

# The Trajectories of the Concept of Life in Judith Butler's Thought

## Las trayectorias del concepto de vida en el pensamiento de Judith Butler

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**ABSTRACT.** In this paper we propose to look into different meanings of livability and life in Judith Butler's thought. Although crucial for her early work (she points to it in her 1999 Introduction to *Gender Trouble*), the concept of livability as such emerges more often and in a more pronounced manner in her later books (from *Undoing Gender* and *Precarious life* to *Towards a Performative Theory of Assembly*). Our main question is: what is the thread that runs through different concepts of life in Butler's work? What are the links between abject, unlivable, precarious, ungrievable, jettisoned and dispossessed life? This raises further questions: the question of gradation of livability (which life matters and 'how much', and how to think this quantifiability of something so unquantifiable); and the question of universality (all lives matter). These questions obviously need to take into account the terms under which a life is qualified and counted as livable. Such conditions encompass the norms that organize the possibility of recognition and the orders of recognizability and differential al-

location of humanness. They encompass the ways in which we are constituted politically, but also in which this 'we' is social and bodily. The question of livable life is thus very much entangled with the issue of (individual) agency, but also with what we as agents require "in order to maintain and reproduce the conditions of (our) own livability" (*Undoing Gender* 2004: 39).

*Key words:* Life; livability of Life; bodily Ontology; grievable Life; jettisoned Life; precarious Life.

**RESUMEN.** En este ensayo, nos proponemos explorar los diferentes significados de los conceptos de vivibilidad y vida en el pensamiento de Judith Butler. Si bien es crucial para su obra temprana —Butler se refiere por primera vez a este concepto en su introducción del libro, *El género en disputa* de 1999—, el concepto en sí emerge con más claridad y elaboración en su obra tardía (*Deshacer el género*, *Vida precaria* y *Apuntes hacia una teoría performativa de*

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asamblea). Nuestra pregunta principal sería: ¿Cuál es el hilo conductor que une las diferentes concepciones de vida en el trabajo de Butler? ¿Cuáles son los lazos entre la vida abyecta, invivible, precaria, indolora, desechada y desposeída? De estas dos preguntas surgen otras más: como la cuestión de gradación de vivibilidad — qué vida importa, y “cuánto,” y cómo pensar este tipo de cuantificación de algo no-cuantificable—; y la cuestión de la universalidad (todas las vidas importan). Estas preguntas, obviamente, tienen que contar con evidencias bajo las cuales la vida es cualificada, calificada y contada como vivible. Estas condiciones abarcan las normas que organizan las posibilidades de reconocimiento y los órdenes de reconocimiento

tanto como la distribución diferencial de la humanidad. Y además engloban las maneras en las que estamos constituidos políticamente, pero también, las maneras en las que el “nosotros” se define como social y corporal. La cuestión de la vida vivible está, por ende, enmarañada con la problemática de la contraposición entre la voluntad individual y la idea del “nosotros”, que, como seres, necesitamos —en palabras de la propia Butler— “para mantener y reproducir las condiciones de (nuestra) propia vivibilidad” (*Deshacer el género* 2004: 39).

*Palabras clave:* vida; vivibilidad de la vida; ontología corporal; vida digna de duelo; vida desechada; vida precaria.

### INTRODUCTION: MAKING A BID FOR A LIVABLE LIFE

In a text written for the exhibit “Uprisings,” curated by George Didi-Huberman at Paris’ *Jeu de Paume*, building her argumentation in favor of rebellion, Judith Butler uses the phrase “making a bid for a livable life” (Butler 2017: 26). This phrase, “making a bid”, is in a certain way the initial shibboleth and action of our text. It is our intention to sketch the “life” path in Judith Butler’s conceptual apparatus, but even more, we wish to take a closer look at the crucial move that highlights the set of characteristics that make ‘life’ ‘livable’. Indeed, it could be said that here is a sort of auction of relational potentialities of a life when certain philosophical protocols are reinforced and profiled as a very specific articulation of “bodily ontology” (Butler 2009a: 3), followed by epistemologies of “life” in the feminist philosophy of Judith Butler.

In order to embark on an analysis indicating the places and appearances of the word ‘life’, which form, in all their varied yet intrinsically connected attributes, the philosophy of Judith Butler, it is first necessary to list, count, distinguish, and separate the strategies that follow the category of life in general, and then all the elements in her texts whereby life acquires its symbolic ethical and political, but also certainly reflexive shadings of ‘livable life’. Thus the assessment and ranking of various forms of life, the competition and evaluation of various life statuses, the myriad appearances of life all become part of our task. The cards are on the table, the chips are all in in the struggle for “something [that is] indispensable for living with dignity or freedom” (Butler 2017: 23).

We argue that ‘life’ belongs to the arsenal of Butler’s main critical concepts, and *Frames of War* gives us justification for that, since it departs from the ques-

tion, "*What is a life?*" (Butler 2009a: 3). Without remaining in a general ontology of life in which its definition is determined through universal questions of life and death, her argument advances through a meticulous vivisection of mechanisms of power that naturalize but also denaturalize life, by blurring its various meanings and statuses. That in turn compels us to articulate this 'making a bid' as a designation of the assessment of the analytic potential required for reflection on 'life' to performatively grow into purposeful acting with the aim of a more just and better community.

What we propose to ask is which elements of life are counted in, and which are not in the set that makes life 'livable'. Is it possible to arrive at consensus regarding the choice of strong analytic tools that surpass ideology, to evaluate or rank the pricelessness of a 'life'? Is it at all possible to define the untouchable constitutive elements of 'a life' and can these elements justify the differences in assessing 'the life' of one who has nothing left but life itself? Do we still need to stand on the traces of thought of negative theologies for which there is always an instance greater than human, or is it, rather (following thinkers who have deconstructed apophatic inference, such as Buber, Levinas or Derrida...), necessary to deconstruct the mechanisms of production of such higher instances that serve to justify given negative hierarchies? Clearly, one of the first tasks of feminist philosophy is the analysis and criticism of existing negative constitutive structures. It seems to us that Judith Butler develops her thought precisely in that direction by examining and deconstructing relational categories of such 'operations of power' and their structures.

We argue that one such feminist philosophy of life assumes a specific bodily ontology, and further insists on an insurrection on the level of ontology. In other words, life has to be thought as inherently attached to the body, but at the same time, as de-biologized; as the carrier and vessel of life, which in its finitude seeks to overcome its own form. At the same time, we have to bear in mind the sociality an embodied life is imbued with: "[t]o be alive or, indeed, to be 'attached' to life would mean to be attached to one's own dissolution or, indeed, to discover that life is never exclusively one's own" (Butler, Malabou 2011: 637). When 'life' begins to be considered in the phrase 'livable life', we are inquiring after the normative conditions that need to be fulfilled in order for life to become 'life'. Insisting on the formulation of a 'bodily ontology', Butler announces her intention to critically examine "precariousness, vulnerability, injurability, interdependency, exposure, bodily persistence, desire, work and the claims of language and social belonging" (Butler 2009a: 3). The phrase, 'bodily ontology', then, comprises a whole slew of nouns that indicate specific states or manifestations bodies take, or that take place in bodies. None of these various states is accidental. They can be said to encompass, in a semantically open associative range, ontological uncertainty

(to which we are exposed as precarious), incompleteness (as disarmed before the fullness of being), essential defenselessness to the law, necessary dependence on others who could go missing at any point, that is, the necessity of facing others, being with others, and for others. By introducing ‘bodily persistence’, all these states acquire a temporal dimension through the paradox of understanding duration *despite* finitude.

In shifting from bodily persistence to ‘desire’ and then to “work and the claims of language and social belonging,” Butler borrows from the philosophical tradition that has shaped her thinking, while also criticizing it in the process. In what follows, we will show that particular textual strategies, present from *Subjects of Desire* to *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly*, have formed and articulated conditions of livability of life, while carefully building up its affective, ethical and political dispositions. In nearly every text of hers, as well as her precise, but not necessarily explicitly directed readings of Hegel, Kojeve, Marx, Althusser, Benjamin, Foucault, the French feminists, but also Arendt, Derrida, and contemporaries who have reflected upon life, it is possible to find Butler’s specific grammar and syntax which makes life livable. The life that she thematizes certainly does not precede social and linguistic formulations of life, since, “sociality conditions and interrupts each and every apparently intimate and immediate relation I might have to my existence” (Butler, Malabou 2011: 638).

### GOOD LIFE

What is then a livable life? The answer lies scattered across Judith Butler’s works. We will, however, begin with the claim from *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly*, where she equates the livable with the good life (Butler 2015: 208). One might at first wonder what could be good in livability. Is it not possible to live a shadow life or a life of the living dead? A life that is an endlessly prolonged survival is livable as much as it is lived. Livability might designate mere perseverance, unintended and unwilling ability to live, obstinacy of the body in enduring the unendurable. There seems to be hardly anything inherently good in the body’s capacity not to die, to be live-able. Clearly, the concept of livability needs to involve much more than that.

Butler’s relatively recent insistence on a *good* life may offer a clue on how to read livability, almost against the very term. First, such an attribute implies that there is a life which is not good, a life lived against the odds and despite the fact that it cannot be lived. Second, if we allow for the move from the ethical to the political, a good life may refer to more than one life, one’s individual life, indeed it may suggest that there also have to be other good lives that of necessity intersect with my

life and impact upon it. In that sense, for my own life to be good, there has to be either a community of those leading good life, or a political infrastructure that enables something good to emerge from the sheer fact that we are living beings. Third, life in itself, a life which would somehow precede or transcend the multifarious levels and forms of support (institutional and infrastructural, ranging from the availability of an irrigation system, the restoration of the ozone layer, to a just government and caring communities), also does not merit a name of a good life.

Behind the good life trope one hears several of Butler's interlocutors: Benjamin, Socrates via Arendt, and Adorno, among others. We find Benjamin's differentiation between *Dasein* and *gerechtes Dasein*, his insistence on the falsity and ignominy of the proposition that existence, or mere life (*bloßes Leben*), stands higher than just existence – that “nonexistence of man is something more terrible than the (admittedly subordinate) not-yet-attained condition of the just man” (Benjamin 1978: 251). Butler claims that “we cannot struggle for a good life, a livable life, without meeting the requirements that allow a body to persist... And yet, that demand proves insufficient since we survive precisely in order to live, and life, as much as it requires survival, must be *more* than survival in order to be livable” (Butler 2015: 208). Furthermore, one life, *my* life “is and is not my own, and this is what makes me a social creature, and a living one” (ibid, 200). No life can be led outside a community – we live with, or for, or by virtue of others. A good life cannot be removed from the company of others, other lives whose livability affects the scope and content of what makes my life livable. No life is livable on its own, and differential allocation of values to lives affects my understanding of what a good life is. If Adorno wondered how is one to lead a good/right life (*richtiges Leben*) in a bad/false one, implying that society we live in creates obstacles to moral living (Freyenhagen 2014), Butler contends that a good life, an affirmed life is inseparable from a critical examination of the structures that differentially value life itself (Butler 2015: 199).

The livable life thus functions as a not-yet-attained life, even if my life seems quite livable. It functions as a regulative ideal more than as an achieved state of humanity, even if some portions of humanity regulate their life critically and with an ideal in mind. Livability is constituted – albeit not determined – by a certain lack, by a certain negation of the possibility to live. For that reason, there are any number of instances of – and names for – *the not livable* in Butler's thought, even in those works where livability as such does not figure as an especially prominent term. Abject, unintelligible, ungrivable, jettisoned, precarious and dispossessed are but names for a bad life and environment that precludes an individual from leading a good life. Hence our decision to begin our consideration of livable life with the only positive reference to it, that is good life.

## GRIEVED LIFE

A good life is, above all, a life that is grievable. This proposition may seem too hyperbolic, ethically too elusive, politically too timid. However, we would argue that Butler's oft repeated question – whose lives do and do not matter as lives? – underpinning her understanding of equality and social transformation, is closely related to the issue of grief. Grief becomes the central affect in the struggle for equal livability, almost its prerequisite. Also, the thread of grievability appears in Butler's early texts, tying them with her latest considerations, i.e. the political management of the differential allocation of humanness.

In *Frames of War*, Butler famously wrote that “grievability is a presupposition for the life that matters” (Butler 2009a: 14). In order to be regarded as life, as something sustainable, apprehended, as mattering, a life needs to be grievable: its loss matters before its actual ending; its loss constitutes its value before it even began. Butler speaks here of war and of lives lost or losable during military operations. But the very same idea appears more than a decade prior to *Frames of War* and in an entirely different context. Grief is, namely, present already in *Bodies that Matter*, conjoined with the domain of the object, of bodies not qualified as *viable*: “What challenge does that excluded and abjected realm produce to a symbolic hegemony that might force a radical rearticulation of what qualifies as bodies that matter, ways of living that count as ‘life,’ lives worth protecting, lives worth saving, lives worth grieving?” (Butler 1993: xxiv).

Grief is an uncanny candidate for defining what equality is. If we, however, remain skeptical towards the idea that equality is or can become an impossible state, systemically produced by the neat workings of a certain political regime or an institutional arrangement, then the usual definitions fail us. Total enfranchisement and gradual legal extensions within the domain of equality – necessary as they certainly are – have not yet suspended structural inequality or the systemic deprivation of the privilege of ontology to certain kinds of beings. Laying claim to ontology, being counted or qualifying as real or viable (Meijer and Prins 1998: 280), implies a different judgment on equality, such that does not invoke only equal status, rights and opportunities, but also the absence of gradation of humanity. In other words, if all men are created equal – and recognized as such by their respective states – how come that certain lives are still unequal, illegible, unknowable, and unfelt? One possible answer is that, formal equality notwithstanding, there still is an erratic separator between lives worth living and those worth destroying, lives deemed valuable and grievable, and those devalued and ungrievable (Butler 2009a: 22).

How does grief work? On the one hand, grief is a deeply psychic, inner and private state which involves overflows of protracted emotional emptiness and fullness.

On the other, it becomes deprivatized through its diverse socially mediated expressions. Grief related affectivity often has recognized and ritualized public forms and forums. Although it may be used for political purposes, grief is not an institutionally arrangeable act – one cannot be ordered to *feel* grief, or requested to grieve (although one can feign or simulate it). But that does not mean that grievability cannot be imposed or induced. Individual ability to feel grief, mediated by the shared belief that somethings and someones ought to be grieved (while some others ought not), is established and maintained through various exclusionary practices of effacement and denominalization (Butler 2004b: 38; see also Athanasiou 2017).

Such exclusionary practices are integral to a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeals over time, repeatedly producing the appearance of a substance, and hence of something seemingly natural; these practices function as norms that define what is able to appear, to be thought of as natural or qualifiable in the domain of cultural intelligibility.<sup>1</sup> Exclusionary practices contribute to the differential distribution of what is intelligible and set the limits to a publicly acknowledged field of appearance. Thus certain lives appear before us as visible, knowable, even close. They appear in the public; their appearance constitutes the very meaning of the public, of the visible and intelligible. And when they cease to appear, or disappear, we feel loss. We grieve, or we at least feel allowed to feel grief. On the other hand, there are also lives, less visible or invisible, faceless or effaced, lives that never make it into the obituaries, those most public forms of mourning – remaining unburied, if not unburiable (Butler 2004b: 34). The fragmented visibility of such lives suggests that they are in some ways unintelligible, or that their intelligibility is foreclosed to us. Although these lives may belong to my fellow citizens or to the fellow humans endowed with equally binding human rights, to people who inhabit the spaces in my vicinity or are in other ways close to me (despite the fact that I may wish to scornfully repudiate any such closeness), these lives register differently in terms of their possibility. Butler designates such unlivable and uninhabitable zones of social life – otherwise densely populated – as the domain of the abject (Butler 1993: xiii), the domain that circumscribes the space that is visible, and where the loss of life is grievable. Not being admitted into public view, or being framed out of view, makes these lives unintelligible *as lives*. Hence, when an ungrievable life perishes, it is sometimes as if it had never really been at all. Its abjectness allows us to feel no grief, and what is more, to feel allowed to ungrieve it.

There are thus gradations of humanity that go far beyond the level of legally produced equality. Such equality tries to ameliorate deep ontological and epistemological deprivations still in place. Some lives, be they, for example, lives of

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<sup>1</sup> The definition provided here combines Butler's definitions of gender (Butler 1999: 45) and sex (Butler 1993: xii).

women or trans people or lives of other sexual minorities whose bodily integrity is exposed to a constant threat of violence; or lives of people who were historically considered only a fraction of the human life (Yancy and Butler 2015), such as black in the US (who under slavery were legally framed not as humans but as animated chattel); or the lives of enemy civilians in the course of military operations, etc. Those lives are less entitled to grievability. They are human only in a limited sense, because certain exclusionary practices that help define what is normatively human are still in place.

Grievable death is the flip side of livable life. Lives may be only differentially livable if all deaths are not at least potentially grievable. That may mean that equality in grievability becomes a regulative ideal of livability. Changing the matrices and registers under which unintelligible lives become legible, both legally and ontologically, reveals not only the historical conditions of their becoming unintelligible, but also the power relations that organize the space of public appearance, publicly tolerated grief and, conversely, enforced unlivability.

### TO JETTISON A LIFE

Bad lives seem confined to certain spaces. They do live somewhere physically, perhaps even in our midst, but they do not appear as lives worth grieving over: their sheer physicality does not grant them recognition. Such lives may be deprived of legal and/or ontological subjecthood. When they do not qualify as properly gendered or having clear borders of materiality, they may be relegated to the domain of the abject. They may be deployed in an unspeakable, unviable, nonnarrativizable belt; they populate a ‘constitutive outside’ which provides borders for that which is deemed properly human, properly livable (Butler 1993: 140, xiii). They are out of sight because they are systematically framed out of view: in ghettos, in prisons, in hiding, on border crossings. They may be mediatized as sacrificable lives, terrorist lives, lives of enemies rightfully crushed and vanquished. Or they may be understood as scattered illegal lives that combine the reified life of a thing with a willfully felonious person, for which reason they are rightfully deportable and expugnable to some vague elsewhere.

The way these lives are organized, managed through governmental and non-governmental means, differentiated and differentially disposed to precarity, belongs to the sphere of biopolitics that “establishes a set of measures for the differential valuation of life itself” (Butler 2015: 196). Biopolitically devalued lives are certainly not ‘good’. Perhaps then one might equate such lives with what Agamben defined as the ‘bare life’? Perhaps the distinction between *zoe* (nothing but life, a simple fact of living, a mere life that can be reproduced) and *bios*, a qualified and politi-

cally recognized life, life within the polity, can also find its application here? With her insistence on unlivability, Butler would maybe then also subscribe to Agamben's thesis that the fundamental categorical dyad of Western politics is that of "bare life/political existence, *zoē/bios*, exclusion/inclusion" (Agamben 1995: 12).

Non-appearance of lives in spaces where grievability is publicly sanctioned, where lives are publicly sanctioned, hints towards such a conclusion. Both Agamben and Butler read Arendt carefully, and for Arendt the public implies that something can be both seen and heard by everybody, because it belongs to the world itself, to a world "as it is common to all of us and distinguished from our private place in it" (Arendt 1998: 50, 52). It is only in public that speech and action, "the modes in which human beings appear to each other, not indeed as physical objects, but *qua* men" (ibid: 176), can be enacted, and whereby the "mere bodily existence" becomes transformed into a political being – the human proper. Yet, Butler and Agamben read Arendt differently.

For Butler, lives removed from the public do not reside in some indistinct zones excluded from the domain of the political. They are also never pure physical objects, divested of agency. Their tentative naturalness is already fundamentally political. Is there a human life that is ever only natural; or must we see its tentative naturalness as an effect of diverse, fundamentally political processes of naturalization which posit certain lives as always and necessarily pre-political, consigned to the realm of the private? "Politics," Butler claims, "is not defined as taking place exclusively in the public sphere, distinct from the private one, but it crosses the lines again and again, bringing attention to the way that politics is already in the home" (Butler 2015: 71) within the private. If naturalization is a complex set of effects deeply embroiled with the biopolitical ordering of livability, then no life is ever truly 'bare'.

Unlivability is not only always within the political – it is what defines the terms and the stakes of the political domain. The matrices according to which lives are organized and managed within the different levels of precarity, but also visibility, belong to the domain of political "power to 'make' live and 'let' die" (Foucault 2003: 241). They are also firmly embedded in the changing constellations of sovereignty and governmentality, specific to our own time. Finally, they are framed by the historically conditioned assessments of the scope of applicability of the idea of the human. Such frames are produced and reproduced by the norms and practices, discursive and non-discursive, which normatively constrain our understanding of who belongs to the political community, what is the meaning of the rights of those who belong, what are their legal entitlements, as well as the placement of the border between the political and the non- or pre-political (even if there is no such border, even if its construction belongs to the very mechanics of the political).

Despite the fact that they do not equally form or contribute to the realm of the public –the realm where having a voice, acting and appearing is politically recognized (or allowed by the state)– these lives are nonetheless centrally implicated in the workings of the political. Thus, instead of ‘bare life’, a life that is somehow outside the polity (Butler 2007: 36), which in fact depends on an exclusionary logic which depoliticizes life, Butler proposes another notion. Her jettisoned life refers to a precarious unlivability, saturated *in* the political.

A life that can be jettisoned is a life that *may* be discarded, dumped, thrown away. It is a load or burden that may be inconsequentially cast overboard, lightening a vessel in order to improve its stability in an emergency. Such life is not expendable because all contemporary lives are ill-fated such that they could potentially be reduced to some biological minimum, which is what we encounter in Agamben.<sup>2</sup> These modern-day jettisoned lives – lives of the refugees, detainees, the stateless, illegal immigrants, unpaid laborers, precarious workers (much like in Ancient times women, slaves and metics) – are not outside the political in their dispossession. Butler is emphatic: “this is not bare life, but a particular formation of power and coercion that is designed to produce and maintain the condition, the state, of the dispossessed” (Butler 2007: 5).

Being jettisoned out of the public, foreclosed from the public, or framed out of public view, does not mean that certain lives are bare. They are neither reduced to mere living, nor expunged from the political. They are steeped and mired in power, although “not with modes of entitlements or obligation” (ibid: 32). Their unlivability is produced within a framework which defines politics as founded on the distinction between *zoe* and *bios*, exclusion and inclusion, as if the boundaries between these were not in themselves political, volatile and shifting. However, being jettisoned from the public does not mean that one is outside the political: there is no ‘outside’ to the political – one can only be qualified as a load that can be thrown overboard, or as a treasured cargo that defines the purpose of a voyage. Various “spectral humans deprived of ontological weight and failing the tests of social intelligibility required for minimal recognition” (ibid: 16) indeed do not qualify for status of livable life, that is status of cherished cargo. Yet, they do qualify for the status of the one not-belonging; and as such, they are produced and presupposed as jettisoned, as an interiorized outside.

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<sup>2</sup> “If there is no longer any one clear figure of the sacred man, it is perhaps because we are all virtually *homines sacri*” (Agamben 1998: 68). We may, however, also bear in mind that such notion of modern bare life, wounded, expendable, and endangered, can rather be seen as the remainder of the destroyed political *bios* (Ziarek 2008: 90), which never belonged to certain lives, which were still for that reason not reducible to *zoē*.

### PRECARITY AND DISPOSSESSION

In *Who Sings the Nation State?* Butler examines the *accorded status* of non-belonging to those who are produced and paralyzed in their dispossession – the stateless. They are an emblematic instance of one “both expelled and contained, as saturated with power precisely at the moment in which it is deprived of citizenship” (ibid: 40). Such spectral humans, stateless within a state (incarcerated, stuck in internment camps, residing and laboring illegally, but also, in some other respects, those deprived of recognition in their gender), remain stateless but still under the control of state power. They are without legal protection, yet not relegated to a ‘bare life’, they lack the minimum conditions for a livable life with regard to human life, but are still not reducible to minimum biological form of living (Butler 2004a: 39). Such spectral humans are constituted as deprived, wanting, placeless and dispossessed within the political itself.

Associated with all these attributes is precarity. One is not precarious in an imaginable ‘outside’ of the politics, in a space where there is no protection and no support at all, and where lives are nothing but a voiceless act of breathing. Quite the contrary, precarity appears only when the minimum conditions for a livable life with regard to human life become disputed to certain portions of humanity. In a way, precarity works as an indicator: it reveals that there are conditions that provide persistence and flourishing – integral to a good life – and that they are at the same time differentially distributed. Derived from Latin legal jargon, ‘precarious’ referred to something “obtained by praying” (Bojanić 2016: 71), something which has already been there (for some), but is essentially inaccessible (to others) without solicitation, begging, or prayer. Those who have to beg, who are marked by precarity, are variously dispossessed of the means to persist and flourish.

What is precarious life? A book with the same title combined Butler’s abiding concern with grievability with the newly established conditions of heightened vulnerability and aggression. It is here that interdependency becomes explicitly recognized as the basis for global *political community* (followed by a concession – “I confess to not knowing how to theorize that interdependency” [Butler 2004b: xii–xiii] – which will strongly direct her further endeavors). Interdependency is fundamentally related to the engagement with livability, because only a “social network of hands”, could eventually minimize the unlivability of lives (Butler 2015: 67). “The idea of interdependency of lives that are mutually implicated in one another already establishes a principle of equality and connectedness” (Butler and Athanasiou 2013: 107). And it is through the idea of interdependency too that one reveals the double valence of the idea of precarity and dispossession.

Butler distinguishes between precariousness and precarity to emphasize this double valence. Discussing, with Levinas, the precariousness of another's life, she suggests that life itself is precarious (Butler 2004b: 134). Through our dependency on others, which comes from our (sometimes utterly unwilling) attachment and exposure to other people, precariousness defines our bodies and our selves as socially constituted (ibid: 20). In addition, our dependency on institutions and infrastructure that prop us up and enable some of our most fundamental rights to at all be exercised – acting in that sense as the heteronomic condition of possibility of autonomy – further reveal the precariousness of human life. We are precarious in the sense that we are exposed, simply by virtue of living, to constant injury and loss. We are vulnerable in our dependency, and this is the precarity we all share equally, as a trait that cannot be reversed.

But there is also the other valence of precarity. Norms which frame some lives as unintelligible and ungrievable, and institutions that have the power to produce jettisoned life and life in dispossession, distribute precarity differentially. Precarity causes and exacerbates gradation of livability and its differential saturation in power. In other words, all lives are precarious because they ‘beg’ for solid infrastructure in which they could embed themselves, and for attachments that will not lead to their utter destruction. However, not all precarious lives live in precarity as a politically enforced “condition of induced inequality and destitution” (Butler and Athanasiou 2013: 20). We all share the condition of precariousness equally, but the condition of precarity is what makes our lives unequally precarious.

The notion of dispossession also carries a double valence. Dispossession is both something that defines what life is, on condition that it is always and inevitably lived among others, and something that defines a profound and troubling lack, which further induces precarity. The relations we depend on, many of which we never choose, constitute and dispossess us at the same time (Butler 2004a: 24). Through dispossession, by accepting relationality and interdependence as the basis for autonomy, we understand how being with, for, and by virtue of others defines our very selves. There is, so to speak, no I with a you, and my life is moored in and dispossessed by the life of another. A life which is never entirely mine, never truly in my possession, which is “outside from the start” (Butler and Athanasiou 2013: 5), also opens itself to the other meaning of dispossession, the one that entails loss, deprivation, want, placelessness, any of which is, more often than not, enforced through violence.

To say that lives are precarious or dispossessed is to stress the conditions within which lives, as complex processes of living, are able or unable to evolve, continue and thrive. “If we are beings who can be deprived of place, livelihood, shelter, food, and protection, if we can lose our citizenship, our homes, and our rights, then we

are fundamentally dependent on those powers that alternately sustain or deprive us, and that hold a certain power over our very survival” (ibid: 4). Precarious lives, or simply lives, are not entirely livable – even if they are lived – unless various normative conditions are not politically fulfilled for livable life to be secured. If one needs to beg for a certain kind of futurity, if one is accorded status of human that lacks the potential to flourish, even if it persists in the unendurable, then perhaps no prayer can save one from precarization.

To define life as precarious, dispossessed, caught in the intricate web of interdependencies, is to disavow the individual self-sufficient, sovereign life, as much as it is to dismiss life as the mere biological minimum. Lives take place; they also take time. The place they take is conditioned socio-economically for physical persistence (some will be born in magnificent hospitals, some in arid fields or in internment camps; some will live in prosperity, some in destitution; some will die in dignity, while some may never find their way to obituaries). The time we are born into and live in is constituted, albeit not determined, by frames of intelligibility and recognizability, which we did not choose. Yet they make our life on Earth counted more or less.

Thus the struggle for livability, “the ability to sustain a viable life in conditions of inherent precariousness and the socio-political operation of precarity” (McNailly 2015: 150), seeks a different kind of politicization of ontology, such that it does not configure in advance who counts as human and who does not (Butler and Athanasiou 2013: 120). The struggle for livability requires much more than the expansion of the domain of the human based on gradual broadening of the space of those ‘included’, ‘counted’, and ‘qualified’. Such struggle in fact assumes an “insurrection at the level of ontology, a critical opening up of the questions, What is real? Whose lives are real? How might reality be remade?” (Butler 2004b: 33). An ontology which counts and discounts, based on an exclusionary frame of belonging, autonomy, and self-mastery – ontology of individualism – has to be called into question, because “there is no life without the conditions of life that variably sustain life, and those conditions are pervasively social, establishing not the discrete ontology of the person, but rather the interdependency of persons, involving reproducible and sustaining social relations, and relations to the environment and to non-human forms of life, broadly considered” (Butler 2009a: 19).

The life that is precarious or dispossessed is not a good life or a life that can be lived so long as there are politically articulated forces, norms, social and political organizations developed historically in order to allocate precariousness and dispossession differentially. The new social, bodily ontology Butler calls for, will therefore need to rearticulate performativity in terms of precarity, since “there is no reproduction of the social world that is not at the same time a reproduction of

those norms that govern the intelligibility of the body in space and time” (Butler 2009b: x).

What takes place when the uncounted begin to count themselves – not merely enumerating their own ‘wounded attachments’, their specific identity claims, but by thoroughly changing the very terms of appearance, the very meaning of the public, of the frames which differentially accord statuses of belonging and non-belonging, is “performativity within precarity and against its differential allocation” (Butler and Athanasiou 2013: 101). Performativity and precarity have therefore everything to do with each other, and it is the question, who counts as a life worth grieving and sheltering, that provides this link (Butler 2009b: iv, xii). Moreover, “the performative emerges as the specific power of the precarious... to demand the end of their precarity” (Butler and Athanasiou 2013: 121).

### PERFORMATIVE PRECARITY

We began our exploration into livability by referring to Butler’s very recent text “Can One Lead a Good Life in a Bad One?” Its title seemed to revolve around a decidedly ethical stance. But the two problems posited at its very beginning complicated the matter: Butler asks how to live one’s life well if good life is systematically foreclosed to so many, and how the historical time which shapes our understanding of that question conditions the form of the question itself (Butler 2015: 193–194)? Adorno, whom Butler chooses to evoke when she offers her single positive reference to a livable life, believed that norms and moral principles have always replicated social domination, and that in the false totality of advanced capitalist society, good life is not possible (Schweppenhäuser 2004: 328). Still, unlike Adorno, Butler seems resolved to struggle for a regulative ideal of a livable life. In one such struggle, the ethical cannot be disentangled from the political, or from the wider framework that produces reified ontological configurations of (un)livability. And the political, the structuring of the world through inequality, exploitation and forms of effacement, cannot be transformed without insurrection at the level of ontology.

As we have shown, Judith Butler’s understanding of life, and livable life in particular, has had a long trajectory. Its first appearances can be gleaned as early as *Subjects of Desire*, in Butler’s reading of Hegel’s concept of life, where she inverts the dynamic particularity of Hegel’s subject claiming that it “concludes that the proper object of desire is Life” (Butler 1987: 36). Here, as well, one finds a sketch of what would later become ‘bodily ontology’. Namely, desire is the engine without which the subject cannot be constituted, yet nor can it be self-sufficient; it rather must emerge *into the world* to acquire its definite form: “this [Hegel’s] subject does not yet know its own ‘livelihood’, its capacity to create and dissolve shape...” (ibid).

We find here what would later become the 'bid for a livable life'. The pathway through which the body's 'livelihood' acquires its *Gestalt* (and *Gestalt* for Hegel is the formation of consciousness) is the very same emancipatory process necessary for the acquisition of elements of human life with the potential to form humanity's 'bios'.

The ontological element of livability is, in return, always already political; hence the question of context. Our understanding of Adorno's question is framed by the time of consolidation of an unprecedented political rationality which induces fierce precarization (Brown 2015). It is a time of precarity solidifying into a regime, a hegemonic mode of governing and being governed, which uses managerial tactics and exploitation to acclimatize populations to fear and insecurity (Butler in Lorey 2015: ii, xi). This is a time when false universalism, chanted in the slogan "All lives matter," once again becomes a means to write off myriad lives marked as producers of insecurity. Ours is a time when majorities accuse the most vulnerable, those whose life is normatively abject, ungrievable, jettisoned, for their own heightened vulnerability.

In such times, insurrectionaries have to use precarity as activism, and precarity itself needs to become a site of alliance (Butler 2015: 27), with livable interdependency as its regulative goal. Such an alliance is of course an alliance in the name of equal livability, but its immediate effects may be utterly troublesome: high risk and errancy seem constitutive of such an insurrection, and injury, detention, and death are never far removed from it (one should only remember Ayotzinapa; see Butler 2016). There is nothing inherently celebratory in precarity as activism: such activism is always potentially dangerous and may annihilate life. However, its emergence and urgency speaks volumes about our times, when the reigning ontologies of individualism fall patently short, because even the basic support for persistence – let alone flourishing – become rigidly foreclosed to many whose lives are without entitlement (or whose entitlement might be removed with ease and in the name of greater security), although they remain mired in power.

Yet, if they, the spectral lives accorded non-belonging, burst into sight and resist being removed from it, then jettisoned life becomes jettisoned not in an interiorized outside, but onto the heart of the public sphere (Zaharijević 2016: 11). If the spectral lives gather in order to protest their invisibility – the decimated bodily existence of unrecognizability and unintelligibility – then their bodily presence disrupts and unsettles both their own induced spectrality and the very public wherefrom they have been jettisoned. When precarity enacts itself in performative assemblies – in plural form of agency and social resistance practices – the very terms of the public become altered. What is then exposed in the public is not an aggregate of certain individual bad lives, but their bodily exposure of the fact that the social and economic organization of life is bad.

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