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Abstract

This e-special issue of *Theory, Culture & Society* presents works published by and about US philosopher and activist Judith Butler (1956). Judith Butler is Distinguished Scholar at the Graduate School, University of California, Berkeley. They contributed to *Theory, Culture & Society* and inspired key debates and scholarship around their work. k *Gender Trouble* (1989) transformed our understanding of gender, influencing generations of academics, activists, and cultural producers since. Butler is an exceptional thinker who aims to build more inclusive and sustainable societies through their writing. Their writings influenced numerous fields, e.g., sociology, gender studies, politics, and the arts. The editorial introduction juxtaposes earlier and subsequent writings by Butler in order to encourage a wider reading of their work. Drawing upon the full catalogue of *Theory, Culture & Society*, and *Body & Society* the collection includes articles published by Butler, interviews with them, a book review, and articles about their work.

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Judith Butler: Life, philosophy, politics, ethics

Introduction or what it means to be a philosopher?

Following the publication of *The Force of Non-Violence* (2020) Judith Butler gave an interview to the journalist and writer Masha Gessen for *The New Yorker* (February 9, 2020). Gessen introduces Judith Butler as 'hold[ing] a peculiar place in contemporary Western culture. Like very few men and perhaps no other woman, Butler is an international celebrity academic' (February 9, 2020). Judith Butler is indeed an internationally renowned academic who, if I may rephrase Gessen's description, is a *cultural* icon; they are, for example, the object of a 1993 fanzine *Judy!*, they make an appearance in Maggie Nelson's auto fictional novel *The Argonauts* (2016) and also *Merli* (2015-2018) a Spanish television series about a philosophy teacher whose pedagogical aim is to instill curiosity in his students, dedicates an episode to Judith Butler. Butler's writings and appearances in the media both exemplify their status as a cultural icon but also reveal their power to influence debates. For example, in the interview that they gave to Jules Gleeson for the *Guardian* newspaper (September 7, 2021) they spoke in support of trans activists in their struggle for recognition and were critical of the anti-gender ideology movement for its attacks on trans activists. Butler's analysis and their pro-trans position gave rise to comments, discussions, and attacks, in the social media. Judith Butler's cultural iconicity and their sustained influence on gender, politics, ethics, and culture comes about *not* because they flirt with sensationalism or because they chase celebrity status but because of their commitment to thinking; to thinking how we can create worlds that ameliorate social exclusion and differential treatment.

In describing Butler's philosophical thinking as an 'assault to common sense' in *Guernica*, an online art and politics magazine (March 15, 2010), Nathan Schneider aptly captures the clarity, sharpness, and innovation of Butler's thinking, maintaining that it is precisely these qualities that makes us read Judith Butler and think with Judith Butler. Butler's philosophical and cultural influence makes demands on them; demands for more public engagements or to respond to political and cultural events. When pushed by Gleeson to explain how they manage their fame, Judith Butler replied: 'I have found a way to live to the side of my name' (September 7, 2021), in a non-judgemental statement about those who chase fame that simultaneously reveals that they never chased such fame themselves. A set of adjectives does not suffice to fully grasp the quality of Judith Butler's thinking and their iconic status.

When Gessen asked Butler to expand on the statement made in *Force of Non-Violence* that our ethical obligations to others or the world need to be unrealistic, Butler responded, 'Sometimes you have to imagine in a radical way that makes you seem a little crazy, that puts you in an embarrassing light, in order to open up a possibility that others have already closed down with their already knowing realism' (February 9, 2020). This succinct and passionate answer captures the kernel of their thinking and practice. It is a practice characterised by a sustained commitment to thinking the impossible, reflecting on pressing contemporary questions, and generosity and is always in solidarity with those who demand and labour for a better world, because as they repeatedly remind us, we are bound to one another. A commitment to a better future amidst a world in ruins. All this, together with hard work, makes Judith Butler the philosopher who has captured our cultural imagination and made us engage with their work in such depth.

The Making of Philosopher: A Brief Biography

Judith Butler was born on the February 24, 1956, in Cleveland Ohio. The daughter of Jewish parents, a dentist father, and a housing activist mother, from a young age they participated in the General

Jewish Education program where they found the synagogue classes on ethics particularly interesting. They enjoyed the debates and ‘found them existentially pertinent’ as they reveal in an interview they gave to Rabbi Dr Shmuly Yanklowitz (April 7, 2020). They read the philosophical works of Baruch Spinoza and Moses ben Maimon (Maimonides) trying to make sense of how they relate to, ‘how people made choices during the Second World War, whether Jews fled, or hid or how they could be part of resistance, how they could offer support for one another, under conditions ... that were utterly atrocious’ (April 7, 2020: between 1.10 and 1.33). These ethics classes obviously triggered their curiosity and whet their appetite for philosophy and were probably formative for their philosophical writings. I think it is important to note that Judith Butler’s interest and engagement with philosophy does not begin with their university studies, but rather stems from their early life. They then went on to study philosophy at Bennington College where they received a BA (1978), an MA (1984), and a PhD (1988) from Yale University.

Judith Butler is currently a Distinguished Scholar at the Graduate School at the University of California, Berkeley. They previously held the Maxine Elliot Chair in the Department of Comparative Literature and the Program of Critical Theory also at Berkeley.

Professor Butler has published over eighteen books on gender, sexuality, nonviolence, human rights, solidarity, ethics, psychoanalysis, literature, aesthetics, and the Covid-19 pandemic. *Gender Trouble* (1990), their second book, revolutionised the way we think about gender, feminism, and sexuality within and outside the academy as their numerous awards testify. In 2012 they were awarded two prestigious awards, the Adorno Prize from the City of Frankfurt for their contributions to feminist and moral philosophy and the Brudner Prize from Yale University for lifetime contributions to gay and lesbian studies. In 2014 the French Cultural Ministry awarded them the Chevalier of the Order of Arts and Letters Diploma. In 2016 the City of Cologne awarded them the Albertus Magnus Professorship – an award granted to internationally renowned individuals whose work addresses issues of importance beyond the Academy. Judith Butler’s work is situated within the field of critical theory and the humanities, and as such they have been an avid supporter of both. They received the Andrew Mellon Award for Distinguished Academic Achievement in the Humanities which was used to originate and develop the International Consortium of Critical Theory Programs (2016-2020) a product of which was the journal *Critical Times*. Judith Butler served as a co-chair of the Consortium and as an editorial board member of *Critical Times*. They were elected in 2019 as Fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences and they served as President of the Modern Language Association (2020) and were elected a Corresponding Fellow of the British Academy the same year. Their work has influenced many disciplines, including geography, and unsurprisingly in 2015 the American Association of Geographers made them an “honorary geographer”. More recently, in 2022, the canton of Catalunya awarded Butler the Catalonia International Prize and the gold medal from the Circulo de Bellas Artes in Madrid. They are the recipient of 14 honorary degrees from universities including, Université Paris-VII, McGill University in Canada, University of St. Andrews in Scotland, Université de Fribourg in Switzerland, Universidad de Buenos Aires in Argentina, Universidad de Chili, and Belgrade University and are College Fellow at Birkbeck University. -Additionally, they have received fellowships from Guggenheim, Rockefeller, and Ford Foundations, from the American Council of Learned Societies, and were Fellow at the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton and at the Ecole Normale Supérieure in Paris. They are also an avid activist for gender and human rights with a sustained commitment to anti-war politics not only as evidenced in *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* (2009) *Parting Ways: Jewishness and the Critique of Zionism* (2012) and *The Force of Non-violence* (2020), but also through the work they do with the Jewish Voice for Peace and its committee on Academic Freedom where they serve on the advisory board. Additionally, they are a

member of the Advisory Council of the New University in Exile at the New School University and on the board of the Centre for Constitutional Rights respectively located in New York City.

When one meets Judith Butler, and I am lucky enough to have done so on numerous occasions over the years, one is impressed by their generosity and kindness. Judith Butler is not one of those philosophers who looks down on another's stumbling thinking, but rather a rare human who patiently listens to what you say and then proceeds to ask the most searching questions, which help iron out one's thought process. One is also impressed by their presence, and by this I mean by their ability to be present and active towards interlocutors, political events, cultural demands and even fans. In one of their pre-pandemic lectures in London, I and several colleagues from Birkbeck and London School of Economics found ourselves dining with Judith Butler at the North Sea Fish Restaurant in Leigh Street, in Bloomsbury. A young queer waitress shyly came up to our table and asked Judith Butler, 'Are you Judith Butler?', to which they answered that indeed they were. On hearing this the waitress excitedly reported just how much her feminist/queer community and its activism had been influenced by Judith Butler's philosophy. Although all of us around the table had been influenced by their philosophy, it was very special, though not surprising, to witness the young woman's enthusiasm and admiration. I recall asking Judith Butler afterwards, whether all this attention bothered them. They replied that they had come to terms with the phenomenon of 'Judith Butler' and felt that it was appropriate to engage with people that recognise them. There was a stoicism in their reply, revealing the fact that they had given this matter a lot of thought. Most of us, I suspect, would feel such attention or demands from strangers were an encroachment on our privacy, a theft of our time, or even suffocating. Others, of course, may welcome this type of adulation, and do their best to get more of it. Judith Butler's response to the excitement of the admirer, was neither one of withdrawal nor one of over-exposure, but rather one of presence, and in that presence I witnessed the working of one of their philosophical propositions – we are all bound to one another – that subjects are constituted by the Other, a proposition that they put forward in *Subjects of Desire: Hegelian Reflections in Twentieth-Century France* (1999b) and *Gender Trouble* (1990). Living out one's philosophical position is both hard and remarkable but a requisite of a philosopher if we are to follow Peter Sloterdijk's observation 'that for the philosopher, the human being who exemplifies the love of truth and conscious living, life and doctrine must be in harmony' (Sloterdijk, 2005:111). Sloterdijk goes on to say that for philosophers the most difficult task is not 'to live what they say' (Sloterdijk, 2005:111) but rather 'to say what they live' (Sloterdijk, 2005:112).

1. Saying what we live: Philosophy, Ethics and Politics

Butler's ability to say what they live is exemplified in their writings. For example, in *Gender Trouble* (1990) we find out how gender is formed. We learn that whilst sex is assigned to us by birth gender is not, and furthermore that gender is not a natural phenomenon. Gender is performative and a process, it challenges the idea that things are natural, including 'sex', and addresses the social and cultural limits to our understanding of gender. In telling us that neither 'sex' nor 'gender' are as fixed as laws and social norms would have us believe, Judith Butler asks us to be attentive to the world around us, noticing and pointing out the differences and exclusions that are marked by normative understandings.

1.1 Subjectivity and Gender

Gender Trouble problematises and critiques the way in which certain feminisms understood gender within the binary framework femininity /masculinity, and consequently a heteronormative logic. As they write in the 1999 preface of *Gender Trouble*:

In 1989 I was most concerned to criticize pervasive heterosexual assumptions in feminist literary theory. I sought to counter those views that made presumptions about the limits and propriety of gender and restricted the meaning of gender to received notions of masculinity and femininity. It was and remains my view that any feminist theory that restricts the meaning of gender in the presuppositions of its own practice sets up exclusionary gender norms within feminism, often with homophobic consequences. It seemed to me, and continues to seem, that feminism ought to be careful not to idealize certain expressions of gender that, in turn, produce new forms of hierarchy and exclusion. In particular, I oppose those regimes of truth that stipulated that certain kinds of gendered expressions were found to be false or derivative, and others, true and original.

(Gender Trouble, 1999a: vii-viii)

Their ability to say what they see in relation to gender was not limited in the 1990 debates about gender. More recently, in response to the attacks waged against gender by the anti-gender ideology movement, Judith Butler explains that a certain fantasy about gender presents gender as a threat to human existence. This fantasy has had devastating effects; it stokes fear in populations that are not open to differences and restores patriarchal, racist, and capitalist values.ⁱ As they say the anti-gender movement is:

a global movement [that] insists that sex is biological and real, or that sex is divinely ordained, and that gender is a destructive fiction, taking down both “man” and “civilization” and “God” and ‘have been bolstered by the Vatican and the more conservative evangelical and apostolic churches on several continents, but also by neoliberals in France and elsewhere who need the normative family to absorb the decimation of social welfare.

(Judith Butler responding to Jules Gleeson, September 7, 2021)

The only way to counter this assault on gender, as they explain, is to build political resistance and solidarity amongst those political formations (anti-racist, abolitionist, trans, queer) that remain committed to the building of inclusive and non-violent worlds.ⁱⁱ As we have noted one of the most challenging things for philosophers is to be able to say what they see. Judith Butler’s astute observations on contemporary gender politics do not just explain why there has been a rise in attacks on gender but also suggests the type of politics and political formations that we need to foster in order to resist these sustain attacks. The latter enables us to appreciate with fresh eyes how gender is formed (not just in relation to sex and sexuality but also in relation to capital, race and oppression) and that we cannot think of the subject in isolation, we need to think of it as a collective subject rather than just an intersectional one.ⁱⁱⁱ What do I mean by this? Intersectional approaches teach us that subjects are not just racialised, gendered or classed, etc. but formed by a variety of identities (Crenshaw, 1989). The subject in these approaches is the outcome of all these identities. All subjects are intersectional in some way. In contrast, a collective subjectivity is a subjectivity that is comprised of the alliances it has without necessarily possessing all the characteristics (i.e., gender, class, race, abilities) of the allied subjects. The difference between collective subjectivity and intersectional subjectivity lies in the fact that an intersectional subject is based on the idea that we possess certain characteristics (i.e., gender, race, class, age) which give us access to and help us understand the exclusions and injuries that we endure whereas a collective subjectivity builds on the idea that we can keep fighting against these exclusions and injuries together without necessarily being shaped by those experiences and being given a fixed identity. A good contemporary example would be the global group Extinction Rebellion. The group is comprised of diverse subjectivities that may not share exactly the same experiences, but they came together and formed the group out of

necessity to save our environment and as such they have a collective subjectivity, which is identified by the name Extinction Rebellion.

Butler has also written extensively about collective subjectivities in *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly* (2015). In this book they reflect on the insurrections –Tahir Square, Occupy Wall Street and so on – that took place in 2010 and 2011. Their account of these insurrections focuses on the subjectivities, politics and ethics that unfolded in the course of these uprisings. They describe the political subject as one that resists and rises against the precarious positions that it finds itself in and ultimately forms political *alliances* with other precarious subjects in an attempt to ameliorate the unliveable conditions that envelop their lives. Butler explains how the subjectivities, politics, and ethics that we witnessed during these uprisings are latent within our societies or ‘sometimes [are] actually ... the structure of our own subject-formation’ (68). Moreover, they remind us, the individual subject is neither bounded nor confined but a bundle of alliances or, as they write, ‘“I am myself an alliance, or I ally with myself or my various cultural vicissitudes”’. They remind us that social relationality is involved in the formation of the ‘I’ and identity is not fixed (68). Or, to quote them, ‘the point is not [that] I am a collection of identities, but that I [am] already an assembly, even a general assembly, or an assemblage, as Jasbir Puar had adapted in terms of Gilles Deleuze’ (68).

It is also important to note that their analysis of the collective subject of/in politics is more complex than the one offered by Arendt. Arendt defined the political subject as the one that appears in public or becomes visible in public when people come together to discuss commonalities, contest injustices and claim rights. Politics, Arendt taught, is something that takes place in public, it is not a matter of the private realm. Reflecting on the way people come together to contest their political conditions, *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly* alludes to a different conception of politics. ‘[P]olitics’, Butler explains, ‘is not distinct from the private one, but it crosses those lines again and again, bringing attention to the way that politics is already in the home, or the street, or in the neighbourhood, or indeed in those virtual spaces that are equally unbound by the architecture of the house and the square.’ (71). They reiterate this point once more in an interview that they gave to Seelinger and Braslavsky (2022: 71). This is an expansive understanding of politics, politics as process, and includes amongst other things the organising and strategizing that may take place in homes or social media and enables us to see how ‘bodies in their plurality lay claim to the public, find and produce the public through seizing and reconfiguring the matter or material environments’ (71). As such, the ‘I’ that assembles or the assembly and collective subjectivity that comes together is supported not just by bodies, the bodies of the participants, but also by material objects – podiums, cars, barricades, tents, placards with relevant and humorous slogans –revealing an expansive collective subject that breaks away from the mind/body dichotomy more often associated with the subject. The subject in this case is not just embodied but formed by the material objects that support it.

1.2 A Philosophy of Assembly and Collective Subjectivity

Judith Butler’s writing is impressive in that it draws our attention to limits, such as that of the body/mind dichotomy. The political subject, the collective political subject that we see in *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly* is one that breaks away from the body/mind dichotomy; it is embodied and supported by material objects. The collapse of the body/mind dichotomy is present in all of Butler’s works – the discursive subject is an embodied one – the senses and thinking are interlinked. The breaking of this dichotomy is patiently explained and explored in their essay ‘How can I deny that these hands and this body are mine?’ (2001: 254-73) where they offer their interpretation of Descartes’ ‘First Meditation: about the things we may doubt’ (Descartes, 1968: 95-101). In this meditation Descartes sets out to demonstrate that the senses (or rather sensual

experiences) cannot ground truthful or scientific knowledge and doubt enables the possibility of the formation of knowledge. Butler proposes that the 'First Meditation' reveals that Descartes' mistrust of the body exposes a certain tension. On the one hand, he doubts the body and, on the other, 'the very language through which he calls the body into question ends up reasserting the body as a condition of his own writing' (258). In deconstructing Descartes, contrary to what he intended, they reveal that language acts and that this very action returns the body as a figuration. At the same time, they are demonstrating that the figuration cannot wholeheartedly capture the materiality of the body. On the contrary, what we witness is a relationship between the figural, or the mind, and the body. Butler's exquisite deconstruction of Descartes also acts as a rebuttal of the accusations that have been levied on them by feminist theorists such as Nancy Fraser (1997) that they ignore the material body and inequalities in their analysis of gender, thus reproducing the mind/body distinction.

I have demonstrated thus far how Butler's philosophy reveals to us that the mind/body dichotomy is unsustainable. It has also been noted that the subject is not only embodied but also comes into being through the material environment that supports it. Whilst this is explicit in *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly* it can also be traced back to their earlier work *Bodies that Matter* (1993), particularly in the chapter 'Gender is burning: questions of appropriation and subversion' (121-40). Butler critiques Althusser's reading of interpellation that observes that subjects are subjugated and socialised via the hailing of the police officer and the law and suggests ways in which this very hailing can be disobeyed:

The law might not only be refused, but it might also be ruptured, forced into a rearticulation that calls into question the monotheistic force of its own unilateral operation. Where the uniformity of the subject is expected, where the behavioral conformity that subtly calls into question the legitimacy of the command, a repetition of the law into hyperbole, a rearticulation of the law against the authority of the one who delivers it. Here the performative, the call by the law which seeks to produce a lawful subject, produces a set of consequences that exceed and confound what appears to be the disciplining intention motivating the law. Interpellation thus loses its status as a simple performative, an act of discourse with the power to create that to which it refers and creates more than it ever meant to, signifying in excess of any intended referent.

(Butler, 1993: 122)

As the quote above suggests there are many possible ways of subverting the law. Whilst Butler does not overtly claim that material environments are supportive or play a role in the subversion of the law, we notice that this idea is subtly present in 'Gender is burning', when they turn to the film *Paris is Burning* to discuss the subversive potential of drag performances. *Paris is Burning*, a documentary film made by Jennie Livingston and filmed in the 1980s over several years, is a record of the drag balls that were taking place in Harlem at the time, and a commentary on queer life, sexuality, racism, music, community building and responses to HIV/Aids and activism. The documentary film focuses on the preparations and the drag ball performances. Drag ball performers, Butler writes, were "'men" who [were] either African-American or Latino' (1990: 128). Butler explores the extent to which the drag balls succeeded in 'denaturaliz[ing] subverting the 'norm' (1993: 129). As they explain despite the energy and passion that went into the balls and drag performances, drag performances may not have been as liberating as we may think. For example, some of the participants of the drag balls confess their desire for a heteronormative life. My point here is not to summarise the chapter but to point out that Butler recognises early on that the drag performers in the film were supported in the *process* of denaturalising the norm

by material objects (it is immaterial whether or not they have been successful): a range of styles of women's clothing and make-up. The contestants Butler explains were not just trying to pass themselves off as real *but* also as real women in different roles, Ivy League students, executives and so on (1993: 129). This is, of course, not to say that one performs gender through dressing, a common interpretation of their work that they refute in the Preface of *Bodies that Matter* (1993: x) but rather to highlight that, the idea 'that bodies in their plurality lay claim to the public, find and produce the public through seizing and reconfiguring the matter or material environments' (2015: 71) was already present in their earlier writings. In 'Gender is burning', in particular, they explain how bodies take on cultural spaces, use material objects, clothing, make-up, in order to *challenge* the 'monotheistic and unilateral' (122) operations of law and gender norms but also to show us, or inadvertently reveal, the *phantasmatic* character of laws and norms.

Butler's subject is both political and ethical. In *Together: The Rituals, Pleasures and Politics of Cooperation* (2012), Richard Sennet reminds us that we respond with either sympathy or empathy to difficult situations (20-22). Both sentiments are, as he writes, steeped in cooperation. The person that responds sympathetically to a distressing situation – let's say to the news of forest fires roaming their country, would simply *identify* with those in distress (2012: 21). The sympathetic person will recognise the distress that somebody near the fires is experiencing, identify with them and think of ways to help – in other words reach out to help because they have identified or put us in the situation of those people. The empathetic person, on the other hand, recognises that their situation is different and offers support despite themselves, or as Sennet puts it 'outside him- or herself' (2012: 21). Butler's collective subject is empathetic, as Sennet describes, but is also somewhat anarchic, as I explain below. You may recall, Butler's essay 'Ethical ambivalence' (2000a), and their books *Antigone's Claim* (2000b) and *Giving An Account of Oneself* (2003). 'Ethical ambivalence' concerned itself mostly with drawing similarities between the ethics of Nietzsche and those of Levinas and evaluating their limits. *Antigone's Claim* addressed the most common philosophical interpretations (Hegel, Lacan, Irigaray) that see Antigone, the protagonist of Sophocle's tragedy that has her name as its title, as an ethical figure and points to the limitations of those interpretations. In *Giving an Account of Oneself* (2003) Butler offers us an account of her ethics, and ethical subject. The book was published after the attack on the Twin Towers in New York by allegedly al-Qaeda terrorists and, since the lecture was given in the aftermath of these attacks, she provides us with an account of the responsible and ethical subject within this context. In the first chapter of the book they set the scene in which ethical questions emerge:

It may be that the question of ethics emerges precisely at the limits of the schemes of intelligibility, the site where we ask ourselves what it might mean to continue in a dialogue where no common ground can be assumed, where one is, as it were, at the limits of what one knows and still under the demand to offer and receive recognition.

(Butler, 2003: 18)

As you can see from the quote above they consider it necessary to think about the parameters of liveable and viable lives within the very conditions of their impossibility, where no common ground or foundation can be assumed. These words can be contextualised in different ways. They could refer to 'unresolvable' fallings out between friends, lovers, colleagues and the Palestinian–Israeli conflict, the animosity that exists between India and Pakistan, and so forth. However, it would be misleading to think that the above is prescriptive. Rather, it is a description of the way in which the subject constitutes itself and its relation to the world.

1.3 Ethical Contours

Overall, Butler sets out to 'revise recognition as an ethical project' (2003: 35). The concept of recognition, as we know from the analysis of the *Phenomenology of Spirit* (2004), produces a subject through its externality; it needs the Other – whether this Other takes the form of an individual, language, the state, or community – to simply exist and be alive. Moreover, they explain that the subject's desire for autonomy are overridden by the desire to stay alive. They find the concept of recognition useful because it makes the subject the outcome of the agonistic relationship between the subject and its social and cultural spheres. This is where their account of ethics, the subject and responsibility begin in this particular book. The 'I' (subject) as they write, 'has no story of its own that is not at once a story of a relation – or asset of relations to – a set of norms' (2003: 12). This 'I' then, by the very fact that it exists within a social realm, is never in possession of its 'I' or its being. In this sense, the 'I' is an essence. For Butler, the 'I' is also never outside the conditions of its emergence. However, this does not mean that the 'I' does not acquire or possess agency or any ethical grounds. On the contrary, it means that this provokes the 'I' to deliberate upon the conditions of its sociability and thus to evaluate its surrounding values (2003: 12–13). For Butler, ethics emerges as the space for critical evaluation of social and cultural norms and the 'I' can achieve this through deliberating on the conditions that make its life unliveable. Moreover, in the same book, they explain that the 'I' is supported by the Other whilst the Other remains singular and non-identical to the 'I'. As we have seen, the 'I' which comes into being, through the Other can never account fully and coherently for him/herself. The concept that the 'I' is supported for its existence by the Other reminds us of the mutual ethic that the anarchist thinker and activist Peter Kropotkin in *Mutual Aid* (1999), first published in 1902, identified as being present in the human, animal and plant worlds. Kropotkin's book is a critique of the narrow interpretations of Charles Darwin's *Descent of Man* which emphasised the importance of competition and the survival of the fittest in his writing and ignored Darwin's reference to mutual support as a way of having liveable lives. Kropotkin methodically follows this ethic and explains that survival, growth and liveability work best through a mutual aid ethic.

Somewhat counterintuitively, Butler's ethical subject also shares some affinities with the work of the anarchist thinker, Max Stirner. In *Ego and Its Own* (2006) Stirner suggested that we can only become free and anarchic if, as subjects, we manage to possess ourselves. Only then will we be able to engage and support each other and not enslave ourselves to each other or ideas. He proposed that a possible way of doing this is to detach ourselves from qualities and institutions (including the state) through a sustained process of critiquing such attachments which he calls 'own criticism' (2006: 310). Although he does not provide us with any example of criticism or thinking that may emanate from itself, he invites us to think about it in antithesis to thinking and criticism that emanates from a presupposition (state, religion, love, etc.), which tends to be dogmatic and static. 'Own criticism' could perhaps be the type of thinking that brackets out any ideology. Own criticism considers that we can only be unique individuals when we free ourselves from ideological positions and relate to one another as unique individuals. For example, in order to be a free subject, and moreover a subject that is able to offer support to the other without enslaving them, as an anarchist I need to rid myself of even the ideological positions of anarchism. Butler's subject that acts after having rid themselves of any ideological positions that may stop them from contributing to the liberation and creation of a better world resembles Stirner's call for anarchism. The ethical subject as we have seen is one that undertakes a rigorous critique of themselves, and simultaneously is supported by the Other. For the most part, Stirner has been interpreted as providing us with an individualist subject, an egoist that is not formed by the environment that surrounds them, and does not align at first glance with the ethical subject developed by Butler, a subject that is dispossessed of one self (Butler, 2000a; Butler and Athanasiou, 2013), they nevertheless share the desire to critique presuppositions that hinder

cooperation and the development of freer and more liveable worlds. Perhaps the post-Hegelian Stirner has something to learn from Butler's radical re-interpretation of Hegel about the possibility of critiquing oneself or being an own critique without needing to create a solitary and somewhat lonely ethical subject, a more appealing and necessary proposition is that Butler brings to the fore.

Butler is not, of course, an anarchist, though they are well aware of anarchist research, activism and solidarity actions. In their essay 'Palestine, state politics and the anarchist impasse' (2013: 203-223) they write about the possibilities of better sociality and the freedoms offered by non-state activist groups like Anarchists Against the Wall (an Israeli direct action group that opposes the Occupation and Israeli settlements in Palestine) and the Palestinian struggle for self-determination and statehood. In this essay Butler makes complimentary comments about the actions of the Anarchists Against the Wall, who are mainly Israeli citizens, because of their support for the Palestinians and their courage. However, Butler asks us to note there is a paradox; although *Anarchists Against the Wall* are anti-statist they have not rescinded their Israeli citizenship and the Palestinians who are being supported by this anarchist organisation still want to have a state. In doing so they don't just warn us that the anarchist political positions may not align 100% with the Palestinian people but also that perhaps there is still something in the idea of the state that needs to be saved. Though the essay focuses mainly on anarchist politics, the idea of mutual aid and support that they recount in the essay and are complimentary of align precisely with anarchist ethics. Ideas about an ethics of solidarity, cooperation and support are repeated in *Notes toward a Performative Theory of Assembly* (2015: 99-122) and *Parting Ways: Jewishness and the Critique of Zionism* (2013) bringing to the fore once more the idea of an ethical subject who is supported if not constituted by the Other. In no way am I trying to turn Judith Butler into an anarchist thinker, the scope of reading their work along anarchist ideas of ethics is the result of my desire to show the generative facet of their work, and its ability to address emerging events (9/11, the occupy movement, anti-trans crusades, Palestine and so forth).

2. Five themes: Feminism, subjectivity, performativity, bodies, vulnerability/precarity

I hope I have been able to show you how interlinked Judith Butler's political and ethical subjects are and how vibrant and able their writing is in providing us with a philosophical assessment of the political, social and ethical demands of our times. I don't think it is an exaggeration to say that if we want to avoid the economic, climate, social and political crises that surround us we need to be able to work together collectively, despite or at the limits of ourselves, and be able to forge political alliances that are anti-authoritarian, open and enable human, animal and nature to flourish. Since *Gender Trouble*, Butler has been addressing the limitations placed upon our existence (materially and discursively) and been able to point out possible ways of escaping these limitations without of course offering a blueprint. It is no surprise that academic scholars, activists and mere citizens engaged creatively and critically with their ideas. I will turn now to a series of writings, interviews and essays given or written by Butler, academic articles, book reviews written by fellow academics that engage with their work and have been published in *Theory Culture and Society* and *Body and Society* over the years.

I have divided the contributions that I selected into five themes, though as I noted earlier it is impossible to categorise Butler's work into themes as the themes tend to be interrelated and interconnected. For example, their understanding of politics is closely intertwined with that of ethics, and whilst their understanding of subject formation relies on the linguistic theory of performativity Butler's understanding of performativity is not abstract, discursive, or cultural, rather it is embodied and material. I am only highlighting this here because I want us to be aware that these five themes,

feminism, subjectivity, bodies, performativity, and vulnerability/precarity are interlinked. I now turn to these themes.

2.1 Feminism

Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble*, as already noted offers a critique of certain forms of feminism whilst being a feminist herself. More specifically, Butler 'writing in the tradition of immanent critique ... [sought] to provoke a critical examination of the basic vocabulary of the [feminist] movement of thought' (Butler, 1999: vii) without necessarily wanting to undermine the movement but rather wishing to address potentially exclusive vocabularies and practices. As they explain:

I opposed those regimes of truth that stipulated that certain kinds of gendered expressions were found to be false or derivative, and others, true and original. The point was not to prescribe a new gendered way of life that might then serve as a model for readers of the text. Rather, the aim of the text was to open up the field of possibility of gender without dictating which kinds of possibilities out to be realized. One might wonder what use "opening up possibilities" finally is, but no one who has understood what it is to live in the social world as what is "impossible", illegible, unrealizable, unreal and illegitimate is likely to pose that question.

(Butler, 1999: viii)

Feminist theories contrary to their calling for equality and justice for women, emancipation of all from patriarchy they remained attached to the heterosexual matrix with the result that the categories of woman, lesbians and trans women were excluded. Butler challenged these feminist theories, pointing to the disjunction between the feminist ideas and their practices. One of the important points that Butler makes in *Gender Trouble* is that subjects are not static, they are constantly changing or forming, and therefore any fixed and normative understanding of subjectivity risks creating exclusions and makes the lives of the excluded unliveable. The category 'woman' is still a contested term with gender critical feminists conserving the category of woman to biologically born women (an odd phrase to pen down) and excluding trans women from this category. Butler's response has been the same since 1989, to challenge and critique feminisms that are exclusionary. Feminist exclusions are central to Alex Hughes and Anne Witz's (1997) article included in the feminist theme. The article from 1997, is quite representative of the theoretical questions that academics across the Global North brought to the writings of Judith Butler. The authors engage with Butler via Simone de Beauvoir's discussions of gender and sex. Like Butler in *Gender Trouble*, they welcome de Beauvoir's critique of feminisms that associate gender with biology whilst simultaneously being critical of de Beauvoir's understanding of the body. In her attempt to demonstrate that one cannot be reduced to one's biology, that women are not born as such but rather become so, Hughes and Witz argue that de Beauvoir pathologizes the body, predominantly reducing it to its reproductive capacities. They write that Butler's feminism, on the other hand, focuses on the desiring body, reminding us that women are not merely reproductive bodies. Whilst they welcome Butler's critique of de Beauvoir's theory of gender formation they simultaneously critique Butler for being over discursive and inadvertently excluding 'real' experiences that women emanating from their bodies. This is a very common critique that is made in relation to Butler's understanding of gender and, by extension, their feminism. Lois McNay (2003), on the other hand, critiques the evaluation of Habermasian feminists, like Seyla Benhabib, of Butler's agentic subject and consequently their version of feminism. As McNay writes:

In Benhabib's view, the poststructural view of the unified subject as a discursive effect is far too abstract to provide an adequate account of agency. Agency is regarded as a property of language conceived as an abstract structure, rather than as pragmatically oriented speech

between individuals. The possibility of linguistic agency in Derrida, for example, is linked to the reiterative structure of language itself. When this essentially structural account of agency is generalized, as it is in Butler's idea of 'performative resignification', it is unable to answer the question 'How does anyone know, that such resignification and reinterpretation have taken place?' (Benhabib, 1999: 340; Osborne and Segal, 1994). This conception of agency as an abstract potential connected to the reiterative structure of speech does not adequately address ideas of intention, reflexivity, and attendant notions of validity against which the political legitimacy of a given speech act can be assessed.

(McNay, 2003: 2)

McNay's understanding of agency is closer to that of Butler and to Butler's feminism. In agreeing with Butler she explains that 'the coherent, rational subject does not exist ... in some pure sense prior to action, but emerges through time as an effect of the repeated reworking of sedimented linguistic conventions' (3). McNay, like Butler, shows that if feminism is to remain a liberatory project, it needs/has to shift its understanding of subjects having agency before they act and recognise that agency emerges through action. In reminding us via Butler that agency is not always already there, that there is no intentionality prior to action, McNay points to the limits of the construction of woman in Habermasian feminism, but also in feminisms that want to adorn women with pre-existing agency. We may wonder why 'empowering' women with pre-existing agency is problematic. If we stick with the argument that women, or all subjects, have a pre-existing agency or intentionality we run into two problems: (a) the impossibility of tracking such intentionality and (b) entrapping subjectivity into a kind of stasis, with the result that only certain subjects are recognised as belonging to this category, i.e., biological women, and not emerging subjectivities, i.e., trans women. Woman's subjectivity and subjectivity more general is never static, it is always in movement; furthermore, different environments and times expose different aspects of women and their actions in the world. Vasilaki's essay (2016) is the third piece that I have chosen to include in the feminist theme. Vasilaki's essay situates Butler's feminist writings within debates on post-secularism. Such debates critique secularism as the platform for feminist politics. Vasilaki is critical of Butler's critique of secularism. Whilst Butler is critical of secularism, pointing to its exclusionary logic, Vasilaki is sceptical of Butler's critique. Vasilaki suggests that Butler's analysis renders indistinguishable secular values and religious values. It is quite difficult to follow Vasilaki's critique of Butler's critique of secularism. So-called Western 'secular' states have explicitly aligned themselves with certain religions, such as Christianity, to the exclusion of other faiths (mainly Islam) or community values. Such alliances reveal, as Butler and others have argued, that secularism has become an ideology that protects certain populations to the detriment and exclusion of others. I fear that although Vasilaki may be right to warn us of the limits of our critiques of secularism at the same time she may fall into the trap of promoting a certain feminist engagement with religion that may be exclusive and in total opposition to some of the aspirations of feminism, inclusivity, democratisation and being open to the future. My aim here was not to be critical of the contributions I have chosen but rather to present you with the way in which academics over the years have engaged with Butler's critique of feminism.

2.2 Subjectivity

As discussed, we cannot talk about Judith Butler's work without all the themes merging into one another. When we looked at the theme of feminism, we paid particular attention to their critique of feminism and how academics engaged with it. Questions such as 'Is Butler's critique of certain feminisms able to represent all the experiences of the gendered subject?', 'Is it inclusive?', are central to such discussions. When we are discussing Butler's understanding of the subject/subjectivity we shift our focus away from the general debates about how subjects are framed in feminist discourses to how Butler articulates the formation of the subject. Butler's understanding of subject formation has been influenced by a number of philosophical

perspectives - Hegelian phenomenology, Lacanian psychoanalysis and post-structuralism (Derrida, Foucault) – and we witness early glimpses of their understanding of subject formation in their book *Subjects of Desire* (1999). We know, for example, that the subject in certain philosophical traditions was adorned with specific characteristics: being rational, disembodied, and static. Butler was attracted to Hegel's concept of the subject primarily because it is linked to a desire and therefore produces an embodied subject (Taylor, 1999: 144). Indeed, fundamental to their understanding of the Hegelian subject is the question of recognition and its relationship to desire (Butler, 1999: xiv). Butler provides us with a powerful understanding of the subject and subject formation via Hegel. For Hegel the process of recognition, recognising ourselves, takes place through an encounter with the other. In our encounter with the other we recognise who we are by recognising what we are not. I am A becomes I am not B. This process of recognition also shows us that we are dependent on others for self-recognition, and we realise that if we are to become fully autonomous subjects, we will have to annihilate the other. Butler's interpretation of the master slave dialectic suggests that we realise that if we annihilate the other, our self-identification will be jeopardised, therefore we choose to spare the other's life. The fact that their interpretation of the Hegelian subject is central to their understanding of subjectivity reveals an understanding of a process that produces a subject, -constituted externally, embodied, and interdependent on the other for their existence where their desire for survival overrides the urge to annihilate the other. This subject is also lacking or their wholeness is always dependent on the other, whether that other is another person, history, or culture, etc. The three essays included under the theme of subjectivity reflect on the relationship with and effects of desire, recognition, and loss on the subject (Butler, 2004b: 95-100), question how an interdependent subject gains agency (McNay, 1999) and how by disrupting the cartesian subject, an embodied subject is carved with the potential to identify itself (Boyne, 1999). Reflecting on the psychoanalyst and artist Bracha Ettinger's understanding of subjectivity, Butler notes that our subjectivity can also be formed by a past that does not belong to us:

by an unknowable history of trauma, the trauma that others who precede us have lived through and, on the other hand, the very sites in which a new possibility of visual experience emerges, one which establishes a temporality in which the past is not past, but is not present, in which the present emerges, but from the scattered and animated remains of a continuing, not continuing, trauma.

(Butler, 2004b: 97)

Their engagement with Ettinger's subject formation is exemplary of Butler's deep engagement with contemporary thinkers and their own perspective on subjectivity, which as I have already described, is embodied, collective and always interdependent.

2.3 Performativity

Gender performativity is a practice of citationality, through which discourse produces bodies 'as already sexed' (Ahmed, 1998: 113), that is as having a sex prior to one's naming. As you can see from the above, language and, more specifically, a critical analysis of the 'way language operates is at the centre of Butler's method.

Judith Butler introduces the concept of gender performativity in *Gender Trouble* (1990). However, the most interesting manifestation and citation of this concept takes place in their subsequent books *Bodies that Matter* (1993) and *Excitable Speech* (1997) (in this latter book they use primarily their own concept of performativity as it emerges from gender performativity). Their concept of performativity in general – a radical variation on Austin's theory of performativity – has been used by them to explain how gender is formed, how racist, sexist, and hate speech operate and how institutions in general exclude, torture, and terrorise individuals and construct them as the enemy (2004a). The term 'performativity' is a linguistic term that Butler takes from

Austin (1962) and Derrida (1992a, 2000) and adapts to gender. I have written about (Loizidou, 2007: 26-37) Butler's critique of the essays on performativity by Austin and Derrida elsewhere, and these are brilliantly described by Vicky Bell (2006) and Molly Anne Rothenberg (2006) in the performativity theme.

I would like to revisit a few things about Butler's own concept of gender performativity. As I noted earlier, for them, gender performativity is understood as a citational practice whereby it produces the 'subject as already sexed'. Nevertheless, this citational practice is fantasmatic; it creates the illusion that the subject pre-exists its calling into being, its citation. Gender performativity becomes the practice by which genders are constituted as materially intelligible. In other words, gender performativity produces as intelligible those genders that 'institute and maintain relations of coherence and continuity among sex, gender, sexual practice, and desire' (Butler, 1993: 17); it produces 'subjects as already sexed' in order to sustain intelligible genders and, thus, maintain the hegemony of heterosexuality. This comes into effect through the foreclosure or disavowal of identifications that are not intelligible. Such identities are produced as 'abject beings', beings that are not yet subjects (Butler, 1993: 3), although, Butler argues, the 'abject' subject remains "'inside" the subject as its own founding repudiation' (1993: 3). Thus, the 'abject' is not outside the 'subject' but is rather part of its foundation; that which is refuted or disavowed in order for a subject identification to take place. The 'abject' that is internal to the foundation of the subject is of primary importance in Butler's work because it helps to demonstrate the limits of gender performativity and also opens up ways in which embodiment can be reconfigured through these limits. Gender performativity becomes the practice through which we realise that we are not necessarily what heteronormative cultures want us to be but rather we can become the subjects that we want to become, through a series of acts or recitations that bring us into being (Butler, 1993: 2-4). The essays that are included in this theme draw our attention to a series of problematisations produced by gender performativity, and performativity as used by Butler in subsequent works. These problematisations evolve around what happens to the agency of the subject if it lacks intentionality (Lloyd, 1999; Campbell and Harbord, 1999), the relationship of the voice to performative discursive practices and how it contributes to the formation of the gendered subject (Schlichter, 2011), how Butler's analysis of performative speech acts is influenced by psychoanalysis (Lovell, 2003), how Butler's psychoanalytic understanding of subject formation enables us to subvert existing gender norms (Campbell and Harbord: 229-239) and, finally, to what extent and how gender performativity can address ecological theories that address the environment rather than the human (Bell, 2012). Even when sharply critical, all the papers talk of the possibilities that Butler's concept of performativity provide by thinking about the limits of theoretical paradigms and creating better ways of being with each other.

2.4 Bodies

Bodies are at the heart of Judith Butler's philosophical analysis. We have seen earlier how Butler's conception of the body is not just discursive but also material. We have also noted that when, for example, they are talking about uprisings and demonstrations in both *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly* and 'Palestine, state politics and the anarchist impasse' they have at the forefront of their thinking the risks that bodies take in transforming political terrains. This sustained interest in bodies, particularly gender and sexed bodies, is not only evidenced in *Gender Trouble* and *Bodies that Matter* but also in their essay 'Revisiting bodies and pleasures' (1999c) published in *Theory, Culture and Society* which I have included here. We have already seen that Butler considers the subject to be both embodied and desiring, a philosophical move that disrupts both Cartesian and Hegelian philosophy. Butler's philosophical tradition is always in critical conversation with other philosophers and thinkers. A thinker that they engaged with is Michel Foucault. In 'Revisiting bodies and pleasures' they consider Foucault's call for more thinking and reflections on 'pleasures and bodies'. Foucault's call for 'pleasures and bodies' aimed at breaking away from the usual thought pattern of identifying sexuality with sexed bodies. In the

essay Butler carefully show that Foucault's proposition, which he repudiated later on, risks proposing that; (a) 'sexuality is pervasively structured by sexual difference' (Butler, 1999c: 20) (b) pleasures are processed through sexual difference, (c) power has an effect on bodies and (d) desire is opaque. In highlighting the effects of Foucault's call for more research on 'pleasure and bodies' Butler's reflective essay points out the dangers of studying gender and sexuality in the vacuum of a power analysis. The other essays that form part of this theme either critique Butler's understanding of how bodies are constituted and affected or use Butler's concept to point to the limitations of theories of sexuality. Sylvester (1998) is critical of Butler's understanding of the relationship between power and bodies, as shown in their reading of Richard Reeves' *President Kennedy: Profile of Power* and Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* that bodies may be neither resistant nor compliant or abject. Hird (2002) critiques Butler's use of Freudian psychoanalysis in relation to sexual identification and finds it fails to understand that homosexuality is *not* an identification. Chambers (2007) revisits discussions on discursive and material bodies and succinctly remarks how Butler neither reproduces the body/mind distinction nor do they ignore the material body, while Frazer (1999) going along *with* Butler's understanding of gender formation and bodily identification questions the separation of gender, race, class, ethnicity, and sexuality from their analysis of bodies. And finally, Meagher (2007) compares Butler's understanding of bodily citationality with the work of the artist Cindy Sherman, known for undoing her identity through her photography. Butler's understanding of bodily formations has influenced academic writings in a variety of disciplines, from sociology (Bell and Frazer) to political theory (Lloyd and Chambers) to the arts (Meagher) to name but a few.

2.5 Vulnerability/Precarity

In his engagement with Judith Butler's concept of the body, Chambers (2007) compliments them for stressing that bodies 'are vulnerable' and 'both dependent upon others and subject to violation by another, by others' (Chambers, 2007: 49). The connection between precarity and vulnerability is central to Butler's overview of bodies, subjects and pressing social problems. We have seen earlier in our discussion of Butler's ethics that their ethical subject is one that recognises that it depends upon the other for recognition and survival. The words vulnerability and precarity were not of course present in those early writings, but we can speculate that Butler's understanding of the ethical subject in those earlier writings is somehow a precursor to the exploration of Butler's concept of vulnerability in their ethical and political writings. Indeed, we could say that these two terms expand the connection between politics and ethics. In *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (2004a) reflecting on the 9/11 attacks and state responses to them, Butler reviews how we respond to injurious events, how we embrace (or not) mourning, and the possibility of always being injured and injuring others (2004a: xii). Moreover, Butler notes that vulnerability is not equally distributed (2004a: xii) and that it is vitally important to consider and 'reflect upon injury, to find out the mechanisms of its distribution, to find out who else suffers from permeable borders, unexpected violence, dispossession, and fear' (2004a: xii). In rearticulating injury in terms of vulnerability Butler unravels the myth of sovereign self-mastery and its promise of security, without of course suggesting that an equilibrium in the event of a breach of state security can be reached by violent counter attacks. Instead, *Precarious Life* acts as a reminder that violence is perpetrated precisely because states hold onto this myth of sovereignty and self-mastery. They return to the theme of precarious life and vulnerability in *Parting Ways: Jewishness and the Critique of Zionism* (2012b), *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly* (2015) and in their essay 'Rethinking vulnerability in resistance' (2016). 'Precarious life, vulnerability and the ethics of cohabitation' (2012a) is an expansive essay that re-evaluates Levinas' ethical philosophy premised on vulnerability and Arendt's concept of cohabitation. In this essay Butler explains that the concept of precarity, or to be precise, that life is precarious, pertains to the precarious conditions of life – i.e., losing your home or your country due to war or natural disaster, becoming unemployed, not having a home, food, or health care,

etc. The discussion of vulnerability, on the other hand, emerges in relation to Levinas's understanding of ethical responsibility. Levinas's ethics propose that when a vulnerable Other calls for our support or help we are obliged to offer our support which is not based on the requirement for reciprocity (Butler, 2012a: 140) and, furthermore, 'the Other has priority' (Butler, 2012a: 140). Levinas's ethical subject sustains an idea of a bounded subject, one that differentiates between the one that responds to the call for help and support and the one that asks for support. As a result, they fail to recognise firstly that the subject is embodied but also that is not bounded but constituted by the Other. Butler agrees with Levinas that self-preservation cannot be the premise for ethics, but also argues, as they did in *An Account of Oneself* when discussing ethics, that the vulnerable subject is linked to us:

In my view (which surely is not mine alone) the life of the other, the life that is not our own, is also our life, since whatever is "our" life is derived precisely from this sociality, this being already, and from the start, dependent on a world of others, constituted in and by a social world. In this way there are surely others distinct from me whose ethical claim upon me is irreducible to an egoistic calculation on my part. But that is because we are, however, distinct, also bound to one another and to living processes that exceed human form. ... To find that one's life is also the life of others, even as this life is distinct and must be distinct, means that one's boundary is at once a limit and a site of adjacency, a mode of spatial and temporal nearness and even boundness.

(Butler, 2012: 141)

Butler has a rather complex understanding of vulnerability. They recognise the vulnerability of the Other as a result of being interlinked with us, binding us to the Other. The question of vulnerability arises in their work not just in relation to ethics and responsibility but also in relation to politics and, particularly, in relation to the politics of resistance. In the essay 'Rethinking vulnerability in resistance' they consider the infrastructures of support, including bodily support which we have in demonstrations, uprisings, moments of resistance. In this essay Butler moves from vulnerability as a 'subjective disposition' (Butler, 2016: 25) to vulnerability as a relational disposition. If we are supported by people and material infrastructures (barricades, placates, streets, social media) in acts of resistance, they invite us to see that we are not truly masters of ourselves, and that political transformations can be achieved precisely when we recognise that we are not bounded sovereign subjects. Therefore 'vulnerability is a kind of relationship that belongs to that ambiguous region in which receptivity and responsiveness are not clearly separable from one another, and not distinguished as separate moments and sequences; indeed, where receptivity and responsiveness become the basis for mobilizing vulnerability rather than engaging in its destructive denial' (Butler, 2016: 25) they argue. Indeed, in this essay Judith Butler insists that vulnerability can be the premise for a politics that moves us away from violence and destruction towards cooperation and support and the creation of better worlds and conditions precisely because we are supported by each other and infrastructures. In the interview they gave to Bell (2010), Butler explains that they came to think about the promise of invulnerability and its consequences as a result of the US response to 9/11, of the differential distribution of vulnerability revealed in those responses (US citizens should have maximum protection while others less). Butler finds ways of undoing the normalisation of 'differential vulnerability'. We have seen how their reconceptualization of vulnerability as the infrastructure for creating social and political relations is based on cooperation and collective missions. Agreeing with Butler and in line with their ideas of vulnerability, Velicu and García-López (2018) consider how theories of the commons align with ideas of vulnerability. Pfingst and Rosengarten (2012) use Butler's understanding of precarity and photography to reveal how medical infrastructure is blocked from reaching the Occupied Palestinian Territories. Butler's problematisations on precarity and

vulnerability find their way in to so many of our contemporary writings, and the essays selected here are examples of precisely this.

Judith Butler's writings, thinking and philosophy have been influential in so many academic fields, and in so many spheres of life. What I have brought to the fore here is a snapshot of this, a snapshot that can be supplemented by others over the years. In re-reading some of their work, I was impressed by their use of questions. Questions make their appearance in almost all their writings, a way of giving their reader a breathing space to digest what has gone before, but also a way of opening us up to different ways of articulating, thinking and imagining the social, philosophical and political impasses that we may be encountering. The question is also a way of reminding us that we cannot solve problems alone but that we are not bounded, isolated individuals but rather that we are collective subjectivities that can only forge the future together. Can we sustain such a reminder? A question for all to think and act on together.

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ⁱ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yD6UukSbAMs> . The themes and analysis in this lecture form now part of their excellent book, *Who's Afraid of Gender* (2024).

ⁱⁱ Supra note 1.

ⁱⁱⁱ Collective subjectivity, is a subjectivity that is constituted by the alliances it has without necessarily possessing the characteristics (i.e., gender, class, race, abilities) of those political alliances. Intersectional politics keep hold to the idea that we possess certain characteristics (i.e., gender, race, class , age) that can provide us access and understanding to the exclusions and injuries that we have. It is important note that Judith Butler is in alignment with intersectional feminism, and so am I. Nevertheless, here I note a slight difference in the structure of Judith Butler's thinking that make it closer to the idea of collective subjectivity. We can say that an intersectional subjectivity needs to be embraced and enables a collective one.