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VERSION

AM (Accepted Manuscript)

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REPOSITORY RECORD

Lloyd, Moya S.. 2019. “Towards a Cultural Politics of Vulnerability: Precarious Lives and Ungrievable Deaths”. figshare. https://hdl.handle.net/2134/15589.

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[7,507 words]

Towards a *Cultural* Politics of Vulnerability:

Precarious Lives and Ungrievable Deaths

Moya Lloyd

For a long time now I have been interested in what I see to be a particular tension in the work of Judith Butler. This is the tension between her explicit commitment to producing 'ontology itself as a contested field' by exposing how particular ontological claims are constructed and then circulate (Butler in Meijer and Prins 1998: 279; see also White 2000) *and* Butler's own unacknowledged ontological presuppositions. In previous work I have explored this tension in terms of the relation between agency and performativity-as-citationality in order to raise questions about Butler's approach for an understanding of political intervention and change (Lloyd, 2007a). Here my focus is somewhat different. I am interested in the ethics that Butler has begun to develop in writings such as *Precarious Life*, which will be my main focus, *Undoing Gender* and *Giving an Account of Oneself*. In short, this is an ethics, indeed a potentially global ethics, that issues out of a common human experience of vulnerability, and particularly vulnerability to violence. What interests me are the ontological assumptions that ground this ethics.

My argument is two-fold: first, that Butler's account of ethics relies upon an idea of the ek-static subject that itself depends upon an *unproblematized* and *unexamined* ontological claim concerning the desire for existence; and, second, that even at those moments when Butler attempts to rethink this desire in social terms, she does not go far enough. This is because, Butler fails to engage adequately with the historicity of the social; that is, with the historical practices that constitute the social.

I have an additional reason for exploring Butler's work on ethics. As a thinker who in 2000 confessed to 'worrying about the turn to ethics' on the grounds that 'ethics displaces

from politics' (Butler in Butler and Connolly 2000: 5), I am interested in whether this worry has dissipated or whether Butler's attitude towards ethics and politics (and, specifically, the relation between them) has altered. So I will spend some time towards the end of this paper considering how Butler appears to conceptualise the connection between ethics and politics in the texts published after 2000.

Mourning and Politics

Precarious Life, published in 2004, contains a series of essays in which Butler reflects on politics in the aftermath of the events of 11 September 2001 ('9/11'). In particular, she is concerned with the political opportunity that was lost when instead of attempting to 'redefine itself as part of the global community' the US 'heightened nationalist discourse, extended surveillance mechanisms, suspended constitutional rights and developed forms of explicit and implicit censorship' as public criticism came to be all but silenced (Butler 2004a: xi). [1] So what was the lost political opportunity in question? It was, Butler asserts, a chance to acknowledge the fact of human interdependency (that my life depends on 'people I do not know and may never know'); to reflect on the relation between human vulnerability and violence; and to consider 'what, politically, might be made of grief besides a cry for war' (2004a: xii). 9/11, that is, furnished an occasion on which to 'start to imagine a world in which violence might be minimized, in which an inevitable interdependency becomes acknowledged as the basis for a global political community' (Butler 2004a: xii-xiii). Although the US Administration eschewed this opportunity, Butler does not. In *Precarious Life*, she ponders, to borrow from the book's subtitle, 'the powers of mourning and violence'.

Butler's interest in grief and mourning is not new. It is explored in detail, for instance, in *Antigone's Claim*. Here, drawing on arguments first advanced in *Gender Trouble*, and developed in *Bodies that Matter* and *The Psychic Life of Power*, she explores how heteronormative sexuality works to restrict the public expressions of grief amongst non-

normative sexual minorities. Moreover, via the story of Antigone, Butler tackles the issue of what happens when against the edict of the state an individual (Antigone) attempts publicly to mourn for a person deemed ungrievable, unmournable by the state and indeed, whose very body it constructs as unburiable. (Recall that Creon forbids the burial of Polyneices.) In the essay 'Violence, Mourning, Politics', contained in *Precarious Life*, Butler extends this analysis of mourning in new directions. She not only considers how conventions or norms of mourning are shaped by power relations (a thesis already encapsulated in her arguments in *Antigone's Claim* and elsewhere).[2] She now speculates about how the experience of mourning might open up 'another kind of normative aspiration within the field of politics' (Butler 2004a: 26); specifically, an opportunity for rethinking politics, and particularly international politics, in a less aggressive, more ethical, mode. In saying this it is important to be aware that Butler is not interested in developing an account of grief or mourning *per se.* She is interested in them only because they expose the precariousness of life and our vulnerability to the Other. Grief and mourning, that is, are symptomatic of the interdependent nature of human existence. So how does this argument work?

In the act of 'undergoing' grief and mourning, Butler surmises, 'something about who we are is revealed, something that delineates the ties we have to others', moreover 'that shows us that *these ties constitute who we are*, ties or bonds that compose us' (2004a: 22, my emphasis). It is not only that loss makes a 'tenuous "we" of us all' (Butler 2004a: 20) since at some time we will all experience the loss of someone (through death, or simply through separation). It is not even that loss and vulnerability are effects of 'being socially constituted bodies, attached to others, at risk of losing those attachments, exposed to others, at risk of violence by virtue of that exposure' (Butler 2004a: 20). What is critical is that grief and mourning are forms of 'dispossession' (Butler 2004a: 28): when loss occurs, that is, 'I think I have lost "you" only to discover that "I" have gone missing as well' (Butler 2004a: 22).[3]

Loss reveals the subject's dependence on an other for its own sense of self and thus for its continued existence. With the dispossession that follows the loss of the other, a transformation in the self takes place. I am no longer what I was. It is precisely at the moments when one body is undone by another – and for Butler the body is central to her conceptualization of vulnerability since it is the body that exposes us or opens us up to the other: to their gaze, their touch, their violence (Butler 2004b: 21) – that human existence is explicitly exposed as one of interdependence. Vitally, it is this porosity to the other (a corporeal porosity) that is also the source of an ethical connection with the other.

Although grief is often assumed to be privatizing, Butler demurs. She argues that actually, mourning 'furnishes a sense of political community of a complex order' by foregrounding 'the relational ties that have implications for theorizing fundamental dependency and *ethical responsibility*' (Butler 20004a: 22, my emphasis). Loss exposes the fact that the one thing that all humans share is a physical dependence on other humans for their survival. Clearly violence – individual or state-sponsored; pre-emptive or retaliatory – is one of the principal means by which that survival is put at risk. In order to counter such violence, and to acknowledge ethically the fact of our being 'invariably in community' (Butler 2004a: 27) with the other, what Butler suggests is the development of a 'point of identification with suffering itself' (2004a: 30). Instead of denying human vulnerability, in order to recognize it, losses must be grieved. The difficulty is, of course, that not all human lives are deemed to be worthy of grief; indeed, not all deaths count as deaths deserving public acknowledgement. It depends on the social norms regulating the scene of recognition (Butler 2005). Bearing this in mind, from an ethical perspective identifying with suffering has to be allied, for Butler, with a certain critical reflexivity about the ways in which particular lives figure as more vulnerable or more valuable than others; in short, as more human than others (Butler 2004a: 30). Making grief into a resource for either ethics or politics invites the

question: ‘Who counts as human? Whose lives count as lives? … What *makes for a grievable life*?’ (Butler 2004a: 20).

It is Butler’s emphasis in *Precarious Life* on the regulatory production of the human and the kinds of normative violence that are operative in ranking who can be mourned or grieved, and more broadly, who counts, that I find most compelling. Butler marshals plenty of examples to demonstrate what she calls ‘a differential allocation of grievability’ at work in the world today. She compares the public grief ensuing in the US over the death of journalist Daniel Pearl with the *San Francisco Chronicle*’s refusal (on the basis that it would cause offence) to publish either obituaries or memorials for a group of dead Palestinian women and children killed by Israeli troops. She exposes how the unmournability of specific lives serves to dehumanise them and thus to effect a form of normative violence against them, a violence, that is, that cannot be seen as violence because we cannot see such lives as lives at all. Finally, she identifies how mourning as an act of nation building is predicated upon a process of ‘national melancholia’, wherein certain deaths are disavowed as deaths. Her point, of course, is not just that the norms defining who counts (in all the senses just noted: mournability, grievability, liveability and recognisability as human) are socially conditioned; it is also that such normatively-driven accounting also serves a variety of political purposes.

I am also persuaded by her contention that that the experience (both individual and collective) of mourning, might motivate people to act politically. Certainly grief at losing a son or daughter in the armed forces serving in Iraq since 2003 has galvanized parents to become active members of the antiwar movement on both sides of the Atlantic (McRobbie 2006: 85 n. 2). Take, for instance, Reg Keys of ‘Military Families Against the War’ who stood against Tony Blair in Sedgefield in the 2005 General Election, campaigning under the strapline ‘War-torn families unite’. Moreover, it is also clear that there are already many instances at work of an ethical or political identification with suffering of the kind that Butler

advocates. Butler herself cites two particularly potent examples. First, she explores how the 'shock, outrage, remorse and grief' produced by the circulation of photos of Vietnamese children being burned and killed by napalm, photos the US public 'were not supposed to see', was pivotal in turning the tide of public opinion against the Vietnam War (Butler 2004a: 150). The US public (or at least sectors thereof) identified with the vulnerability, indeed destruction, of the lives on view and expressed ethical outrage at their (continued) treatment. Second, she touches very briefly upon the activities of Women in Black as an example of feminist opposition to militarism. What is noteworthy about this network is precisely that the silent vigils it holds in cities throughout the world exemplify the very identification with suffering that Butler's ethics advocates: when women, that is, reflect on their own suffering and the suffering of other women who have 'been raped, tortured or killed in concentration camps, women who have disappeared, whose loved ones have disappeared or have been killed, whose homes have been demolished'.[4]

Butler, however, is not simply concerned with reflecting on the kinds of human accounting that prioritize certain lives and that negate particular deaths. She is positing an ethics of responsibility towards the other based on vulnerability. This account of vulnerability draws on arguments that Butler makes in *Psychic Life* about primary dependency and is, thus, intrinsically connected to the idea of ek-stasis that she deploys throughout her work. Obviously there is much that could, and should, be said about this ethics. I will restrict myself, however, to highlighting what I perceive to be two of its problems. The first concerns the ontological assumptions underpinning Butler's discussion of human vulnerability as it relates to the idea of ek-stasis. The second relates to Butler's understanding of the social, which I will argue is too thin.

Ek-static subjectivity

Butler's first treatment of the idea of ek-static subjectivity comes in *Subjects of Desire*, when she describes the relation between desire and self-consciousness in Hegel's *Phenomenology*. Like the myopic 'Mr. Magoo whose automobile careening through the neighbor's chicken coop always seems to land on all four wheels', ready to travel somewhere else to fail all over again (Butler 1999: 21), the journeying consciousness according to Butler is not a subject progressing neatly from one 'ontological place to another' on its way to journey's end. It is the narrative of a consciousness that is perpetually outside itself; the narrative of an 'ek-static' subject, a subject that, because negativity is 'essential to self-actualization', must 'suffer its own loss of identity again and again in order to realize its fullest sense of self' (Butler 1999: 13).

When Butler returns to ek-stasis in *Precarious Life*, which is the rendition that I am concerned with, she defines it as 'literally, to be outside oneself'. Helpfully, she furnishes various examples of what this means: 'to be transported beyond oneself by a passion, but also to be *beside oneself* with rage or grief' (Butler 2004a: 24). The movement outside the self that characterizes ek-stasis is, she surmises, a movement that is potentially transformative of the self. It is, to borrow a phrase from *Giving an Account of Oneself* (where Butler is describing recognition as a process of ek-stasis), the means 'by which I become other than what I was and so cease to be able to return to what I was' (2005: 27). The idea of being outside oneself also has a second related connotation: for it indicates that the self 'invariably loses itself in the Other who secures that self's existence' (Butler 2004b: 149). Otherness is, that is, constitutive of selfhood. In order to understand the significance of this idea for Butler's understanding of the vulnerability that she sees as fundamental to – indeed 'ineradicable' from (Butler 2004a: xiv) – human life and sociality, I want to reprise briefly the argument that she makes in *The Psychic Life of Power*. I have two reasons for doing so:

first, because it is here, I contend, that most of the co-ordinates of her increasingly complex account of ek-stasis are laid out and second, because it is this account that informs the discussion of primary vulnerability in *Precarious Life.* [5]

The context for Butler's discussion in *Psychic Life* is her articulation of a psychoanalytically-informed theory of subjectivity, a theory that I now want to sketch. There are three key elements to this theory. First, Butler begins by considering primary human dependency. Her argument is very simple: in infancy all subjects develop a 'passionate attachment' to those on whom they depend for life: If 'the child is to persist in a psychic and social sense', Butler notes, 'there must be dependency and the formation of attachment: there is no possibility of not loving, where love is bound up with the requirements for life' (Butler 1997: 8). Although this initial dependency, or 'primary passion', is not political 'in any usual sense' it is important for Butler principally because it 'conditions the political formation and regulation of subjects', becoming 'the means of their subjection' (1997: 7). Out of a 'desire to survive' (Butler 1997: 7) subjects are perpetually willing to submit to their own subordination.

Second, she highlights the role of foreclosure in the formation of the subject, specifically the foreclosure of certain kinds of passionate attachment or 'impossible' loves. 'If the subject is produced through foreclosure', she notes, 'then the subject is produced by a condition from which it is, by definition, separated and differentiated' (Butler 1997: 9). Far from being an autonomous subject, the psychic subject is thus a dependent subject, a subject that is produced in subordination and whose continued subordination is essential to its continued existence. While primary attachments are essential to the survival of the child, if the subject is to emerge fully then they must ultimately be disavowed. That is, the subject must disavow its dependency on the Other in order to become a subject (even though the impossible loves that it disavows continue to haunt it, threatening it with its own unraveling).

And so, some aspects of who we 'are' are pre-conscious: they are both unknown and unknowable to us.

The final element is her (Freudian) conception of melancholia, an idea already outlined in detail in *Gender Trouble* and developed in subsequent works. Melancholia, as Butler understands it, is the means by which a lost object instead of being let go of, as in mourning (though of course Freud ultimately drops the distinction between mourning and melancholia), is incorporated 'into the very structure of the ego' (Butler 1990: 57). Thus an act of identification takes place in which the melancholic subject incorporates the lost object into its own ego such that its ego is constituted by that identification, the result of which is the creation of 'a new structure of identity' in which certain qualities of the lost other are permanently internalized in the ego (Butler 1990: 58). In a particularly provocative and suggestive move in her earlier texts, Butler applies this process specifically to heterosexuality, contending that heterosexuality is based upon a similar melancholic process in which, because of a prior prohibition on homosexuality, lost homosexual love objects are incorporated into the ego and an identification set up with them. Hence the so-called 'never-never' structure of gendered identity (Butler 1990: 69) that recurs throughout her work: 'the "I never loved her, and I never lost her", uttered by a woman, the "I never loved him, I never lost him", uttered by a man' (Butler 1997: 138). In *Psychic Life*, however, Butler also links melancholia more specifically to the formation of conscience and guilt, to suggest that a subject's very capacity for reflexivity is itself an effect of disavowal, foreclosure and the installation of the other within the ego. What is critical here is that it is loss – and its survival – that is essential to the inauguration of the subject.

Together all of these elements suggest a self that is never quite knowable to itself because of what it must disavow, a process Diana Fuss captures nicely when she notes that '[b]y incorporating the spectral remains of the dearly departed love-object, the subject

vampiristically comes to life' (1995: 1). This is a self that is, moreover, always susceptible to subordination by any Other who promises to guarantee its survival or 'continued existence' (Fuss 1995: 7); and who through its potential to suffer loss is always potentially open to the transformations brought about by melancholia.

Butler does not simply limit her account of this ek-static process to the kinds of interactions humans have with other humans from birth. Subjectivity is equally an effect of encounters with the social world, broadly conceived. As Butler puts it in *Undoing Gender*: 'one's persistence as an "I" through time, depends fundamentally on a social norm that exceeds that "I", that positions that "I" ec-statically, outside of itself in a world of complex and historically changing norms' (2004b: 32). From this she concludes that 'in our very ability to persist, we are dependent on what is outside of us, on a broader sociality, and this dependency is the basis of our endurance and survivability' (Butler 2004b: 32). Indeed, the very fact that one comes into a world already configured by certain norms, that 'precede and exceed me' (Butler 2004b: 32) suggests that any sense of self must always already be a social self, an historically conditioned self, a self governed by the regulatory norms that determine what makes a culturally intelligible subject and what allows for a livable life. This accords with her argument in *Psychic Life* where she explores how the topography of the psyche is configured according to certain prevailing social norms, and is thereby configured according to the operations of power. [6]

If we relate the foregoing discussion to the concerns that motivate Butler in *Precarious Life*, we can see how the relation to the Other (widely understood) conditions the nature of the self that is formed, and how the social world itself impinges on, or more accurately constitutes subjectivity in particular, regulated ways. We can also thus, discern a site of critique: against the norms that limit who counts. A conundrum nevertheless remains. If, as Butler writes, '*the ec-static character of our existence is essential to the possibility of*

persisting as human' (2004b: 33), since we depend on things external to us (others, norms and so on) in order to be, then what is it about relationality, ek-stasis or our vulnerability to the other, that would lead us to a non-violent encounter with them rather than to a course of self-preservation whatever the cost? What is it in the experience of vulnerability, in other words, that might lead us to treat the Other, indeed any Other wherever and whomever they are, as deserving an ethical response from us, moreover a response that reveals our own potential vulnerability at their hands? To try to make sense of these questions, it is necessary, I think, to return to *Psychic Life*.

Butler's debt to Spinoza

There is a paradox at the heart of *The Psychic Life of Power* that I have always found slightly perplexing. This is Butler's debt to Spinoza.[7] *Psychic Life* is a book that seeks to explain its own paradox, the paradox of subjection. Deriving from Foucault's notion of *assujetissement*, this is the contention that the subject depends for its existence upon its continued subordination by power. Why, Butler wants to know, is this subject 'passionately attached' to the conditions of its own subjection? Or, as she puts it, 'What is the psychic form that power takes?' (Butler 1997: 2) Part of her answer, and the part I want to dwell on here, is that the desire for its continued subjection by power is the result of 'a *prior* desire for social existence' (Butler 1997: 19, my emphasis) or what Spinoza called the *conatus*, the contention that 'desire is always the desire to persist in one's own being' (Butler 1997: 28; see also Butler 2004b: 32 and Spinoza 1955 [1677]: 136). There is, of course, something deeply problematic about this debt to Spinoza, for as Butler recognizes in *Subjects of Desire*, the Substance of which the *conatus* is an attribute is a 'metaphysical' substance (1999: 12). Furthermore, in *Psychic Life*, she observes that Spinoza promotes a 'metaphysical monism' (Butler 1997: 28). The Spinozan desire for existence is a metaphysical desire; a desire that transcends culture, language and politics. And so she proposes in *Psychic Life* to 'recast' this

metaphysical idea as a 'more pliable notion of social being', rendering it as 'something that can be brokered only within the risky terms of social life' (Butler 1997: 28). It is here that the tension noted at the beginning of this chapter (between Butler's deconstruction of particular ontological claims and her own ontological assumptions) enters. For while the terms by which persistence – or survival – are made possible are *social* terms, that is norms that are the contingent effects of specific power relations, the desire for existence itself as she deploys it appears not to be. This is clear from her characterization of it. The desire for existence is, she notes, a desire that is 'exploited by regulatory power' (Butler 1997: 19); a desire with the 'capacity' to 'be withdrawn and to reattach' under different modes of subjection (Butler 1997: 62); a 'desire to survive, "to be"' that is a 'pervasively exploitable desire' (Butler 1997: 7). For desire to be exploited – or exploitable – by power implies, of course, that it pre-exists power and is thus not one of its effects. Likewise, the notion that desire can withdraw and reattach suggests also that it a substance with capacities independent of power. Truncating an argument developed at more length elsewhere (Lloyd 2007b), it means that the desire for existence appears to operate as an *a priori* universal that transcends and/or precedes culture and society.

It would be wrong, in my view, to see this emphasis on Spinoza's *conatus* as so much detritus in her thought that is eventually vacuumed away, to be replaced by a more resolutely constructionist idea of desire. Rather the 'desire to survive', as she often terms it, is an idea that persists into her most recent work. In *Undoing Gender*, for instance, she explicitly claims that 'the Spinozan *conatus* remains at the core of my work' (Butler 2004b: 198), explaining in a later essay in the same volume both what excited her about his work, namely that 'the extrapolation of emotional states from the primary persistence of the *conatus* in human beings' and why it was so important to her: it allowed for 'a form of vitalism that persists even in despair'(Butler 2004b: 235). Moreover, her increasing emphasis on what I call the

'politics of survival' is predicated, in my view, on this idea, albeit mediated through Hegel's understanding of desire as the desire for recognition. The crucial point is that similar problems to those found in *Psychic Life* – of attributing the desire to exist with certain qualities *prior* to its imbrication in power relations – are carried over into this later work. For here what interests Butler is the way that social norms of recognition are configured such that the desire 'to persist in one's own being' is denied to certain individuals (Butler 2004b: 31). In other words, it is the norms of recognition that she subjects to critical scrutiny *not* the desire for existence as such. As with her earlier discussion, Butler never interrogates the 'status' of this Spinozan precept (Chambers 2003: 147). She thus continues to use it as an explanation for the paradox of subjection (why the subject accepts its own subordination by power) and, by extension, a politics of survival. But now, she also appears to deploy it as an explanation for an ethics of responsibility towards the other. What, therefore, is relation between the desire for existence and the idea of a non-violent relation with the other?

A partial answer is perhaps supplied in *Undoing Gender*, when Butler notes that for Spinoza 'This [conscious and persistent] being desires not only to persist in its own being but … to live in a world in which it both reflects the value of others' lives as well as its own' (2004b: 235). If, when Butler takes over Spinoza's idea of the *conatus*, she also takes over his idea of a dualistic ethics where ethical or 'virtuous actions' can be sub-divided into two types, those arising from tenacity or '*animositas*', that is 'the desire whereby every man strives to preserve his own being' and those from 'highmindedness' or '*generositas*', that is, 'the desire whereby every man endeavours … to aid other men and unite them to himself in friendship' (Spinoza, 1955 [1677]: 172-3), then there is a possible explanation for the ethical relation to the other that she envisages. This is one where, as for Spinoza, the 'virtuous person does not merely pursue private advantage, but seeks to cooperate with others' (Garrett 1995: 872). There is some reinforcement for this view when in a conversation with William Connolly,

discussing the possibilities of a 'new sense of ethics' that might emerge from ek-static relationality, Butler notes that this new ethics 'involves paradoxically, both a persisting in one's being (Spinoza) and a certain humility, or a recognition that persistence requires humility, and that humility, when offered to others, becomes a generosity' (Butler in Butler and Connolly 2000: 5-6). Whether the desire for existence and the generosity that Butler alludes to are two distinct qualities or whether, as critics have suggested of Spinoza, cooperation with the other ultimately reduces to an act of self-preservation guided by the belief that assisting the other guarantees one's own survival (an ethical egoism), is a moot point. Either way, the idea of the *conatus* as universal and pre-discursive appears to be at the heart of Butler's ethics.

Why is this so significant? The justification that Butler offers for her efforts to critique the ontological is that ontological claims define what or who qualifies as real. Ontology is thus intrinsically connected, for Butler, with power. Ontological claims function to generate hierarchies, to subordinate, to exclude and to create 'domains of unthinkability' (Butler in Meijer and Prins 1998: 280). Contesting them is thus a way of contesting who counts as real – which persons, which kinds of lives and so forth. It is an expressly political move. The fact, therefore, that Butler deploys an ontological claim of her own *without contesting its validity or scope* is potentially problematic for according to the logic of her own argument such unproblematized claims work in the interests of power limiting who or what counts. Assuming rather than problematizing the ontological nature of the desire for existence means, for instance, that lacking such a desire becomes unthinkable. To construe the Spinozan *conatus* as a principle that pre-exists subjection, as Butler does, is thus to commit the very same theoretical error she accuses *inter alia* Lacan, Žižek, Foucault, and Kristeva of: that by siting a particular element or quality (be that the Imaginary, the Real,

heterogeneous bodily pleasures, or the semiotic) outside of culture, they effectively immunize that notion from critique and also, crucially, from political transformation.[8]

When Butler neglects to account for the 'discursive and social production' of the desire to exist in either *Psychic Life* (Chambers, 2003: 147) or her more recent work, she too places that idea beyond critique and outside of politics. This, in my view, is a mistake. What is required, instead, is an exploration of the desire for existence as a discursive construction or cultural practice operating according to and constituted by certain historically specific norms and power relations. This is necessary not only in order to be able to assess the potential costs (and benefits) of an ethics (or, indeed, an account of subjectivity) that takes this postulate as its starting-point. It is also necessary to overcome the limits that this assumed connection between the *conatus* (as an ontological presupposition) and ethics sets on our ability to think the possible. Here I want to turn my attention to my final concern. Earlier I noted that Butler proposed to 'recast' Spinoza's essentially metaphysical notion of the *conatus* into a 'more pliable notion of social being' (Butler 1997: 28). My question in what follows is whether Butler's understanding of the social would allow her to 'recast' this idea in such a way as to accommodate my demand for an account of the desire for existence that is able to acknowledge not just its discursivity but also its historicity. To set the scene, I briefly reflect on the link for Butler between ethics and politics.

Ethics and politics

In her introduction to the *Judith Butler Reader,* Sarah Salih surmises that one of the themes that 'may be said to characterize Butler's work as a whole … is the ethical impetus to extend the norms by which "humans" are permitted to conduct livable lives in socially recognized spheres' (2004: 4). Is it, in fact, judicious to read Butler's discussions of heteronormativity in *Gender Trouble* say, or her account of the resignificatory potential of hate-speech in *Excitable Speech*, in terms of such an ethics? Certainly both texts, in different ways, are

concerned with forms of normative violence that produce only certain subjects as viable and culturally intelligible, and their speech as publicly acceptable speech, but is it accurate to interpret this concern as an ethical rather than political concern? I would suggest not. Both texts, it seems to me, are fundamentally political texts, the only difference being that the former foregrounds a subversive politics while the advocates a resignificatory politics.

There is clear support for such an interpretation in the remark I reported earlier, where Butler declares her resistance to ethics on the grounds that it displaces politics. She elaborates thus: that a political approach takes 'the use of power as a point of departure for a critical analysis', a move that 'is substantially different from an ethical framework' (Butler in Butler and Connolly 2000: 5). This suggests to me that Butler would read her own work *prior to* 2000 as addressing *political* rather than ethical issues. But what of the statement itself? There is something slightly odd about. In setting up an opposition between ethics and politics, Butler *appears* to suggest that ethics is apolitical insofar as it is not inflected, conditioned, or underpinned by power relations. For a thinker whose work is draws on Foucault's this is a peculiar statement to make, for as he showed in his final writings, social norms shape in a variety of ways the kinds of ethical relations that are possible (as well as thinkable and allowable) with both self and Other. And, to be fair, Butler acknowledges as much with regard to Foucault, at least, not just in the conversation from which her remark is extracted but also in *Giving an Account of Oneself*. Given her expressed ambivalence towards ethical frameworks, what is to be made of her own recent foray into ethics? Does it testify to willingness to adopt an apparently apolitical position in order to think about self-other relations? Or, is the ethics that Butler articulates better thought of as an ethico-politics, or politicized ethics, that is, an ethical framework that takes power as its starting point?

Although for reasons of spatial economy I am unable to pursue this argument very far, I think her engagement with the work of Emmanuel Levinas is instructive here. When Butler

turns to Levinas she does so, she contends, in order to elaborate the significance of Levinas's idea of ethics 'in the context of today' (Butler 2004a: 140) There are two particular aspects of his thought that are relevant. She notes, through the idea of the face 'he gives us a way of thinking about the relationship between representation and humanization' and, in addition, he 'offers, within a tradition of Jewish philosophy, an account of the relationship between violence and ethics that has some important implications for thinking through what an ethic of Jewish non-violence might be' (Butler 2004a: 140). I want to pause briefly to consider the first of these claims. Instead of subjecting to critical scrutiny the idea of the face as the means by which others make ethical demands on us, Butler simply concurs with it. Although she disagrees with Levinas about the nature of the address the face makes (he sees it as accusatory; she does not), she seems to accept unquestioningly that it is on the basis of our 'primary susceptibility to the action and the face of the other, the full ambivalence of the unwanted address' that 'exposure to injury *and* our responsibility for the Other' are constituted (Butler 2005: 91). What she then does is show how Levinas's work lends itself to an exploration of how particular 'faces' are produced. And so Butler discusses how photographs in the *New York Times* of young Afghani women throwing off their burkas were used to 'humanize' those women for an American readership; their humanization being not a recognition of the agonies and pains they suffered during the US invasion and thus of the precariousness of their lives, but of their 'liberation' as they divested themselves of their repression, symbolised by their throwing off of their burkas. Their bare faces symbolizing, according to Butler, 'successfully exported American cultural progress' (Butler 2004a: 142). She also looks at how certain faces are produced as 'evil' – the faces of Osama bin Laden, Yasser Arafat and Saddam Hussein – and how this construction of them according to dominant cultural norms works to dehumanize them, and all like them (Butler 2004a: 141 f.).

It is, I propose, this same approach that has largely characterized to date her discussion of the relation between ethics and politics in general. She concentrates, that is, on exploring how power circumscribes the kinds of ethical encounters that take place – how, that is, existing normative frames operate to regulate and determine who counts (and how they count), as well as who is derealized in the process. At the same time, however, she appears to take for granted the existence of the ethical imperative, by which I mean the factor or principle that makes possible the ethical encounter. This is what happens with the idea of the *conatus* and the impulse of 'generosity' towards the other that arises from ek-stasis; it is also what happens when she accepts Levinas's idea of the face (the ethical demand of the other on the subject). On these occasions, therefore, Butler argues *as if* the ethical imperative is *apolitical* (because it is presented as prediscursive and, thus, as not predicated on power relations) and *as if* ethical encounters in determinate contexts are political (because they operate through power relations and normative violence). Although it would be wrong to dismiss Butler's concern with lived ethical conduct and how the norms that govern recognition operate differentially throughout society, as noted earlier, the dependence of her ethical theory on certain unexamined prediscursive assumptions needs to be addressed. Does Butler's work provide the resources to offer a plausible account of the discursive and social construction of the desire to exist (of desire 'recast', as it were)? My argument is that, ultimately, it does not. This is because of the impoverished conception of the social with which Butler works.

Social and Political

As Kirsten Campbell points out in relation to Butler's discussion of the Lacanian Symbolic, one of the difficulties with Butler's thinking here is that 'the "social", the "cultural", the "symbolic" and the "norm" are not clear and distinct conceptual categories' in her work' (Campbell 2002: 647). Indeed, Butler appears to use them all synonymously. What Campbell

locates as a problem with the idea of the Symbolic is, I think, a more extensive problem pervading both Butler's understanding of language and resignification and, more to the point here, her understanding of politics, ethics and emotions. One of the oppositions that sustains Butler's work is that between the social and/or cultural on the one hand, and *a priori* universals that transcend or precede culture and society, on the other. Although Butler's aim, as Laclau contends, may well be to expose these 'structural determination[s]', as he calls them, as culturally and historically contingent products (2000: 188), it is how she goes about this that is the issue. In this respect, it is not just that Butler's own work relies, as I have suggested, on certain universal ontological or metaphysical claims of its own. It is that her understanding of the social is too narrow and undifferentiated to do the work that she wants it to for it is insufficiently historicized. When Butler deploys the term 'social', whether in relation to norms, culture, or language, it signals a contingent effect circumscribed by power. What she does not do, however, is pay sufficient attention to the *historical* conditions of emergence of these particular effects. She does not, that is, examine the historical practices that themselves generate the social.

So to demonstrate that the desire to exist is a thoroughly social rather than metaphysical desire (or, even, one simply affected by social arrangements) Butler must, in my view, do rather more than contend that the form that this desire takes depends upon the material context in which it is articulated, and that consequently shapes it or gives it a determinate meaning. She has to address the historicity of this idea. She has to examine the actual historical conditions of its emergence. She needs, in other words, to minimize what might be thought of her quasi-Derridean impulse to explore ontological conditions of possibility (in this case of an ethical relation with the other with, recall, the capacity to reconfigure international relations, and which is based on the abstract notion of a desire to exist) and to maximise the Nietzschean-Foucauldian imperative to examine precisely the

kinds of assumptions this desire is predicated upon, the discourses it is locked into, the norms that configure it (and that it configures) and the implications it has for particular practices.[9] Only then will she be able to create the potential for a critique of the desire for existence as a social artefact, and thus to open up a space for rethinking the relation between desire, existence, survival and the human. Only then will she be able to explore fully what I have tentatively called a *cultural politics* of vulnerability.

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[1] This was the time, recall, of Guantanamo detentions, the Patriot Act, and the establishment of the Office for Homeland Security.

[2] Intriguingly, Butler never considers how the act/experience of mourning itself may be conventional; she simply adopts Freud’s account of what takes place psychologically in mourning and melancholia.

[3] Arguably for Butler other emotions might be equally dispossessing, such as love, desire, anger and so forth, since all reveal one’s dependence on the Other. While I agree with this, in principle, what bothers me about Butler’s approach is that she does not consider how particular emotions themselves are culturally constituted. Indeed, as it stands, she seems to accord them a certain naturalism by assuming that they are experiences that we all have or are capable of having because we all experience love and desire and so on. She does not, that is, explore how particular emotions are produced as the effects of certain socially constituted

discourses, practices and power relations and that, as such, their shape might differ under different conditions and that those entitled to experience them might also be culturally determined. Indeed, she appears far more concerned with the human ontological condition (of dependence and vulnerability) than with what Chambers has called the 'ontic practices of emotion' (personal correspondence with the author). If this is the case, then it is precisely this concern that generates the tension in her work outlined at the outset of this chapter: between her deconstruction of ontological claims and her own unexamined ontological assumptions.

[4] 'Women in Black', http://www.womeninblack.net/mission.html (first accessed 25/04/06). Women in Black began in Israel in 1988 when women began protesting against Israel's Occupation of the West Bank and Gaza. The network subsequently spread. Since 1991 women in Belgrade have held weekly Women in Black New York have held weekly vigils since 1993.

[5] The links between *Psychic Life* and *Precarious Life* are manifold. There is the shared lexicon, the explicit anticipation in the former of an ethics based on the desire to be, the central place accorded to mourning and melancholia in both (see Lloyd 2007b).

[6] This argument is developed in more detail in Lloyd 2007b, chapter 4.

[7] This point is also developed by Chambers (2005), pp. 146-8.

[8] Recall that one of the strategies of argumentation that Butler deploys in *Gender Trouble*, and elsewhere, is to contend that all notions of the prediscursive are, in fact, constructions of discourse that are posited as prior to discourse. It is not the fact that she is inconsistent that bothers me; it is what consequences follow from this in terms of how she conceptualizes the relation between ethics and politics.

[9] On the opposition between Derrida and Foucault in relation to Butler, see Nealon (1996).