
Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly is perhaps Butler’s most relevant work for geographers, urbanists, and scholars of social movements. Drawing from contemporary popular uprisings, assemblies and occupations—including Occupy Wall Street, Tahrir Square, Gezi Park, Black Lives Matter and the Indignados—Butler engages with political philosophers ranging from Arendt to Agamben to Adorno seeking a universal theory of assembly through performative, embodied dissent.

Those who closely follow Butler through working papers passed by email or recorded lectures online will recognize some of the chapter titles and main arguments. Most of the six essays were developed first as lectures delivered at Bryn Mawr College in 2011 as part of the Mary Flexner Lectures, and four of the six were previously published in similar form in journals or edited volumes.¹

In speaking about contemporary popular uprisings that commanded global attention, Butler enters a crowded arena. Known as a founder of queer theory, her groundbreaking work on gender may not make her an obvious candidate to elucidate 21st century organized resistance. However, she notes that:

[o]ne political point probably has remained pretty much the same even as my own focus has shifted, and that is that identity politics fails to furnish a broader conception of what it means, politically, to live together, across differences, sometimes in modes of unchosen

¹ See https://www.brynmawr.edu/flexner For chapter two see Butler (2012a); for three Butler (2012b); for four Butler (2014); and for six Butler (2012c).
proximity, especially when living together, however difficult it may be, remains an ethical and political imperative. (p.27)

The underlying question of the text is, what fosters radical or revolutionary coalitional politics if not traditional Marxist class-conscious formation, intersectional identity politics, or ideological solidarity?

A favorite quote among activists who work across geographies and identities comes from the well-known Aboriginal activist and scholar Lilla Watson: “If you have come here to help me, you are wasting your time. But if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together.” Butler does not reference this quote directly, but in Notes Toward she lays out a theoretical framework that substantiates Watson’s beautiful, if ambiguous, ethical code.

In Chapter 1, “Gender Politics and the Right to Appear”, Butler establishes bodily actions as performative, arguing that the theory to explain the formations of gender is applicable to mass demonstration. She deftly maneuvers from the individual subversion of gender norms to the performativity of the plural–those concerted corporal actions signifying political intent and claims. When bodies come together in the street in a political action, they signify, by definition, that they are here, visible, and they have a “right to appear”. Citing examples such as the Black Rights Movement in the United States and Muslim women resisting the ban on using the veil in France, Butler says that the:

“right” to appear is tacitly supported by regulatory schemes that qualify only certain subjects as eligible to exercise that right…For those who are considered “ineligible”, the
struggle to form alliances is paramount, and it involves a plural and performative positioning of eligibility where it did not exist before. (p.50)

While Butler does not argue that gender and sexuality serve as a global model, she does convincingly demonstrate how gender performativity serves as a springboard to broader conversations. The connector is her theorization of precarity, defined as “that politically induced condition in which certain populations suffer from failing social and economic networks of support more than others, and become differentially exposed to injury, violence, and death” (p.33). The asymmetrical “distribution of precariousness”, which Butler (2010) previously theorized in *Frames of War*, relies on the culture and politics of recognition, which allows for the categorization of bodies and populations as somehow less than human. The embodiment of certain social norms renders the body categorically legible as “woman”, as “citizen”, or most basically as “human”; while the failure, or inability, to perform and reproduce those norms leaves one unrecognizable as “human” or deserving, resulting in precarity.

Geographers will note that the concept of space is central in Chapter 2, “Bodies in Alliance and the Politics of the Street”. In arguing that shared precarity is both foundation and glue to contemporary political alliances against neoliberal annihilation, Butler builds on and critiques Hannah Arendt’s theorization of politics, particularly the creation of “political space”, the location of assembly. Butler’s critique of Arendt is focused on the false division between the gendered spheres of public and private— the public sphere supplying (male) actors with a space for politics. Butler contends that political space does not precede political action as Arendt would have it, and certainly not when that political action calls into question the legitimacy of the state. Rather, political space is relational and created through plural action. That is to say that assembly’s performative nature engenders space to be readable as political. What constitutes
assembly, and thus political space, Butler does not take up until Chapter 4, “Bodily Vulnerability, Coalitional Politics”.

Butler follows contemporary critical geographers in dismissing spatial fetishization and the idea that space preemptively produces human sociality, although she neither uses those exact terms nor cites any spatial thinkers. She further notes that political action relies on various infrastructures, the physical and the technological. In order to assemble freely–and here she acknowledges the work of disabilities studies–bodies must be able to access the public square in order to come together. In doing so they lay claim to what Butler refers to as the visible and audible “space of appearance”, again referencing Arendt.

Butler engages with Giorgio Agamben’s work throughout the book. She concedes that his theorizations have proven useful, but takes issue with a political model in which the power the state wields to protect some subjects’ fundamental rights (such as assembly) is the same power that strips those rights from others–an argument she makes at length in Chapter 5, “‘We the people’: Thoughts on Freedom of Assembly”. In Chapter 2 Butler critiques Agamben’s concept of “bare life”:

> if we seek to take account of exclusion itself as a political problem, as part of politics itself, then it will not do to say that once excluded, those beings lack appearance or “reality” in political terms, that they have no social or political standing or are cast out and reduced to mere being. (p.79)

Viewing Agamben’s “bare life” as derivative of the traditional Arendtian conception of the *polis*, such that political space preemptively determines the legitimacy of actors, Butler insists that we
use language that recognizes the agency of those bodies exposed to violence and harm and their potential to produce political space through assembly and networks of support and solidarity.

Chapter 3, “Precarious Life and the Ethics of Cohabitation”, is a relatively short piece in which Butler reads Emmanuel Levinas “against himself” along with Arendt to co-opt their at times racist philosophies of the ethical relations between humans (Levinas) and ethno-nationalism (Arendt) to further construct an ethics of coalitional politics based on precarity. To readers who haven’t followed Butler’s recent work on Israel/Palestine, this chapter may seem out of place since it does not explicitly focus on political action of pluralities, social movements, or resistance. Her argument is simple and beautiful:

if I am only bound to those who are close to me, already familiar, then my ethics are invariably parochial, communitarian, and exclusionary. If I am only bound to those who are “human” in the abstract, then I avert every effort to translate culturally between my own situation and that of others. If I am only bound to those who suffer at a distance, and never those who are close to me, then I evacuate my situation in an effort to secure the distance that allows me to entertain ethical feeling and even feel myself to be ethical.

(p.104)

She pairs her subversive reading of Levinas—that human ethical relations follow the relational definition of human (as argued in Chapter 1: “I am human if and only because you are human”)—with the Arendtian argument that we do not, cannot, choose with whom we cohabitate the earth and therefore our ethical responsibilities to other humans and populations preempt any choice or decision. In order to tie the chapter into the theme of the book, Butler again turns to her notion of precarity, arguing that all forms of political governance count on an unequal “tactical distribution
of precarity”, and therefore the struggle for a livable life is based the universal “ethical obligation that is grounded in precarity” (p.119).

Chapter 4 makes the case that infrastructure (which is loosely defined as material objects such as streets and public squares or institutional networks like healthcare) is at once necessary for public assembly as well as increasingly what assemblies are fighting for, laying claim to, or struggling to maintain against the onslaught of neoliberal governance. Drawing on Donna Haraway, Butler theorizes the body as defined by its position to other humans/animals, processes, and “inorganic conditions and vehicles for living” (p.130). This fundamental relationality of the body allows for a broad conceptualization of assembly, the actions of bodies in concert, so that we may move from the public square to transnational networks of resistance, converging digital and physical spheres of actions, or assemblies of bodies that have been denied basic rights. Even those reduced to “bare life”, indefinitely detained by the state, may still find corporal agency to resist in the form of hunger strikes and through prisoners’ rights networks.

Arguably, Butler fails to explicitly differentiate between precarity and vulnerability; however, the reader may surmise that while precarity is the political condition of unequal distribution of exposure to harm, vulnerability is its effect–moments in which discrete bodies are subject to injury. Precarity works categorically, while vulnerability depends on a body’s economic and historical relationships. Injurability, we understand, is hegemonically harm committed against vulnerable bodies. A valuable critique argued in this chapter is that the distribution of vulnerability is an effective means to govern certain populations. It can work to both specify a population for paternalist protection or target a population for attack. Readers needn’t look far to witness the working of vulnerability. The xenophobic rhetoric of the US Republican presidential primaries or the continued justification of the killing of unarmed black bodies by police in US cities or the Brazilian favelas are timely examples. As a “paradox of
neoliberalism”, populations suffering precarity are blamed for their own vulnerability, and are made responsible for their own injuries.

Butler’s examination of coalitional politics is confined to why such alliances are essential. She does not devote significant space to discussing how coalitions operate successfully on the ground. In the final pages of this essay, she recognizes that working in coalitions is not fun or easy (in fact it is often very taxing) but ethically necessary due to our interdependent nature. Her argument builds on her relational definitions of human and freedom: we must build coalitions and support each other’s mobilizations of precarity if we are all to live freely. Whereas Butler succeeds in constructing an ethical model of interdependency—which she names as a shortcoming of identity politics in Chapter 1—she does not convincingly explicate, in my opinion, how the concept of precarity succeeds in sustaining coalitional politics, in practice, where identity politics (and Marxism-Leninism) has failed.

Chapter 5, “‘We the people’: Thoughts on Freedom of Assembly”, is one of the most substantial chapters in the collection of essays. Butler employs one of the most famous political phrases in occidental history, “We the people” from the US Declaration of Independence, as the ultimate performative declaration of popular sovereignty. However, she effectively argues that the performative actions of assembly are meaningful prior to any speech claims, and that we must develop an understanding both of popular assemblies as well as the “will of the people” as a “plurality of bodies who enact their convergent and divergent purposes in ways that fail to conform to a single kind of action, or reduce to a single kind of claim” (p.157). This plurality, and the fact that bodies acting in concert does not necessarily translate to conformity, was a source of puzzlement during the Occupy protests since the first question of news crews to an assembled body was “why are you assembled?”. The inability of corporate media to adequately represent the plurality of demands, which in fact may be contradictory, is an argument for citizen
journalism. Techno-media infrastructure has proved effective in both disseminating events from the perspective of protesters as well as transposing the scene of protest, the space of appearance, beyond the public sphere, engendering increasingly wider networks of bodies acting in concert.

One of Butler’s boldest claims in the book is the assertion connecting assembly, popular sovereignty, and state legitimacy. The argument cannot be justly summarized in these paragraphs, but Butler convincingly reasons that the basis for state legitimacy is the corresponding notion of popular sovereignty, which is engendered through assemblies that claim to speak as the “will of the people”. As such, which (assemblies of) people constitute “the people” becomes a struggle for and against hegemony. Given that governments maneuver to recognize some assemblies as legitimate while declaring others as illegal and rendering their claims to “popular will” illegitimate, does freedom of assembly depend on being protected by or from governing bodies wielding police power? Popular sovereignty is a perpetual, reflexive exercises in self-making. Relying on bodies acting in concert, it can only legitimate a governing body when it is completely separate from that body. Thus Butler concludes that freedom of assembly must be understood in its universality, irrespective of sanctioned law, as a precondition of politics and legitimate governance.

Chapter 6, “Can One Lead a Good Life in a Bad Life?”, is a concise response to a provocation made by Theodor Adorno. Butler’s argument, in short, is the following: how to lead a good life, a basic question of morality, is also biopolitical. In asking “whose lives matter?”, Butler builds on earlier work and argues that those lives considered worthy of living are the same lives that are grievable should they be destroyed. We reach a conundrum after acknowledging that those bodies subject to unacceptable injurability—caught in war, or indefinitely imprisoned—are placed in a seemingly impossible position to live a good life, for a life worth living is dependent on various infrastructures, as argued in Chapter 4. If a body is denied that which
makes life livable, what agency is left? Moreover, if we are to understand our own humanness, and our own liberty, as relational, that is dependent on one another, how can one live a good life when another is maintained in a state of denial? Forever resisting Agamben’s “bare life”, Butler argues that “only through a concept of interdependency that affirms the bodily dependency, conditions of precarity, and potentials for performativity can we think a social and political world that seeks to overcome precarity in the name of livable lives” (p.211).

In the final pages of the book, Butler engages with Adorno’s musing that a good life is necessarily critical, one in which the subject says “no” to the status quo. She asserts that the critique requires resistance, necessarily plural and embodied, and therefore performative. Embracing interdependency and resisting precarity is Butler’s common observation across social movements, from Occupy to Tahrir: “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” (p.218).

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Some may be weary of picking up Butler due to the unfortunate reputation of overly complex, hard to follow and harder to understand writing⁴, but I found these essays rather accessible relative to her early work. Readers—both academics new to Butler and students alike—should be

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⁴ In 1998 Butler “won” the “bad writer” award of the journal Philosophy and Literature (see http://denisdutton.com/bad_writing.htm). Butler responded with a rather epic op-ed in the New York Times (Butler 1999) defending “difficult and demanding” language in order to challenge the hegemony of common sense; and her critique must have hit its mark because the “bad writing” contest was discontinued the very same year. Still, she seems to have made an effort to, when possible, write shorter sentences.
able to follow her arguments easily enough, and while it’s still challenging, professors should not shy from including the text on course syllabi.

There were certain moments reading the book when I was exasperated that Butler is a philosopher rather than a social scientist. If she were, we could feel rightly indignant that she theorizes place, the production of space, infrastructure, and state legitimacy without calling on canonical literature. Similarly anarchist scholars may feel that Butler’s reoccurring implicit references to prefigurative politics and anarchist praxis should be explicitly named and discussed as such. We could, on the one hand, charge that because Butler’s works seem written to be read across disciplines and not just by philosophers, she should at the very least situate her questions within the established literature. On the other hand, it could be the job of her fans in the social sciences to transpose her philosophical arguments into critical social theory. As common to her discipline, Butler’s methodology and fieldwork are unspecified, so we may start by grounding her concepts and claims with actual data from in-depth fieldwork. Opportunities for geographers abound.

When evaluating literature that claims to be critical or radical, I follow the opinion of Razmig Keucheyan (2013) that critical social theory necessarily challenges the existing social order. In a critique, the author consciously enters a constructive debate on how to make the world more just. However, when the subject matter is resistance, social movements, or counter-hegemonic activism, I believe the author should additionally aim to produce a work that is beneficial to those radical movements for social justice, the activists “in the square” and “on the street”. The critique must seek resonance beyond the academy. Butler has proved as much with her past work, most famously *Gender Trouble* (Butler 2006), and more recently with her pro-Palestinian advocacy (see, for example, Butler 2015; Falcone 2014). Whether or not Butler’s
Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly passes such a test cannot be decided in a review essay, but I believe that is both the intent and potential of the text.

References

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