, I am arguing that there ought to be a more inclusive and egalitarian way of recognizing precariousness, and that this should take form as concrete social policy regarding such issues as shelter, work, food, medical care, and legal status." See Butler, *Frames of War*, 13.