

BUTLER, J. (2004) *PRECARIOUS LIFE: THE POWERS OF MOURNING AND VIOLENCE*. VERSO.

Preface

This all takes place right in the wake of 9-11 xi

our vulnerability was exposed; and fear and mourning are normal xi

she wants to suggest that patient political reflection is possible even after so horrible an attack xi

military violence and retribution is not necessary, and it means we have not mourned the right way xii

we can recognize our dependency on others; and that some are more subject to arbitrary violence than others; and that our First World privilege is shakable xii

we are not in permanent, total control xiii

the political vision she advocates is not utopian xiii

first essay is about censorship and intellectual critique xiii

those who sought to seriously understand the events were pilloried xiii

but such understanding is the right approach both strategically and morally xiv

we need another public culture where unexpected violence and reactive aggression are not accepted xiv

second essay psychoanalytic understanding of why aggression is our response to loss/vulnerability/being attacked xiv

national sovereignty, by its nature, tries to *deny* interdependence xiv

we define some lives as more grievable, and more human, than others xiv

third essay explores what it means politically to define some as more members of the human community than others – the Guantanamo prisoners are the focus

sovereignty gets to declare its own suspension [in a state of exception] xv

prisoners are not *subjects* of any sovereign [but they are *subjected* to power] xvi

Patriot Act regulates what can be said xvi

fourth essay explores how the charge of anti-Semitism can quell critique of Israel xvi

public sphere is constituted [circumscribed] by what cannot be said and shown xvii

certain ideas are rendered unsayable [and even unthinkable?] xvii

[seems so mild: her vision is just free speech and the Millian marketplace of ideas?]

fifth essay examines a non-violent ethics that understands how easily we can be killed xvii

Levinas: understanding this precariousness of life makes it easier to care about the other xviii

aggression does not disappear, it is the *matter* that ethical struggles are about xviii

we need to *see* the faces of the Other (and not present them as symbols of evil) – they must be in public view if we are to value others' lives more fully xviii

[why faces and not *voices*, as is usual in the study of Politics? – because of Levinas]

then we will be able to mourn their death, and this mourning will be a great resource for

better managing violence and aggression in our politics xviii

we have to have critical views to have dissent and debate [duh] xix

dissent is quelled by threatening to revoke one's status as a speaking being [i.e. one who speaks and is understood and taken seriously by others] xix

what is sayable should not be too narrowly constrained xx

critique is “central to any democracy” xx

to produce the public sphere is to control what appears and what is said and therefore what is seen and what is heard [very akin to R's *partage du sensible*] xx
[and by marking some as speaking outside of those bounds, we can revoke their membership in the polis]

1 – Explanation and Exoneration, or What We Can Hear

Post 9-11: media seen to be the “public voice,” and they are censoring intellectual critique 1
we are not examining the cause of the war, or justifying our aggression carefully 2
we are not allowed to critique our waging war, that would be deemed siding with the terrorists 2
any examination of the grounds of the conflict, i.e. its complex historical and political sources, is off limits 3
esp. any role that US foreign policy played in begetting the attacks 3
no dissent on the war allowed, which she overblows into a general devaluing of all dissent 4
consent is produced on the meaning of terms: terror, self-defense 4
we are defined as the victim, and so we can do whatever to retaliate 4
her point is that in the wake of an attack like 9-11, we construct a frame to understand violence: to condemn our attackers, to preclude certain kinds of questions, and to erect a moral justification for *our* violence 4
this frame decides what we can hear, what is coded as exoneration or explanation 5
we construct a personal pathology for the attackers, limit their agency to their own personal story 5
we refuse to situate those individuals in a wider history or politics 5
[As with Holland, I find this kvetching over the importance of the Bush/neocon years overblown – it was our worst selves personified by our worst leaders, being juvenile, macho, dumb, and ineffective, and it was quickly rejected – even by 2004 we were mostly done with Bush and his crew]

our own violence is justified, noble, and principled; we do not see – literally or figuratively – [the faces of] those we kill 6
no asking how it came to this, no openness to our own failings, the story begins on 9-11: we are the victim, and our acts are justified 6
we deem ourselves to be the only reasonable actor with autonomy; the rest is noise, we act unilaterally 7
we must de-center this first-person narrative we are stuck in, and instead understand ourselves as part of a global [*polis*], as interdependent with many, many others 7
to do so, we will need to understand the back story, to understand the many moving, interconnected parts that resulted in 9-11 8
this better way is both ethical and strategic 8
we also must avoid the other extreme, the unthinkingly critical claim that the US is evil and it got what it deserved 9
that still puts the US as the only subject, the only agent 9
but we must understand that there are many agents operating in a complex system, all of which played a role in producing 9-11 9
we must understand that there is a collective agency, a *collective responsibility* for 9/11 – and therefore there is a collective response that is called for 9
we are not the sole author of 9-11, nor is *al-Qa'ida* 10

no cause is sufficient, but many are necessary 11

i.e. there are lots of conditions (e.g. US imperialism), none of which *caused* the events, but which still needed to be there for the events to happen 11

de-centering ourselves can also help us see the situation through the eyes of others (e.g. Arabs), and this can help us flesh them out as fully human, as thinking and speaking beings, which will help us count their lives as full lives 12

currently we can't imagine [well, Giuliani can't imagine – but he's an idiot] applying the word *slaughtered* to both the 9-11 victims and the Palestinians killed by the Israeli government because our frame [well, Giuliani's myopic frame] won't allow it 12-14
we can't imagine those two victims being equally *victims* 14

so – for Butler:

the US needs to think about how its political investments help create a world of rage and violence 14

it needs to intervene more productively in global politics to produce more egalitarian conditions so that *al-qa'ida* becomes less likely 14

again with the complaint that voices of dissent were silenced, accused of being “with the terrorists” 15

[but not really, I mean Arundhati Roy did speak, and she was heard – it *is* on the record, and Butler did report it in a book published by Verso] 15

Roy was willing to ask: out of what system did bin Laden emerge? 15

there *is* an individual-and-collective responsibility for the existence of bin Laden 15

it is not just an “evildoer” who is entirely responsible for everything 16

but we are not allowed to ask about the conditions that gave rise to him [and yet it seems

we are – Roy was; I taught students in Geog 100 about the context...] 16

once we are armed with a better understanding of what actually happened, we can start to more effectively ask what role we want to play in the “relay of violence” 16

she hopes we can take stock of the world and participate in its social transformation toward justice 17

[I can't help conclude she is only imagining – or only able to imagine – the kindergentler foreign policy that Obama brought]

we should find and try those who are responsible [well, OK, BHO got one out of two] 17

this wayward military solution will just breed more violence, and it's dumb 17

so to do Butler's agenda in bold, we will have to see and hear beyond what we can currently [2004] see and hear, de-center ourselves from the narrative and our supremacy, and get to the root of the violence 18

we need another, radical vision of the future 18

[I can't imagine at all why one would call her vision radical, even if it goes so far as to be a kind of geopolitical social democracy (and there is only thin evidence it does) that's not all that radical. It sounds like she just wants more multilateralism abroad and more free speech and open debate at home. That makes her a liberal more than a social democrat.]

2 – Violence, Mourning, Politics

exposure to violence, mourning, loss can be a basis [a resource] for political community 19

the human is not a universal condition, it is a category, and we decide who counts as part of it and who doesn't 20

one way we know who counts as human is whether we grieve them when they die 20

loss and grieving is common to us, though not identical 20

exposure of our bodies to violence is common as well, though not equally distributed 20

our vulnerability to loss comes from our being socially constituted [from being members of a *polis*, which is what makes us human, for A]

loss, in this sense, is a loss of our *attachments* to others 20

so dealing well with loss and mourning is always a *political* activity 20

that does not mean forgetting or replacing those that are lost 21

instead we accept the loss, and accept that we are fundamentally changed; we need to *submit* to this change, we are fallen, then we go on, but as a different person, one who knows we are not in control fully [not autonomous, because we are not alone – we are in community with others to whom we are attached] 21

who am I without you [is the question mourning forces us to ask]? 22

in mourning, we understand that restoring the former order is not going to happen 22

the ties we make constitute *who we are*, so losing a tie changes who we are 22

this loss is therefore a question of truly feeling the extent to which we are in political community, it is a public [i.e. not a private-individual] question 22

it is a question of dependency, attachedness, and ethical responsibility to Others 22

in grief, we see the *thrall* that others hold us in; “we are undone by each other” 23

this is true of grief and desire both 23

the ties (of say sexuality [or parenthood]) are not *my* possession, it is a mode of being dispossessed, of being *for* another 24

[cf. Ag. *Use of Bodies*]

clearly individual rights do not capture the situation satisfactorily 24-5

and grief-with-loss can help reveal this inadequacy, reveal the extent to which we are connected to others, the extent to which the idea of autonomous individuals is just not a good way to understand how we live in the world 25

political community is wrought by speaking to another 25

autonomy is tricky, because it wants to claim total control for the agent 25

but each of us can never be fully in control: we are always vulnerable/beholden to others 26

so “autonomy” cannot pretend this vulnerability does not exist 26

my *self* is not there at the beginning, and then later I discover it; my self is constructed through the relations I make with others 27

[cf. Ag. *Use of Bodies*]

a struggle for autonomy has to be paired with a struggle for seeing ourselves as *in community*, and therefore not fully in control 27

demands are imposed on us by others; relations of interdependence and mutual vulnerability *are* a dimension of our lives, and we should admit them and be attentive to them 27

violence is one of these relations 27

and yet each of us is separate, not the same as others 27

there is a tension between autonomy and interdependence 28

my self is partly undone by a loss, and so therefore I am fundamentally social, made up of others; grief/mourning is the affect that alerts me to that 28

violence shows us we are vulnerable to an address from another [that is what 9-11 was, a violent interpellation] 29

we cannot deny this vulnerability (and pretend, instead, that we are fully in control) – we have to *attend* to it, work with it 29

grieving has to be done right, worked through, not cut off quickly 29

we cannot restore what was lost, we cannot obliterate the loss; we have to live with it as part of the new us 30

grief brings disorientation, suffering, unknowingness; but it also opens up a chance for a new understanding 30

one possibility is: a new order in which some lives are *not* more grievable than others 30

so that those others can be better protected, less casually killed 30

there is no human nature, but there is a common human condition of being given over to the other, and vulnerable to violence from that other 31

this exposure, this vulnerability, this being-laid-bare is a condition to which we must attend, it cannot be overcome 32

important to remember that this vulnerability is unevenly distributed in the world 32

and so we can effect an insurrection at the level of ontology, meaning we can redefine whose lives are real 33

if their lives are real, and therefore grievable they are harder to kill 33

the war on terror has 'derealized' a whole swath of people; their lives are not publicly grievable [of course they are grieved in private] 34

we know this ungrievability, because when we try to publicly grieve them and get a backlash 35

she says that dehumanization emerges at the limits of the discourse, the limits of what we can say/think/feel 36

for those whose lives are not real, they are not alive or dead, they are not publicly grievable 36

[i.e. they have no *bios*, they are only *zoe*]

they are not vulnerable, not common 36

Daniel Pearl is the example of a grievable life; he has a name 37

we cannot consider as dead [i.e. as having lost *bios*] those we have killed 37

[I think this is not that we are actively preventing recognizing deaths, it is more about the lack of a desire to recognize some deaths (or even a lack of knowledge that they died) – and an eager desire to mourn other deaths like Pearl that crowds out the desire to grieve the others]

this process, of choosing whom to grieve, is part of how the public sphere is constituted 37

it shores up a nationalism, an 'us' and a 'them' 38

[there is also the issue of it being 2003, when there were only major news outlets that constituted the 'media' – if CNN didn't report it it didn't happen – now access to the media is radically expanded...is CNN even on the air anymore?]

our loss is a loss of our sense that we are invulnerable, our first-world prerogative to not be in danger 39

we have lost, and are grieving the loss of a national entitlement, and one bad response is to try

to restore what was lost, to go back to how we were before [which we can't] 39
but we *could* work through the loss, we could reconsider our hubris, live with the loss of our first-world privilege, not try to recapture it 40
as a result we could make different kinds of ties, work toward a *democratic* political culture 40
[here, and this is an important idea, democracy is a community in which the members are given over to each other, undone by each other, each surrenders their sovereign entitlement and full autonomy to the others]

there is a sense in which nation has a psyche, in which it is a subject 41
a nation can be violent and self-centered, deny its vulnerability 41
or it can accept its vulnerability and attend to it 42
 women are familiar with how to do this 42
we should neither deny vulnerability nor get paralyzed by it 42
 we accept that we are vulnerable in common 42
 this acceptance is a condition for our humanization [and our building together a democracy] 43
 the vulnerability of each must be honored; and so each must have a real, grievable life 43
community requires us to see that each of us is in the same boat: in a community of others and wanting to be recognized 44
 in asking for recognition, we have changed ourselves, because we have connected to – and interpellated – those we ask, and that connection is part of what constitutes us 44
 so asking for recognition is initiating a becoming, aspiring to a different future-in-common 44

yet she cautions against a psyche-nation analogy, and then using psychotherapy on a nation 45
but psychoanalytic feminism can: understand how “I” cannot come into being without a “You”, without being enmeshed in systems of recognition and valuation 45
it can help us see that all “I”s are always enthralled in a “We”, and so psychoanalysis of an individual must involve political (and ethical) analysis of the community 45
an individual is made up of attachments [and so loss of attachments is a reconstitution of the individual] 45

I cannot know myself perfectly because I do not contain myself fully, I am contained in others, and others are contained in me 46

so psychoanalysis is ethical analysis is political analysis 46
norms of public grieving reveal how the *polis* constitutes the human 46

we do not need universal claims (of ethics, politics, communication, reason, subjects) 47
there are many ways of being human, many ways of being a political agent 47
and our agency is constantly developing 47
incommensurable political and ethical beliefs are inevitable in a political community 48

Adriana Cavarero: we are connected to each other because we are exposed to and different from each other 48

what binds us together? Not universals, not western political ideals 49

 maybe it is that we *confound* each other, that we are already implicated in each other, the *we* is constituted by my tied-ness to you 49

 I must know you to know myself, and so I must learn how to open into your idiom, to some extent, even if we must always remain different 49

through disorientation and loss [and grieving well], what I gain is being exposed to you [or at least understanding that I am exposed to you] 49

5 – Precarious Life

Worry that the humanities' relativism has gutted their ability to be ethically relevant 129
not that we should re-establish the old certainties; but we *could*, instead, say something about the structure of address 129
to practice/think ethics by asking what responsibilities the addressee has toward the addresser 129
we come to exist in the moment of being addressed, which is to say we *need* our connection to the other 130
and this address-that-we-cannot-prevent binds us morally; that is how moral demands exist, not as the creation of an autonomous will, [or as *a priori* laws], but as a demand placed on an addressee – an interpellation 130

Levinas works on this issue 131
the face of the Other, he says, is the Other before death who asks me not to let him die alone 131
my duty to the other suspends even my right to survive, my *conatus* 132
I and the Other are tied together, neither can survive without the other 132
and so I have no choice but to expose myself to the face and attend to its call 132
the face is that whose meaning consists in saying “thou shalt not kill” 132
the face does not speak, yet it conveys the message 132
the sounds that emanate from it are suffering; it is an utterance that is not linguistic 133

the face presents the extreme precariousness of the Other, and we can be awake to this precariousness, a condition he calls 'peace' 134
peace means to be awake to the precariousness of life in general 134
I do not project my own precariousness onto the Other; I really *get* that the Other's life is precarious 134

when I really *get* the precariousness of the Other, then I am *both* called to peace and tempted to kill 134
this is the struggle at the heart of ethics 135
I am murderous and prohibited from murder 135
[the State, as sovereign relation to me, is analogous to this: I am tempted both to surrender to the State, and to *not* surrender and be democratic]
the face is an artificial person of sorts, who “speaks in a voice that is not its own” 135

why would the other's precariousness tempt us to kill, to totally negate? 136
fear for our own survival 136
and this desire is primary to humans 137

but we are also anxious about hurting the other 137
ethical non-violence exists in the tension between the two desires 137
speaking/discourse arises in the context of this primary address: “thou shalt not kill” 138
we are addressed by the Other, even though we do not wish to be, before we ever speak ourselves 138
and, as well, this interpellation initiates the tension between killing and not killing 138
we do not want to be addressed, because it constrains our will 139

but even so, to be in a political community, and in a linguistic community, is to be interpellated by Others and thus deprived of will 139

we do *choose* how to respond to every interpellation though, and we can (and do) choose to respond differently to different speakers 140

seeing bin Laden as the 'face' of evil makes us unable to see the Levinasian face (to see the precariousness) of the Muslim Other 142

but however it actually plays out in practice [her interpretation of real events is not very convincing here], Butler wants us to make *real* the lives of others, and to be able to really *see* the precariousness of those lives 143

the human is that which limits the success of any representation 144

[a kind of remainder for all *partages du sensible*]

the human loses something important when it is represented 145

all claims of sameness/identicalness, as having overcome difference, must fail 145

all claims of representation, as having accurately represented, must fail 145

and it is crucial to point out this failure 146

we have to be attentive to how we decide what lives count as human, what deaths can be mourned, what cries/interpellations we hear and respond to, what images we take to be real 147

in her time, Big Media controlled these processes, and she calls for its dissolution [which actually took place, though not through legislation] 147

so seeing, grieving, and hearing are all political resources and actions 149

they are hard, b/c they force us to see our own precariousness, our own dependence on the Other, our own weakness and unfreedom 149

but, she says, we will be the better for it, as long as we confront that precariousness honestly instead of covering them up with violence or denial or diversion 150

there are times, like the photo of kids burned by napalm, where we really see/hear the face, and we are awoken 150

we need to see the human in its frailty and inability know and make sense 151

and create a public with truly oppositional voices that awaken us to see/feel/hear differently 151

[quite close to R's vision of politics disrupting the *partage du sensible*, though she gives us new tools – mourning, listening, being vulnerable – that R does not]