

Butler, J. (2015) *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly*. Harvard.

[Website](#) for the book.

Introduction

The meaning of democracy is at stake in this work. It is not just whatever is called democracy, but in fact the word means something, and that something is tied to a notion of popular sovereignty. But of course that idea begs the question: who are/what is "the people"? This entity must be posited -- *performed* (bodily and linguistically)-- in order to come into being. When it is performed, there are always inclusions and exclusions, which is to say, after Laclau and Mouffe, that performing the people is always a hegemonic operation. Even when it is defined as "all people," there is still difference inscribed in the definition, because not everyone counts/appears/is recognized the same. Drawing on the events of 2011, she suggests that "the people" can be performed thru a bodily assembly acting in concert (their acting "appeared" the people, if you like). This acting in concert and performing the people can call the political into question, by delivering a bodily demand that those assembled have more livable lives. She thinks that *precarity* can be a shared "galvanizing condition," one that seems to run through all groups to a greater or lesser degree, that prompts bodies to assemble and act. The assembly is not a multitude of unrelated individuals, nor is it a unified "body politic," it is a collection of interdependent bodies that share similar but not equal conditions of life and vulnerabilities/exposures. Through assembling and acting, the bodies can demand (and begin to create) an end to the differential distribution of precarity (health care, housing, sexual violence, employment, violence on street, etc.). They can demand (and begin to create) a more social, caring, connected world instead of an individual, competitive, and disconnected one. They can also come to realize just how able we are to act autonomously-within-solidarity/interdependency. To recognize felt ethical obligations to each other, as well as shared dependency on each other, a realization that *my* achieving a more livable life depends on *you* doing so as well.

The moment of assembly, when assembled bodies begin to act and to "appear" the people, is not, she says, the same thing as democracy, and that is because it is transitory (presumably democracy must be non-transitory, or even institutionalized), it might be "fugitive democracy," she says. [Butler's contribution to democratic theory is here. The gist of it is the realization that democracy's coming to life occurs in the difficult act of an assembly of bodies that are neither a multitude nor a body politic, and that are interdependent and vulnerable to each other, but not equally, coming to act autonomously-within-solidarity/interdependency.

Chapter 1 -- Gender Politics and the Right to Appear

Those who are precarious, ungrivable, disposable, unrecognized, less human may assemble in order to both claim and enact their *right to appear*, which is a right to be seen, heard, treated as full participants in the public sphere. But it is also an enactment of the fact that these bodies are persisting, in the face of unequal exposure to violence and suffering. Even though they persist, however, they are assembling to demand more livable lives, both for themselves and for those who are precarious. They are demanding an equalization of 1) the opportunity to live well, 2) who is considered human, and access to robust networks of support. Precarity can serve as a basis for alliance across the identities of identity politics (e.g. Palestinians, women, sex workers, African-American youth, transgendered people, undocumented workers). Assembling precarious bodies "performs" this alliance, it brings the alliance into being. And it performs an awareness of the *interdependence* of

the assembled bodies, that *my* struggle to persist is consonant with and even depends on *your* struggle to persist. That interdependence exists because we are all of us dependent on relational networks of support in order for our bodies to persist, and in order for them to be able to act. This idea is in Arendt and Aristotle, though of course she rejects the division of labor between supporters (women/slaves) and actors (male citizens) therein. The economic necessity that supports bodies is not different or separate from the political action of those bodies. For precarious bodies to assemble and present their persistence -- against the odds because they are afforded less robust networks of support -- is a (defiant) political act.

The assembly is a chance to *appear*, and in appearing lay claim to the right to appear. This right is absolutely vital to Butler, and that stems from her performative theory of gender. That theory holds that gender is not given at birth, but is initiated after birth by declarations by medical, legal, psychiatric professionals, and interpellations of gender norms by diverse agents. We do not merely accept these impositions of gender norms, we decide what to do in response to them. We can conform to them, or we can queer them. Gender is thus a negotiation with power. Whether we conform to or queer norms, we do so by performing acts with our body in the presence of others. That is why the right to appear matters, because we must appear with others and be recognized by them in order to perform our gender (or any other aspect of our selves) in relation to a community of others. In other words, we have to *appear* in order to *live*. But gender and sexual minorities are not able to appear as easily as normative genders are. Since the goal of any gender politics is to achieve more livable lives for gender and sexual minorities (and to progressively reduce the extent to which such minorities are considered less human), and since those lives are currently more precarious -- more excluded from the sphere of appearance because they are more exposed to violence -- then those bodies will need to assert a right to appear in order to break open the strictures of the sphere of appearance (that sets out gender norms). In that way, as precarious genders appear, assemble, and perform their gender with others, their lives will become more livable, more nearly equal to normative genders in terms of how easy it is to perform their gender in public with others.

[Butler seems willing to allow transcendent power to remain in place, and to have this demand for equality be made to that power. But I think we need to make that power immanent, understand the profound extent to which we are beholden to each other, exposed to each other, and on that basis work out how we are going to distribute the right to appear, and vulnerability/precariousness.]

Chapter 2 -- Bodies in Alliance and the Politics of the Street

[This chapter mostly rehashes everything in chapter 1]

Gender politics must make *alliances* with other precarious groups to realize we are one population, and at that point we will have commenced a radical democratic project. We must expand our notion of what "we" means, and emphasize the links among precarious people. This radical democratic project is needed to pursue the claim that we must 1) more equitably distribute precarity, and 2) socialize/politicize the support/care/bodily needs that we all rely on (this latter is especially important in the face of the neoliberal drive to *individualize* responsibility for everything). The latter two achievements will also, in their turn, support any radical democratic project. The alliances will understand that the "I" is already complex, and that it is embedded in a still-more complex "we," not to mention a complex biophysical web on which all "wes" depend utterly. This new idea of "we" is enacted by bodies assembling and laying claim to public space in order to articulate a popular will that it not unitary, but created-in-alliance. Who is included/excluded from the assembly matters. Our bodies must appear in public and speak/act with others there, and be seen/heard by others there, in order to enact an event that cracks the shell of norms. But she wants to emphasize (pace Arendt, JB thinks) that the bodily supports are always a necessary part of that public acting. In fact, when the precarious (undocumented workers, sexual minorities, squatters, homeless, etc.) assemble and appear, they make public those bodies that are *supposed* to

be private (in Aristotle). They do not merely add new bodies to the polis' sphere of appearance, they redefine what can be political, what can be public, what can be seen and heard. Because, what is going on is that those with no right to appear are enacting the right to appear [so strange that Ranciere, and his part with no part that nevertheless partakes, is absent here]. What is also going on is that the alliance is enacting already the new social form it seeks to bring about (this new social form includes social and political institutions, for JB, since we need them to persist). It seeks to enact an alliantic community in which freedom is not seen as a possession of an individual, but a relation among bodies. Again, this new form will be built through a radical democratic project that takes as given the need for a socialization of the networks of care support, and the equalization of precarity/exposure to danger.

Chapter 3 -- Precarious Life and the Ethics of Cohabitation

Rehashes much of the argument from *Precarious Lives*. We have an ethical obligation not only to those proximate, but also to those distant. And, importantly, we are always both here (bodily emplaced) and there (able to be beamed around the world).

One mode of the obligation is Levinasian. We are interpellated by an Other that we did not choose, an interpellation we were not expecting. This interpellation is 'heard' by a faculty of ours, sensibility, that precedes the ego, and it is this faculty that moves us to action [à la Hume]. So we cannot choose whether to be obligated: voluntary consent and contractual relations ('I'll be obligated if *you* will) are not part of the ethical obligation. The Other acts on us without our sayso, and this is what L. calls "persecution". The other comes first for L, over me, the relation is not reciprocal, my obligation is not dependent on the other accepting a similar obligation to me (then it would be contingent and not necessary). For Butler, the Other *is* me, and I am her; I am constituted by my relation with others (human and not); I am socially constituted. I am exposed to their solicitations and their violence. I am beholden to them, precarious before them (and vice versa). But I am also obligated to protect the life of the Other, because I am defined by my relation to her before I even have an ego. [It is almost as though the model for this relation is Mother-Child, and this is a maternal ethics.]

The other mode of this ethics is Arendtian, and it says that proximity is not chosen, at least not at the biggest scales, since we cannot choose with whom we inhabit the Earth, both human and not. These cohabitants [i.e. L's Others] are heterogeneous, and they are a condition of our existence. They (and the way we relate to them ethically) are therefore not a choice, but prior to choice [again the parent model], our relations with them are prior to any existing social or political contracts. Because they are a condition of our existence, we are therefore also obligated to preserve their lives. Our institutions and policies must follow from the fact of our unchosen cohabitation with heterogeneous Others. To wit: policies must valorize equality of opportunity for a livable life. That is a non-negotiable baseline. We are all equally unchosen cohabitants, equally exposed to, dependent on, and defined by many Others whose lives we are therefore obligated to preserve, and so precariousness cannot be (justifiably) distributed unequally. Note that these relations with unchosen equal Others can be either good (nurturing) or bad (violent). [So, unlike Hobbes' SoN, we must work on these relations, so that they best ensure the thriving of the vast interconnected social multitude.]

[These Levinasian relations are of course germane to democracy, to the question of how each in the demos will relate to all the others in the demos as they begin the project of governing themselves.]

Chapter 4 -- Bodily Vulnerability, Coalitional Politics

Bodies collected in the street are not always good, but it is an important act. At times, it is a claim for the street (and urban infrastructure) itself. Such infrastructure is necessary for both a livable life and the ability to appear -- and both are key to politics. Sometimes presenting one's body in the street calls attention to bodily precarity, and to the differential distribution of that precarity, and it demands an equalization of that distribution. JB reiterates that all bodies are precarious, in that they are dependent -- on networks of other bodies, on the environment, on technology -- these provide the necessary support structures that allow bodies to persist. Bodies are not individual/isolated/independent. Neither are they blended into a body politic. They are instead distinct things embedded in these networks of support. We enter life dependent on caregiving others [the Mother-Child relation as model again]. We cannot do without these networks on which we are dependent, and so these networks are the stake of politics.

That politics must be enacted collectively -- the agent is collective -- and so the question of solidarity matters, the question of what holds the collective agent together matters (some shared unlivability, she intones). Often (not always) the agent assembles in the street, and this assembly can be a way both to voice a demand [like for the equalization of the distribution of precarity], and to enact -- bodily -- new ways of life, new relations, and new arguments/ideas [about justice]. Vulnerability is a necessary condition and stake of this politics, but we want to avoid a paternalistic dynamic where the helpless vulnerable plead with the State and NGOs to protect them. The agent of politics has to acknowledge its own vulnerability, but it must also be a capable agent who can assemble and act and and speak and show resolve. It must call out the fact that some bodies are more vulnerable than others, and this is true not because of the inherent qualities of those bodies, but because of the structure of the current regime of power. The agent must demand equalizing changes be made to that regime. [She sees a role for the State here, but does not seem to see the necessary paternalism of the State doing things *for* people instead of people themselves.] On the flip side, the relatively less vulnerable [privileged] must recognize that they too are vulnerable and not *invulnerable* (as they are trained to think they are). [This is also a challenge for all in a *demos*, who must open out to peer-others in the *demos* and accept their vulnerability to and dependence on those others.] In general, we must recognize and work with the fact that we *depend* on each other, and on the environment, and on technology, and on institutions. But we cannot let these relations of dependence be relations of *exploitation*. We are all of us vulnerable, precarious, not in control, because we are all of us dependent. As Deleuze and Spinoza put it, every body opens out onto other bodies and is defined by those relations [Marx says this very well in the EPM too]. And we are often aggressive/uncaring toward those we depend on (and depend on us), so we can get these relations of dependence wrong or right. What is more, we do not choose those on whom we depend. We don't even -- really -- choose those with whom we are in solidarity/community. [In the squares of 2011, for example, all manner of folks showed up and the assemblies had to figure out how to manage the relations among diverse others inside the square.]

Chapter 5 -- "We the People" -- Thoughts on Freedom of Assembly

Assembling and appearing in public is important (not necessary) for positing "the people" (for saying "we the people"), and that is always a hegemonic act (a la Laclau) that includes some and excludes others and is always contested. Positing "the people" is an acting in concert that does not mean uniformity/conformity -- it is plural and concerted in solidarity. The right to assemble is fraught with the State's sanctioning that right, but assembling-and-positing-a-people pre-exists the government/rights, and even politics. Assemblies posit "the people" but speak in plural voices. They posit popular sovereignty. Popular sovereignty is different from State sovereignty. The former always retains ultimate power [as in Locke]. But the people of popular sovereignty does not just exist; it must be posited, or *performed*, by people. There are moments when popular sovereignty exceeds State sovereignty (Jason Frank). But "the people" is always exclusive, since *all people* never say "we the

people" in unison [she is just rehearsing the realization that the body politic is a weird fantasy that can never actually exist].

So it is the moment when people assemble to posit "the people" that we see the gap between popular sovereignty and State sovereignty. "The people" not only creates itself, calls itself into being, constitutes itself, performs itself bodily...it also *authorizes* itself [an important idea she does not explore. There is no power on earth that can authorize it, other than itself. This is something both Hobbes and Locke knew very well.]. Popular sovereignty can only be subject to [which is closer to exploitation than dependence (Ch.4)] another if it *decides* to be, if it gives itself, and even then it can always withdraw its consent [again, this is all worked out in detail in Locke, whom she never mentions, even as she traces back and forth over issues he already covered at length]. [The agent *she* needs to be talking about isn't "the people," it is "the network of bodies that all bodies depend on," since the latter would be consistent with how she conceives of political subjects. This would be an immanent BwO.]

"The people" is not self-evident, it has to be posited/performed. It is a plural subject [why is it then "the people"??] that claims that bodily needs are not being met equally, that precarity is distributed unequally, that not all lives are equally livable. And merely performing this claim (through ephemeral mobilizations) is not enough for JB, it should lead to concrete changes in that inequality (i.e. equalization). A sense that this inequality is *wrong* is the basis for solidarity. But we can't choose the others who will show up in the square, with whom we will have to make claims in solidarity. We hold together with these unchosen others in solidarity *non-violently*, even though the police will come and disperse the assembly. Our practice/ethic of non-violence channels our antagonism into constructive people-positing and claim-making.

Chapter 6 -- Can One Lead a Good Life in a Bad Life?

Is there a "good life"? She is wary of this term, but the phrase is better rendered as "living well," if one wants to understand what P&A were calling for. She avows that it is important to be able to *live*, to persist in living, but she then says that is not enough. She spends a lot of time [again] working through and complaining about the Aristotelian/Arendtian conception of politics in which the good life can only be lived in public by those male heads of households that are supported in private by women and slaves (who themselves can only live, and cannot live well). [There is a whole strange foul-up here where she imagines *logos*, as political action, to be only *speech*, rather than *speech-reason*, which is what it actually is. The discussion of Arendt reads like she is just getting to know Arendt, and the discussion of Aristotle reads like she hasn't spent much time with him either.] Clearly she wants to bring this private, reproductive, bodily politics of *living* out into the public sphere and make it fully political, alongside public action and speech, or living well. This is consonant with her idea that there must be an equalization of the "grievability" of lives, such that all lives matter (at least more) equally.

However, again, her "normative aim...is not simply to call for an equal distribution of vulnerability" (210). Beyond just living, persisting in life, one must also be able to live well, or to live a "livable life," a "life that can be lived" (209). This idea is never fully worked out. We can say that it does not mean that each individual lives entirely how s/he pleases, since we are all *dependent* on others and on a social (and natural) infrastructure for our survival. That dependence is unavoidable, and there is nothing wrong with it, as long as it is not *exploitation*. And dependence also does not mean losing oneself in a *body politic* (212). Living well (or a livable life) *does* mean that I can "act," in something like the Arendtian sense, that my acting into the world (speaking, but not only this) is capable of being received/recognized, of making a difference to those around me. It would mean that my life "has value" in the reigning order of values (200). There is a sense that "flourishing," or "thriving," is the same thing as a livable life (208).

There is a depressing ending part where she picks up Adorno, who tells us that the way to live a good life in a bad life is just to resist the bad life in the way that "the most progressive minds" tell us to. This is of course a totally useless idea of the good life, and she seems to agree, but she does not then spin it into a useful idea of the good life. There is a semi-useful idea in the same passage, though, which says that we do have to say "no" to the part of us that wants to go along with the bad life. We need to refuse our desire for a bad life and affirm our desire for a good life. We need to "say no to one way of life...and say yes to another" (217). But it is not very clear just what that other life, the good life, is. It is "radically democratic." OK. In its organizing coalitions to mobilize against the bad life, it should prefigure the good life [and maybe she should say, also, that it should make little experiments in this new, good life]. The good life includes, even embraces, vulnerability and interdependency. It realizes that the "I" is constituted, in part, by the "you," but it tries to make this vulnerability and interdependency livable.