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Judith Butler, *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly*, Harvard University Press, 2015, 256 pp., \$27.95 US (hbk), ISBN 9780674967755.

Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly is about the pre-conditions of politics. The book is comprised of Butler's Mary Flexner Lectures delivered at Bryn Mawr College in 2011. In many ways it serves as both a follow up to her work as an activist and pro-Palestinian advocate, as well as her previous books, specifically *Gender Trouble*,¹ *Precarious Life*,² and *Frames of War*.³ In short, in the present volume Butler engages with contemporary political movements drawing upon her theory of performativity.

Throughout the book Butler discusses many contemporary uprisings in order to bring into clear relief the horrors of neoliberalism and contemporary capitalism. Tahrir Square, Palestinian resistance movements, Black Lives Matter, Gezi Park, and Occupy Wall Street are just a few of the examples that Butler draws upon in her discussion about the potentials of performative actions to open up new political possibilities. First and foremost, she reminds us to ask which humans in any given context or situation are recognized *as human*: "Which humans count as the human? Which humans are eligible for the recognition within the sphere of appearance, and which are not?... The very fact that I can ask which humans are recognized as human and which are not means there is a distinct field of the human that remains unrecognizable, according to dominant norms, but which is obviously recognizable within the epistemic field opened up by counterhegemonic forms of knowing" (36).

Before the question of an ethical life, the question of a livable life appears. In other words, the pre-conditions for a livable life come before the type of life one might want to choose to live. Taking demonstrations as her point of departure, Butler's argument begins at the boundaries imposed on humans by their bodily vulnerabilities as well as by different forms of social and political vulnerabilities. She clearly explains that whether one likes it or not, whether one wants it or not, by definition we are all dependent on each other—on the other, on a set of relationships, support networks, an infrastructure that makes our own actions possible. But: "What does it mean to act together when the conditions for acting together are devastated or falling away" (23)?

The thesis of the book is that the pre-conditions of acting are not separate from the act. The platform and setting for performing is part of the performance itself. The early chapters

¹ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (London: Routledge, 1990).

² Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London: Verso, 2004).

³ Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?* (London: Verso, 2009).

in the book discuss demonstrations in general, how they mark an unendurable situation and what they hope to achieve from demonstrating. Here Butler engages with the work of Hanna Arendt and Emmanuel Levinas, among others, to discuss modes of belonging and nationalism. The specific locations, times, and occasions of various contemporary demonstrations are crucial datum for differentiating between them; but this same datum is also the building block for establishing a shared structure of precarity. The later chapters of the book question the ethical responsibilities regarding the other. Butler takes Adorno's claim that it is not possible to lead a good life in a bad life to articulate a morality based on assembly, solidarity, and vulnerability.

In the first chapter, "Gender Politics and the Right to Appear," Butler convincingly links gender and sexual minorities with precarious populations. Her question cited above, "Which humans are eligible for recognition within the sphere of appearance and which are not," can be translated into political and legal terms as: Who is eligible for protection by the law and who is not? Based on her theory of gender performativity, Butler explains that the right to appear in public is one of the pre-conditions of politics. In performing bodily and speech acts, one is making visible their right to appear, and therefore is a political action. A good example Butler gives is the slogan on the signs held by Palestinians during demonstrations: "We Are Still Here" (49). To appear in public assembly is to persist and affirm one's political existence. Butler argues that public gatherings express an understanding of precarious conditions as shared situations.

Perhaps surprisingly, Butler welcomes the recurring misinterpretations of her theory of gender performativity; the two most common misreadings being: that we radically choose our gender and that we are utterly determined by gender norms (62). This, she claims, serves as further proof of the dual dimension of performative actions. Butler's theory of gender performativity precisely aims to relax the judgments and prescriptions of normativity. Performativity describes both processes and conditions of acting. Butler builds upon Eve Sedgwick's theory of queer deviations as well as the concept of iterability in Derrida's account of the speech act as citational. She argues for queer as a movement (rather than just an identity) that opens up spaces not always recognized within established norms. She writes: "As much as recognition seems to be a precondition of livable life, it can serve the purposes of scrutiny, surveillance, and normalization from which queer escape may prove necessary precisely to achieve livability outside its terms" (62).

Chapter 2, "Bodies in Alliance and the Politics of the Street," focuses on political spaces. Here Butler discusses the processes and conditions of political assembly. Building upon Hannah Arendt's work on the political space, Butler questions the pre-conditions of power, agency and resistance. She argues that the streets cannot be taken for granted as the space of politics or of appearance as Arendt claims. She criticizes Arendt's division between the political space and the political action, between the private and public spheres (45). As counterevidence to Arendt's claim, Butler presents the examples of transgendered people who are not legally allowed to appear in public, as well as the debate in France to prohibit Muslim women from wearing the veil (53). In Butler's argument the material conditions for assembly are not fully separable from generating a political space; i.e., the ability to appear on, or occupy, the street is part and parcel of protest.

Chapter 3, "Precarious Life and the Ethics of Cohabitation," is relatively short and focuses on the ethics of a political solidarity. Butler begins with the compelling accounts and images of war that stir a strong sense of ethical responsibility. Discussing the work of Susan Sontag and "invoking a reading of Hegel in the midst of the digital age," (104) Butler questions relationships of ethics and proximity. She offers close readings of Levinas and

Arendt whose works were informed by shared Jewish intellectual traditions. In light of her own recent work on Palestine/Israel,⁴ she discusses cohabitation based on the ethical obligation compelled by shared precarity. For Butler, Levinas and Arendt “offer views that are both illuminating and problematic”—the latter being so because parts of their positions “are clearly racist” (117). For instance, she reads the work of Emmanuel Levinas “against himself,” arguing that ethical relations are also bound by the other as is the very definition of human. To this, Butler retorts: “If only the Israeli army felt this way” (109)! She also criticizes the ethno-nationalism in Arendt’s work—in particular, her differentiation between Arab and European Jews. Butler stresses that conditions of precarity are intertwined in all modes of political dependencies. “Whether explicitly stated or not,” she writes, “every political effort to manage populations involves a tactical distribution of precarity, more often than not articulated through an unequal distribution of precarity” (119). This is a point that she also made in her book *Precarious Life* in her analysis of “unlivable lives”—lives whose legal and political status are kept hanging in suspension.

In Chapter 4, “Bodily Vulnerability, Coalitional Politics,” Butler presents a case for utilizing vulnerability as a form of resistance. The framework for her argument is built around the fact of unmet pre-conditions of politics, i.e., the lack of “infrastructure.” Put into question form, what happens when the infrastructure for politics and the support networks that we are dependent upon are lacking? This lacking is an occasion for Butler to reconsider the relationship between resistance and vulnerability. She begins by questioning the agency of the vulnerable. When public assemblies gather in the street to demonstrate they are not only resisting the power of the state, police, or opposition protestors, but they are also exposing their already vulnerable selves. By exposing precarity in a plural enactment, Butler explains, demonstrators are mobilizing their vulnerabilities. Although Butler admits that she does not differentiate between precarity and vulnerability, her main point is to emphasize the significance of the agency of the vulnerable.

As the title suggests, “‘We The People’—Thoughts on Freedom of Assembly,” Chapter 5 is focused on the plurality of protestors. Starting from the phrase “We the People” Butler examines the unrecognized identity of who the people are. While “We The People” does not clearly define any specific people as such, the phrase still points to a common shared “will of the people” against the state. The inability of the state and affiliated media to define who the people are threatens its legitimacy. Butler argues that performative assembly in its plurality is a universal pre-condition of politics and threat to the legitimacy of the state. Finally, in Chapter 6, “Can One Lead a Good Life in a Bad Life?,” responding to Adorno’s argument that it is impossible to lead a good life in a bad life, Butler contends that performative resistance is an ethical possibility. She writes: “If I am to lead a good life, it will be a life lived with others, a life that is no life without those others; I will not lose this *I* that I am; whoever I am will be transformed by my connections with others, since my dependency on another, and my dependability, are necessary in order to live and to live well” (218).

The book is realistic and sensitive in distinguishing between the various forms of political assembly. It is written in a clear uncomplicated manner, making Butler’s argument accessible to a wide range of intellectuals, professors, students, and activists—perhaps even especially to the latter, i.e., those who are on the streets participating in demonstrations, as well as those who are unfamiliar with the dynamics of demonstrations. Butler’s argument for collective assembly is well defined. She beautifully points out how gender performativity,

⁴ Although published after she presented the Mary Flexner Lectures, see: Judith Butler, *Parting Ways: Jewishness and the Critique of Zionism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013).

precarity, and recognition are necessarily intertwined in the bio-politics of demonstrations. Although, she claims that she does not wish to restore humanism (119), her book challenges our contemporary social order that no longer honors peaceful demonstrations and the humanity of so many humans.

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