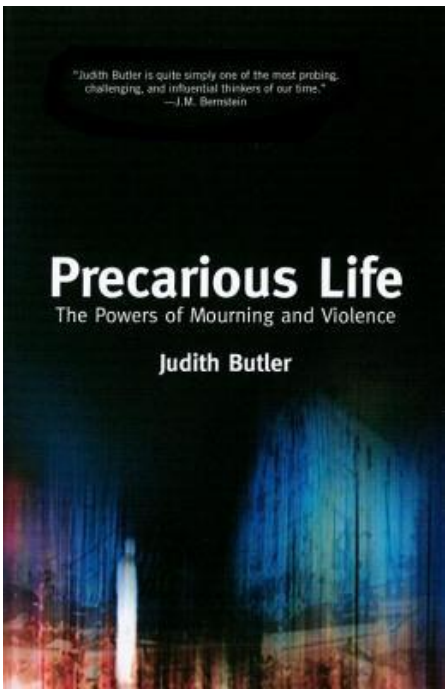

Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence

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In her most impassioned and personal book to date, Judith Butler responds in this profound appraisal of post-9/11 America to the current US policies to wage perpetual war, and calls for a deeper understanding of how mourning and violence might instead inspire solidarity and a quest for global justice.

Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence Details

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From Reader Review Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence for online ebook

Frank D'hanis junior says

WWLD? What would Levinas do?

Khush says

I think it is a great book. It achieves what it seeks. In this age of US versus Them, unfortunately, sane voices are curbed, ridiculed, and dubbed as naive across the globe. With thinkers like Butler, one can see what they are trying to do, and what truly motivates them. She tries to build things when most politicians want to erect walls by playing identity politics.

A few days ago, I read Dr. Jordan Peterson. I wonder what kind of conversation he will have with Butler. I can imagine him talking to Trump, though.

It is easy to convince when you start from the position of love, care, and concern. But who is listening to sane voices when bigotry has become the new norm.

Reading Butler makes me think that it is not too difficult to figure out how to live, love and be responsible in the world at any given moment.

Frances Wilde says

Chose to do my literature review on this and was completely blown away by Butler's case against the desensitisation used by the media, and case for moral relativism to be married with basic ethical practice of seeing the face of the Other for what it is- a face.

Clarissa Lunday says

This book has a lot of insights into how we see other people: who is legitimate and who is not. Judith Butler answers these by leading us into the complexities of 9/11 as well as anti-Semitism and the Palestine and Israel conflict. But these same principles can be used today, especially with the Syrian conflict, the killings of Black men by White cops, the view of women’s bodies, and the indefinite detention of immigrants. Read it.

Robert says

An intervention into the question of the human, and, more intensely, Bush-era politics and foreign policy.

This philosophical and theoretical text argues that the U.S. never "properly" grieved and mourned, but rather moved straight to lashing out, which created (and continues to create, I would argue, as others have, too) an incredible amount pain and suffering, and in the end did not help the U.S.'s mourning. Furthermore, Butler argues, the U.S. at the time of "9/11" (and the aftermath) had an opportunity to critically rethink itself -- the way it has been conducting itself -- as a military and economic global power. As we know, this was refused, and the U.S. chose to continue in its destructive ways. The text asks some important questions, which are still relevant now: "Who counts as human?" to "Why are only some lives grievable?" to "What do we lose in loss?" Here, I would like to quote a rather brilliant part of the text: "It is not as if 'I' exist independently over here and then simply loses a 'you' over there, especially if the attachment to 'you' is part of what composes who 'I' am. If I lose you, under these conditions, then I not only mourn the loss, I become inscrutable to myself. Who 'am' I , without you? When we lose some of these ties by which we are constituted, we do not know who we are or what to do. On one level, I think I have lost 'you' only to discover that 'I' have gone missing as well. At another level, perhaps what I have lost 'in' you, that for which I have no ready vocabulary, is a relationality that is composed neither exclusively of myself nor you, but is to be conceived of the tie by which those terms are differentiated and related" (22). I quote this to highlight one of the most valuable aspects of the book: relationality. Precarious Lives shows how we are in dense, yet fragile, relationality with others (many of whom are anonymous), and that we are "undone" by each other -- and in an unnumberal amount of ways. Indeed, life is precarious -- for us all. And there is nothing we can do about this situation, which becomes especially intense for those living on the borderlands of those who constitute the human. I argue that this important text can aid in the rethinking of how we live with each other and more. To be sure, Precarious Life is even more important today: the drone wars,the violence in Syria, the current refugee issues, and the rise of Trump. It is required reading for anyone doing political science, ethics, any field in the humanities, and, simply, anyone who desires to go deeper into the issues and action of yesterday and today. Sadly, I think, it will always be a book that we will need to return to -- given our global, international corporate, war-drive economy world we currently live in. But perhaps, as Butler leaves open, there is a way to re-imagine the world -- one more inviting, accepting and inhabitable for all.

Swathi Muthu says

The language was too abstract for me to understand her arguments.

Patrick says

A very useful book to be interrogated for responses to human vulnerability and political censorship, and that introduces topics for further research. To what degree IS the State open to analysis on the level of a true individual? Is one more various than the other?

Bárbara says

This is a very interesting book, although a bit dated. It compiles five essays Butler wrote on the first years after 9/11, commenting on the events as they were unfolding.

Stephanie Berbec says

With Butler, I could easily flip back to the beginning and read again. *Precarious Life*, written just after the events of 9/11 in response to trauma, heightened vulnerability, fear, aggression, and our subsequent engagement in perpetual war, remains a timely and necessary read. The book is premised on what has come to constitute a human being: namely, as that which counts as a liveable life and a grieveable death. Anyone, or rather, any*thing* that does not fall within those two categories, as a life worth living or a death worth grieving, is no longer regarded as human. In just five chapters, Butler confronts the rise in censorship within the media, public sphere, and the U.S. government, with particular emphasis on the harm of operating within binarism: that one is either for us or siding with the enemy, without possibility of a third way.

We move quickly—too quickly—from the experience of trauma and suffering to acts of aggression and violence. Butler asks, “what might be made of grief besides a cry for war?” The reality is that we don’t know what to do with grief. This is as much true for many of us individually as it is collectively true for the country as a whole. Butler addresses this in part by offering a psychoanalytic approach to understand why aggression so often follows the experience of loss. In doing so, she pulls from Levinas’ concept of the “face,” the notion that we can’t “will away” an Other because in doing so, we cease to be human. Which is to say, in our dehumanization of others, we are, in effect, dehumanizing ourselves. Zizek would affirm: we’re okay with the Other, insofar as he doesn’t intrude. That others around the world suffer extreme violence remains of little concern to us—so long as said violence does not affect us. Indeed, our own violence, that which we inflict on others, is justified as an act of self-defense, thus an act of noblity.

Butler highlights two current examples where we see the aforementioned themes at work: indefinite detention at Guantanamo Bay and anti-semitism, in light of the Israeli/Palestinian conflict. With the former, pulling from Foucalt’s notion of sovereignty and governmentality, we see that Guantanamo Bay operates within a suspension of the law that simultaneously suspends the political status of the detainee. They are not even considered “prisoners,” much less human. The example of anti-semitism provides Butler’s perspective of an attempt to “quell public criticism” by censoring speech in the public sphere so as not to offend. This particular section is also a testament to the operative binarism of being with us or against us; Butler, herself a Jew, has much to say on this point and remains hopeful for the potential and necessity of critical speech and thoughtful dialogue in the public sphere.

As Butler forewarns in the preface, there is no happy ending or resolution. Her final chapter is only an approach toward a non-violent, Levinasian-inspired, ethics that is based on the precariousness of life. In sum, she writes in hopes that we might begin to think both critically and publicly about the collective experience of trauma and the effects of war. *Precarious Life* is a call to responsibility, a call to work toward becoming political in the truest sense of the term.

Kyle Williams says

"Let's face it. We're undone by each other. And if we're not, we're missing something." (23)

Joel says

"violence, mourning, politics" chapter was very very good; the rest was eh.

Kevin Jimenez says

I'll keep this short and simple since this book will serve as the primary framework for my theoretical analysis on precarity. Precarious Life was exceptionally researched and Butler is just phenomenal. Butler believes that certain modes of legality constituted through rule of law are used to justify the detaining of individuals despite not having any legal ground to do so. Governmentality effectively bypasses all systems of legality in our society because it serves as a mechanism for managing groups of people(s). Henceforth the "othering" of individuals becomes a normative measure in facilitating anyone labeled as an “enemy” to the state. In other words, the state holds the power over who is recognized and who is cast into the periphery.

P.S. Judith Butler is my new favorite theorist.

Karl Steel says

A strange book to read in 2009, as much of it concerns the limits of the sayable in public life (Chapter 1: "Explanation and Exoneration, or What We Can Hear") and the empty status of detainees ("Indefinite Detention"); Butler includes several remarks about "the shambles into which presidential address has fallen" (131) and the bloody dynamic of white men saving brown women from brown men (see: the moral justification for the Afganistan invasion). It's easy, then, to relegate Precarious Life to the status of a historical document, a set of primary texts for some future one writing an intellectual history the Bush II era [**HEY**: This is me coming back to this review in 2012, post OWS, and with indefinite detention ongoing. Looks as though I spoke too soon!]. Nonetheless, some points still stick: given what AIPAC did to Freeman, the chapter on "The Charge of Anti-Semitism," as repetitive and obvious as it is, still needs to be said (and, as an awful bonus, the first figure she discusses is Lawrence Summers (!), who on 9.17.2002 conflated opposition to the policies of Israel w/ antisemitism: I can only hope he's not advising our current president on foreign as well as financial policy).

Chiefly useful to me for, first, for its *excellent* discussion of the Levinasian "face," which, *pace* the reviews below, I found clear enough for classroom use: I've never quite understood the impossibility of killing the Other until now [basically, the Other as Other exceeds all assimilation to Self, all representation, all understanding; if a self believes he or she has killed an Other, he or she believes the Other to be mastered, contained, delimited, which is to say, that the killed Other has not be met AS an Other:].

I've also made much use of the chapter "Violence, Mourning, Politics," about which I've written:

> Judith Butler has written about the exclusions that mark certain lives as “grievable” and exclude others from the community of concern. “Each of us,” she writes, “is constituted politically in part by virtue of the social vulnerability of our bodies.” Those not recognized as belonging to the community have no social vulnerability. They are not recognized as vulnerable insofar as they are not recognized as belonging to the community of those whose lives matter and thus who are understood as being fully alive. They, who “cannot be mourned because they are always already lost, or, rather, never ‘were.’” They possess only what Agamben terms “bare life,” a life included within the boundaries of a meaningful life or death only in its complete vulnerability, which is, simultaneously, not a vulnerability, since these unmournable lives cannot be recognized as being wounded, since no one feels any outrage or

> sense of shared suffering for what they suffer. Thus, “if violence is done against those who are unreal...from the perspective of violence, it fails [from the perspective of the dominant community:] to injure or negate those lives since those lives are already negated.” This exclusion of some—most—lives from the community of sympathy helps constitute the human, for, as Butler writes, “I am as much constituted by those I do grieve for as by those whose deaths I disavow.” Butler emphasizes that therefore obituaries should be understood as acts of community formation; as Chloë Taylor insisted in a recent reading of Butler, the obituary should also be understood as an act by which animals lives become forgotten. After all, no casualty list ever records massacres of beasts; they have no memorial.

This of course isn't the whole picture, since it doesn't get at the political realm she imagines founded on a more inclusive sense of mutual vulnerability. Note also that I'm told that Bryan S. Turner has dealt with much of these matters already: it would help, then, if Butler had made reference to his work.

Michael says

There are a few great ideas in this book, but they could have been expressed in about 3 pages. Or else she could have taken these great ideas and expanded them into an entire book. I was expecting more than it delivered.

Katrinka says

The book probably would have been more striking had I read it when it first came out-- and hence, not already heard (and/or made), in various forms, many of the awesome arguments Butler employs. Absolutely worth it, though.

Rui Coelho says

This book reflects on the world after 9/11. It documents the return of the extra juridical power of sovereignty (as conceived by Foucault) and its impact on the precarization of life (naked life). As a response to this attack on life, Butler advocates an ethical responsibility focused on mutual-recognition and visibility of the excluded, even if the only way to do it is to mourn them.
Great to read along with Butler's Undoing Gender or Agamben's State of Exception.

Abby Brown says

Precarious Life is a book comprised of five essays written by Judith Butler and published in 2004. These essays were written in response to United States (US) government actions and actions of the general US public following plane bombings of the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001. Most North Americans over thirty will remember with vivid accuracy their location the time of these bombings. Either we heard on the radio or we saw on the television the planes crash, people jumping, or towers imploding. Perhaps we remember how we walked around in shock that day. But Butler challenges readers to think beyond this

Western starting-point in history, and she questions whether the country was allowed to properly grieve these events - being vulnerable to understanding violence committed around the world many times perpetuated by the United States on others. She states: "our own acts of violence do not receive graphic coverage in the press, and so they remain acts that are justified in the name of self defense, but by a noble cause, in name of terrorism". (Butler 2004:6). She believes grief is one space that shows we are connected to others, and the grieving process, coupled with vulnerability, can be a time of moving towards understanding the ideal-type vulnerable human. Later in the book, she mentions how productive and peaceful coalitions could be formed but they would have to avoid concepts of universality saying: "Such a coalition would have to be modeled on new modes of cultural translation and would be different from appreciating this or that position or asking for recognition in ways that assume we are all fixed and frozen in our various locations or subject-positions" (ibid. 47). She closes the book with an essay echoing the book's name "Precarious Life". She uses philosopher Emmanual Levinas' description of the precariousness of the other to talk about representation of humans and violence (ibid. 134). She puts out a call to the humanities discipline: "If the humanities has a future as cultural criticism, and cultural criticism has a task at the present moment, it is no doubt to return us to the human where we do not expect to find it, in its frailty and at the limits of its capacity to make sense" (ibid. 151).

Nicole Gervasio says

Butler's animating question in *Precarious Life* is "Who counts as human?" Within a global, neoliberal political economy and international mass media obsessed with identifying every cultural catastrophe with a death toll, Butler observes that not all lives count as lives. In order to have had a life, the dead must have been recognized as human. However, not all *homo sapiens* ascend to the subject-category of the human-- or, at least, that's the story told by American politicians and mass media outlets.

This short book collects five of the famous philosopher's essays on the latent possibilities in shared, collective grief as a stimulant for positive social and political change. Her case studies include 9/11, Guantánamo Bay, anti-Semitism, and the Israel/Palestine controversy. Part of her aim is to advocate for a loosening of restrictions on what gets to be termed "politically correct" public speech for intellectuals and social critics; in strengthening new strictures around what can and cannot be said publicly, academia misguidedly presumes that the liberal left shares a single, homogeneous ethical programme. In doing so, academia also inadvertently sides with and replicates a repressive kind of state censorship that seeks to limit public discourse. At the same time as Butler calls for the relaxation of boundaries on public speech, she calls for the *tightening* of definitions for political categories like "terrorist," which automatically dehumanize those subsumed within its bounds and increasingly require very little verification or proof of criminality.

The logic goes that if the dead are labeled 'terrorists,' they are never seen to have lived a life; instead, their deaths preceded a devalued lifetime wasted in trafficking social death. 'Terrorism' is one categorization by which humans lose their rights to injurability, vulnerability, and grievability. But at the same time, the U.S. labels non-national others "terrorists" without recognizing that the state itself is hypocritically acting on neo-terrorist impulses, by lawlessly evaluating the worth and viability of certain (racialized, denationalized, non-secularized) lives without restrictions. She compares this phenomenon with various neocolonial practices, such as Israel's oppression of Palestinians, England's sequestration of Irish Catholics, and African National Congress racist practices in apartheid South Africa: "The use of the term, 'terrorism,' thus works to delegitimate certain forms of violence committed by non-state-centered political entities at the same time that it sanctions a violent response by established states" (88).

Moreover, the increasingly common instinct to ascribe the category of "terrorist" to certain racialized and denationalized others without strict proof of crime is widening the parameters of a reckless form of state sovereignty beyond reproof. Butler uses the example of Guantánamo Bay, where the practice of "indefinite detention" has become commonplace; "detainees," another objectified, subhuman category like "terrorist," live and die in obscurity without any recognized human rights-- or with "trials" that are only nominal trials at best. Guantánamo signifies a site in which the state suspends its own normative regulations in order to extend its power infinitely.

Butler's greatest interventions in the field of modern philosophy in this book derive from Foucault (on governmentality and sovereignty) and Levinas (on "the face"). The latter is particularly relevant to perceiving "precarious life" as a mode of traumatized embodiment; in Levinas, "the face" is an abstraction for the difficulty of recognizing "the Other." Particularly the face of the Other howling in pain makes an "ethical demand" on its beholder; it requires the beholder to "waken to the precariousness of the Other's life," the vulnerability of his/her vitality, specifically by eliciting the inhuman through untranslatable, nonhuman, incomprehensible sounds (139).

Butler's ethical takeaway is fairly straightforward: all human lives ought to be valued as human lives. States and institutions, as well as individual human actors, should not have the right to subtract worth from any other humans' lives by objectifying and dehumanizing them through torture and detainment, even if they have committed heinous crimes against humanity. For as long as "we" (the First World, the West, any dominant group in power, really) withhold recognition of humanity along these lines, we arrest the development of our own individual progress towards humanity; in other words, we "radically imperil" our ability "to become human" so long as we foreclose the possibility of compassion in the midst of great trauma (100).

Lenore says

This is Butler at her best: lucid, graceful prose that takes to task constructs of what constitutes a liveable life and a greiveable death in American news media: "The task at hand is to establish modes of public seeing and hearing that might well respond to the cry of the human within the sphere of appearance, a sphere in which the trace of the cry has become hyperbolically inflated to rationalize a gluttonous nationalism..." Butler's final chapter in which she grounds her critique in Levinas's concept of "the face" is one of the most beautiful pieces of prose I've read in a long time, especially in the wake of her earlier, much less stylized work in poststructural/gender theory.

Butler is sometimes criticized for the breadth of her scholarship, but I think her eclectic background culminates in _Precarious Life_ to produce an impassioned, thoughtful response that necessarily speaks across disciplines. I especially urge people doing media studies to read this. It's much less didactic than a lot of stuff out there.

Natasha says

Judith Butler stuns again, academic prose written so eloquently, full of emotion that you forget that this draws from the events of 9/11. The precarity of life is always through face of the other and by relating back to work from Foucault, Agamben and Levinas, her political philosophy is meaningful, powerful and always

thoughtful. On page 22 she writes “who am I, without you?”, and just like that, she’s written every love story possible. Bravo Butler, as always you are my hero.
