Agency, recognition, politics:
Feminist questions in Judith Butler’s post-9/11 texts

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Abstract

Judith Butler is a central figure in contemporary feminism. To date, however, the majority of feminist engagement with Butler has taken place in relation to a relatively narrow selection of her texts. This thesis contributes to efforts to extend the feminist interpretation of Butler to take in her more recent writing. To this end, it identifies a set of persistent questions that have animated feminist engagement with Butler but which have been focussed narrowly on her texts of the 1990s. It uses these questions as a framework for reading Butler’s more recent work, concentrating on those texts published in the ‘post-9/11’ period. To structure its critical engagement with these texts, the thesis employs the categories of agency, recognition, and politics, and asks to what extent these texts might speak to persistent feminist questions on these themes. In this way, the thesis explores the relationship between Butler’s interventions in feminist theory, her post-9/11 texts, and established debates in the feminist reception of her work.

The central argument of this thesis is that Butler’s post-9/11 texts constitute a significant body of feminist thought. By reading these texts in the context of persistent points of feminist contention about her work, the thesis demonstrates that Butler’s recent texts do bear a consequential relation to her earlier interventions in feminism, despite their thematic variance from her earlier work and their status as relatively overlooked in the feminist critical literature. Specifically, it shows that in these texts, Butler significantly develops certain aspects of her earlier writings, developments which, when read with rather than against her prior claims, can be understood to speak in important and interesting ways to persistent questions posed in the feminist interpretation of her thought. Indeed, although she rarely takes up the task herself, these developments in Butler’s thinking allow her to address to a significant degree the problems that feminist critics have identified with her prior work.

The thesis thus makes clear that while Butler’s post-9/11 texts may differ thematically from her earlier work in feminist theory, they remain in a significant sense continuous with this work and should be approached as important sources for furthering the feminist understanding of Butler’s thought. It also demonstrates that feminist questions have remained central to the progression of Butler’s thinking, and in this way the thesis suggests the value of continuing to read Butler as a feminist theorist, despite her now much broader intellectual appeal.
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No publications.

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No publications included.

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No contributions by others.

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Abbreviations

“BPR”  “Bodies and Power Revisited”

FOW  *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?*

GAO  *Giving an Account of Oneself*

GT  *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*

“NSV”  “New Scenes of Vulnerability, Agency, and Plurality: An Interview with Judith Butler”

PL  *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*

PLP  *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection*

“RJB”  “Reply from Judith Butler to Mills and Jenkins”

UG  *Undoing Gender*

“WIC”  “What is Critique? An Essay on Foucault’s Virtue”
Chapter One

Introduction

With the publication of *Gender Trouble* (1990), Judith Butler established herself as a central figure in contemporary feminism. Conceived as “a political genealogy of gender ontologies” (*GT*: 44), *Gender Trouble* pursued the claim that the categories of ‘sex’ and ‘gender’ assumed to be foundational to feminist politics are in fact produced as the naturalised effects of discursive regimes of power, including the discourses of feminism itself. Rather than the culturally mediated expression of a pre-given bodily reality, gender is, Butler famously argued, performative – a doing rather than a being in which the forcible and ritualised repetition of bodily norms brings about the identity that those acts are supposed to express. Butler thus contested feminism’s claim to represent women as if we are a self-evident and unmediated group, arguing instead that “sex itself is a gendered category” (*GT*: 7) and cannot serve as the unproblematised ground for either feminist critique or community.

Together with *Bodies that Matter* (1993), in which she developed her account of the gendered body as discursively mediated, and her contributions to the debate published as *Feminist Contentions* (1995), in which she questioned the ways in which the normative frames of feminism are founded in metaphysical assumptions, Butler dislodged some of feminism’s most taken for granted categories: sex, gender, the subject, the body, identity, agency, and politics were all fundamentally rethought in Butler’s iconoclastic work. It is thus difficult to overestimate the impact that Butler has subsequently had on feminism. A central figure in the self-scrutiny characteristic of feminism’s ‘third wave’, she has been described as the world’s most influential gender theorist (Buchanan 2010) and has been credited with inaugurating the field of queer theory, with defining debates about the relationship between feminism and postmodernism, and with setting the terms for the feminist critique of identity politics (Jenkins 2008; Lloyd 2007a: 2). Perhaps unsurprisingly, her critique of feminist foundations has provoked equal measures of excitement and suspicion, and, as Clare Hemmings (2011) makes clear, Butler is both hero and villain in the stories feminists tell each other.
about the evolution of our collective endeavour: while she has been celebrated for her anti-
essentialism and her rejection of separatist forms of feminism, Butler has also been criticised for her
philosophical abstraction and her complex writing style, and she has been charged with
depoliticising feminism in favour of cementing its professionalisation within the academy,
retreating, on this account, from the pressing material concerns of gendered violence, poverty, and
inequality (Nussbaum 1999; MacKinnon 2000). On either reading, Butler’s impact on feminism is
not in doubt. In the words of one critic, “it is perhaps an understatement to say that Butler rocked
the foundations of feminist theory” (Heinamaa 1997: 20), and for this, according to Lynne Segal
(1999, quoted in Lloyd 2007a: 2), she was the single most cited feminist theorist of the 1990s.

While Butler’s importance as a theorist is unquestionable, the nature and value of her contribution
to feminism remains a source of intense debate. To date, however, the bulk of feminist critical
gagement with Butler has taken place in relation to a relatively narrow selection of her texts,
namely, those published in (roughly) the decade of the 1990s: Gender Trouble (1990), Bodies that
(1997b), and, to a lesser extent, Antigone’s Claim (2000a) and Butler’s contributions to
Contingency, Hegemony, Universality (2000b). In a sense, this limited focus is understandable, as
it is in these texts that Butler is most explicitly engaged with the politics of gender and sexuality,
and her publications since 2000 have ranged far from the topics that animated her earlier writing.
However, Butler has produced a great deal of writing in the years since these texts were published,
including what is generally acknowledged as some highly significant work. Hence what this
limited focus means is that the majority of feminist engagement with Butler is based on only a
partial reading of her work. It is therefore worth asking how Butler’s more recent texts might
respond to persistent points of feminist contention about her thought. It is here that this thesis finds
its purpose, and it is to conversations about the feminist significance of Butler’s thought that this
thesis seeks to contribute.

Specifically: I aim to extend the feminist critique of Butler to take in some of her more recent
publications; I want to deepen and complicate the existing feminist interpretation of Butler’s
thought by pointing to Butler’s own development of key points of contention and concern,
particularly those that contradict or shift the emphasis in existing treatments of her thought; and I
seek to reinvigorate feminist engagement with Butler by drawing attention to her continued
relevance for feminist questions, thus reinforcing her writing as a key site for the development of
contemporary feminist thinking.
1.1 Research Questions

The central questions pursued in this thesis are:

1) How does Butler’s recent writing relate to her earlier work in feminist theory?

2) How do Butler’s ‘post-9/11’ texts relate to persistent questions posed in the feminist interpretation of her thought?

1.2 Existing Approaches

This thesis is located in the critical and interpretive literature engaging Butler’s thought. Within this literature, there are three overlapping strands that bear upon the questions pursued here: a long-standing literature which constitutes the feminist critique of Butler’s thought; a more recent body of literature focussed on the critical interpretation of Butler’s post-9/11 texts, to which feminists have made significant contributions but whose animating concerns depart from the feminist critique of her work; and a growing body of work that discusses Butler’s writings as a whole or *oeuvre*, and which engages her earlier work in feminist theory alongside her more recent texts. Below, I outline each of these strands and indicate how the thesis is situated in relation to this literature.

1. The literature which constitutes the feminist critique of Butler’s thought.

This literature is largely incited by Butler’s critique of established feminist ideas. It represents what might be thought of as the first wave of critical engagement with Butler and it falls into four broad themes of concern: 1) her critique of the sex/gender distinction and the relationship in her thought between signification and materiality, including, especially, the materiality of the body; 2) her account of the performative constitution of gender and her corollary insistence that agency does not consist in the assumption of autonomy but in the resignification of norms; 3) her understanding of the way that the gendered subject relates to its others, particularly as this relationship is approached through the concept of recognition; and 4) the vision of feminist politics developed in her work, including related questions about the normative grounds of her thought. I will now provide a brief overview of these four strands of feminist engagement with Butler’s work.

The earliest and perhaps best known feminist critique of Butler centres on her distinctive understanding of the central feminist concepts of sex, gender, and the body. Responding to Butler’s argument in *Gender Trouble* (1990) that the distinction drawn by feminists between ‘sex’ as a
biological given and ‘gender’ as the cultural meaning assigned to that given had naturalised binary and heteronormative constructions of sex, gender, and desire, feminist critics raised two sets of concerns. The first set was focussed on Butler’s claim that feminist discourses of sex and gender operated normatively; that they were, as she argued, regulatory fictions which produced ‘woman’ as a normative category through processes of coercion and exclusion. For critics, this represented a denial of the reality of sexual difference which, they argued, continued to structure women’s lives, and a too hasty dismissal of the notion that feminism could provide a politically workable account of what constitutes women as a meaningful social group (Benhabib 1992; Moi 1999; Nussbaum 1999; Haslanger 2000; Braidotti 2002; Alcoff 2006). Contra Butler, these critics argued that feminism needed an account of the category of women in order to sustain claims about inequality and social subordination, and to justify political organising directed at their remedy.

The second set of concerns that feminists raised with Butler’s critique of the sex/gender distinction centred on her claim that sex is not – as many feminists had assumed – a natural state of being but is rather a cultural construction produced by the discourses of gender. Early critics interpreted Butler as claiming that the sexed body did not exist outside of its cultural signification, and thus objected to what they saw as her denial of the materiality of the body (Zita 1992; Bordo 1993; Segal 1994; Grosz 1995; Bigwood 1998; Pearce 2004). In *Gender Trouble*, they argued, the body took on a curiously disembodied character, seemingly unconstrained by biology and infinitely culturally malleable. Taking up Butler’s development and clarification of her position in *Bodies that Matter* (1993), later critics developed more sophisticated readings. For some, Butler’s move to rethink the matter of bodies in terms of the process of materialisation succeeded in clearing her of charges of linguistic idealism (Vasterling 1999; Lloyd 2007a: 73-74; Loizidou 2008b; Jenkins 2010). For others, this move was interpreted more ambivalently: while it was clear that Butler did not straightforwardly reduce the body to an effect of discourse, she nonetheless continued to privilege language in her approach to understanding the body, overlooking the politically salient features of ‘fleshy’ corporeality (Cheah 1996; Kirby 1997, 2006; Olkowski 1997; Bray and Colebrook 1998; Hekman 1998; Colebrook 2000; Wilson 2001; Hollywood 2002; Webster 2002; Noland 2009, Schep 2012).

Growing out of and running parallel to this discussion about sex, gender, and the body in Butler’s thought was a second line of feminist engagement with Butler centred on her understanding of the forms of agency available to the gendered subject. In response to *Gender Trouble*’s (1990) claim that gender is performatively constituted, two seemingly contradictory concerns emerged in the feminist reception of Butler’s thought. On the one hand, Butler was charged with determinism, with advocating a conception of the subject as nothing more than a cultural or linguistic
construction, an account that was taken to evacuate the subject of any and all interiority and thus to destroy the subjective resources necessary to challenge unjust gender relations (Benhabib 1992, 1995a, 1995b; Nussbaum 1999). On the other hand, Butler was charged with voluntarism, her account of performative constitution taken to suggest that gender identities could be produced and reproduced at will, fabricated through parodic or subversive action, overlooking both corporeal (Bordo 1993) and psychic (Rothenberg and Valente 1997; Mackinnon 2000) attachments to identity, as well as downplaying structural limitations on what can be achieved by individual action (Hennessy 1995; Fraser 1995a).

As Butler’s work developed beyond the terms of *Gender Trouble*, critics developed more sophisticated accounts. Butler’s move in *Bodies that Matter* (1993) to account for agency as a practice of resignification, an account she later developed in *Excitable Speech* (1997a), attracted much feminist interest. For one group of critics, this move succeeded in steering a middle path between voluntarism and determinism, dislodging this vexed antinomy by locating agency in the very social, linguistic, and discursive structures by which subjects are performatively constituted (Allen 1999; McNay 1999; Lloyd 2005a, 2007a). For another group, this move introduced new difficulties, and they began to problematise what they saw as Butler’s abstraction of gendered agency from its broader subjective and social contexts, objecting to the way that her account of resignification figured agency as a structural potentiality rather than a subjective capacity for critical reflection, negotiation, creativity, or responsibility (Weir 1996; Nelson 1999; McNay 2000, 2003; Mahmood 2005; Magnus 2006). At the same time, feminist concerns about determinism in Butler’s thought continued to surface, finding a new focal point with the publication of *The Psychic Life of Power* (1997b). While appreciating Butler’s desire to move beyond a model of agency as autonomy, critics were not convinced that the account of subjection developed in this text succeeded in achieving this aim. By theorising the subject as attached to its subjection, *Psychic Life*, they argued, tended to preclude the emergence of agency by making opaque the subjective motivation to resignify norms. For some critics, this development constituted an obfuscation of Butler’s otherwise commendable account of agency as resignification (Allen 2006; Lloyd 2007a); for others, it represented a compounding of problems that were already present in her earlier work (Mills 2000; Alcoff 2006; Magnus 2006); for others still, it was a difficulty that could be overcome by bringing to bear resources from elsewhere in Butler’s thought (Disch 1999; Barvosa-Carter 2001).

More recent feminist engagements with Butler on questions of agency have continued to explore the resources her thought might offer for navigating between voluntarism and determinism, between the subjectivism of traditional accounts of agency figured as autonomy and the “discursive objectivism”
(McNay 2008: 166) that has been taken to characterise Butler’s account of agency as resignification. For some critics, it has been important to look at how agency might be developed in Butler’s more recent writing, a task which has taken the form of connecting Butler’s earlier account of resignification with her more recent reflections on ‘liveability’ (Coole 2008) and non-violence (Magnus 2006; Jenkins 2007, 2008, 2010). For other critics, there are resources still to be mined in Butler’s earlier work. In this vein, Rothenberg (2006) offers a new reading of Excitable Speech, one that rejects the feminist critique of the abstraction of resignification to excavate from this text a psychoanalytic account of agency as an embodied practice, while Clare (2009) and Davis (2012) return to The Psychic Life of Power, reading the concerns about determinism that have characterised feminist responses to this text as ultimately resulting not from Butler’s obfuscation of the subjective motivation for resignification, but from the way that she understands the temporality of subject formation.

While debates continued about materiality and agency, the body and the subject in Butler’s thought, a different group of feminist critics began to raise concerns about the way that relations between subjects were figured in her writing. Thus a third strand of feminist engagement with Butler emerged, one centred on her understanding of intersubjective relations. Focussed on the account of performative constitution developed in Gender Trouble (1990) and refined in Bodies that Matter (1993), early critics took issue with what they saw as the centrality of processes of exclusion to Butler’s account of subject formation (Dean 1996; Weir 1996; Benjamin 1998; Diprose 1999, 2002; Oliver 2001). Butler, they argued, premised the development of identity on the exclusion of difference, on the abjection of what is perceived as other, and did not take adequate account of the role of intersubjective relations in the performative production and transformation of gendered identities. As a result, they concluded, her early work was ethically impoverished: it emphasised the violent potential of human relationships over and above our capacity to positively sustain one another, and in this way offered no resources for thinking about how the self might develop relations with others that are enabling rather than oppressive.

For later critics, the problem in Butler’s thought was not a lack of attention to intersubjective relations but rather the form that these relations have taken. Prompted at least in part by the publication of The Psychic Life of Power (1997b), a new wave of feminist critique emerged that centred on Butler’s understanding of intersubjectivity in terms of the practice of recognition (Grosz 2002; Allen 2006; Magnus 2006; Ferrarese 2011; Stark 2014). These critics focussed on the way that Butler understands recognition as essentially conditioned by norms, and thus as a practice that is bound up with the reproduction of regulatory regimes of power. They argued that recognition, for Butler, is profoundly conservative: it tethers the subject to what is already given, to what can be
known and acknowledged within the terms of prevailing norms, and thus constructs a subject who is servile to the existing arrangement of social relations. For Grosz (2002) and Stark (2014), this was a problem essential to the concept of recognition itself, and they argued that Butler would do well to abandon this way of approaching the self’s relations with others. For Allen (2006), Magnus (2006), and Ferrarese (2011), the problem was not with recognition per se, but with the way that it was figured in The Psychic Life of Power as that which secures subjection. While Magnus and Ferrarese found resources for theorising a positive account of recognition in Butler’s more recent work, Allen remained unconvinced, arguing that feminists must look elsewhere for an account of recognition that could support the transformation of gender relations.

The fourth and final strand of feminist engagement with Butler that I would like to discuss is that centred on the way that she understands feminist politics. Early critics of Butler’s work raised concerns with what they saw as a lack of normative grounding in her thought, arguing that this produced a toothless politics that tended to relativism. Focussing their critique on the account of performative subversion developed in Gender Trouble (1990), these critics argued that while Butler might have provided an account of how change in gender identities comes about, she did not provide an explanation for why such change is desirable (Anderson 1992, 1998, 2006; Fraser 1995a, 1995b; Allen 1999; Nussbaum 1999). Butler, they argued, only proliferated the possibilities for gender expression; she did not think about which possibilities might be just. Later critics have tended to reiterate this critique, though in more sympathetic terms. While agreeing with the claim that Butler’s work lacks a fully developed normative framework, Stone (2005) and Zerilli (2005) have argued that there are resources in her early work which can be developed to overcome this problem, while Karademir (2014) and Barthold (2014) look, respectively, to Heidegger and Gadamer to develop the normative commitments implicit in her work. Taking a different tack, Rushing (2010) and Thiem (2008) have explored Butler’s more recent work for answers to feminist questions about normativity in her thought. For Rushing, Butler’s recent texts make clear that there has always been a normative aspiration in her work, figured in terms of the notion of ‘liveability’; for Thiem, what is evident in Butler’s recent writing is that her thought is not normatively impoverished but rather exhibits a complex approach to normative thinking centred not on the defence of evaluative norms but on the ethical practice of critique.

While one group of critics asked questions about the normative grounds of Butler’s politics, another raised concerns with the way that political community was figured in her thought. Responding to Gender Trouble’s claim that feminist politics must move past the limitations of identity-based forms of political community and action, these critics problematised what they saw as Butler’s too hasty abandonment of ideals of feminist solidarity (Dean 1996; Weir 1996; Allen 1999).
Appreciating Butler’s concern with exclusion in the feminist movement, and acknowledging her suggestion that feminism take up a model of collective action in terms of coalition, they nonetheless argued that her radical critique of identity politics left no way to register the power of collective action, or even to conceive of collectivity at all. This individualistic tendency in Butler’s thought was perceived was a problem for feminist critics not only because it led her to overlook the intersubjective grounds of political organising, but because it meant that she offered no alternative vision of solidarity, no other way to think about working with and across difference, and thus risked reinforcing sameness as the basis of community. More recent iterations of this critique have emphasised the important work that social movements like feminism do when they organise on the basis of identity. In different ways, Allen (2006) and Stavro (2007) have argued that what Butler loses with her rejection of identity-based organising is one of the most important political tools for empowering minority communities and for transforming socially denigrated identities into something more enabling.

Emerging parallel to concerns about normativity and community in Butler’s thought was a third line of feminist engagement with her politics, one centred on what has been perceived as her undue privileging of resignification as a form of political action. Focussed on Gender Trouble’s rendering of feminist politics in terms of the subversion and resignification of norms, early versions of this critique argued that Butler constructed political action in narrowly symbolic terms (Hennessy 1994-1995; Weston 1994; Fraser 1995b, 1997; Kruks 2001). Butler, these critics argued, did not connect a politics of resignification to broader feminist struggles for equality, safety, or redistribution, nor did she connect individual acts of resignification to their social and material contexts. Taking up Butler’s development in Excitable Speech (1997a) of a politics of resignification in relation to hate speech, later critics argued that while resignification might be a plausible way to account for agency between the poles of voluntarism and determinism, it was less successful as a feminist strategy for effecting political change (Lloyd 1999, 2005a, 2007b; McNay 1999; Mills 2000; Webster 2000; Smith 2001b; Lovell 2003; Schwarzman 2002). For these critics, Butler’s account of resignification might have explained the conditions under which agency becomes possible for the discursively constituted subject, but it did not provide the tools needed to analyse the political efficacy of particular acts of resignification, nor did it illuminate how these acts might relate to movements for social transformation. Moreover, they argued, by privileging resignification as the most effective response to hate speech while problematising strategies of legal regulation and redress, Butler relied on a reductive understanding of the state that led her to overlook the importance of constructive engagement with law and policy as a feminist political strategy (Jenkins 2001; Passavant and Dean 2001; Mills 2003; Lloyd 2005b, 2007a). While some critics have found in Butler’s recent work a
more sophisticated account of resignification that supports a broader range of feminist political action (Loizidou 2008a; Zivi 2008), others remain skeptical, diagnosing in these texts only a reiteration of the problematic abstraction from social and historical context that, they argue, has characterised Butler’s politics of resignification from Gender Trouble onwards (Lloyd 2008a; Schippers 2008).

There are two points that I would like to make about the feminist critique of Butler’s thought. The first is that I believe this literature represents an important body of feminist writing. It is longstanding, complex, and coherent. By this I mean that it constitutes a well-defined conversation about a set of questions that remain important to feminism in the present day, as both a theoretical discourse and a social and political movement. In this sense, the value of this literature extends beyond questions about the interpretation of Butler as a theorist: it has been an important site for the emergence and debate of postmodern and poststructuralist ideas in feminist discourse; it has also been a significant impetus for feminist critical thinking about identity and identity politics, and thus for the posing of questions about how best to understand the meaning, purpose, and future of feminism itself (Hemmings 2011).

Despite its importance as a body of feminist thought, however, this literature is also limited in scope. It primarily engages the texts that Butler produced in the period between 1990 and 2000. As I hope I have demonstrated in the discussion above, the pattern of feminist engagement with Butler has been to respond to the unsettling of feminist orthodoxy that she enacted in Gender Trouble (1990), and then to pursue the feminist questions raised by this text as they were developed across her writing of the 1990s. While a small number of feminist critics have explored these questions in relation to Butler’s more recent work, they are the exception to this general pattern of critical engagement rather than the rule. Nonetheless, their work is important as it extends the feminist interpretation of Butler’s thought and ensures the continued vitality of this literature by bringing its central questions into new textual domains. What might we learn, these critics ask, by bringing these longstanding feminist debates into contact with the expanded range of theoretical resources and thematic concerns taken up by Butler in her post-9/11 texts? Thus Magnus (2006), Jenkins (2007, 2008, 2010) and Coole (2008) seek to explore the way that Butler’s account of resignificatory agency might be modified or developed in her recent texts; Ferrarese (2011) and Stark (2014) trace both the shifts and continuities in her account of recognition; and Lloyd (2008a), Loizidou (2008a), Schippers (2008), Thiem (2008), Zivi (2008) and Rushing (2010) all explore the way that Butler’s politics is deepened as it is brought into the post-9/11 context. It is this emerging body of feminist critical engagement with Butler’s work beyond the 1990s that this thesis seeks to build upon and expand.
This is not to suggest that feminist engagement with Butler’s more recent work has been limited to the contributions I have just cited. Other feminist readings of Butler’s post-9/11 texts do exist, as I indicate in the following section. What is important to note before proceeding is that the questions which animate the bulk of feminist engagement with Butler’s more recent work are generally not the same set of questions which continue to drive feminist critique of her earlier writing: when feminists have engaged Butler’s recent texts, they have only rarely connected these texts to her earlier work, and the critical conversation has tended to be with other readers of Butler’s recent texts rather than with the feminist literature discussed above. In this sense, the feminist specificity of this more recent literature is contentious – which does not make it problematic or of lesser value as a body of critical thought, but does mark it out as distinct from the feminist critique of Butler that I have outlined in this section.

2. The literature which engages Butler’s post-9/11 texts.

The second strand of critical engagement with Butler that is relevant to this thesis is that body of literature focussed on her post-9/11 texts, which is the selection of Butler's writing with which I am primarily concerned. The focus of this literature has tended to be on the ways in which Butler’s recent work might constitute a distinctive body of thought. Specifically, discussion has centred on the question of how to understand what is generally viewed as these texts’ introduction of distinctly ethical and/or political themes, with the suggestion, sometimes explicit, that Butler is no longer centrally concerned with questions of gender and sexuality. Accordingly, even amongst the feminist readers of Butler’s recent texts, discussion has tended to focus on the topics and themes which are immanent to these texts, rather than on the ways in which they might take up or develop the concerns which animated Butler’s earlier work.

There are four themes upon which critics have focussed their inquiries. Firstly, they have critically engaged with the way that the War on Terror is treated in Butler’s post-9/11 texts (Thobani 2007; Zehfuss 2009; Gregory 2012). Secondly, they have been interested in how these texts develop elements of cosmopolitan and international political thought (McRobbie 2006; Jenkins 2011; Schippers 2014). Thirdly, they have debated how best to understand what appears to be these texts’ endorsement of a revitalised form of humanism (Honig 2010, 2013; Murphy 2011; Kramer 2015). And fourthly, they have taken up the account of ethics that Butler develops in these texts (Dean 2008; Segal 2008; Frosh 2011; Shulman 2011; Culbertson 2012; McIvor 2012; Gies 2015; Jenkins 2015). This fourth line of engagement has generated by far the most critical discussion, with specific strands of debate focussing on Butler’s ethics of vulnerability (Watkins 2008; Gilson 2014; Jenkins 2013; Petherbridge 2016); her theorisation of violence (Chambers 2007; Mills 2007; Feola
her account of ethical non-violence (Jenkins 2007, 2010; Knisely 2012; Karhu 2016); and the question of under what political conditions Butler understands ethical responsiveness to become possible (Lloyd 2008b, 2015; Mills 2015; Rushing 2015; Schippers 2015).

This literature does not usually make the relationship between distant temporal strands of Butler’s thought central to its purpose. Nor is it principally concerned with exploring the way that Butler’s post-9/11 texts might relate to her earlier interventions in feminism. When this literature does bring Butler’s more recent work into proximity with her earlier writing (e.g. Bell 2008; Gies 2015), the point of such association tends to be to highlight continuities in her thinking, and is less concerned with the ways in which the recent work might be said to modify, develop, or transform the earlier work than it is with developing a coherent account of a particular motif or theme in Butler’s thought (the notions of ‘survival’ and ‘liveability’ in the examples given above). Thus, while this literature does develop in-depth readings of Butler’s recent thought, it neither brings this thought into systematic conversation with her earlier work, nor relates these readings to persistent questions posed in the feminist interpretation of her thought. This literature therefore informs my reading of Butler’s recent texts but it does not bear directly upon the thesis’s overall purpose.

3. The literature which approaches Butler’s writing as a whole or oeuvre.

Finally, there is a small but growing body of literature whose primary purpose is to treat Butler’s corpus of writings as a whole, either in order to provide a general introduction to her thought (Salih 2002; Kirby 2006; Lloyd 2007a; Jagger 2008; Brady and Schirato 2010), or to develop an understanding of the relevance of Butler’s writing for a specific field of inquiry (Loizidou 2007; Chambers and Carver 2008; Thiem 2008; Schippers 2014). This literature is relevant to this thesis because it brings apparently disparate strands of Butler’s thought into explicit relationship, which is something that I am also concerned to do. In this sense, the thesis shares a purpose with these texts, contributing to efforts to approach Butler’s oeuvre coherently and to bring her more recent writings into proximity with her earlier work. Nonetheless, there are two ways in which my work in this thesis differs from those texts cited above.

Firstly, I am less interested in elucidating continuities in Butler’s work. While they may differ in their scope and focus, the purpose of these texts is to make Butler’s thought meaningful as a singular corpus or contribution to contemporary theory. They thus tend to perform synthesising and unifying analyses that, while extremely useful for a project such as my own, are less concerned with the significance of subtle developments and variations in Butler’s thought than they are with the ways in which different aspects of her work can be understood to be connected.
Secondly, I am primarily concerned to relate these developments in Butler’s thought to persistent points of contention among her feminist interlocutors. Although several of the texts cited above are centrally concerned with Butler’s feminist reception (Kirby 2006; Lloyd 2007a; Jagger 2008), none develop extended discussions of the relationship between the way that Butler has been engaged by feminists and her more recent work. What this points to, then, is the presence of a gap between the feminist interpretation of Butler’s thought and her recent writing. It is in beginning to bridge this gap that the thesis makes its specific contribution.

1.3 Method

In order to answer the research questions, I undertake three steps. First, I carry out a brief review of the feminist literature which engages with Butler’s work. I identify the persistent questions that feminist critics have posed to her thought, and make a selection of these with which to structure my exploration of her recent work. Second, I review the texts that Butler has published since 2000 and make a selection of key texts upon which to focus the analysis of the thesis. Third, I read these key texts with and against the feminist critique, engaging the persistent questions as a critical framework for reading Butler’s post-9/11 writing. I outline each of these steps in more detail below, and discuss their consequences for the scope and focus of the thesis.

1.3.1 Identifying Persistent Feminist Questions

My engagement with Butler is motivated by a desire to explore the relationship between her reception as a feminist theorist and her more recent work. In order to do this, it is necessary to have a clear sense of in what this reception consists. To this end, I have reviewed the literature which constitutes the feminist critique of Butler’s thought. As indicated earlier in this chapter, this is a voluminous and complex literature. It is possible, however, to identify in this literature a set of questions posed to Butler that have remained ‘persistent’. By this I mean two things: 1) that these questions have been posed repeatedly, by multiple feminist critics, in relation to multiple texts of Butler’s, and in this sense have persisted through time; and 2) that in persisting through time these questions have shown themselves to be both of enduring interest and not easily settled or resolved. As such, these questions are worthy of continued exploration, not in the hope of resolving them once and for all, but because in continuing to discuss them we continue to have the opportunity to think critically and creatively about some central themes in feminist thought.
In line with the outline of the feminist critique of Butler’s thought presented in the previous section, the persistent questions that I have identified cluster around four themes in Butler’s thought: 1) her reformulation of feminist ideas about sex, gender, and the body; 2) her account of agency as a practice of resignification rather than an assumption of autonomy; 3) her understanding of recognition and intersubjective relations; and 4) the approach to politics that is present in her work. The literature out of which these questions emerge is extensive, and there is not space in the context of a doctoral thesis to explore all of the questions that feminist critics have raised. Instead, I make a selection of questions upon which to focus my analysis. The persistent questions that this thesis takes up are those focussed on the themes of agency, recognition, and politics. I do not engage those feminist questions which have been addressed to Butler’s ideas about sex, gender, and the body. For the most part, this is simply because other aspects of Butler’s work interest me more. One way to represent this interest is to say that I am concerned with the directly political themes in Butler’s feminist reception, if the political is defined broadly as a concern with power and the possibilities available for its resistance, transformation, critique, and use. In saying this, I do not mean to suggest that questions of the body are not political questions. Indeed, I engage questions of embodiment throughout the thesis: desire, violence, vulnerability, affect, and the persistence (or otherwise) of life are all recurring themes in my reading of Butler’s post-9/11 texts. The difference is that I am not relating these themes to questions about signification and materiality in Butler’s thought, but to questions about agency, recognition, and politics.

There are seven persistent questions that this thesis engages: two on the theme of agency, two on the theme of recognition, and three on the theme of politics. Below I provide a brief mapping of the way in which these questions have emerged from the feminist critique of Butler’s thought.

**Agency**

The first persistent question which this thesis takes up is related to theme of agency in Butler’s thought. It emerges from discussions about the relationship between Butler’s account of agency as a practice of performative subversion and her understanding of subject formation as a process of subjection to power (Benhabib 1992, 1995a, 1995b; Disch 1999; Diprose 1999; Nussbaum 1999; Mills 2000; Barvosa-Carter 2001; Alcoff 2006; Magnus 2006; Allen 2006). A clear challenge to the idea of the subject as an autonomous, self-grounding, self-actualizing entity, critics have wrestled with the implications for feminism of Butler’s refusal to attribute to subjects capacities that are prior to their production within regimes of power. Worrying that Butler evinces a problematic determinism, critics have asked her: How does the subject gain a critical purchase on her subjection if there is no part of her that is not of power’s creation? How does one resist or transform the
structures on which one’s existence depends? In short, they have asked: How is agency possible for the subject for whom autonomy is but a fantasy? Acknowledging Butler’s argument that agency consists in the performative subversion of norms, these critics have nonetheless wanted to know from Butler how this performative agency comes about if, as she argues throughout her work, the subject depends for its persistence on normative regimes of power. Butler has thus been read as evacuating the gendered subject of the psychic resources necessary to resist her oppression and desire her freedom, obfuscating, for many critics, the possibility of feminism itself.

The second persistent question is also related to the theme of agency, and emerges from feminist discussion of Butler’s move to locate the possibility of agency in the structure of signification. While this move has largely succeeded in clearing her of charges of voluntarism, it has produced its own set of difficulties, and feminist critics have problematised what they see as the emergence of a limiting form of abstraction in Butler’s thought. This abstraction is manifest both in what has been called her “discursive objectivism” (McNay 2008: 166) – the claim that Butler locates agency in structures rather than subjects (Weir 1996; McNay 2000, 2003, 2008; Magnus 2006) – and in her tendency to analyse agency at a point of remove from its social, political, and historical contexts (Nelson 1999; Mahmood 2005). For critics, this abstraction produces in Butler’s thought a domination/resistance binary which reduces agency to a reactionary activity – to a pushing back against power from within the terms of domination – overlooking the more complex forms of engagement with power that can and do characterise normative life. It is the charge of abstraction that has persisted in the feminist reading of Butler’s thought, and it is this charge that I explore in this thesis. To pose it in the form of a question, critics have asked of Butler: What happens to the social and subjective complexities of agency when it is defined narrowly as the resignification of norms?

Recognition

The third and fourth persistent questions which this thesis explores are addressed to Butler’s account of recognition. These critics take issue with the way that Butler binds recognition to the process of subject formation – that is, they are concerned with the way that Butler makes recognition a constitutive part of becoming socially intelligible within the terms of prevailing norms (Dean 1996; Benjamin 1998; Diprose 1999, 2002; Grosz 2002; Oliver 2001; Magnus 2006; Allen 2006; Stark 2014). For these critics, Butler conceptualises recognition as bestowed in the relationship between the subject and power: for a subject to be recognisable requires that she submit herself to power’s terms, becoming intelligible to others because she has become an embodiment of the norm. What this means, these critics argue, is that all trace of the truly other must be eliminated
from the self as it strives to become a fully intelligible subject, whether through violent repudiation or a process of assimilation that nullifies all difference. Recognition therefore functions in Butler’s thought as a practice of regulation: because recognition is only possible for subjects who live the terms of their production in normative ways, it works, critics claim, to reify normative identities and to reinforce existing patterns of social subordination. Critics thus charge that in Butler’s work recognition takes on a profoundly conservative meaning, and she misses an opportunity to think about the potentially enabling or transformative aspects of the self’s encounter with others. They have thus posed two questions to her account: Firstly, must self-other relations be fated to violence? And secondly, must recognition always proceed within the terms of prevailing norms?

Politics

The fifth, sixth, and seventh persistent questions that I engage in this thesis emerge from feminist discussions of Butler’s politics. The fifth question arises from Butler’s genealogical understanding of critique and her subsequent reluctance to ground her politics in a fully developed normative framework. The issue for critics has been what they perceive as a tendency towards relativism in Butler’s thought: for Butler, they claim, there is no way to tell which policies, programmes, and actions are politically commendable and which should be the object of critique. In other words, they argue, there is no way in Butler’s work to ground feminist claims about justice, equality, and freedom (Anderson 1992, 1998, 2006; Fraser 1995a, 1995b; Allen 1999; Nussbaum 1999; Stone 2005). To put it in different terms, these critics have argued that while Butler may be able to account for the possibility of political change in terms of the subversion and resignification of norms, this position tells us nothing about why such change is desirable. Are there better and worse instances of subversion, progressive and reactionary forms of resignification? The answer, for critics, is clearly affirmative. They have thus asked of Butler: What are the normative grounds of a politics of resignification, and why not make explicit the sources of political judgement?

The sixth question that I engage is addressed to Butler’s understanding of political community. Butler has famously criticised the idea that feminist politics requires a stable and unified collective subject – ‘woman’ – in whose name it is mandated to act, and argued instead for feminism to take up a model of collective action conceived in terms of shifting and contingent coalition. While critics acknowledge that Butler’s argument is driven by a concern about the exclusionary aspects of identity politics, they argue that she neglects to theorise the form that such a coalition politics might take (Dean 1996; Weir 1996; Allen 1999, 2006; Stavro 2007). They want to know what would be entailed in a Butlerian political community that is not based on the shared experience of social identity but is nonetheless enabling, and wonder whether Butler has a sense of the positive and
empowering aspects of identity-based political organising. To pose it in the form of a question, critics have asked: What does a post-identity political coalition involve, and how is it held together in the absence of the unifying structure of identity?

The seventh and final persistent feminist question engaged in this thesis arises from Butler’s valorisation of political action as the practice of resignifying norms. The claim of feminist critics has been that Butler does not adequately attend to the social, legal, and historical context within which a politics of resignification takes place (Hennessy 1994-1995; Fraser 1995b; Lloyd 1999, 2005a, 2007b; McNay 1999; Mills 2000; Schwartzman 2002; Weston 2002; Lovell 2003). She tends to assume, they argue, that resignification will always be subversive and that subversion will always be in line with feminist political goals. As such, she forecloses questions about the efficacy of resignification as a political strategy: she downplays the impact of context in determining whether a particular act of resignification will be successful and whether it is likely to have progressive or conservative effects. As a result, critics argue, Butler disregards the importance of feminist engagement with law and policy – that is, with the state – both as an alternative political strategy to resignification and as an activity that, by acting on the broader social context, can potentially enhance the political efficacy of any resignificatory act (Jenkins 2001; Passavant and Dean 2001; Mills 2003; Lloyd 2005b, 2007a). In short, feminist critics have worried that Butler’s account of politics in terms of resignification is needlessly reductive. They have thus asked of her: What is gained and what is lost when the complexity of political action is reduced to the practice of resignification?

1.3.2 Reviewing and Selecting Key Texts

There are a particular set of challenges which accompany any sustained engagement with a living theorist, especially one who is as prolific as Butler. When this project was initially conceived, the designation in my research questions of ‘Butler’s recent writing’ or ‘Butler’s post 9/11 texts’ was quite straightforward: it referred to the four monographs Butler had published between 2001 and 2010. Since 2010, however, and since this project first took shape, Butler has produced a significant volume of written work, including three monographs1 and two co-authored texts2, and has given numerous lectures and interviews about her work3.

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1 Parting Ways (2012), Senses of the Subject (2015), and Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly (2015).
3 See, for example, Butler (2013, 2015c, 2015d), Yancy and Butler (2015), Ahmed (2016).
Nonetheless, the way that this thesis understands the designation ‘Butler’s recent writing’ remains the same as it did when this project was first conceived. That is, in exploring the relationship between Butler’s feminist reception and her recent work, I am primarily concerned with four key texts selected from the body of writing Butler produced between 2001 and 2010. These texts are: *Precarious Life* (2004a), *Undoing Gender* (2004b), *Giving an Account of Oneself* (2005), and *Frames of War* (2009). I also engage a small selection of contemporaneously published essays which I take to illuminate or expand upon the more substantive texts. This selection comprises “What is Critique? An Essay on Foucault’s Virtue” (2002), “Bodies and Power Revisited” (2004c), “Reply from Judith Butler to Mills and Jenkins” (2007), and Butler’s interview with Vikki Bell, “New Scenes of Vulnerability, Agency, and Plurality” (2010).

Partly this is a pragmatic decision. Butler’s texts are complex. They demand time, space, and focus. In a situation where resources are limited, there is a necessary sacrifice of depth for breadth, and I have chosen to limit the number of texts that I engage in this thesis in order to maintain depth of analysis. From this perspective, the selection of the four monographs published between 2001 and 2010 – and the four essays mentioned above – is both practical and reasonable. Because some time has elapsed since the publication of these texts, I have been able to develop my understanding of them and to benefit from the interpretation and criticism of other scholars as it has become available. The texts published between 2001 and 2010 are also the closest chronologically to Butler’s earlier work, and thus to the feminist debate and criticism that this work has inspired. In my view, this proximity results in a sense that something is being responded to; in the texts published between 2001 and 2010 Butler is, I believe, in conversation with her feminist critics, even though she does not usually frame her work in these terms, and rarely discusses this criticism in an explicit way.

There are other reasons for focussing the thesis on Butler’s publications between 2001 and 2010. As Butler’s work continues to develop, it has become clear that these publications constitute a coherent and significant body of thought. The four monographs and, to a lesser extent, the four essays upon which this thesis is focussed are thematically linked: they each develop Butler’s account of subject formation in terms of ‘ec-static’ constitution, and as such are each centrally concerned with concepts of relationality, vulnerability, and dispossession. Each of these texts also contributes to developing an explicitly normative orientation for Butler’s work, centred on the

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4 It is important to make clear that I do not look at all of Butler’s writing from the post-9/11 period. Significantly, and for the same reasons as I articulate above, I do not engage any of the texts that Butler co-authored during this time. These texts are: *Who Sings the Nation State?* (2007), co-authored with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Is Critique Secular?* (2009), co-authored with Talal Asad, Wendy Brown, and Saba Mahmood, and *Sois Mon Corps* (2010), co-authored with Catherine Malabou, which has been translated into English as *You Be My Body for Me: Body, Shape, and Plasticity in Hegel’s Phenomenology of Spirit* (2011).
question of what is required for life to persist and flourish, and hence asking, albeit in different ways, how the precarity of life might be ameliorated. The thematic coherence of these texts provides a rationale for demarcating them from the rest of Butler’s recent publications, and means that it is theoretically meaningful, as well as practical, to engage these texts together.

It is important to acknowledge that the theoretical coherence of these texts has also been registered in the interpretive literature. This is usually approached in terms of the question of whether (and how) these texts might constitute an ‘ethical turn’ in Butler’s thought. This is a way of referencing the focus on relationality in these texts, and Butler’s explicit location of their endeavours within an ethical framework – that is, within a framework whose central questions are about how one should act, both in one’s relations with others and in the broader political context in which one lives. It is also emerging as a way to signal what is taken to be a shift in Butler’s work – towards ethics, certainly, but, it is sometimes claimed, away from politics and explicitly political concerns, including those of gender and sexuality which animated Butler’s earlier work. Indeed, under the rubric of the status of Butler’s ethical turn, the question of how to characterise the distinctive intellectual contribution of these texts is emerging as an important source of debate among Butler scholars and critics (see Mills 2007; Jenkins 2007, 2008, 2010; Dean 2008; Lloyd 2008b; Honig 2010; Rushing 2010; Shulman 2011; McIvor 2012; and the essays collected in Lloyd 2015).

While I am aware of this discussion in the interpretive literature, and of the tendency to designate some or all of the four monographs published between 2001 and 2010 as those texts which constitute (or do not constitute, depending on one’s perspective) Butler’s ethical turn, I do not reproduce this designation in the thesis. Instead, I refer to these texts variously as Butler’s ‘recent work’, Butler’s ‘more recent work’ or, more specifically, Butler’s ‘post-9/11’ texts. I have two main reasons for doing this.

Firstly, the designation of these texts as comprising a turn to ethics in Butler’s thought is a controversial one, and it remains contested in the interpretive literature. Indeed, the question about the nature and status of ‘the ethical’ in Butler’s oeuvre is a complex one: In what ways are these texts ‘ethical’ in nature and/or scope? What form of ethics do they articulate? Is the ethical focus in these texts a new development in Butler’s thought or does it build upon earlier tendencies? How is the ethical thread of these texts related to Butler’s more avowedly political work, and how does it relate to these texts’ own explicitly political passages? While I do not contest that these questions have value, they are not the primary concern of the thesis, and they do not motivate my engagement with this selection of Butler’s texts. My interest in these texts is driven, instead, by a desire to explore the way that they relate to established debates in the feminist interpretation of Butler’s
thought, none of which, on my reading, are about the status of a turn to ethics in her thought. As such, I see no advantage to framing my engagement with these texts in terms of their significance for understanding ‘the ethical’ in Butler’s work, and I do not refer to them in this way.

Secondly, I believe that the designation, ‘Butler’s post-9/11 texts’, is a more appropriate one given the purpose and focus of the thesis. By taking up this designation, I aim to capture both the location of these texts in time, particularly their status as not yet thoroughly related to the feminist critique of Butler’s thought, the focus of which, as demonstrated above, tends to be on those texts of Butler’s published prior to 2001, and a sense of the thematic concerns that drive and animate the arguments developed in these texts. In my view, the label ‘post-9/11’ is meaningful because it reflects the dual ethical/political impetus of this writing: while not her only motivation, the events of 9/11, and more strongly, the response of the US state to the attacks, impel Butler’s reflections in these texts on vulnerability, non-violence, and the possibilities for transnational political community. In this way, the term ‘post-9/11 texts’ makes sense as a description of what unifies this strand of Butler’s oeuvre, and captures the thematic coherence of these texts while avoiding a debate about precisely what this coherence means.

1.3.3 Implementing a Critical Framework

The third step that I take to answer my research questions involves bringing to bear upon Butler’s post-9/11 writing the persistent feminist questions identified by my review of the literature. These questions form the critical framework with which I engage Butler’s recent work. I employ the conceptual categories of agency, recognition, and politics as a mode of organising my analysis of Butler’s post-9/11 texts, and I ask to what extent these texts might speak to persistent feminist questions on these themes. My critical practice thus involves reading Butler’s recent writing with and against the feminist critique of her earlier work. In this way, the thesis explores the relationship between Butler’s interventions in feminist theory, her post-9/11 texts, and established debates in the feminist interpretation of her thought.

1.4 Thesis Argument

The argument developed in this thesis is that Butler’s post-9/11 texts constitute a significant body of feminist thought. By reading these texts in the context of persistent points of feminist contention about her work, the thesis demonstrates that Butler’s post-9/11 texts do bear a consequential
relation to her earlier interventions in feminism, despite their thematic variance from her earlier work and their status as relatively overlooked in the feminist critical literature. Specifically, it shows that in these texts, Butler significantly develops certain aspects of her earlier writings, developments which, when read with rather than against her prior claims, can be understood to speak in important and interesting ways to persistent questions posed in the feminist interpretation of her thought. Indeed, although she rarely takes up the task herself, these developments in Butler’s thinking allow her to address to a significant degree the problems that feminist critics have identified with her prior work.

The thesis thus demonstrates that while Butler’s post-9/11 texts may differ thematically from her earlier work in feminist theory, they remain in a significant sense continuous with this work, and should be approached as important sources for furthering the feminist understanding of Butler’s thought. It also makes clear that feminist questions have remained central to the progression of Butler’s thinking, and in this way the thesis suggests the value of continuing to read Butler as a feminist theorist, despite her now much broader intellectual appeal.

1.5 Chapter Outline

In the remainder of this thesis, I explore the ways in which Butler’s post-9/11 texts might be understood to respond to persistent questions posed in the feminist interpretation of her thought. In Chapter Two, I look at those questions which have been posed to Butler’s understanding of agency. I argue that even though feminist questions of agency recede from thematic prominence in Butler’s post-9/11 texts, there is nonetheless significant and ongoing attention given to these questions in her recent work. I thus show in this chapter that while not always obvious, Butler’s post-9/11 writing does relate to her earlier work on agency, autonomy, and the resignification of norms, and it does respond in several ways to persistent feminist questions on this theme. Specifically, I argue, Butler’s post-9/11 texts continue to develop a feminist conception of agency that navigates between the twin pitfalls of voluntarism and determinism: these texts demonstrate that agency emerges, for Butler, not from a position that is outside of power, but from a critical engagement with power that takes the form of a ‘living’ relation with norms.

Chapter Three takes up those persistent feminist questions which have been directed to Butler’s account of recognition. I argue that Butler significantly develops her understanding of recognition in her post-9/11 texts, and in ways that can be read to constitute a response to the concerns that feminist critics have raised. I show that while recognition is conceived in Butler’s earlier work in a
largely pessimistic fashion, her post-9/11 reflections find her in a more positive frame of mind: recognition comes to name, in these texts, both a non-violent way of encountering the other and a means of acting upon the normative field. In this way, I argue, recognition becomes, for Butler, an intrinsic part of a feminist ethics that does not abstract the sphere of the ethical from its political determinants, but rather takes as its central concern the political conditions under which ethical relations are made possible.

Chapter Four engages the set of persistent feminist questions addressed to Butler’s politics. I show that questions of politics are central in Butler’s post-9/11 texts, and I demonstrate that in these texts her earlier account undergoes significant and broad-ranging development. These developments in Butler’s thinking are not only a nuanced response to changing social and political contexts, but, I claim, address and respond to the questions that feminist critics have posed to her earlier work. The conception of politics which emerges in Butler’s post-9/11 texts is, I argue, one in which feminism must take shape as a critique of militarism, violence, and the coercive power of the state. I thus show in this chapter that in the contemporary context feminism, for Butler, is not limited to a politics of resignifying the norms of gender, but is a way to critically intervene in the normative production of the human.

Chapter Five is a short conclusion which summarises the main findings of the thesis, identifies and reflects upon its limitations, and discusses the broader implications of the analysis that I present.
Chapter Two

Agency

In this chapter, I begin to explore the ways in which Butler’s post-9/11 texts might address or respond to persistent questions posed in the feminist interpretation of her thought. My focus here is on those feminist questions that have been posed to Butler’s understanding of agency. While agency is not as central a concern in Butler’s post-9/11 texts as it was in her earlier work, I argue that there is nonetheless ongoing and significant attention in this area. I engage a selection of essays and interviews alongside the monographs that Butler published in the post-9/11 period to show that in her recent writing she significantly develops aspects of earlier work, responding, as she does so, to persistent feminist questions about how agency is conceived in her thought.

The chapter consists of two parts, each of which corresponds to a feminist question about agency outlined in Chapter One. In the first part of the chapter, I look at developments in Butler’s post-9/11 writing that bear on the question of autonomy. While feminist critics have wondered how agency can emerge from a situation of subjection to power in which autonomy is impossible, Butler has consistently maintained that agency arises precisely because the structures of power in which we are formed enable us to act. What her post-9/11 work contributes, I argue, is a clarification of the ways in which this action comes about. To this end, I discuss a set of recent engagements with Foucault in which, I argue, Butler makes clear that agency does not depend on the capacity to achieve autonomy from power but rather emerges from the ways in which the limits of power are experienced in the activity of living. I thus show that Butler’s post-9/11 texts provide a better sense than her earlier work did of how agency emerges and takes shape not from a position that is outside of power but from the engagements with power that subjection itself produces.

In the second part of the chapter, I look at the abstraction that feminist critics have argued constrains Butler’s framing of agency as the resignification of norms. I show that Butler’s post-9/11 texts develop a more nuanced account of resignification than that contained in her earlier work,
one that acknowledges the variety of ways in which power is inhabited and negotiated. In support of this claim, I discuss the expanded account of gender norms that Butler develops in her recent work, arguing that it implies a conception of resignification not as a structural abstraction but as a form of human action. I also take up Butler’s post-9/11 framing of resignification as a practice of non-violence, a development which I argue fractures a domination/resistance binary that feminist critics have claimed constrains Butler’s earlier thinking. In these ways, I argue, resignification, in Butler’s recent work, is not the reduction of agency to a structural potentiality, but a practice of embodied action that centrally involves the subject in a ‘living’ relation with norms.

2.1 Autonomy

The question of how agency is possible for the subject who is formed in submission to power has long vexed feminist critics of Butler’s work. How, they have wanted to know, does the subject resist her subjection if there is no possibility of autonomy, of achieving a critical distance from power (Benhabib 1992, 1995a, 1995b; Weir 1996; Nussbaum 1999; Barvosa-Carter 2001)? How does one transform the structures of power on which one’s social existence depends (Disch 1999; Diprose 1999; Mills 2000; Alcoff 2006; Magnus 2006; Allen 2008)? In this section of the chapter I take up these feminist concerns. I engage a series of essays in which Butler reflects on the work of Foucault to show that while it may not be as central in her recent work as it was in her earlier writing, there are nonetheless moments in Butler’s post-9/11 texts in which she takes up the question of how agency emerges for the non-autonomous subject. Taken together, I argue, these moments clarify the ways in which, for Butler, agency arises not from a position that is outside of power but from the way that the process of submission to power produces the conditions for its own undoing.

My discussion proceeds in three parts. In the first part, section 2.1.1, I look at the way that Butler’s post-9/11 texts use and develop the Foucauldian idea of ‘critical desubjugation’, wherein a critical relation to power does not rely on an autonomous core of the self but rather arises in an encounter with the limits of a given regime of intelligibility. I show that this constitutes an important clarification in Butler’s thought: it makes plain that Butler does not jettison the idea of critical distance as feminist critics have claimed but rather reinvents it as an embodied practice of transformation, an encounter with the limits of power that compels a critical consideration of the terms of one’s production as a subject. Building on this argument, in the second and third parts of the discussion I look at developments in Butler’s post-9/11 writing that take up the question of how
the motivation for resistance arises when one’s social existence is dependent on structures of power. In section 2.1.2, I look at the way that Butler reframes her understanding of subjection as an iterable process through which the foreclosures necessary to subject formation are psychically ‘lived out’; and in section 2.1.3, I look at her recent claim that it is through a certain form of desire that subjection is both reproduced and resisted. I read these developments as responding to the feminist claim that Butler evacuates the subject of the psychic resources necessary to resist her subjection and desire her freedom: they make clear that the psychic impetus for agency arises, for Butler, not from a part of the self that escapes constitution by power but from an engagement with the possibilities for living that are created by the structure of subjection itself.

2.1.1 Critical Desubjugation

In this section of the chapter I look at the way that agency is framed in Butler’s recent work in terms of the Foucauldian idea of ‘critical desubjugation’. I engage three sources in which this idea takes shape in Butler’s recent writing: the essay, “What is Critique? An Essay on Foucault’s Virtue” (2002); Chapter Three of *Undoing Gender*, titled “Doing Justice to Someone: Sex Reassignment and Allegories of Transsexuality” (2004b: 57-74); and Butler’s brief remarks about Foucault in the first chapter of *Giving an Account of Oneself* (2005: 22-26). I argue that what this framing of agency as a practice of critical desubjugation makes clear is that a critical distance from power does not emerge, for Butler, from an autonomous core of the self but rather arises in an encounter with the limits of a given regime of power. In this way, I argue, Butler’s recent work establishes that contrary to the claims of feminist critics, she does not jettison the idea of critical distance in her work but rather reinvents it: to take a critical distance from power, for Butler, is to question the limits of one’s constitution as a subject, and to undergo a process of self-transformation the outcome of which one cannot know in advance.

In “What is Critique?” (2002) Butler offers a close reading of Foucault’s lecture of the same name. Her aim is to elaborate a Foucauldian account of critique that differs from the way that critics have usually approached him. Specifically, she takes issue with the Habermasian interpretation of Foucault as “normatively impoverished in some sense”, and argues instead that Foucault makes an important contribution to normative theory, albeit one that is “difficult, if not impossible, to read within the current grammars of normativity” (“WIC”: 214). What emerges from Butler’s reading of Foucault in this essay is an understanding of critique as the process by which the subject develops a critical relation to power. Termed ‘critical desubjugation’ by Foucault, this understanding of
critique is both an alternative approach to questions of normativity, and a way of understanding agency that differs from conventional approaches based in a notion of autonomy.

According to Butler, Foucault’s contribution to normative theory is to “rethink critique as a practice in which we pose the question of the limits of our most sure ways of knowing” (“WIC”: 215). It is a practice of exposing the boundaries of an established epistemological order. Such a practice arises, Butler argues, not because the subject is particularly fond of the activity of questioning, but because in the activity of living she has already run up against the limits of the prevailing order. For Butler, then, it is an experience of epistemic crisis which produces the practice of critique rather than “an upsurge of some human freedom” (“WIC: 223). As she puts it:

One asks about the limits of ways of knowing because one has already run up against a crisis within the epistemological field in which one lives. The categories by which social life are ordered produce a certain incoherence or entire realms of unspeakability. And it is from this condition, the tear in the fabric of our epistemological web, that the practice of critique emerges, with the awareness that no discourse is adequate here or that our reigning discourses have produced an impasse. (“WIC”: 215)

Such a practice of questioning entails that one foregoes the certainty of the established order, which, for both Butler and Foucault, means also that one foregoes a settled relationship with oneself. This is because, for Foucault, self-constitution must take place in relation to the regimes of rationality in which one lives. These regimes provide the terms within which the self comes to know and understand itself. Thus, for Foucault, any relation to the regime of truth in which one lives is also a relation to oneself (GAO: 22). What this means, Butler argues, is that “an operation of critique cannot take place without this reflexive dimension” (GAO: 22). In other words, when I bring a regime of truth into question, I am also bringing myself into question – I am making of myself a question. “To call into question a regime of truth, where that regime of truth governs subjectivation,” Butler argues, “is to call into question the truth of myself” (GAO: 22-3). Thus, for Butler, “if I question the regime of truth, I question, too, the regime through which being, and my own ontological status, is allocated” (GAO: 23).

On this account, then, critique involves a process of self-transformation. As Butler puts it, “[t]he limits of what is knowable … can only be tread or interrogated by risking a certain security within an available ontology” (“WIC”: 222). This self-transformation – this risking of a secure ontology – takes place via the unsettling of what Foucault refers to as “the contemporary order of being” (quoted in “WIC”: 221). What this means, Butler argues, is that critique becomes, for Foucault, a
practice of desubjugation: it requires that the subject refuse, in a sense, who they are known – and who they know themselves – to be. Butler thus makes clear that what is operating in Foucault’s thought, for her at least, is an understanding of critique not as a practice of judgement but as a practice of freedom that requires, precisely, that we suspend our judgement, and thus both exceeds and problematises conventional approaches. For Foucault, Butler argues, critique is not the positing of evaluative norms nor is it the application of universalisable justificatory procedures but is the risk and the virtue of a practice of questioning wherein “liberty emerges at the limit of what one can know” ("WIC": 221).

In this way, for Butler and Foucault alike, becoming ‘critical’ is not primarily about the positing and defending of norms. Becoming critical is, rather, the process of developing a critical relation to power – it is the process of undergoing a critical desubjugation, a form of self-transformation. As such, the notion of critical desubjugation can be understood to name in Butler’s thought not only an approach to the act of critique but a form of agency that is not reducible to the idea of autonomy. Critical desubjugation is a mode of being in which one questions the terms of the regime of power in which one lives; it is thus a way of gaining a critical distance on power that does not rely on the claim that power must be transcended in order to from the object of critique. A critical desubjugation arises, for Butler, from an epistemological crisis, an encounter with the limits of a given regime of power. It arises, in other words, not from a part of the self that escapes constitution by power, but from the way that power is experienced in the activity of living.

In “Doing Justice to Someone” (UG: 57-74), Butler discusses as a speculative ‘case’ of critical desubjugation the story of David Reimer. David was a Canadian man born biologically male but subsequently medically reassigned as female following a surgical operation in infancy in which his penis was destroyed. Raised as female from the age of eight months, and subjected to regular ‘progress’ visits with the medical team who engineered his reassignment, David chose in his teenage years to identify as male and eventually underwent treatment, including surgery, to reverse the reassignment (UG: 59-62). David’s case became a central point of contention in the debate in academic sexology between essentialists and social constructionists over how we should understand gender identity, a debate which centred on the question of whether gender is innate or is developed through socialisation (UG: 62-68). Butler’s point in discussing David’s story is to show that it does not tell us anything about how gender identity is developed; it does not establish the truth of gender as either a social construction or a fact of nature, but rather tells us something about gender as a regulatory regime. What we see in David’s story, Butler argues, is the forcible application of the norm of gender to the body and the life of a person, and, if we pay close and proper attention, she
claims, we might also see the way in which that person experiences, negotiates, and, ultimately, resists that “violent attempt to implement the norm” (UG: 68).

What I would like to focus on in this essay is Butler’s understanding of the way in which David comes to resist his subjection to the regulatory regime of gender. Towards the end of her analysis, Butler takes up a statement of David’s which she argues can be understood to constitute a certain form of critical speech (UG: 71-74). In this statement, David reflects on the advice delivered by his medical team, before he chose to reverse his reassignment, that vaginal surgery and living as a female was the only way he would find happiness, and, indeed, be loved. David says: “If that’s all they think of me, that they justify my worth by what I have between my legs, then I gotta be a complete loser” (Diamond and Sigmundson 1997: 301, quoted in UG: 71). As Butler reads him, what David is saying is that what will justify his worth will not be the congruence of his body with the norm. She thus reads this statement as manifesting David’s critical distance from the norms of gender which have been forcibly applied to him:

[H]e has already established that what will justify his worth will be the invocation of an ‘I’ which is not reducible to the compatibility of his anatomy with the norm. He thinks something more of himself than what others think, he does not fully justify his worth through recourse to what he has between his legs, and he does not think of himself as a complete loser. Something exceeds the norm, and he recognizes its unrecognizability. It is, in a sense, his distance from the knowably human that operates as a condition of critical speech, the source of his worth, as the justification for his worth. He says that if what those doctors believe were true, he would be a complete loser, and he implies that he is not a complete loser, that something in him is winning. (UG: 72)

We can see in this statement that Butler understands David to have undergone a form of critical desubjugation, an encounter with the limits of power. There is, she states, something about David which exceeds the norm and, importantly, David recognises this putatively unrecognisable part of himself. As David recognises the unrecognisable, he encounters, on Butler’s reading, the limits of his normative formation as a subject; he encounters, in other words, what has been foreclosed, made abject, in the process by which he became, albeit forcibly, a normatively gendered subject. Thus, while it may seem in Butler’s statement that what exceeds the norm is David’s body – the incompatibility of his anatomy with the norm – what she is actually describing, I think, is the way in which David has come to understand that he is not at one with the norm. In this sense, it is not David’s body as a kind of ineffability which exceeds the norm, but the way that David interprets
and understands his body, and, therefore, himself. David’s critical desubjugation thus arises not from an encounter with the ineffability of his body but from an encounter with the limits of his subjection. In this way, critical desubjugation comes to name, for Butler, a form of agency, a process by which subjection to power is resisted and remade.

Hence while it is tempting, Butler argues, to read David’s statement as evidence for the existence of an autonomous core of the self, a core of the person which escapes subjection to power and from which agency thus emerges, this is not the reading of David’s words that she would prefer that we take up. For Butler, to posit David’s words as testifying to a core of the self which remains untouched by power is only to subject David to another discourse, whether it be the discourse of humanism or the discourse of psychoanalysis. “We might be tempted to say,” she argues, “that there is some core of a person, and so some presumption of humanism, that emerges here, that is supervenient to the particular discourses on sexed and gendered intelligibility that constrain him” (UG: 73). But, she continues, “that would mean … that [David] is denounced by one discourse only to be carried by another discourse, the discourse of humanism” (UG: 73). Similarly, we might be tempted to think that David’s words testify to the existence of another kind of ineffable core, something like an unconscious which is beyond discourse, which has escaped subjection to power and which remains intact as a source of necessary resistance. “[W]e might say,” Butler posits, “that there is some core the subject who speaks, who speaks beyond what is sayable, and that it is this ineffability that marks David’s speech, the ineffability of the other who is not disclosed through speech, but leaves a portentous shard of itself in its saying, a self that is beyond discourse itself” (UG: 73).

What Butler would prefer, however, is if we were to read David’s words another way. Butler’s preferred reading emphasises the way in which David refuses the promise of love that comes from the discourse of gender norms and insists instead upon his own loveability outside of – or at the limits of – intelligibility itself:

[H]e refuses to accept that what they are offering in their discourse is love. He refuses their offering of love, understanding it as a bribe, a seduction to subjection. He will be and he is, he tells us, loved for some other reason, a reason they do not understand, and it is not a reason we are given. It is clearly a reason that is beyond the regime of reason established by the norms of sexology itself. (UG: 73-74)

We must understand David’s refusal, Butler argues, as a critique of the regulatory regime of gender, as an embodied practice of transformation in which he not only enacts but lives the terms of his
critical desubjugation. In this light, David’s words take shape, for Butler, not as a testament to his ‘human’ core, but as the performative enactment of his humanness in a context in which he has been constructed as the less than human. In this sense, what is most important, for Butler, about David’s words is not the way in which they might be said to testify to the origins of resistance but the way in which they perform a practice of critique:

[H]e establishes the limits of what they know, disrupting the politics of truth, making use of his desubjugation within that order of being to establish the possibility of love beyond the grasp of that norm… And in this sense, David’s discourse puts into play the operation of critique itself, critique which, defined by Foucault, is precisely the desubjugation of the subject within the politics of truth. This does not mean that David becomes unintelligible and, therefore, without value to politics; rather, he emerges at the limits of intelligibility, offering a perspective on the variable ways in which norms circumscribe the human. (UG: 74)

I have discussed in this section Butler’s use and development in her post-9/11 texts of the Foucauldian idea of critical desubjugation. Through a series of reflections on Foucault, Butler deploys this idea to make clear the ways in which a critical distance from power does not for her emerge from an autonomous core of the self. Instead, she argues, critical distance arises from an encounter with the limits of a given regime of power – an encounter, that is, with the abject, with what has been made unintelligible in oneself or in others. Moreover, because the subject is not autonomous but is formed in submission to power, developing a critical relation to power involves a process of self-transformation. In this way, Butler theorises critical distance as a process of critical desubjugation: she argues that to assume a critical distance from power requires that we question the very terms of our existence, and thus compels us not only to a consideration of the limits of what can be known and made intelligible within a given regime of power, but to a consideration of the limits of ourselves. Thus, what is made clear in Butler’s more recent writing is that she does not jettison the idea of critical distance as has been claimed by critics. Instead, I argue, she reinvents it as an embodied practice of transformation.

2.1.2 Foreclosure, the Unconscious, and the ‘Living Out’ of Subjection

In the previous section, I argued that there are developments in Butler’s post-9/11 writing which establish that while a critical distance from power is possible for Butler, it does not consist in the achievement of autonomy but rather arises from an encounter with the limits of a given regime of
power. In this section of the chapter, I take up the question of the psychic impetus for this form of non-autonomous agency – the question, in other words, of what motivates the subject to turn away from power and undertake a critical desubjugation. I outline a development in Butler’s thinking on the psychic impetus for agency, whereby the motivation for resisting one’s subjection does not arise from a part of the self that escapes constitution by power but rather inheres in the way that the foreclosures necessary to subject formation are psychically ‘lived out’. I begin with an early text, *The Psychic Life of Power* (1997b), in which Butler first takes up the question of psychic resistance to subjection. I show that while Butler establishes in this text the importance of accounting for the psyche in any explanation of how resistance comes about, she does not yet provide an account of how the psyche interacts with the social in both driving and limiting change. Such an account emerges, I argue, in a recent text, an interview with Vikki Bell entitled “New Scenes of Vulnerability, Agency, and Plurality” (2010), in which Butler is pushed by her feminist interlocutor to clarify how she understands the process of subject formation. Here Butler brings a psychoanalytic perspective to bear on Foucault to argue that the psyche is formed and maintained through a reiterated process of foreclosure that is distinctly social in nature. As these foreclosures are encountered and experienced – as they are ‘lived out’ by their subject, Butler argues – the possibility is created for their resistance and refusal. In this way, I argue, what Butler’s recent work make clear is that what motivates, for her, a critical desubjugation is not the psyche understood as pure resistance to subjection but an encounter with the psychic limits of one’s formation as a subject.

In Chapter Three of *The Psychic Life of Power* (1997b), Butler is centrally concerned with the question of how resistance comes about from a situation of subjection to power, and she engages Foucault and psychoanalysis in pursuit of an answer. Given Foucault’s suggestion that the body is both the instrument of subjection and the source of its disruption, one might expect, Butler posits, that the body would be central to Foucault’s account of how subjection can be resisted (*PLP*: 89-90). However, she argues, apart from isolated references to the body as a kind of ineffability or “non-normalizable wildness” (*PLP*: 90), this is not the case. Instead, for Foucault, resistance is an effect of power: it arises not from the “wildness” of the body but rather emerges as a subjectivation exceeds its normalising aims or as a discourse converges with other discursive regimes (*PLP*: 93). In this way, resistance appears, for Foucault, as a structural effect, “as a part of power, as its self-subversion” (*PLP*: 93).

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5 This chapter is titled: “Subjection, Resistance, Resignification: Between Freud and Foucault” (*PLP*: 83-106).

6 While at this point in her thinking Butler dismisses the suggestion that for Foucault the body has a special relationship to resistance, elsewhere in her writing she is more willing to countenance this claim. I take up one of these moments (in the essay “Bodies and Power Revisited” (Butler 2004c)) in the following section of this chapter.
This position is appealing to Butler for the way that it refuses a single locus of resistance that is located outside of power in favour of affirming “multiple possibilities of resistance [that are] enabled by power itself” (PLP: 97). For Foucault, Butler explicates, resistance cannot be outside of the law in the manner of the Lacanian imaginary, nor can it be inside that which eludes the law in the manner of the Freudian unconscious (PLP: 98). Resistance, for Foucault, can only be an effect of the power that it opposes. This, for Butler, is an important insight, and one that she thinks is fundamental to the task of developing an account of resistance that does not disavow our dependency on power for social intelligibility and recognition.

Butler then develops this Foucaultian insight in what might be called a Derridean direction. She argues that it is the iterability of subjection – the fact that to be successful, to be sustained, subjection must be repeated – that produces the possibility of resistance. “The Foucaultian subject is never fully constituted in subjection,” she argues; rather, “it is repeatedly constituted in subjection, and it is in the possibility of a repetition that repeats against its origin that subjection might be understood to draw its inadvertently enabling power” (PLP: 94). To say that resistance is an effect of power, then, is to say that when power constitutes the subject it simultaneously constitutes the conditions for that subject to undergo desubjugation. Thus, when a subject is produced it is not fixed by that production in time and place. Rather, Butler claims, the making of that subject “becomes the occasion for a further making” (PLP: 99). She continues:

[A] subject only remains a subject through a reiteration or rearticulation of itself as a subject, and this dependency of the subject on repetition for coherence may constitute that subject’s incoherence, its incomplete character. This repetition or, better, iterability thus becomes the non-place of subversion, the possibility of a re-embodying of the subjectivating norm that can redirect its normativity. (PLP: 99).

The strategic question for Foucault is thus: “how can we work the power relations by which we are worked, and in what direction?” (PLP: 100). In this sense, Butler argues, Foucault is not calling for the liberation of a repressed subjectivity but for a radical remaking of subjectivity – for a simultaneous refusing of the identity that power makes possible and a reimagining of identity both with and beyond power’s terms (PLP: 101).

Butler poses two critical questions to this account. First, she asks: can resistance be derived solely from within the terms of power? (PLP: 94). Isn’t it the case, she continues, that discourses operate to produce both what is intelligible and what is made to be unintelligible? “What can we make,” Butler asks, “of the way that discourses not only constitute the domains of the speakable, but are
themselves bounded through the production of a constitutive outside: the unspeakable, the unsignifiable?” (PLP: 94). It seems foolish, to Butler, to discount this constitutive outside as having no role to play in the way that subjection might be resisted. Second, Butler asks: how is it possible for the subject, for any subject, to refuse its identity? (PLP: 102). If subjection to power is what confers intelligibility upon the subject and allows it to become socially recognisable, then for what reason would the subject refuse this intelligibility, this recognition? For Butler, we cannot simply throw off our identities, especially if they are, as she argues in Psychic Life, the objects of a passionate attachment. This thus poses a problem for a Foucaultian account of resistance to subjection as the refusing and remaking of identity.

Given these lacunae in the Foucaultian approach, Butler turns to psychoanalysis to further develop her account. Psychoanalysis, Butler argues, provides a way to understand the production of the unintelligible as intrinsic to subject formation, and, in the concept of the unconscious, suggests a way that this domain of the unintelligible might be significant to the production of resistance (PLP: 94, 97). Moreover, psychoanalysis takes seriously the claim that the subject is psychically invested in its identity and thus cannot easily refuse it (PLP: 102). From this perspective, for Butler, it is possible to see that Foucault evacuates subjection of any psychic content and refuses any psychic impetus for resistance, preferring, instead, to theorise resistance as driven entirely by structural forces. Butler thus argues that it is important to supplement a Foucaultian account of resistance with a psychoanalytic perspective: we cannot jettison the psyche entirely, as Foucault does, even though his account of resistance as an effect of power, as the remaking of identity, is compelling (PLP: 102).

This supplementation, however, poses its own difficulties. For, Butler asks, if we reject an understanding of the psyche as the remainder of subjection, as that which escapes discursive production and guarantees resistance, how, then, do we understand it? Can we reformulate a concept of psychic resistance that does not rely on opposing the psychic to the social – that does not rely, that is, on an understanding of the psyche as that which is, by definition, not the social, as that which remains intact throughout the process of subjection to power? It is clear here that Butler does not want simply to import into a Foucaultian account a psychoanalytic understanding of the psyche as necessary resistance or of the unconscious as that which escapes discursive production and thus remains untouched by power. Instead, she wants to reformulate psychic resistance in terms of the social without also domesticating that resistance – without, that is, making that resistance a recuperation of power (PLP: 102). As Butler puts the problem:
If we reject theoretically the source of resistance in a psychic domain that is said to precede or exceed the social, as we must, can we reformulate psychic resistance in terms of the social without that reformulation becoming a domestication or normalization? (PLP: 102, emphasis in original)

Butler thus seeks here to bring Foucault and psychoanalysis together to theorise an account of resistance to subjection that neither relies on the psyche as the guarantor of resistance nor jettisons the psyche as irrelevant to resistance. However, in Psychic Life she does not quite achieve this synthesis. While Butler posits, in this text, the necessity of bringing an understanding of the psyche into an account of resistance as a process of reiteration, she does not yet connect the idea of reiteration to an understanding of the unconscious as a psychic structure that is produced by processes of foreclosure. In other words, in Psychic Life Butler does not yet theorise the unconscious as itself an iterable production, one whose repeated formation depends upon a socially mediated process of ‘living out’ one’s subjection to power.

It is this connection of the psyche with the social that takes place in Butler’s interview with Vikki Bell. The first question that Bell puts to Butler in “New Scenes of Vulnerability, Agency, and Plurality” (2010) is one about the relationship in her work of Foucault to psychoanalysis. Bell points out that Foucault has been a constant in Butler’s thinking, centrally informing texts ranging from Gender Trouble (1990) to Giving an Account of Oneself (2005). However, Butler’s engagement of Foucault has not been a straightforward one, according to Bell, and in order to move her thinking forward Butler has often needed to “bring[] him onto the terrain of psychoanalysis” (“NSV”: 131). Against this background, Bell notes Butler’s suggestion in Giving an Account of Oneself that Foucault shares something with psychoanalysis, specifically the claim that “something is sacrificed or lost in the moment in which the subject constitutes him or herself” (“NSV”: 131). But, Bell wonders, in bringing Foucault into proximity with psychoanalysis, is something intrinsic to a Foucauldian position itself foregone? Specifically, Bell asks, what happens to his critique of the psychoanalytic unconscious, and why is it important for Butler to supplement a Foucauldian approach to subject formation with a psychoanalytic perspective?

In response to these questions, Butler reformulates her understanding of the production of the unconscious in the process of subject formation. She takes up the idea that Bell’s query centres on, the statement she makes in Giving an Account of Oneself that when a subject is constituted, or constitutes herself, something is sacrificed or lost. This claim is made by Foucault in the interview “How Much Does it Cost for Reason to Tell the Truth?” (Foucault 1989). On Butler’s reading, what Foucault is saying in this interview is that when we enter a regime of rationality, we do not
ever enter fully (“NSV”: 132). When I become a subject, I make myself socially intelligible within the terms of a discursive regime, but achieving this intelligibility does not mean that I am wholly constructed, wholly at one with that particular regime. Rather, I enter a regime of rationality by paying a price, by giving up something of myself. Butler points out that Foucault does not say what it is that we give up upon entrance to a discursive regime; he does not specify what price the subject pays for becoming socially intelligible. For Butler, however, this is the important question: “If we think about the subject as paying, as losing or giving up something, in order to enter into a discursive regime that enables it to achieve intelligibility, rationality, recognizability, then what,” Butler asks, “becomes unintelligible, unspeakable, unrecognizable?” (“NSV”: 132).

For Butler, it is in forming an answer to this question that a psychoanalytic perspective becomes helpful. This is because, in the concept of the unconscious, psychoanalysis provides a way to think about what is sacrificed or lost when an identity is constituted. However, Butler states, to bring psychoanalysis into contact with a Foucauldian account of subject formation necessitates an important modification to a psychoanalytic position. In prosecuting the view that subject formation produces a domain of the unintelligible, a standard psychoanalytic framework would impute to this domain a form of autonomy (“NSV”: 132-3). On this understanding, Butler argues, the unconscious is figured in spatial terms as a ‘container’ for psychic content that is prohibited under current historical conditions. As such, it is an established part of the psyche that operates in the same way for every person: it exists outside of consciousness and established modes of intelligibility, and because of this is instilled with the capacity to interrupt and to alter, on occasion, our conscious life.

Butler wants to depart from this standard psychoanalytic view. “I don’t think we can seek recourse,” she argues, “to a kind of ongoing structural unconscious, that’s there for every person in the same way, or regard the unconscious as the repository of the unintelligible” (“NSV”: 132). What Butler wants to ask instead is how the unconscious gets produced. In this way, she joins Foucault with psychoanalysis in order to imbue the analysis of the psyche with an appreciation of social processes and especially of power relations. “If the unconscious … is instituted and maintained depending on how the domains of rationality and intelligibility are circumscribed and instituted,” Butler argues, “then we have a social and discursive analysis that is fundamental to the thinking of psychic process” (“NSV”: 132). Butler thus makes clear that the unconscious, for her, is not a static structure, “a kind of place or territory” (“NSV”: 133), but a field of the unintelligible that is socially produced and actively maintained. This is one way that Foucault and psychoanalysis come together in her thought.
Importantly, what this synthesis reveals, for Butler, is that the production and maintenance of the unconscious is an iterable process: it does not happen once, in the beginning, and then ossify into a permanent psychic structure. Rather, the unconscious is continually being formed and reformed, shored up and made vulnerable, as the process of becoming a subject is repeatedly undergone. “As a domain of the unacceptable, the unintelligible or the enigmatic,” the unconscious, Butler argues, “is constantly being produced and maintained, which is not to say that it is effectively so!” (“NSV”: 133). She continues:

Now, I want to say that this is also lived out psychically. If we live in a world in which that kind of separation is always happening, and that gets lived out psychically, then we can start to use terms like ‘the unconscious’ in an adjectival way, as process, or even as an iterable kind of action whose effectivity and fallibility belong to its own temporal logic. To understand how this operates, we have to ask how, say, the unacceptable gets lived out, how the unintelligible gets lived out, and how what is not lived out, what is unliveable, also leaves its mark or assumes figural or symptomatic form as spectre, monstrosity or a mode of unintelligibility. (“NSV”: 133)

There are two points that I would like to make about this formulation. First, in understanding the unconscious as an iterable production Butler suggests that the unconscious is vulnerable to being produced differently. In other words, what is made unintelligible as one enters a regime of rationality, or as one undergoes a process of subjection to power, can yet be made intelligible if the limits of that regime are brought into question or if that regime is subjected to a reformulation. A process of critical desubjugation would then be undergone, another entrance would be made to another regime of intelligibility, and the contours of the unconscious would change. Second, in bringing the psychoanalytic concept of the unconscious into contact with a Foucauldian understanding of subject formation, Butler reformulates the reiteration of subjection as a process of ‘living out’. On this formulation, it is not the pure form of iterability that means that subjection is vulnerable to dissolution, but the way that this iterability takes shape in practices of living.

Butler thus gives a Foucauldian inflection to the psychoanalytic concept of foreclosure by maintaining that it does not name a purely psychic process but a form of action which is socially produced and mediated, and which in its ‘lived’ iterability forms the condition for resistance to subjection. Hence, Butler states, if she has a psychoanalytic project it can be understood as genealogical, in the sense that she is looking for what is left out of any process of subject formation, what is not produced, what is not made socially intelligible. For her, the merit of this kind of
inquiry is that “it allows us to see that there are forms of suffering … that are not just there, but produced, enforced and managed over time, that get lived out, or that a set a limit to what can be lived out” (“NSV”: 134).

To summarise, then, in this interview Butler clarifies the way that she understands the process of subjection to power, and specifically the way that this process results in the production of the unconscious. On Butler’s account, the unconscious is produced through a process of foreclosure, as the subject sacrifices something of itself in order to enter into a regime of intelligibility. Butler does not view the unconscious as a necessary source of disruption to conscious life, as some psychoanalytic accounts would have it, but, with Foucault, as a domain of the unintelligible that is socially produced and maintained. The production of the unconscious is thus an iterable process, meaning that it is vulnerable to change and dissolution, to being produced differently. This does not mean, though, that the unconscious itself is the source of disruption to the reiterated process of subjection. What produces a disruption is rather the variable ways in which the foreclosures that create the unconscious are ‘lived out’.

In this way, Butler makes clear in this recent text that the psychic impetus for agency arises not from a part of the self that escapes constitution by power – it arises not from an autonomous core of the self that remains intact despite the depredations of power, nor from a psyche understood as pure resistance to subjection – but from an engagement with the possibilities for living that are created by the structure of subjection itself. This constitutes a development of her earlier claim, in *The Psychic Life of Power*, that the psyche must be accounted for in any attempt to explain how resistance to subjection comes about. It also constitutes, I believe, a response to feminist critics who have long wondered how agency emerges for the Butlerian subject – a subject for whom agency understood on the model of autonomy is no longer a possibility.

### 2.1.3 Resistance, Persistence, Desire

In this section of the chapter, I take up another moment in Butler’s recent work in which she responds to the question of how the psychic impetus for agency emerges for the non-autonomous subject. I engage a recent essay, “Bodies and Power Revisited” (Butler 2004c), in which Butler addresses the question of how the motivation for resistance comes about when one’s social existence depends on structures of power. I read this essay as a development of Butler’s earlier claim, first made in *The Psychic Life of Power* (1997b), that it is through a certain form of desire that subjection is both reproduced and resisted. Specifically, I argue, what becomes clear in this essay is that the desire to persist is not only the basis for accepting subjection, but is the grounds for
its resistance as well. What this development constitutes, I argue, is both a clarification of the implications of Butler’s argument that the subject is attached to her subjection, and a response to feminist critics who have wondered how agency arises from within such a situation of ‘pathological’ attachment. I thus show that what Butler’s recent work makes clear is that the desire to resist does not depend, for her, on there being a part of the self that is uninvested in power, but is rather made possible by the way in which subjection works with and on a certain form of desire.

My discussion in this section proceeds in two parts. I begin with The Psychic Life of Power, a pre-9/11 text in which Butler first suggests that the desire to persist is the grounds of both subjection and resistance. I explicate the way that this suggestion emerges from Butler’s critical engagement with Althusser, and I show that while it constitutes a promising moment in what is otherwise quite a pessimistic discussion of how submission to power is secured, it is not pursued very far in this text. I then look at “Bodies and Power Revisited”, a post-9/11 text in which Butler revisits her claim that the subject is attached to her subjection. While she does not abandon her earlier account, Butler makes, in this text, the question of resistance central to her discussion. I show that through a creative engagement with the work of Foucault, Butler offers an expanded account of the desire to persist as both the motivation for subjection to power and the source of its resistance.

The Desire to Persist in The Psychic Life of Power

Butler makes the suggestion that the desire to persist is the basis for both subjection and resistance in Chapter Four of Psychic Life. In this chapter, she engages Althusser to further explore the process by which subjection to power is impelled. Having already established at this point in the text that the subject is formed in submission to power – that it turns against itself to inaugurate reflexivity in response to an external demand that issues from the law – a further question arises for Butler (PLP: 107): Why does the subject accept the law’s demand? Why, in other words, is the subject willing to participate in the process of securing its subjection? A possible answer to this question emerges, for Butler, in Althusser’s characterisation of subjection as a process of interpellation.

As Butler understands it, interpellation is an allegory for subject formation. Interpellation stages subjection, Butler argues, as “a social scene in which a subject is hailed, the subject turns around, and the subject then accepts the terms by which it is hailed” (PLP: 106). As Butler points out, though, the one who turns in response to the hail does not precisely respond to a demand to turn around; the hail is merely that, a call that could be ignored, that could be misheard, that could be directed, in fact, to someone else (PLP: 95). Rather, Butler reasons, in order for the turn towards

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7 This chapter is titled “‘Conscience Doth Make Subjects of Us All’: Althusser’s Subjection” (PLP: 106-131).
the law to take place there must be a readiness on the part of the subject to make that inaugurating
turn. “But where,” the question is, “and when does the calling of the name solicit the turning
around?” (PLP: 107). She continues: “What kind of relation already binds [the subject to the
law] such that the subject knows to turn, knows that something is to be gained from such a turn?”
(PLP: 107). There is thus, for Althusser, Butler postulates, a prior complicity of the subject with
the law such that no subject emerges without a pre-existing relationship to the law. In this way,
Butler argues, interpellation “figures the subject’s uncritical relation to the law as a condition of
subjectivation” (PLP: 108). Pre-existing the process of interpellation there is, then, for Althusser, a
desire for subjection – a desire to turn toward the law and to accept the terms of the hail. The
question for Butler is how do we understand this desire?

For Althusser, Butler argues, the desire for the law is a desire to be cleansed of an original guilt. On
Butler’s reading, Althusser frames interpellation as a quasi-religious practice: he elevates religious
authority to the status of exemplar so that, in Butler’s words, “the divine power of naming structures
the theory of interpellation” (PLP: 110-11). This framing of interpellation through the religious
example has the effect of making interpellation, for Althusser, a way for the subject to assuage itself
of an original guilt. It is, Butler argues, the desire to be free of this guilt that for Althusser compels
the subject to turn towards the law and to accept the identity that the law holds out as a promise of
“sanctification” (PLP: 109).

Butler has a different understanding of the desire that impels subjection. For Butler, the prior desire
for the law that Althusser posits can be understood as a passion bound up with a primary desire to
exist and persist. “One form that the passionate attachment to existence takes” she writes, “[is a]
passionate attachment to the law” (PLP: 129). Thus, when Butler writes, explicating Althusser, “as
a prior and essential condition of the formation of the subject, there is a certain readiness to be
compelled by the authoritative interpellation” (PLP: 111), what she means is that our primary desire
for social existence implicates us in the process of interpellation before the hail has even been
heard. On Butler’s account, then, “the turn toward the law is not necessitated by the hailing; it is
compelling, in a less than logical sense, because it promises identity” (PLP: 108). I turn toward the
law, in other words, because it offers me recognition, identity, social existence, and the desire for
my own existence, the desire to persist, compels me to accept the terms by which I am hailed
because this acceptance constitutes a means of social recognition, “a way to gain a purchase on
identity” (PLP: 109, 129). In this way, the desire to persist structures and impels the process of
interpellation, or, to put it another way, the promise of recognition is what motivates the subject to
submit to the call of power.
For Althusser, then, the desire for subjection arises from an original guilt of which the subject is driven to assuage herself by submitting herself to the sanctifying power of the law. For Butler, on the other hand, the desire for subjection arises from a primary desire to exist and persist, a desire which is necessary for human survival, and which must be satisfied through the social recognition promised by the interpellating hail of the law. For both theorists, the subject desires her subjection; the difference in their positions arises from how they understand this desire.

For Butler, Althusser’s framing of interpellation as a process of sanctification means that it becomes difficult to see how interpellation might be resisted. If interpellation cleanses the subject of guilt as it bestows a social identity, then, Butler argues, the subject needs the law in order to avoid falling back into a pathological circuit of bad conscience (*PLP*: 109, 118-119). “How,” she thus asks, “does [Althusser’s] figuration of interpellation restrain in advance any possibility of critical intervention in the workings of the law, any undoing of the subject without which the law cannot proceed?” (*PLP*: 109). In answer to this question, Butler suggests that Althusser’s sanctification of interpellation and his consequent reliance on guilt as the motivating force for subjection “fully constrains” his thinking (*PLP*: 129). On this account, the subject’s persistence cannot be guaranteed without a “passionate attachment to the law” (*PLP*: 129), a complicity with power that limits the viability of any critical interrogation of the law that the subject might seek to undertake. For Althusser, Butler argues, “[o]ne cannot criticize too far the terms by which one’s existence is secured” (*PLP*: 129).

For Butler, however, the fact that the subject is attached to her subjection does not therefore preclude the possibility of resistance. For Butler, to be attached to the law because it promises social existence is qualitatively different to being attached to the law because it cleanses one of guilt. On Butler’s understanding, it is the desire to persist – the desire to ‘be’ – that impels the desire for the law, and there is, she posits, something in the nature of this desire that makes it difficult to fully and finally control.

Reflecting on the understanding of subjection that has emerged through her discussion of Althusser, Butler centres the desire to persist in her understanding of how resistance to subjection might be possible. “How,” she asks, towards the close of her remarks, “are we to understand the desire to be as a constitutive desire?” (*PLP*: 130). One way to answer this question, she continues, is to say that the desire to be is that which is exploited by the law such that “we yield to subordination in order to maintain some sense of social ‘being’” (*PLP*: 130). Indeed, this is the way that Butler figures the desire to persist throughout *Psychic Life*, as she develops an account of the way that subjection to power attaches the subject to its own subordination. It is easy to read this as a pessimistic account,
one that obfuscates the motivation that the subject needs in order to resist her subjection and desire her freedom, and indeed this has been the tendency among feminist critics. But here, at the close of her conversation with Althusser, as she thinks directly about how to understand this desire, Butler offers, albeit tentatively, a more hopeful formulation. In positing the desire to be as the source of our subjection, she suggests, we might also “reread ‘being’ as precisely the potentiality that remains unexhausted by any particular interpellation” (PLP: 131).

This seems, to me, to be a suggestion that the desire to be is an essential and enabling desire: it is necessary for human survival and for the subject to persist, and while it may cause us to yield to subordination in exchange for social existence, it may also serve as the motivation for contesting the reproduction of the terms of that exchange. If the desire to be is that which is unexhausted by any particular interpellation, then it is the desire to be which motivates the subject to seek out a less subordinating mode of existence. As Butler puts this point, in characteristically elliptical fashion:

> Such a failure of interpellation [to exhaust the desire to be] may well undermine the capacity of the subject to ‘be’ in a self-identical sense, but it may also mark the path toward a more open, even more ethical, kind of being, one of or for the future. (PLP: 131)

Thus, Butler suggests here, the desire for existence, the desire to be, is both that which is exploited by the law and that which remains unexhausted by the law’s interpellation. It is both the cause of our love of the law and the cause of our resistance to the interpellation that the law requires if it is to achieve a full and final dominion. In this way, the desire to be is indeed a constitutive desire: it constitutes both the source of our subjection and the source of our resistance to subjection. For Butler, it is the desire to be that produces the desire for a more enabling way to live. As I read her, this is Butler’s way of suggesting in Psychic Life that subjection is not a fully determining process. Even as we attach to our subjection – as we “embrace the terms that injure [us] because they constitute [us] socially” (PLP: 104) – the conditions are created for subjection to be undone.

While this is an important moment in the discussion of subjection that Butler presents in Psychic Life, she does not pursue very far in this text the suggestion that it is in accounting for a certain kind of desire that we are able to see how resistance to subjection comes about. It is thus easy to understand why this suggestion has not had very much traction with feminist critics, who have tended to view Butler’s ruminations on the desire to persist as reinforcing her far better developed claim in Psychic Life that the subject accepts subordination in exchange for social existence. In the remainder of this section, I explore the way that Butler’s thinking on subjection, resistance, and the desire to persist is developed in her recent work.
In “Bodies and Power Revisited” (2004c), Butler re-engages her earlier claim that the subject is attached to its subjection. Here, however, her provocation is not the account of interpellation offered by Althusser but the account of subjectivation developed by Foucault. Butler’s stated aim in this essay is to explore the relationship between bodies and power in Foucault’s thought (“BPR”: 183). Acknowledging the shift in Foucault’s work from a focus on power in his texts of the 1970s to a concern with the self in his work of the 1980s, Butler argues that these seemingly disparate bodies of Foucault’s thought share a common concern: they take up the question of how agency arises and takes shape for the subject who is no longer understood as foundational, and they posit the body as central to the form of agency that emerges. In pursuing this argument, Butler posits again the centrality of desire to understanding how resistance emerges from a situation in which the subject is attached to its subjection.

Butler begins her discussion with *Discipline and Punish* (Foucault 1979). Butler focuses her analysis on the question of how power acts upon a body but also comes to craft and form a body. If power acts upon a body, as Foucault suggests in *Discipline and Punish*, then it seems that power is anterior to the body; but if power forms a body, as he also suggests in this text, then the separation between the body and power to some extent dissolves. How, Butler asks, do we understand this seeming disjuncture in Foucault’s account of how power works (“BPR”: 183)? Butler argues that this disjuncture only appears as a contradiction if we understand power as a ‘substance’, something that is appropriated or possessed by a subject. Rather, Butler argues, in *Discipline and Punish* Foucault recasts power as a ‘strategy’ that works on and through the body, thus abandoning the idea that power can be a possession. When Foucault says in this text that power works both on and through the body, then, he is offering, Butler argues, an account of the agency of the body that is meant to separate the thinking of agency from the assumption of a foundational subject (“BPR”: 184). In what, then, does this form of non-foundational agency consist?

As Butler reads him, agency exists for Foucault in the ‘nexus’ between the body and power. In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault establishes that the institution of the prison achieves dominion over the prisoner through an ‘activation’ of its materiality on the body of the prisoner. What this means, Butler argues, is that agency, for Foucault, “is the activity of a strategy, where that strategy consists of the activation of the materiality of the prison on and through, and in tension with, the materiality of the body” (“BPR”: 186). What this conception makes clear, for Butler, is that there is a disjunctive for Foucault between the institution and the body, and it is through this disjunctive, this ‘nexus’ between the body and power, that agency for him arises. It is, then, “this nexus,” Butler
argues, “[which] provides the condition for power to become redirected, proliferated, altered, transvaluated” (“BPR”: 186). In this way, precisely because it is the means through which power acts upon a subject, the body is, for Foucault, the nodal point for agency.

Butler makes clear that this is not an account of the body as the essential ‘source’ of resistance to power – as a “non-normalizable wildness” (PLP: 90), as she has elsewhere put it. It is important, she argues, to distinguish Foucault’s account of the body as the nodal point for agency from a Deleuzian account that establishes the body as the site of resistance by virtue of what a body is (“BPR”: 187). Instead, she argues, Foucault is redefining the body itself, “such that the body is not a substance, not a thing, not a set of drives, not a cauldron of resistant impulse, but precisely the site of transfer for power itself” (“BPR”: 187). Thus, “if the ‘nexus’ redefines power as that which is strategy, meaning activity and dispersion and transvaluation,” Butler argues, “so the ‘nexus’ redefines the body as that which is also a kind of undergoing, the condition for a redirection, active, tense, embattled” (“BPR”: 187). It is this nexus between the body and power that establishes, for Foucault, the possibility of agency beyond the presupposition of a foundational subject.

This is, Butler argues, not the same as saying that power produces subjects through a causative or mechanical effect. Rather, she argues, “[w]e can see in the above that Foucault is trying to understand how power can be thwarted at the site of its application, how a certain possibility of resistance and redirection takes the place of a mechanical effect” (“BPR”: 187). She continues:

In the place of a theory of agency located in a subject, we are asked to understand, in different contexts, and through different venues, the way that power is compelled into a redirection by virtue of having the body as its vector and instrument. Indeed, the theory of the subject is backgrounded, if not fully declined, for the conceptual point at issue here is to think agency in the very relation between power and bodies, as the continued activity of power as it changes course, proliferates, becomes more diffuse, through taking material form. (“BPR”: 187, emphasis in original)

What this account of agency as inhering in the nexus between the body and power establishes, for Butler, is a vital clue for how to read Foucault’s ‘turn’ from power to the subject in his work of the 1980s. Whereas it may seem, Butler argues, that in his turn to the subject Foucault has moved on from his work on bodies and power, for Butler there are in fact important continuities between these two modes in Foucault’s thought. Butler notes Foucault’s late claim that what he is now concerned with – what he has always, in fact, been concerned with – is the question of how human beings are made into subjects (Foucault 1982). While Foucault differentiates this concern from an analysis of
the phenomena of power, Butler reads this late claim as reflecting Foucault’s realisation that subjects come into being through a process that is not fully captured by the notion of ‘production’ by power. “When he asks,” Butler explains, “…how human beings are ‘made’ into subjects, or how they are ‘crafted’ or, indeed, ‘craft themselves’, he is providing for accounts of construction that are not reducible to power in its productive effect” (“BPR”: 188). For Butler, however, this does not mean that Foucault has abandoned an analysis of power, despite his own comments to this effect. It means, rather, that Foucault is still thinking about power, but, Butler argues, he is thinking about power “in a new way” (“BPR”: 188). This new way of thinking about power takes shape, Butler posits, in the terms of what is in fact a longstanding question in Foucault’s work: this is the question of how agency emerges for the non-foundational subject, the subject which, while not a production of power in any straightforward way, is nonetheless emphatically not “conceived as a sovereign agent, a possessor of rights or power” (“BPR”: 188). We can thus see, Butler argues, that what unifies Foucault’s work on bodies and power with his work on the question of how human beings are turned into subjects is a concern with agency in its non-foundational mode.

To elaborate this non-foundationalist account of agency in Foucault’s late work, Butler takes up the essay, “The Subject and Power Revisited” (Foucault 1982). Butler argues that in this essay, Foucault identifies “the specific mechanism by which power acts on a subject and transforms a human being into a subject” (“BPR”: 189). This mechanism is, Butler claims, the way that power attaches the subject to its own identity; it is, and here she quotes Foucault directly:

this form of power [that] applies itself to immediate everyday life which categorizes the individual, marks him by his own individuality, attaches him to his own identity, imposes a law of truth on him which he must recognize and which others have to recognize in him. (Foucault 1982: 212, quoted in “BPR”: 189)

For Butler, the specific mechanism by which power forms a subject is thus identified by Foucault as the way that it imposes norms of recognition that attach the subject to its own identity. Hence, Butler argues, “[e]ven though Foucault asks us to look away from a theory of power at this juncture, we can defy him gently and see that the theory of power becomes linked with norms of recognition” (“BPR: 190). Hence power, for Foucault, Butler argues, “can act upon a subject only by imposing norms of recognizability on that subject’s existence” (“BPR”: 190). On this reformulated account of Foucault’s, then, the subject is not produced as a mechanical effect of power but is rather formed through a process of attachment to oneself.

Butler notes that Foucault does not explore or clarify in his work this notion of ‘attachment’. Speculating that his refusal to subject this idea to critical scrutiny may have been a refusal to turn to
Freud on the idea of self-preservation, Butler posits that what may be at work instead in Foucault’s conception of attachment to oneself is Spinoza’s notion of the conatus: “What does seem to be at work here,” Butler suggests, “is perhaps a Spinozistic presumption that every being desires to persist in its own being, to develop an attachment, or catheysis, to what will further the cause of its own self-preservation and self-enhancement” (“BPR”: 190). Here, then, as in *Psychic Life*, Butler posits that it is the desire to persist that is at work when we attach to ourselves through a norm of recognition. It is the desire to persist that takes social form as a desire for recognition, Butler argues, and it is this desire that causes the subject to apply norms to itself in an operation of attachment.

Positing the desire to persist as what impels the process of subject formation thus makes sense, for Butler, of Foucault’s late claim that power works through attaching the subject to itself. Butler acknowledges, however, that it suggests a certain difficulty for an account of agency. On this understanding, the subject desires to persist in itself, a desire which takes shape as a longing for recognition, and so, Butler argues, the subject “find[s] himself or herself fundamentally attached to the categories that guarantee social existence” (“BPR”: 191). This means, in turn, “that one’s fundamental attachment to oneself, an attachment without which one cannot be, is constrained in advance by social norms, and that the failure to conform to these norms puts at risk the capacity to sustain a sense of one’s enduring status as a subject” (“BPR”: 191). The desire for recognition, then, makes the subject vulnerable to a process of subjection, a process that attaches the subject to itself. The difficulty arises because this process of subjection seemingly cannot be resisted without undergoing a complementary process of detachment from oneself. Resistance to subjection depends, in other words, on the capacity of the subject to suspend its social intelligibility. As Butler articulates this problem:

> In order to be, we might say, we must become recognizable, but to challenge the norms by which recognition is conferred is, in some ways, to risk one’s very being, to become questionable in one’s ontology, to risk one’s very recognizability as a subject… If one is compelled to attach to oneself through the available norm, this means that to question the norm, to call for new norms, is to detach oneself from oneself, and so not only to cease to become self-identical but to perform a certain operation on one’s passionate attachment to oneself. (“BPR”: 191)

This is the same account of attachment to subjection that Butler first presents in *The Psychic Life of Power*, and here, as in the earlier text, she finds both the source of subjection and the promise of
transformation in the nature of the desire to persist. Even as it precipitates subjection, Butler argues, the desire to persist can be the grounds for resistance. While Foucault makes clear that one’s attachment to oneself is socially mediated, this does not mean, Butler argues, that self-attachment is invariable, doomed to persist as a static relation to norms that remains self-identical through time. Rather, Butler argues, one’s attachment to oneself must be understood as contingent: “[W]e will become attached to ourselves through mediating norms,” Butler posits, “norms that give us back a sense of who we are, norms that will cultivate our investment in ourselves” (“BPR”: 190). “But,” she continues, “depending on what these norms are, we will be limited to that degree in how we might persist in who we are” (“BPR”: 190). Butler is saying, in other words, that in the process of subjection, the desire to persist is constrained by the shape that it assumes in relation to mediating norms. This formulation is resonant with the claim that Butler makes elsewhere in her work (and which I discussed in the previous section of this chapter) that in order to enter a regime of intelligibility the subject sacrifices something of herself. Here, however, what is sacrificed by the subject is not only what is unintelligible within the terms of a given regime of power but what might be thought of as the ‘freedom’ of the desire to persist.

As I submit to a process of subjection, then, the desire to persist is constrained by norms: even as it compels me to submit myself to power, it is itself compelled to take a certain form by virtue of the norms of recognition through which my submission takes place. It is, for Butler, the constraint that the desire to persist undergoes through subjection which serves as the basis – the motivation – for subjection to be resisted. Thus, she argues, it is not a delusion to think that the subject might submit herself to a voluntary desubjugation in order to resist her subjection. On the contrary, there are, for Butler, circumstances under which the subject might be willing to bear the risk of unrecognisability that a process of desubjugation entails. To bear this risk is, Butler argues, not only to detach from one’s passionate attachment to oneself, but “to suspend[] the narcissistic gratifications that conforming to the norm supplies” (“BPR”: 191). This is, she continues, “a satisfaction that comes from believing that the one whom one sees framed by the norm is identical to the one who is looking” (“BPR”: 191). Hence Butler suggests that to detach from oneself under conditions of subjection is not necessarily to perform an act of self-negation. It can be, instead, a way of letting the desire to persist live in a way that is less constrained by norms. In this sense, Butler argues, the desire to persist is what motivates a critical desubjugation:

[W]e might say that conforming to the norm allows one to become, for the moment, fully recognizable, but since the norms at issue are constrained, one sees there, in the conformity, the sign of one’s constraint. Indeed, perhaps we can speculate that the moment of resistance, of opposition emerges precisely when we
find ourselves attached to our constraint, and so constrained in our very attachment. To the extent that we question the promise of those norms that constrain our recognizability, we open the way for attachment itself to live in some less constrained way. (“BPR”: 191-192)

This is how Butler understands the desire to persist as the grounds for resisting subjection. When we are attached to our constraint, as she puts it in the quotation above, we find that we are constrained in our attachment – we find, in other words, that our attachment to ourselves, our desire to persist, is constrained by the norms that allow us to become recognisable. We thus see that what has been exchanged for recognisability in the process of subjection to power is the freedom of the desire to persist. It is in the moment that we see this – that we feel this, that we experience this – that the resistance to subjection for Butler arises.

In this way, then, it is the desire to persist which precipitates for Butler an encounter with the limits of a given regime of power. Here, though, these limits are figured as the limits that are imposed on this desire. To be sure, these limits are, Butler makes clear, not an arbitrary quashing of human freedom but a function of the formation of the subject. In this sense, they constitute for Butler the ongoing cost of subjection, “that domain of ourselves that we live without recognizing, which we persist in through a sense of disavowal, that for which we have no vocabulary, but which we endure without quite knowing” (“BPR”: 190). “This can be,” she continues, “a source of suffering. But it can be as well the sign of a certain distance from regulatory norms, and so also a site for new possibility” (“BPR”: 190).

Thus, Butler argues, by bringing Spinoza to bear on Foucault through the notion of the desire to persist, two things become clear about the account of agency developed in his later work. First, Butler claims, the desire to persist makes clear that the body remains, for Foucault, central to the way that power works. On Foucault’s account, as Butler reads him, the body is the means through which we attach to ourselves through norms of recognition; the body is the grounds of the desire to persist. “Foucault has … told us,” Butler argues, “and consistently so, that the very reflexivity through which power works is one of attachment and, hence, one of desire or passion of some kind” (“BPR”: 193). Thus, Butler argues, while in Discipline and Punish, power underwent a redirection as it acted on the body, in Foucault’s late work “power acts upon the body, specifically, in the very formulation of bodily passion in its self-persistence and knowability[,] the very modes by which we affectively seize upon or release a fundamental sense of identity” (“BPR”: 193).

Second, Butler argues, by centering the desire to persist in an account of how subjection to power proceeds, a very different account of agency emerges in Foucault’s late work than that which is
commonly ascribed to him. Although Foucault sometimes spoke as if identity could be shrugged off, opted out of, and new subjectivities created through a process of transcendence, Butler wants to read him differently. She reads the possibility of agency in the process of submission itself:

If we understand the norms by which we are obliged to recognize ourselves and others as those that work upon us, to which we must submit, then submission is one part of a social process by which recognizability is achieved. But matters do not need to end there. The conditions for revolt were also occasioned by submission, by the fact that human passion for self-persistence makes us vulnerable to those who promise us our bread. (“BPR”: 193)

In the process of subjection, then, in the act of submission to power, the conditions for resistance to subjection are contemporaneously created. What Foucault makes clear for Butler is that these conditions centre on the fact that desire is the means by which our subjection is secured. Desire is vulnerable, Butler argues, to exploitation by power, but also to exploitation by other forces, other people, other actions. In this sense, desire – or ‘passion’ in Foucault’s terms – becomes amenable to a redirection. “The question that Foucault opens,” Butler thus argues, “…is how desire might become produced beyond the norms of recognition, even as it makes a new demand for recognition” (“BPR”: 193). She continues: “And here he seems to find the seeds of transformation in the life of a passion that lives and breathes on the borders of recognizability, which still has the limited freedom of not being false or true, which establishes a critical distance upon the terms that decide our being” (“BPR”: 193).

2.2 Resignification

At the same time that critics were asking of Butler what possibilities for agency remain when the subject is not autonomous from the conditions of her construction, another set of feminist questions emerged about how agency is conceived in Butler’s thought: those focussed on the abstraction of her framing of agency as the resignification of norms. Departing from those critics who saw determinism in Butler’s thought, and contesting voluntaristic readings that de-emphasised the compulsory character of the performative citation of norms, these critics raised a different problem: despite its success in navigating between the poles of voluntarism and determinism, Butler’s account of resignification, they argued, was problematically abstracted from social and subjective life (McNay 1999, 2000, 2003, 2008; Nelson 1999; Mahmood 2005; Magnus 2006). These critics therefore asked of Butler: Why define agency so narrowly? What happens to subjective capacities
like intentionality, creativity, and reflexivity when agency is located not in a living self but in the structure of signification? What nuances of power and change are lost when agency is defined in limited terms as resistance or subversion?

In this part of the chapter, I take up these feminist concerns. Despite receding from thematic prominence in her post-9/11 texts, I show that Butler’s account of resignification is importantly developed in her recent work. I discuss two ways in which this happens. Firstly, in section 2.2.1, I look at the expanded account of gender norms that emerges in *Undoing Gender* (2004b), charting a shift in Butler’s thinking whereby she moves from, in her earlier work, a largely implicit understanding of norms as ‘regulatory ideals’ to an explicitly claimed and situated account of norms as forms of embodiment and action. Secondly, in section 2.2.2, I discuss Butler’s figuration at the end of *Frames of War* (2009) of resignification in distinctly ethical terms, wherein the action of resignifying norms is understood to pose the question of how to live the violence of one’s normative formation. I argue that what these developments in Butler’s work represent is a more complex account of agency than that contained in her earlier work, one that acknowledges the variety of ways in which power is inhabited and negotiated. In these texts, norms only exist for Butler insofar as they are enacted, and it is through such a process of enactment – of living, both ethical and corporeal – that resignification comes about. I thus demonstrate in this section that Butler comes to figure resignification as a symbolic practice that is nonetheless (and in multiple senses) embodied, an account of agency that mitigates the abstraction that feminist critics have argued constrains her earlier thinking.

### 2.2.1 Inhabiting Norms

Norms were largely under-theorised in Butler’s earlier work. While central to her development of key ideas such as performativity and resignification, norms themselves were rarely explicitly discussed in this work and were figured only loosely as ‘regulatory ideals’. In *Undoing Gender* (2004b), Butler corrects this oversight, developing an understanding of norms that both develops and departs from that implied by her earlier work. I use three chapters in this text to delineate this expanded account: “The Question of Social Transformation” (*UG*: 204-231), in which Butler puts forward an understanding of norms as embodied phenomena, “Beside Oneself: On the Limits of Sexual Autonomy” (*UG*: 17-39), wherein she argues that the embodied character of resignification is what distinguishes it from traditional conceptions of agency conceived on the model of critique, and “Gender Regulations” (*UG*: 40-56), an essay in which she navigates between voluntarism and determinism by developing an account of norms as forms of action. I discuss each of these
developments below and argue that they constitute a reformulation of Butler’s thinking such that resignification is now conceived not as a structural abstraction but as a form of embodied action.

In “The Question of Social Transformation”, Butler revisits her work in *Gender Trouble* and discusses the feminist critique that it has provoked. One of the issues that she takes up is the discussion of drag at the end of that text as a model for a certain form of agency. Acknowledging the confusion that this emphasis on drag has produced, Butler sets out in this essay to clarify her earlier position. The question from critics that Butler wants to answer is “Why drag?” (*UG*: 213). “Well,” she responds, “there are biographical reasons, and you might as well know that the only way to describe me in my younger years was as a bar dyke who spent her days reading Hegel and her evenings, well, at the gay bar” (*UG*: 213). This disclosure precipitates a description of Butler’s early encounters with drag both as an important source of identification and as an incitement to critical thinking. What these reflections make clear is that drag represents, for Butler, not only a pleasurable spectacle but “a certain implicit theorization of gender” (*UG*: 213). Watching drag performers, Butler saw that “some of these so-called men could do femininity much better than I ever could, ever wanted to, ever would” (*UG*: 213). In this way drag exhibited, for Butler, “what can only be called the transferability of the attribute” (*UG*: 213). It demonstrated, in other words, the performative character of gender identity – the way that the attributes of normative femininity could be effectively decoupled from the bodies upon which they assumed their social meaning. If a drag performer could embody femininity much better than Butler herself ever would, then this could only mean that there is no necessary relationship between femininity and female anatomy, or between femininity and social identity. In other words, drag made visible, for Butler, the fact that masculinity and femininity are not expressions of stable identities, whether biological or socially constructed, but are rather socially mediated norms.

Butler’s turn to drag in *Gender Trouble* was thus a way to think about gender identity in terms of the embodiment of norms. How then does drag come to be figured in this text as an exemplar for gendered agency? Drag, Butler argues, is not only a demonstration of the way that norms can be embodied in variable ways – it does not only make us question, for example, the necessity of the relation between female anatomy and the attributes of femininity. Drag goes further to demonstrate one way that this posited relation can be challenged, and, in this sense, it both incites critical reflection on the naturalisation of gender norms and embodies this critique in a spectacular and subversive performance. Drag becomes a form of agency, then, “by not only making us question what is real, and what has to be, but by showing us how contemporary notions of reality can be questioned, and new modes of reality instituted” (*UG*: 217). Drag is thus exemplary, for Butler, of a form of agency conceived as the subversive embodiment of norms: it is a practice that
denaturalises normative identities by resignifying the social meanings that attach to bodily attributes. Butler’s turn to drag in *Gender Trouble* was, then, “a way to think not only about how gender is performed, but how it is resignified through collective terms” (*UG*: 216).

While these reflections provide a valuable clarification of the way that Butler understands the subversive potential of drag, what is of interest to me in these remarks is the way that resignification is given a specifically corporeal inflection. Indeed, Butler argues, what drag makes clear is that it is precisely because gender norms signify through the body that the possibility for their resignification arises. “Bodies,” she points out, “are not inhabited as spatial givens” (*UG*: 217). Rather, they are changing and changeable entities, “underway in time”, getting older, changing shape, and changing meaning as they interact with various aspects of their environment (*UG*: 217). In this sense, Butler argues, it is the very nature of bodies themselves – their constitutive malleability – that makes changing gender norms a possibility. “[T]he body,” she writes, “is that which can occupy the norm in myriad ways, exceed the norm, rework the norm, and expose realities to which we thought we were confined as open to transformation” (*UG*: 217). Although we cannot choose the norms that shape us, and we cannot refuse norms entirely, what we can do, Butler argues in this essay, is embody existing norms in ways that change their meaning. This is how resignification is figured in her more recent work. That gender norms are embodied means that they are actively inhabited, and, Butler states, “this ‘activity’ is not fully constrained by the norm” (*UG*: 217). Thus, as they are embodied – taken up, inhabited, and lived – norms are not only reproduced but altered, and, potentially, transformed. In this way, the body, in Butler’s recent work, is both the grounds of and the condition for any practice of resignification.

Indeed, in another set of recent reflections Butler makes clear that it is the embodied character of resignification that makes it distinctive as a form of agency, constituting both its political legibility and risk. In “Beside Oneself”, she argues that the body is the means through which gender identities become intelligible to others and assume a social meaning. This means that the body has an irrefutably public dimension: it is, Butler argues, both the condition for recognition, for the persistence of gendered life, and that which makes us vulnerable to violence and abuse (*UG*: 20-21). This situation of exposure produces both challenges and opportunities for the embodied practice of resignification. On the one hand, the public character of embodiment is what makes resignification meaningful as a political practice: it is how subversive resignification assumes legibility as a form of political resistance. On the other hand, though, it is what exposes subversive resignification to a particular risk: that the body is the way in which resignification assumes political meaning entails that those who resignify gender norms are exposed to certain forms of violence. “If a person opposes norms of binary gender not just by having a critical point of view
about them, but by incorporating norms critically, and that stylized opposition is legible,” Butler writes,

then it seems that violence emerges precisely as the demand to undo that legibility, to question its possibility, to render it unreal and impossible in the face of its appearance to the contrary. This is, then, no simple difference in points of view. To counter that embodied opposition by violence is to say, effectively, that this body, this challenge to an accepted version of the world is and shall be unthinkable. (UG: 35)

That subversive resignification exposes one to violence is, then, a function of its embodied status, and it is what makes resignification different from other forms of critical intervention. Gender-based violence, as Butler understands it in this essay, is the phobic attempt to negate a body that does not conform to the norm. It is, as Butler puts it, an action directed against an embodied practice of opposition. That gender and sexual minorities are subjected to violence, that lives can be imperilled by the form that their embodiment assumes, is in fact a consequence of the way that resignification takes the body as its vector and its instrument. What these recent remarks make clear, then, is that resignification does not, for Butler, occur in an abstract space of linguistic instability, but is a practice of signification that assumes its meaning on and through the body. In this way, Butler comes to understand resignification as an embodied practice.

In “Gender Regulations”, Butler deepens this reformulated account. Her aim in this essay is to understand the claim that gender regulates through the modality of the norm: she wants to understand how norms work, how they achieve their effects, but also, importantly, how norms can be changed and the social relations they govern transformed. To this end, she engages the work of Lacan, Foucault, Ewald, and Macherey to develop in this essay her most explicit articulation of what she understands a norm to be. In the course of this development, resignification emerges as a practice of agency that finds its possibility not in the structure of signification but in the embodied structure of norms.

Butler begins her account with the Lacanian distinction between symbolic and social norms. While social norms are culturally variable, she points out, a symbolic norm is not: in the Lacanian framework, a symbolic norm has the status of inalterable cultural law (UG: 43). This is because Lacanians understand symbolic norms as part of a system of laws that govern kinship relations through the prohibition of incest. These laws make possible the linguistic coherence of the subject and necessitate the occupation of a normative kinship position in order to secure one’s cultural intelligibility (UG: 46). As such, Butler argues, they naturalise heterosexual kinship relations, and
cannot be changed without precipitating a dangerous disintegration of social organisation (UG: 44). For this reason, Butler rejects the distinction between symbolic and social norms, arguing that it constructs symbolic law as indifferent to its subjects, and reifies symbolic norms as impervious to social change (UG: 48). Instead, she posits, it is important to understand gender norms as changeable by the subjects that they regulate. Rather than symbolic positions that are immune to social action, we need, Butler argues, to understand gender norms as “the sedimentation of social practices” (UG: 44) that are open to revision and reiteration.

Having established her distance from the conception of gender norms offered in structural psychoanalysis, Butler turns to Foucault to develop an account of norms that emphasises their social character. She notes that Foucault historicises the idea of norms as emerging in the nineteenth century as a mechanism of social regulation distinct from the law (UG: 48-9). Engaging Francois Ewald’s interpretation of Foucault, Butler agrees that norms are not the same as laws, although they may appear in legal form; nor are norms the same as rules, although they may concretise rules and impart to them “a certain local coherence” (UG: 49). Importantly, Butler agrees with Ewald’s claim that, for Foucault, norms are not the same as power: while a norm is clearly related to power, it achieves its effects less by the use of force than by “an implicit logic” (UG: 49, quoting Ewald 1991: 138) that enables power to take as its object various forms of life and living. What this means, for Butler, is that the norm is the mechanism by which power becomes productive: “it transforms the negative restraints of the juridical into the more positive controls of normalization” (UG: 49), and thus marks a shift from thinking of power as repressive constraint to thinking of power as a regulatory mechanism. With this shift comes the claim that power produces subjects, and here Butler, with Ewald, expands upon Foucault to suggest that the norm is the mechanism that effects this production, acting as a measure of comparison and an inducement to individualisation (UG: 50). The question for Butler is whether this Foucaultian account of the productivity of social norms offers any advance upon the Lacanian position.

While endorsing the shift in thinking about power from repression to production, and appreciating the suggestion in Foucault’s thought that norms are not only the means by which subjects are regulated but the mechanism by which they are produced, Butler argues that a Foucaultian understanding of social norms does not offer a coherent account of how these norms might be changed. This is because Foucault perpetuates what Butler calls, echoing feminist criticisms of her own work, “the problem of abstraction” (UG: 50): Foucault conceives of the norm, she argues, as an independent entity that produces effects upon its subjects. As a consequence, Foucault views the norm as structuring all social relations, including those which do not conform to the norm, those relations which may be considered “abnormal”. As Ewald puts it, for Foucault, “the norm …
knows no outside”: the abnormal is not in any significant way different from the normal, and the norm “integrates anything which might attempt to go beyond it” (UG: 51, quoting Ewald 1991: 173). This means, for Butler, that on Foucault’s account, “any opposition to the norm is already contained within the norm, and is crucial to its own functioning” (UG: 51). Thus, Butler argues, by making the power of the norm augmented by any and all form of opposition to the norm, Foucault effectively precludes the possibility that norms may be changed by human action. In this way, as Butler puts it, “it appears that moving from a Lacanian notion of symbolic position to a more Foucaultian conception of ‘social norm’ does not augment the chances for an effective displacement or resignification of the norm itself” (UG: 51). In other words, a Foucaultian understanding of social norms does not appear to offer very much more than structural psychoanalysis on the question of how gender regulations may be transformed.

While this may well be the case, Butler is not convinced that a Foucaultian approach cannot be made useful on the question of transforming norms. To this end, she turns to Pierre Macherey’s (1992) interpretation and extension of Foucault, wherein “one begins to see that norms are not independent and self-subsisting entities or abstractions but must be understood as forms of action” (UG: 51). According to Macherey, when norms produce social effects, they are not acting transitively, in the sense of acting on an object to induce or coerce an outcome, where the norm exists independently of this outcome, but are acting immanently. “To think in terms of the immanence of the norm,” Macherey claims, “is indeed to refrain from considering the action of the norm in a restrictive manner, seeing it as a form of ‘repression’ formulated in terms of interdiction exercised against a given subject in advance of the performance of this action” (UG: 51, quoting Macherey 1992: 185). Rather, to view the norm as immanent is to view the norm as achieving its effects only in and through the actions of its subjects, actions that are produced and regulated by the norm, but without which the norm would not exist. “From this point of view,” Macherey continues, “it is no longer possible to think of the norm itself in advance of the consequences of its action” (UG: 52, quoting Macherey 1992: 186). Instead, as Butler puts it, paraphrasing Macherey, “the norm only subsists in and through its actions… The norm is not exterior to its field of application… the norm produces itself in the production of that field” (UG: 52, emphasis in original). For Macherey, then, the norm cannot be discerned independently of its instantiations.

The significance of this view, for Butler, is that the immanent action of the norm becomes the means by which it can be changed. In her words: “Macher[e]y effectively locates action as the site of social intervention” (UG: 52). Butler thus finds here an account of norms that does not preclude or obfuscate the possibility of social change. On the contrary, if norms only exist in the actions that they produce and regulate, then it is the continuation of these actions that ensures the reproduction
of the norm, and it is precisely via these actions – the changing of these actions, the cessation of these actions – that norms may be transformed. As Butler puts it: “To the extent that gender norms are reproduced, they are invoked and cited by bodily practices that also have the capacity to alter norms in the course of their citation” (UG: 52, emphasis in original).

While this account is similar in some respects to Butler’s earlier description of resignification, there is, I think, a difference. In her earlier work, Butler also argued that norms must be cited in order to persist, and correspondingly claimed that it is in the very necessity of this repeated citation that agency exists as the possibility of enacting a variation in the way that norms are reproduced. What is different about this earlier work, though, is Butler’s tendency to conceive of the variability of norms as arising not from the way that norms are enacted but from the structure of signification itself. As she attempts to explain how it is that performative agency is neither mired in determinism nor a voluntarist conceit, Butler moves away from an understanding of norms as performatively enacted in favour of emphasising their discursive character. As she turns to Derrida to develop an account of the instability of discursive norms, Butler comes to view agency not as the performative subversion of norms but as their resignification. While this may seem a subtle difference, the problem comes, as critics have argued, as Butler increasingly figures resignification as a potentiality residing in the structure of signification rather than a subjective practice. The result is that norms become abstracted from their instantiations and effects, and the actions of subjects in resignifying norms come to seem almost arbitrary.

Hence while the account of norms that Butler develops in “Gender Regulations” may seem like a straightforward continuation of earlier work, I want to argue that in fact it represents a significant revision and development. When norms are understood as forms of action rather than as structural abstractions, it becomes clear that both continuity and change in norms depends upon human action. This is Butler’s updated way of navigating between the twin problems of voluntarism and determinism: by making norms both reproduced and altered by the actions of their subjects, Butler re-centres the subject as the locus of agency. She thus distances herself from what have been called the “objectivist” tendencies of her earlier account.

Summarising her position in this essay, Butler states that while a norm may appear independent of the practices that it regulates, this separation is only an “intellectual heuristic” – norms and their incorporations, the ways in which they are cited by their subjects, are only ever analytically separable (UG: 48). While this analytic separation can be an important step towards understanding how specific norms shape and constrain gendered lives, in actuality, Butler insists, the norm only exists because it is incorporated:
The norm only persists as a norm to the extent that it is acted out in social practice and reidealized and re instituted in and through the daily social rituals of bodily life. The norm has no independent ontological status... [I]t is itself (re)produced through its embodiment, through the acts that strive to approximate it, through the idealizations reproduced in and by those acts. (UG: 48)

Thus, what Butler calls the “ideality” of the norm – the way that it appears to have an independent reality – is in actual fact the effect of the way that it is practised. This suggests, further, that there is no necessary relationship between the norm and the practices that it governs; norms do not produce practices in universal and inalterable ways, and practices can bring about a change in their governing norms. As Butler puts it:

[N]ot only [is] the relation between practices and the idealizations under which they work [] contingent, but … the very idealization can be brought into question and crisis, potentially undergoing deidealization and divestiture. (UG: 48)

This is another way of saying that norms may be transformed by a process of resignification. The difference here is that Butler makes clear that the impetus for such transformation resides not in the abstract structures of language but in a process of embodiment whereby the norm becomes no more and no less than the sum of the practices that it regulates. It is this “structure” of embodiment, Butler clarifies, rather than the structure of signification that makes the norm inherently unstable and open to transformation.

2.2.2 How to Live the Violence of One’s Normative Formation

In 2007, the journal Differences published a critical exchange between feminist philosophers Catherine Mills and Fiona Jenkins on the question of how to understand the conception of non-violence developed in Butler’s recent work (Mills 2007; Jenkins 2007). The journal invited a response to both articles from Butler, which is published alongside the original texts (Butler 2007). Butler then revised and developed her response for the publication of Frames of War, and it appears in this text as the essay titled “The Claim of Non-Violence” (FOW: 165-184). Out of this intensive process of critical engagement emerge a set of reflections on violence, non-violence, and the resignification of norms which, I argue, bear a significant relation to persistent questions posed in the feminist interpretation of Butler’s thought. What these reflections make clear, I argue, is that resignification is no longer understood in Butler’s work as synonymous with subversion, but takes on a more nuanced meaning as a process by which the subject negotiates with norms. In what
follows, I outline the emergence of these reflections on resignification and explain why I think that they constitute an important development in Butler’s thought. In order to do justice to the way that this development emerges out of a practice of critical response, I begin by outlining the interpretations of Butler’s work offered by Mills and Jenkins.

Mills (2007) approaches Butler’s work as a contribution to the critical project of rethinking normativity. In this context, she reads Butler’s recent work as a continuation of her earlier account of the normative constitution of the subject. However, Mills discerns a tension between aspects of Butler’s recent work and this earlier account. Specifically, she argues, the conception of non-violence that Butler develops in her post-9/11 texts is not fully integrated with her earlier descriptions of the way that the subject is normatively produced. For Butler, Mills claims, norms are inherently violent in the way that they produce subjects: norms bear a “world-making” capacity, and they exercise this capacity in a way that determines whose lives will be intelligible and entitled to rights of protection and flourishing and whose lives will be made abject and vulnerable to violence (Mills 2007: 140-1). On Mills’s understanding, it is the existence of normative violence that produces Butler’s call for a nonviolent ethics. But if, as Butler sometimes suggests, ethics only emerges through a process of subordination to norms, then violence would seem to be, Mills posits, an intrinsic part of ethical formation. Hence, Mills argues, “the notion of a ‘nonviolent ethics’ that Butler elaborates stand[s] in a troubled relation with the understanding of normative violence at work in her account of subjectivation” (Mills 2007: 144). Thus, Mills claims, Butler does not fully take up the challenge that she sets herself to think ethics together with the normative constitution of the subject.

Jenkins offers a different interpretation. For her, there is no tension between Butler’s account of normative violence and her understanding of ethical non-violence. Indeed, Jenkins contests the way that Mills understands both the ontological violence of norms and the function and form of non-violence. On Jenkins’s account, Mills construes Butler’s thinking on normative constitution in an overly deterministic way: she does not allow for the way that normative formation is an iterable process, and so she overlooks the fact that normative violence can be made subject to a process of transformative resignification (Jenkins 2007: 170-71). Moreover, Jenkins argues, non-violence in Butler’s thought is not, as Mills seems to imply, the attempt to eradicate violence from ethical action. Non-violence, for Butler, is neither an alternative practice to violence nor an attempt to purify norms of an intrinsic violence but works instead to expose a failure inherent in the promise of violence to restore sovereignty and mastery to the subject (Jenkins 2007: 161-2). In this sense, Jenkins states, non-violence is a critical practice for Butler, one that works with violence as well as against it. Jenkins thus argues against Mills’s claim that non-violence entails the problematic
eradication of normative violence. Rather, Jenkins argues, Butler locates ethics in the midst of normative violence but in a way that does not require that this violence be repeated.

Butler prefaces her response to these differing interpretations of her work by stating that she has no desire to formulate an internally consistent philosophical position. Hence she cannot respond to Mills or Jenkins by giving a systematic or definitive account of the way her conception of non-violence relates to her earlier account of the normative constitution of subjects (“RJB”: 180-1). What she can do, though, is offer a reflection on how she might think normative constitution together with non-violence in the present time. Thus the account of resignification that emerges in Butler’s remarks is not a definitive statement of what her thinking has always been but a conception developed through the specific conditions of interlocution and response.

Butler begins by addressing the interpretation of her work offered by Mills. She makes two critical points about the account that Mills develops. First, she wants to contest the way that Mills has formulated the temporality of normative constitution. On Butler’s reading, and in line with Jenkins’s critique, Mills has not given adequate attention to the idea of iterability. Mills tends to suggest, Butler argues, that normative formation “happens once, or in the past, or in a way that is unilinear and effective” when in fact norms act productively in a way that is reiterated through time (“RJB”: 181). We cannot mark the origin or end of a normative formation because the production of the subject is a practice that happens repeatedly – that is, the subject is continually in the process of being formed and re-formed. “In this sense,” Butler writes, “it is not possible to claim that there are normative conditions by which subjects are produced and then, afterward, that there are ‘breaks’ with such conditions” (“RJB”: 182). Rather, the norm is constantly breaking with the conditions of production. This is how norms operate, Butler claims, how they achieve their social effects. Norms exist only to the extent that they are reiterated, and every iteration is a break with prior conditions. It is the iterability of norms which means that they are not deterministic, and which makes possible, for Butler, the emergence of non-violence from within a scene of normative formation that may itself be violent.

The second point that Butler makes is to question the nature of Mills’s claim that all normativity is founded in violence. For Butler, this claim functions as a transcendental argument which fails to capture the complexity of the way that norms operate in the social field (“RJB”: 184). While it may be true, Butler argues, that norms sometimes work in violent ways, it is surely not the case that norms only and always operate in this fashion. Here Butler cites Canguilheim and Ewald, both of whom argue that what is distinctive about normative power is the way that it does not function through repressive means, and thus constitutes a departure from juridical forms of power that work
through the model of violence (“RJB”: 184-5). In fact, Butler states, it is important to maintain a
distinction between violence and coercion: to say that norms operate coercively in the production of
the subject does not mean that they are violent. Indeed, she claims, that we are able to say that
norms work through coercion is testament to the fact that they do not manifest violence in
commonly understood ways. Butler thus argues that it is important to be careful how we conceive
of violence. Not all forms of power are violent, she points out, and there are different forms and
manifestations of violence. It is, then, for Butler, both possible and desirable to differentiate
between normative violence and a more straightforward sense of violence as something that is
waged against others.

These two points are central to the account of ethical non-violence that Butler understands herself to
be developing. The subject is indeed normatively formed, Butler argues, and this formation may
be, in a sense, an act of violence. It is, however, important to distinguish between the violence of
the subject’s formation and the violence in which the subject might engage. Further, the fact that
normative production is an iterable process means that the violence of normative formation is not a
violence doomed to be forever re-enacted. In this sense, for Butler, “ethical proscriptions against
the waging of violence are not necessarily efforts to disavow or refuse the violence … at work in
the production of the subject” (“RJB”: 185).

Hence Butler does not view her conception of ethical non-violence as standing in tension with the
claim that there is violence in the way that subjects are produced. In fact, she states, in order to
understand what she means when she argues for a practice of ethical non-violence it is necessary to
reverse the terms of this formulation: it is the fact of normative violence – the social imperative not
to reproduce this violence – that produces the need for non-violence. Thus normative violence is
not an obstacle to the practice of non-violence but is, rather, the condition of its possibility. It is,
Butler argues, “precisely because … one is formed in violence, and that formative action continues
throughout life, [that] an ethical quandary develops about how to live the violence of one’s
constitution, how to effect shifts in its iteration” (“RJB”: 185). As an incitement to non-violence,
then, normative violence poses, for Butler, a set of ethical questions for the subject:

How does one live the violence of one’s formation? In what sense can it be
redirected, if it can? And can one work with the violence against certain violent
outcomes and thus undergo a shift in the iteration of violence? (“RJB”: 185)

Here Butler fashions non-violence as the effort not to repeat the violence of one’s normative
formation. This is not a simple expiation of violence, nor a tactic for effecting political change, but
a struggle with the terms of one’s social intelligibility and persistence. Hence, Butler states, non-
violence as an ethical claim could not be understood if it were not for the violence that exists in the making and sustaining of the subject (“RJB”: 185). Non-violence would not be a struggle if there were no violence to be struggled against. “The point,” Butler therefore argues, “[is] not … to eradicate the conditions of one’s own production, but only to assume responsibility for living a life that contests the determining power of that production” (“RJB: 185). Non-violence, then, emerges for Butler from the struggle to live in a way that does not reiterate normative violence.

While Butler does not explicitly connect this conception of non-violence to her account of resignification, Jenkins (2007) suggests, and I agree, that this is one way to read her remarks. Articulating a reading of non-violence in Butler’s thought that she argues departs from Mills’s account, Jenkins reflects on the following passage from Giving an Account of Oneself: “If violence is the act by which a subject seeks to reinstall its mastery and unity, then nonviolence may well follow from living the persistent challenge to mastery that our obligations to others require” (GAO: 64). “Here”, Jenkins argues, “Butler seems to put a somewhat different inflection on the familiar idea of resignification as a rupture in repetition” (Jenkins 2007: 161). What Jenkins is suggesting is that resignification denotes, for Butler, the process through which violence becomes non-violence: it is the name given to the activity through which normative violence is not reproduced through repetition but reiteratively transformed. Hence, Jenkins claims, Butler does not understand resignification as “a simply formal practice” (2007: 162) but as an act of non-violence that “exploit[s] a torsion within what it is to be living” (2007: 159).

While this is but a moment in Jenkins’s response to Mills, for me it is deeply suggestive, and I see this reading taken up in Butler’s own response to Mills’s critique. Indeed, although it is not clear in Butler’s original text that Jenkins’s interpretation is the one that she intended, Butler herself offers retrospective support for this reading of her work. Explicating the account of non-violence that Jenkins develops in her response to Mills, Butler seizes upon Jenkins’s suggestion that non-violence works through exploiting a ‘torsion’ in the condition of living. This is, Butler claims, “a challenging and important suggestion”, denoting an ethical practice that “works experimentally within the scene of violence to redirect its course” (“RJB”: 193). Butler then acknowledges that Jenkins frames this conception of non-violence as a reformulation of her own account of resignification, and seems to endorse this interpretation when she writes: “Jenkins distinguishes between a reiteration of violence that confirms the continuity and identity of violence and a different version of repetition that seeks to undo the very determinism of the first” (“RJB”: 193). I think it is possible to read Butler here as taking up Jenkins’s suggestion that resignification describes a form of ethical agency that is not reducible to a purely formal practice of repetition. Resignification is, rather, for Butler here, a practice that exploits a torsion in what it is to be living.
This reformulated account of resignification is taken up again in Frames of War, as Butler revisits, in “The Claim of Non-Violence” (FOW: 165-184), her response to Mills and Jenkins. Here Butler makes clear that she has come to understand resignification in distinctly ethical terms. She begins her account by connecting non-violence to the question of subject formation. Non-violence, Butler argues, should not be understood as a principle for guiding action, but as a form of address that makes a claim upon the subject. The capacity to respond to this claim takes shape in the “conditions of receptivity” (FOW: 165) that exist, conditions which denote the situation in which the subject is itself formed in relation to norms that do a kind of violence, and which may dispose the subject to doing violence as well. Hence, Butler argues, “[v]iolence and non-violence are not only strategies or tactics, but form the subject and become its constitutive possibilities” (FOW: 165). Non-violence, for Butler, thus constitutes “neither a virtue nor a position and certainly not a set of principles that are to be applied universally” (FOW: 171). It is, rather, a response to the violence of subject formation.

But how, Butler asks, is it possible for non-violence to emerge from within a scene of violence? Engaging again Mills’s critique, she sets out to clarify why she does not think that this formulation comprises a contradiction. It may well be the case, Butler states, that there is violence in subject formation. However, this does not mean that we are doomed only to repeat the violence of our formation. Rather, Butler argues, subject formation must be understood as an iterable process (FOW: 167-9). Norms, she makes clear, do not act only once but must be repeated in order to be effective, and it is in this repetition that norms are open to change. Thus, Butler argues, the violence of subject formation can be exposed to a transformative reiteration, a practice of repetition that constitutes not the reproduction of violence but its resignification. In this sense, for Butler, to resignify the norms that form the subject is a struggle not to repeat the violence of their formative action. It is here Butler explicitly frames resignification as an ethical practice:

Precisely because iterability evades every determinism, we are left with questions such as: How do I live the violence of my formation? How does it live on in me? How does it carry me, in spite of me, even as I carry it? And … [i]n what sense can such violence be redirected, if it can? Precisely because iterability evades every voluntarism, I am not free to dispense with the history of my formation. I can only live on in the wake of this unwilled region of history, or, indeed as its wake. Can we work with such formative violence against certain violent outcomes and thus undergo a shift in the iteration of violence? (FOW: 170, emphasis in original)
Non-violence, Butler here argues, is a form of ethical agency that poses itself as a question for the subject about how to live. At the same time, she makes clear, resignification is a practice of non-violence, a struggle not to repeat the violence at work in one’s own formation. As a form of agency, then, non-violent resignification is neither voluntarist nor determinist but arises in the space of negotiation created by the iterability of norms. This space has not been cleansed of violence but rather poses it as a question: will the violence of my formation be repeated? It is the negotiation of this question – of this ‘torsion’, this claim – that constitutes, for Butler, the “dynamic bind or ‘struggle’ that is non-violence” (FOW: 171) – or, the ethical practice of not repeating but resignifying the terms of one’s own production. Resignification is, here, no structural potentiality. It is, rather, an ethical question, a practice of living, a negotiation with norms.

It is in this way that Butler’s reformulation of resignification constitutes a significant development in her thought. By framing resignification as an ethical practice, Butler develops a more nuanced account of the relationship between the subject and power. When resignification is understood as the struggle that constitutes non-violence, it becomes not simply a practice of resistance, of pushing back against the terms of power, but a labour not to repeat the violence of one’s normative formation, a wrestling with the question of whether and how to develop a non-violent response to normative claims. In this way, this development in Butler’s thought fractures the domination/resistance binary that critics have argued constrains her earlier thinking (McNay 2000; Mahmood 2005). Figured as non-violence, resignification also becomes a question about how one is to live, and in this sense it is no longer formulated as a structural abstraction – a potentiality residing in the structure of signification, in the way that critics have claimed (Nelson 1999; McNay 2000) – but as a subjective practice of negotiation, reflection, and response. Agency thus becomes, in Butler’s recent work, an ethical labour, a struggle with the question of how one will respond to the claims that norms make upon the self.

2.3 Conclusion

In this chapter, have I engaged those persistent feminist questions which have been directed towards Butler’s understanding of agency. I have demonstrated that Butler’s post-9/11 writing does relate to her earlier work on agency, autonomy, and the resignification of norms, and it does respond in several ways to persistent feminist questions on this theme. Specifically, I established that Butler’s post-9/11 texts continue to develop a feminist conception of agency that navigates between the twin pitfalls of voluntarism and determinism: these texts demonstrate that agency emerges, for Butler,
not from a position that is outside of power, but from a critical engagement with power that takes
the form of a ‘living’ relation with norms. In this way, I argued, Butler makes clear in her recent
writing that agency is not precluded by an account of subject formation that emphasises our
dependency on power, nor is the resignification of norms a purely discursive practice. Agency is,
rather, an embodied practice of transformation which is both enabled by and exceeds the way that
we are constituted in relations of power.

In the first part of the chapter, I looked at developments in Butler’s recent work that bear upon the
feminist question of autonomy. I argued that Butler’s recent work provides a clearer sense than her
earlier work did of how agency remains possible for the non-autonomous subject. I identified and
discussed three moments in Butler’s post-9/11 writing in which she develops her understanding of
non-autonomous agency in this way. Firstly, I looked at her development of the Foucauldian idea
of critical desubjugation, arguing that it makes clear the way in which a critical distance from power
does not for Butler emerge from an autonomous core of the self but rather arises from an encounter
with the limits of a given regime of power. Secondly, I discussed the way that Butler develops the
account of subjection as an iterable process that was implicit in her earlier work, arguing that this
reframing makes clear that for Butler the psychic impetus for agency arises not from a part of the
self that escapes constitution by power but from the possibilities for living that are created by the
structure of subjection itself. Finally, I looked at Butler’s clarification of the implications of her
earlier claim that the subject is attached to its subjection, a clarification which suggests that Butler
understands the desire to resist to depend not on the existence of a self that remains uninvested in
power but rather on the way in which subjection itself takes desire as its ground. I argued that when
taken together, these developments in Butler’s thinking provide a better sense than her earlier work
did of how agency emerges and takes shape not from a position that is outside of power from the
experience of – and engagements with – power that subjection itself produces.

In the second part of the chapter, I took up the feminist charge that Butler’s account of
resignificatory agency is overly abstracted from social and subjective life. I argued that Butler’s
post-9/11 texts develop a more nuanced account of resignification than that contained in her earlier
work, one that acknowledges the variety of ways in which power is inhabited and negotiated. I
discussed the expanded account of gender norms that Butler develops in her recent work, and
argued that it implies a conception of resignification not as a structural abstraction but as a form of
change that depends fundamentally upon human action. I also looked at Butler’s recent framing of
resignification as a form of non-violence, a framing which makes clear, I argued, that agency is no
longer understood in Butler’s thought in the restrictive terms of subversion but entails a more
complex process of negotiating with norms. I thus showed that what these developments in
Butler’s thinking make clear is that she no longer understands resignification in the way that critics have claimed: it is not a potentiality residing in the structure of signification but a form of embodied action that centrally involves the subject in a ‘living’ relation with norms.
Chapter Three

Recognition

In this chapter, I take up those persistent feminist questions directed to Butler’s understanding of recognition. As outlined in Chapter One, these questions fall into two broad lines of inquiry. Firstly, feminist critics have asked whether Butler views self-other relations as fated to violence or whether there is room in her thought for a positive account (Dean 1996; Benjamin 1998; Oliver 2001; Diprose 1999, 2002; Allen 2008). Secondly, they have wondered whether recognition, for Butler, must always occur within the terms of prevailing norms, and therefore whether it must always function to reify normative identities and to reinforce existing patterns of humanisation (Grosz 2001, 2011; Magnus 2006; Allen 2008; Davis 2012; Stark 2014). On both questions, critics have argued that Butler views recognition in an overly negative way: she tends, they have claimed, to emphasise the destructive potential of human relationships over and above our capacity to positively sustain one another, and to stress the regulatory function of recognition while remaining pessimistic about the possibility of resisting normative patterns of identification.

In this chapter, I argue that there are developments in Butler’s post-9/11 texts which largely allay these concerns. In these texts, Butler puts an account of intersubjectivity at the centre of her thought: reflecting on the fact of human vulnerability exposed by the 9/11 attacks, Butler is compelled to explore the ways in which we are not only constituted by power but are constituted in our relations with other people. As she elaborates, throughout these texts, the ethical and political implications of this fact, Butler clarifies her understanding both of the impact of human aggression on our capacity to recognise each other and of the relationship between recognition and power. It becomes clear that Butler does not view intersubjective relations as essentially destructive, nor does she understand recognition as only and always a vector through which normative identities are reproduced. In fact, I show, Butler develops in these texts a profoundly positive – even hopeful – account of what our capacity for recognition can make possible.
The chapter is structured in four parts. In the first two parts, I take up the feminist question of whether there exists in Butler’s thought the possibility for a positive understanding of intersubjective relations. In section 3.1, I look at the idea of human dependency in Butler’s thought; and in section 3.2, I discuss the way that Butler understands the relationship between recognition and human aggression. Taking these sections together, I argue that Butler develops in her post-9/11 texts a far more optimistic account of intersubjective relations, one which emphasises the ethical and political promise inherent in the relationship between one self and another. While in her earlier work, dependency is conceptualised ambivalently as a means of securing submission to power, in her recent work it is understood optimistically as constitutive of a certain form of agency. Similarly, while it remained an open question in Butler’s earlier work whether mutual recognition could be possible, in her recent work she theorises precisely this possibility as inhering in the practice of non-violence. In this way, I show, Butler ceases to be ambivalent about the condition of intersubjectivity, developing, instead, a positive understanding of the ways in which this fact of human existence is not only constraining but enabling.

In the second half of the chapter, I look at developments in Butler’s post-9/11 texts that bear on the question of the relationship in her thought between recognition and power. In section 3.3, I explicate the development in Butler’s work of an account of ‘ec-static’ constitution, wherein norms are communicated and become operable upon the subject through her relations with others. I argue that this account establishes the possibility of recognition as a practice of resignification, a way in which norms are not only reproduced in our interactions with each other but, at least potentially, transformed. In line with this reading, in section 3.4, I outline Butler’s development of precisely such a notion of transformative recognition in the concept of apprehension, which, I argue, can be understood to name the practice in which the life of another is acknowledged in its precariousness despite the prevailing conditions of recognisability being unfavourable to such perception. What these developments indicate is the introduction in Butler’s thought of a form of recognition that does not reproduce prevailing norms but rather disrupts and intervenes in their regulatory operation. In this way, I argue, Butler’s recent work makes clear that recognition, for her, does not only work to reinforce relations of power, but, under certain conditions, resignifies and resists the normative production of the human.
3.1 Dependency, Subordination, and Ethical Agency

In this section of the chapter, I look at the way that Butler understands human dependency. I chart a development in Butler’s understanding of dependency whereby it comes to be figured not only as a vector through which submission to power is secured, but as a means of ethical connection with others and a provocation to ethical agency. I begin by examining an early work, *The Psychic Life of Power* (1997a), a text in which Butler puts the fact of human dependency at the centre of her efforts to understand how subjection to power proceeds. In this text, Butler seems ambivalent about dependency: she acknowledges that dependency on others is necessary for any subject to come into being and persist, but she also argues that it is our dependency on others that is exploited by power as we accept subordination in exchange for survival. I then look at the way that Butler’s account of dependency is developed in her post-9/11 work. Focussing on *Giving an Account of Oneself* (2005), I show that while Butler does not abandon her earlier account, she comes to understand dependency in this later work as both constraining and enabling: dependency is not only necessary for the development of any self, it is the condition of possibility for becoming a responsible subject. In this way, I argue, Butler develops in her post-9/11 texts a more positive account of human dependency than that contained in her earlier work.

*The Psychic Life of Power* opens with a rumination on what Butler calls the Foucauldian paradox of subjection, which holds that the subject is brought into existence through a primary submission to power. What interests Butler about this paradox is the question of what motivates and compels the subject’s submission, a question, she argues, that requires thinking about the role of the psyche in the process of subjection. “[I]f submission is a condition of subjection,” she posits, “it makes sense to ask: what is the psychic form that power takes?” (*PLP*: 2). How does “a power that at first appears as external, pressed upon the subject, pressing the subject into subordination,” she asks, “assume[] a psychic form that constitutes the subject’s self-identity?” (*PLP*: 3). *The Psychic Life of Power* is thus an attempt to think “the theory of power together with a theory of the psyche” (*PLP*: 3) in order to offer some insight into the process by which the subject comes to accept and even desire his or her subjection. What is of note for my purposes here is that human dependency plays a central role in the account of subjection that Butler develops.

Butler begins her account with the claim that accepting one’s subordination, becoming attached to one’s subjection, is not a pathology of oppression that can be used to justify relations of domination but a function of the way that power works upon us all. “I would maintain,” she states, “that the attachment to subjection is produced through the workings of power, and that part of the operation of power is made clear in this psychic effect, one of the most insidious of its productions” (*PLP*: 6).
How, then, does Butler understand power to produce such an attachment? Power attaches us to our subordination, she argues, because subordination to power is the means through which we gain intelligibility and social recognition. It is this binding of subordination to social existence that is central to Butler’s development of Foucault’s formulation. However, unlike Foucault, in whose work she claims the psyche remains “largely unremarked” (PLP: 2), Butler is deeply interested in questions of motivation, will and desire, and her account of subjection is informed by the postulation, emerging from her interpretation of Spinoza, that human life is sustained by a fundamental desire for survival and persistence. Thus, she asks, “how are we to account for the desire … for subjection more generally in terms of a prior desire for social existence[?]” (PLP: 19).

The answer begins, for Butler, with the fact of primary human dependency, the situation in which we find ourselves from birth relying not just for our sustenance but for our survival on the care and attention of others. What this fact of dependency means, she argues, is that in order to survive, the child must attach to those who are responsible for her care, meaning that dependency and attachment are central to the process of becoming a subject, a being who persists and endures (PLP: 6-8). As Butler puts it: 

…if the child is to persist in a psychic and social sense, there must be dependency and the formation of attachment: there is no possibility of not loving, where love is bound up with the requirements for life. (PLP: 8)

This does not only mean, though, that the formation of loving attachments is necessary to the process of human development. For Butler, what is important about the constitutive character of dependency is that it makes us vulnerable to subordination. This vulnerability has both a social and a familial form. At the level of the family, it means that we are vulnerable to abuse and exploitation by those to whom we have formed loving attachments. Indeed, to put the point more strongly, the formation of such attachments, necessary for our survival, makes us vulnerable to abuse. Thus Butler draws on Freud to claim that “an infant forms … [an] attachment to any excitation that comes its way, even the most traumatic” (PLP: 61) and gestures towards a psychoanalytically informed understanding of family violence when she states that in order to appreciate the horror of child abuse we must understand that such abuse constitutes not only a violation of love and trust but an exploitation of our primary will to survive (PLP: 7-8). As Butler puts it, “the desire to survive, ‘to be,’ is a pervasively exploitable desire” with the consequence that the child “would rather exist in subordination than not exist” (PLP: 8).

Socially, our situation of primary dependency produces an analogous predicament: it makes us vulnerable to subordination by regulatory regimes. This is the case because, Butler argues, our
desire to survive takes social form as a desire for recognition: when we desire to exist we desire to exist socially, to be intelligible and recognisable to others. This desire for recognition makes us vulnerable to subordination because, on Butler’s account, social intelligibility is achieved via submission to power. Thus, “[w]here social categories guarantee a recognizable and enduring social existence, the embrace of such categories, even as they work in the service of subjection, is often preferred to no social existence at all” (PLP: 20). In other words, the subject becomes invested in its own subordination because subordination is the means through which recognition is achieved, and the subject desires recognition because it desires to persist as a socially intelligible being. Hence, Butler claims, “within subjection, the price of existence is subordination” (PLP: 20). Subordination is thus secured, for Butler, via “the longing for subjection, based on a longing for social existence, recalling and exploiting primary dependencies” (PLP: 20), and in this way is not a simple “love of the shackles” (PLP: 27) but a complex love of the law which has as its basis a primary yearning for persistence and survival.

Dependency is thus figured here as constitutive of subordination. It is our dependency on others for care and sustenance that makes us vulnerable to familial abuse, Butler argues, and it is our dependency on others for social recognition that makes us willing to accept subordination in exchange for social existence. As feminist critics have noted, this is a pessimistic account (Allen 2006; Magnus 2006). While Butler acknowledges that dependency is constitutive, in the sense that it is a necessary condition for any self to come into being and persist, in The Psychic Life of Power she seems reluctant to register the ways in which this fact of human existence is not only constraining but enabling. Critics have thus concluded that Butler overlooks the positive aspects of human interdependency.

In Giving an Account of Oneself (2005), Butler returns to the fact of human dependency, but in more positive terms. Here, she draws on Laplanche and Levinas to develop an account of the way that dependency on others is not just constitutive but enabling. Both theorists offer a way to understand how the self emerges through the address of another, and, Butler argues, both suggest that this situation of being addressed is ethically consequential. In this sense, Laplanche and Levinas give Butler a way to think anew about the constitutive character of dependency, and to emphasise the ways in which dependency is not only a vector through which submission to power is secured but is generative of ethical connection and agency.

I begin this discussion with Butler’s reading of Laplanche. According to Laplanche, the self comes into existence through an inaugurating address that comes to the child in the form of a demand (GAO: 53-55). This demand is an enigmatic message from the adult world that at first overwhelms
the child, and it must be “handled” in particular ways for the self to emerge. This handling
Laplanche theorises as the process by which the psychic structure of the unconscious is formed, as
the demand is lodged somewhere other than consciousness in a strategy of containment. In this
sense, the formation of an unconscious is a necessity of psychic development: without the
unconscious, we would be overwhelmed by the address of the other, and no subject, no “I”, could
emerge (GAO: 54). The unconscious is thus the place, for Laplanche, in which the address of the
other lives on, a marker of the enigmatic demand by which the self is inaugurated. In this way,
Laplanche testifies, Butler argues, to the way in which we are dispossessed in the very moment that
we take possession of ourselves:

In the moment in which I say “I”, I am not only citing the pronomial place of the
“I” in language, but at once attesting to and taking distance from a primary
impingement, a primary way in which I am, prior to acquiring an “I”, a being who
has been touched, moved, fed, changed, put to sleep, established as the subject
and object of speech. (GAO: 70)

For Laplanche, then, and for Butler as well, the self emerges through relations of dependency. In
infancy, we are not only dependent on others for our physical survival, but for our psychic
development. In this way, the situation of being addressed is prior to any possibility of
individuation. Indeed, Butler posits, the address forms the condition of possibility for
individuation, for what we conventionally think of as the process by which we become a subject
with self-awareness and a degree of autonomy from our inaugurating conditions. In this sense,
Butler argues, dependency is a necessary impingement, one without which no self could emerge.
“And so,” she writes, “one might say … that in the beginning I am my relation to you, ambiguously
addressed and addressing, given over to a ‘you’ without whom I cannot be and upon whom I
depend to survive” (GAO: 81, original emphasis). While this may seem little more than a
reiteration, albeit in slightly more positive terms, of the account that Butler offers in The Psychic
Life of Power, she goes on to discuss the ways in which this fact of dependency is, for Laplanche,
not only constitutive but enabling. There are two things I would like to note about this discussion.

First, for Butler, Laplanche makes clear the way in which dependency is both an impingement on
autonomy and the condition of possibility for a certain form of agency. For Laplanche, the self
emerges through the address of another – through the enigmatic demand that comes to the infant
from the adult world. What this means, Butler argues, is that the situation of being addressed is a
necessary condition for developing an understanding of language and of oneself as a linguistic
possibility: one does not come into language in a vacuum, and no response is possible without first
being addressed. As Butler puts it: “One enters into a communicative environment as an infant and child who is addressed and who learns certain ways of addressing in return” (GAO: 63). One must, in other words, be inaugurated into language by the address of another before one can start to use language oneself. “[I]f I can address you,” Butler thus argues, “I must first have been addressed, brought into the structure of address as a possibility of language before I was able to find my own way to make use of it” (GAO: 53). In this way, she continues, “the very possibility of linguistic agency is derived from the situation in which one finds oneself addressed by a language one never chose” (GAO: 53). Linguistic agency thus arises, Butler argues, not from a will or a capacity that is contained within oneself, but from the unwilled address of another, a condition of dependency.

The second point to note about Butler’s engagement of Laplanche is that it produces the claim that our dependency on others makes us inscrutable to ourselves. For Laplanche, the primary infantile experience is that of being overwhelmed by the demands of the adult world. In order to manage these impingements, a repression takes place that creates the unconscious and allows the self to emerge. What is repressed in the formation of the unconscious is a representation of these primary impingements, a representation which then becomes, Laplanche claims, the source of psychological drives. What this account makes clear for Butler is that the self is foreign to itself in some of its most primary desires (GAO: 71). She writes: “Desire emerges first from the outside and in overwhelming form, and it retains this exterior and foreign quality once it becomes the subject’s own desire” (GAO: 72). The primary repression that forms desire cannot be recovered by a knowing subject and thus the subject remains in a persistent state of opacity to itself. In this sense, Butler argues, “we find ourselves besieged from the start by an enigmatic alterity that makes the elaboration of an “I” a persistently difficult achievement” (GAO: 74).

This state of self-opacity is not, however, cause for despair. Indeed, Butler argues, the fact that we are formed in relations with others, and that this formation lives on at the edges of consciousness in ways that make us foreign to ourselves, does not mean that we are unable to exercise agency or to take responsibility for ourselves. Rather, this situation of dependency, of being bound up with others, is the condition of possibility for ethics itself. As Butler puts it:

[I]f it is precisely by virtue of one’s relations to others that one is opaque to oneself, and if those relations to others are the venue for one’s ethical responsibility, then it may well follow that it is precisely by virtue of the subject’s opacity to itself that it incurs and sustains some of its most important ethical bonds. (GAO: 20)
This means “that my very formation implicates the other in me, that my own foreignness to myself is, paradoxically, the source of my ethical connection with others” (GAO: 84). What Butler is saying here is that dependency is the condition for ethical relations. Far from an obstacle to accountability, the self that is opaque to itself is testament to the fact that ethics is a necessary activity. For Butler, then, the self that is bound up with others is not a problem for ethical deliberation but rather constitutes the grounds of ethical reflection: when we acknowledge the fact of human dependency we do not obfuscate ethical responsibility but avow our ethical connection with others. Hence, Butler posits, in rhetorical mode: “[I]s the relationality that conditions and binds this ‘self’ not, precisely, an indispensable resource for ethics?” (GAO: 40).

To further develop her response to this question, Butler turns from Laplanche to Levinas. Having established that a certain form of dependency is the grounds of ethical relationality, Butler moves to consider the question of ethical responsibility. If we are subject to the address of the other in ways that are beyond our control, does this mean, she asks, that we are without agency and unable to take responsibility for ourselves? (GAO: 84-5). For Butler, the answer to this question is affirmative only if the possibility of ethical responsibility depends upon a free and self-transparent subject. To this end, she engages Levinas to argue that the possibility of ethical responsibility can in fact be delinked from the sovereign subject.

For Levinas, the self is formed as the effect of a primary impingement. As for Laplanche, this formation is an action for which I can give no account: it takes place, Levinas argues, in a manner that is “preontological”, prior to any possibility of reflexive self-awareness, and thus it remains unavailable to conscious knowledge (GAO: 86). This impingement takes the form, for Levinas – again, like Laplanche – of an unwilled address by the Other, but for him this address arrives not as an enigmatic demand but as an accusation, a form of persecution. Why, Butler asks, does the address arrive in this way? “This scene is persecutory,” she explicates, “because it is unwilled and unchosen. It is a way of being acted on prior to the possibility of acting oneself or in one’s own name” (GAO: 87). Levinas thus argues that the subject is formed in passivity: it is formed through the actions of others before it is able to act for itself. As Butler makes clear, this is not the ordinary sense of passivity as the opposite state to activity (GAO: 87). Rather, Levinas understands passivity and activity as intrinsically related: as a condition of subject formation, passivity is that which precedes and conditions any activity that I might undertake.

The point that Butler wants to note about this account is that, for Levinas, responsibility emerges from this situation of radical passivity, of primary susceptibility to others. For Levinas, Butler argues, persecution creates a responsibility for the persecuted. He argues that when we find
ourselves, as we must, in a scene of address, an obligation arises to respond to that address, even if it is unwilled (GAO: 85). The situation of being addressed is thus the condition of possibility for ethical responsiveness – it produces the ethical demand to respond to the Other and as such it inaugurates a certain form of ethical responsibility. Hence while we are used to thinking of responsibility in terms that rely on a notion of sovereignty – the idea that “we can be responsible only for that which we have done, that which can be traced to our intentions, our deeds” (GAO: 88) – Levinas, Butler argues, thinks otherwise. For Levinas, “tethering responsibility to freedom is an error… I am not primarily responsible by virtue of my actions, but by virtue of [my] relation to the Other” (GAO: 88). Responsibility emerges, then, for Levinas and for Butler, not because I have acted freely, but because I am in a relationship of radical unfreedom. As Butler puts it: “[R]esponsibility is not a matter of cultivating a will, but of making use of an unwilled susceptibility as a resource for becoming responsive to the Other” (GAO: 91).

In this way, ethical responsibility is made possible, for Butler, by the fact of human dependency. Importantly, though, this is responsibility understood not as a simple responsiveness to the Other but as a practice of non-violence. Butler acknowledges that the situation of radical susceptibility to the Other that both Levinas and Laplanche describe is not only the condition of possibility for the self to emerge but a state of vulnerability in which the self is exposed to injury. Indeed, Butler makes clear, there are circumstances under which the unwilled address of the Other may well be experienced as a form of violation (GAO: 91-2). How then, Butler asks, can we understand responsibility to emerge from such a situation?

In answer to this question, Butler clarifies what she means when she says that responsibility emerges under conditions of violation. She does not mean responsibility understood as a heightened moral sense that responds to injury with righteous rage. Nor does she mean responsibility understood as guilt, the attempt to find a cause in oneself for the injury one has suffered. “These are surely possible and prevalent responses to injury and violence,” Butler acknowledges, “but they are [] responses that heighten reflexivity, shoring up the subject, its claims to self-sufficiency, its centrality and indispensability to the field of its experience” (GAO: 99). Instead, Butler wants to understand responsibility beyond bad conscience, beyond these “moralizing forms of subjectivity” (GAO: 100). She wants to understand responsibility as a practice of non-violent response to the address of the Other – even if, or rather when, that address is unwilled, a violation, a sign of a primary dependency. Such a practice of responsibility means staying open to the Other in the face of exposure, and taking that exposure as the sign of a common vulnerability, of the way in which our existence depends on our relations with others. In this sense, Butler argues,
our dependency on one another constitutes not only a fact of human existence but an ethical
provocation and demand:

That we are impinged upon primarily and against our will is the sign of a
vulnerability and a beholdenness that we cannot will away. We can defend
against it only by prizing the asociality of the subject over and against a difficult
and intractable, even sometimes unbearable relationality. What might it mean to
make an ethic from the region of the unwilled? It might mean that one does not
foreclose upon that primary exposure to the Other, that one does not try to
transform the unwilled into the willed, but, rather, to take the very unbearability of
exposure as the sign, the reminder, of a common vulnerability, a common
physicality and risk[.] (GAO: 100)

Here dependency is figured as the grounds for ethical agency, the condition through which I
become a responsible subject. Levinas and Laplanche thus make clear, for Butler, that ethical
agency does not emerge from a condition of autonomy but from a situation of unfreedom in which
we are subject to the unwilled address of the Other. This is a clear departure from the way that
dependency is figured in The Psychic Life of Power (1997b). In this earlier text, dependency is the
relationship through which we submit ourselves to power, and through which we accept
subordination in order to become or remain recognisable. While the Butler of Giving an Account of
Oneself (2005) would still accept this earlier argument, she would also argue that there is a
relationship between dependency and agency, and that while our dependency on others can be
constraining, it is also fundamentally enabling.

3.2 Recognition as a Practice of Non-Violence

Given the ambivalence about dependency that is present in Butler’s earlier work, and her tendency
to emphasise the way that recognition functions as a means of normalisation, feminist critics have
wondered whether there exists in Butler’s thought the possibility for recognition to be conceived as
an ethical practice. According to critics, such a practice is one in which the self recognises the other
without assimilation or repudiation, in a way that does not contribute to the reproduction of
normative violence. In this part of the chapter, I take up this query to look at Butler’s understanding
of the relationship between recognition, violence, and human aggression. I argue that Butler’s post-
9/11 texts make clear that recognition does indeed exist for her as a form of ethical relation, but,
importantly, it is one that does not seek to resolve or transcend destructive desires but rather works with human aggression in a reiterated practice of non-violence.

I develop this argument in the following steps. First, in section 3.2.1, I engage Butler’s post-9/11 reflections on violence and human aggression. Using Levinas in *Precarious Life* (2004a) and Klein in *Frames of War* (2009), Butler argues that the fact of human destructiveness does not disqualify the possibility of non-violent relations with others but rather forms the problem with and against which non-violence must struggle. This account of non-violence establishes that positive relations with others are possible, for Butler, despite the presence of destructive desires. However, it does not yet connect this possibility to the practice of recognition.

This connection is made in Butler’s engagement with the work of Jessica Benjamin (*UG*: 131-151), the explication of which forms the second step in my argument (section 3.2.2). In a complex response to Benjamin’s criticism of her earlier work, Butler clarifies that she does not view recognition as necessarily destructive but as constituted by the risk of destruction, meaning that recognition, for Butler, is an active struggle, one that must be continually renewed. Recognition is thus figured here as a labouring against destructiveness, a practice of non-violence that takes human fallibility as its problem and its ground.

The final step in my argument (section 3.2.3) takes in Butler’s development of this conceptualisation in *Giving an Account of Oneself* (2005). Here Butler argues that if recognition is to be non-violent, it must refuse the practice of judgement: it must refuse the attempt to know the other and must remain, instead, open and unsatisfiable, always in the process of being restaged. When recognition is non-violent in this way, it does not seek to understand the other in terms of pregiven categories of identity. Rather, Butler argues, a non-violent practice of recognition understands that the other always exceeds the discursive categories that she uses and inhabits. In this sense, recognition does not seek to fix and capture the other in the terms of prevailing norms but rather affirms the opacity, the excess, which marks the other as something *other* than what discourse has marked out. In this way, I argue, in her post-9/11 writing Butler comes to posit recognition as an ethical ideal.

### 3.2.1 Violence, Non-Violence, and Human Aggression

In the titular essay of *Precarious Life* (*PL*: 128-151), Butler engages Levinas to think about “some of the more pressing questions of violence and ethics that are upon us now” (*PL*: 131). She offers two reasons for turning to Levinas in the post-9/11 context: he offers a way to think about the
relationship between human suffering, the representation of others, and the process of humanisation; and he offers an account of the relationship between ethics and violence that might be helpful for articulating an ethic of non-violence (PL: 140). It is the latter engagement with Levinas that I am interested in exploring here.

What Levinas offers, Butler argues, is a way of understanding ethical deliberation as a relational practice. For Levinas, the self is constituted in the moment of being addressed: we are addressed by others against our will – indeed, prior to the formation of our will – meaning that the address of the Other is something that we cannot avoid or escape. As I discussed in the previous section, this means that the self is founded in a relation of dependency, an effect of a primary impingement. It also means, Butler argues here, that ethical demands come to us via this structure of address (PL: 130). In this sense, for Levinas, ethical responsibility is always responsibility to another: ethical demands do not arise in a vacuum but always come to us from somewhere. This is what, for Butler, is useful about Levinas’s concept of ‘the face’ – it is a way of explaining how ethical demands issue always from an Other, even though I do not ask for such a relationship with the Other and do not necessarily want to hear the Other’s demand (PL: 131). In this sense, Butler argues, “there is a certain violence already in being addressed” (PL: 139).

It is the violence of address which produces, for Levinas, a struggle at the heart of the ethical encounter. This struggle, as Butler explicates it, is with and against violence; it is a struggle not to respond violently to the address of the Other. For Levinas, as Butler reads him, when the face of the Other makes an ethical demand upon me it at once tempts me with murder and prohibits me from enacting it (PL: 134-5). But why, Butler asks, does the face tempt me with violence in this way? On Butler’s interpretation, what Levinas means is that the face of the Other is experienced as a threat: the Other is menacing, a threat to my own life. However, the presence of this threat to life does not straightforwardly produce the desire to kill; it produces at the same time an anxiety about hurting the Other. Hence, for Levinas, the ethical dilemma is one in which the fear of one’s own death wars with the anxiety about killing another (PL: 136-7). As Butler makes clear, this means that for Levinas “the desire to kill is primary to human beings” (PL: 137). He also argues, though, that self-preservation is not a good enough reason to act on this desire, and in this sense he seems to be promoting, from this position on the primacy of the desire to kill, “an absolute pacifism” (PL: 136). Hence, Butler argues, non-violence arises, for Levinas, “not [] from a peaceful place, but rather from a constant tension between the fear of undergoing violence and the fear of inflicting violence” (PL: 137).
In this way, non-violence is figured, for Butler, as a struggle with conflicting desires: to kill in order to preserve oneself, or not to kill in order to preserve one’s existence in sociality. This is a struggle that cannot be resolved; indeed, it must not be resolved if it is to remain non-violent. Applying this Levinasian insight to the post-9/11 milieu, Butler argues that while suffering violence can produce the desire to inflict violence upon others, it is also an occasion to reflect on one’s vulnerability and to practice a non-violent response. Importantly, though, we must understand that such a practice of non-violence requires that we reckon with our own tendency to violence. “It is,” Butler argues, “as much a matter of wrestling ethically with one’s own murderous impulses … as it is a matter of apprehending the suffering of others and taking stock of the suffering one has inflicted” (PL: 150).

Thus, while destructive desires may well be primary to human existence, their presence does not, for Butler, preclude the development of non-violent relations with others. Rather, as Levinas shows us, the desire to destroy forms the grounds upon which non-violence is constituted as a practice of perpetual struggle.

In *Frames of War* (2009), Butler turns again to the question of how to understand the relationship between ethics and violence, but here her source is the psychoanalyst Melanie Klein. In “Survivability, Vulnerability, Affect”, an essay in which she attempts to understand how we become morally responsive to the suffering of others (*FOW*: 33-62), Butler engages Klein on the question of how we develop the moral response of ‘guilt’. For Klein, Butler explains, “we develop moral responses in reaction to questions of survivability” (*FOW*: 44). Klein argues that to respond to a moral demand with a feeling of guilt does not bespeak the development of an ethical relation to the Other, but rather indexes a desire for self-preservation, a desire to survive. While guilt is usually understood to arise from the capacity to assume responsibility for one’s actions, Klein thus makes clear that guilt is less about the capacity for rational reflection than it is about the fear of death and the will to live (*FOW*: 45-6). For Klein, then, as Butler reads her, guilt is a response to the desire to survive rather than to the suffering of others, and it constitutes an impulsive reaction to the threat of death rather than a rational assumption of responsibility for oneself.

Butler thinks that Klein is right about the relationship between guilt and survivability. She takes issue, however, with Klein’s individualistic frame, wherein the desire to survive is understood in terms of the drive to preserve the ego. Instead, Butler argues, survivability should be understood in terms of a social ontology of vulnerability, wherein the ec-static character of social existence means that my survival is tied to the survival of others (*FOW*: 44-5). “If I seek to preserve your life,” she thus argues, “it is not only because I seek to preserve my own, but because who ‘I’ am is nothing without your life, and life itself has to be rethought as this complex, passionate, antagonistic, and necessary set of relations to others” (*FOW*: 44). For Butler, then, guilt can be understood as a
response to the fear of my own destructiveness, a destructiveness that can threaten survival by destroying the social bonds necessary in order for life to persist and flourish. “[O]nly as an animal who can live or die do any of us feel guilt,” she argues. “[O]nly for one whose life is bound up with other lives and who must negotiate the power to injure, to kill, and to sustain life, does guilt become an issue” (FOW: 46). Guilt may be, then, a response to the desire to survive, but this does not mean that this survival must come at the expense of preserving “a frail and brokered sociality” (FOW: 46).

This disagreement aside, what Klein makes clear, for Butler, is that “destructiveness is the problem for the human subject” (FOW: 46). In this sense, Butler accepts the psychoanalytic postulate that the destructive impulse is primary to life. Indeed, she argues, it is this impulse which is at work during times of war, when it threatens whole populations and environments (FOW: 46). Accepting destructiveness as primary to life does not mean, however, that we must accept destruction as inevitable in human relations. Nor does it mean that we must attempt to eradicate destructiveness as such. For Butler, destructiveness and aggression are part of life, and in this sense they can neither be transcended nor indulged. The task, rather, is to work with destructiveness – to find ways to make aggression ‘liveable’. This would be a way, Butler argues, “of crafting and checking destructiveness … of affirming its continuing existence and assuming responsibility for the social and political forms in which it emerges” (FOW: 49).

One such way that destructiveness can be “crafted” is as the practice of non-violence. In “The Claim of Non-Violence” (FOW: 165-184), Butler looks again at Klein’s argument that guilt arises in reaction to the question of survival. Again she agrees, concurring with Klein that “destructiveness forms the problem for the subject” (FOW: 176). Here, though, Butler makes clear that destructiveness is not lived in uniform ways. “Even if aggression is coextensive with being human,” she states, “the way that destructiveness is lived and directed varies enormously” (FOW: 176-7). Destructiveness does not, Butler makes clear, have to end up as violence. Rather, Butler argues, destructiveness can become the basis of a certain kind of responsibility, “one that seeks to protect the other against destruction” (FOW: 177). This form of responsibility works with aggression rather than against it, as it seeks “to find a non-violent solution to rageful demands” (FOW: 177). It is, Butler claims, a way of acknowledging the existence of destructiveness and of seeking to protect the other from one’s destructive potential. “In the name of preserving the precarious life of the other,” she argues, “one crafts aggression into modes of expression that protect those one loves” (FOW: 177). Non-violence, here, is not the eradication of destructive desires but the crafting and directing of those desires in ways that are socially preservative.
Destructiveness might be part of the human condition, for Butler, but it does not thereby disqualify the possibility of non-violent human relations.

### 3.2.2 Recognition and the Risk of Destruction

In the essay “Longing for Recognition”, collected in *Undoing Gender*, (UG: 131-151), Butler considers the work of Jessica Benjamin. Writing at the interstices of philosophy, psychoanalysis, and feminism, Benjamin is well known for her work on the importance of intersubjectivity in understanding human relations, and she has been critical of Butler for lacking a positive account of intersubjective recognition in her work. In this essay, which reads somewhat like a reply to Benjamin, Butler sets out a reciprocal set of concerns focussed on Benjamin’s account of recognition, arguing that ultimately it evinces “an untenable hopefulness” (UG: 144) about what the practice of recognition can achieve. In the course of her discussion of Benjamin’s work, Butler clarifies her own understanding of what recognition does and does not entail.

According to Butler, there are three conceptions of recognition operating in Benjamin’s writing. The first is a conception of recognition as a normative ideal, an aspiration for human relationships that also serves, for Benjamin, as a guide for psychoanalytic practice. Understood this way, recognition is a practice in which the subject and the Other “understand themselves to be reflected in one another” (UG: 131) but where, importantly, this acknowledgement of reflection does not repudiate nor destroy the alterity of the Other: as a normative ideal, recognition, for Benjamin, involves both the acknowledgement of common humanity and the acceptance of the Other’s fundamental difference from myself. Communication between the self and the Other is central to Benjamin’s account: communication, usually verbal, is the means by which recognition is achieved and, in turn, recognition is “the ideal form that communication takes when it becomes a transformative process” (UG: 133). As a normative ideal, then, recognition, for Benjamin, is a communicative practice that is sustained and ongoing, in which one consciousness recognises another without incorporation or destruction, and which characterises – or should characterise – the therapeutic relationship.

At the same time, Butler suggests, recognition is the term that Benjamin uses to describe the psychic struggle in which the desire to destroy the Other is negotiated. As Butler points out, an important contribution of Benjamin’s work is her maintenance of a distinction between the idea of intersubjectivity and the psychoanalytic account of object relations. By insisting on the reality of an external Other, a concrete Other who is not the same as the psychic construction of the Other as object, Benjamin is able, Butler argues, to develop a conception of psychic life as structured by
profound conflict (*UG*: 132-3). On this account, the subject’s psychic relations with others are shaped by a struggle for recognition in which the external Other is (or is not) recognised as different to the object by which it is represented in the psyche. As Butler understands it, this struggle is characterised by the presence of conflicting desires: on the one hand, the subject desires to recognise and be recognised by the Other, to have contact with an outside world of human interdependency and love; on the other hand, the subject desires omnipotence, and is driven to eradicate alterity by refusing to recognise the external Other, relating, instead, only to the internalised object. Understood this way, recognition is a struggle to accept the fact of alterity, a struggle in which the risk of destroying the Other is always present. In this second conception, then, recognition names, for Benjamin, a scene of psychic conflict in which recognition is in constant tension with destruction.

The third conception of recognition that Butler sees operating in Benjamin’s thought arises from her work on the psychoanalytic concept of ‘thirdness’. As I understand it, ‘the third’ is the name given in psychoanalytic thought to “something beyond the dyad” (Aron 2006: 356) and it can have one of several meanings: it can refer to the context in which a dyad emerges, it can name an emergent property of the dyad, and it can name an achievement of dyadic interaction that creates the psychic conditions necessary for reflexive self-awareness (Aron 2006; Gerson 2004). Benjamin is well-known in psychoanalysis for her contribution to this latter sense of thirdness, in which ‘the third’ does not stand for what is outside the dyad but names a form of relational reflexivity achieved as a product of dyadic interaction itself. While Butler acknowledges the advance that Benjamin’s position represents over traditional accounts of thirdness that reinforce heteronormativity, she argues that it results in a conception of dyadic interaction that is too optimistic about what the practice of recognition can accomplish.

On Butler’s account, by defining the third as the accord that is created through the act of recognition itself, Benjamin sacrifices consideration of the broader context in which the dyadic encounter takes place. For Butler, this leads Benjamin to idealise the dyad, even as she puts ‘thirdness’ at the centre of her account. As Butler puts it, “[t]his way of approaching the triadic relation is a very happy one, and I’ll confess that I am not sure it is finally credible or, indeed, desirable” (*UG*: 135). What Butler wants to know from Benjamin is “what happens to the other ‘thirds’” (*UG*: 145) when thirdness itself is defined as a product of dyadic interaction? What happens to “[t]he child who interrupts the encounter, the former lover at the door or on the phone, the past that cannot be reversed, the future that cannot be contained” (*UG*: 145-6)? For Butler, these other ‘thirds’ are part of what constitutes the dyadic encounter and as such cannot easily be transcended, even in an idealised practice of recognition. “Surely,” she writes, “these are all negativities, even sources of
‘destruction’ that cannot be fully overcome, sublated, resolved in the harmonious music of dialogue” (*UG*: 146).

What Butler is saying here is that, for her, intersubjective space is never truly dyadic. As Butler sees it, the problems and conflicts that characterise human relationships are not only a function of the dyad: they are not only problems of incorporation, projection, and repudiation that exist between two consciousnesses, but arise because each consciousness has a history and a future that exceed the struggle for dyadic recognition (*UG*: 146). When Benjamin reifies the dyad by defining out of its orbit all consideration of context, she thus underestimates, for Butler, the centrality of conflict to any human relationship. In this way, Benjamin’s framing of the dyadic encounter as “an ideal of transcendence” (*UG*: 135) sits uneasily, for Butler, alongside her prior account of recognition as a struggle that is structured, precisely, by conflict. Moreover, when read alongside her desire to maintain recognition as a norm for psychoanalytic practice, Benjamin’s idealisation of the dyad implies, for Butler, that destruction can be overcome in the communicative practice of recognition, that recognition as a therapeutic ideal can transcend the psychic tendency towards destructiveness. Thus, “[a]lthough Benjamin clearly makes the point that recognition risks falling into destruction,” Butler argues, “it seems to me that she still holds out for an ideal of recognition in which destruction is an occasional and lamentable occurrence, one that is reversed and overcome in the therapeutic situation, and which does not turn out to constitute recognition essentially” (*UG*: 133).

There is thus, for Butler, a dissonance in Benjamin’s work between what might be called her empirical understanding of the psyche, wherein recognition is in constant tension with destruction, and her normative understanding of intersubjective communication, which, when read with her work on the third, implies that recognition can be achieved as the transcendence of destruction. To be clear, Butler does not object to Benjamin’s positing of recognition as a normative ideal. Indeed, she thinks that recognition – understood, in line with Benjamin, as “a reciprocal process that moves selves beyond their incorporative and destructive dispositions toward an understanding of another self whose difference from us is ethically imperative to mark” (*UG*: 144) – is, in fact, “an appropriate norm for psychoanalysis” (*UG*: 144). What Butler does object to is the suggestion in Benjamin’s work that what this normative ideal entails is the overcoming of destructiveness; that accepting the alterity of the Other requires moving beyond the psychic desire for omnipotence.

For Butler, then, it is a mistake to think that recognition can transcend human destructiveness. In Butler’s view, “destructiveness poses itself continually as a risk,” a risk which is, she argues, “a perennial and irresolvable aspect of human psychic life” (*UG*: 147). This does not mean that Butler thinks humans are fundamentally destructive; that destructiveness and aggression constitute us
essentially, defining in advance the sum of what is possible in human relationships. This would be a deterministic position, and it is one that Butler rejects. Instead, for her, human relationships are constituted by the presence of destruction as “a defining or constitutive risk” (UG: 133, my emphasis). In this sense, Butler accepts Benjamin’s characterisation of the human psyche as a scene of profound conflict, a scene in which the desire for contact is in tension with the desire for omnipotence, and wherein recognition and destruction exist equally as possibilities. The important point to note about this formulation is that the possibility of recognition is always present in the psyche – and the possibility of destruction can always be refused. That is the nature of possibilities: they do not have to be enacted. Recognition thus exists for Butler as a constant possibility, but one that involves a reckoning with the possibility of destruction. In this way, recognition is, for Butler, “the temporal dynamism … of a struggle that repeats itself, a labouring with destructiveness that must continually be restaged” (UG: 147).

Butler thus makes clear in this essay that she understands recognition to be both possible and desirable. Not only does she endorse, with Benjamin, as a normative ideal an understanding of recognition as the acceptance of alterity, she makes an argument for conceiving of this norm in a way that she sees as both more realistic and more capacious than Benjamin’s conceptualisation. Recognition, on Butler’s account, does not involve the transcendence of conflict in an idealised dyadic encounter. Recognition, for Butler, is a practice in which the psychic struggle against destructiveness is not overcome but rather continually worked through.

3.2.3 Recognition as an Ethical Ideal

In the passage which opens the second chapter of Giving an Account of Oneself (2005: 41-49), Butler brings her reflections on non-violence together with her account of the formation of the self in relations of dependency and vulnerability to posit the practice of recognition as an ethical ideal. This is, I argue, a significant development in her work: it makes clear that recognition, for Butler, can be an important part of the way in which ethical action must proceed, and thus does not only describe the reproduction of intersubjective violence. The account of recognition that Butler posits in this text possesses four features: it emerges from the constitutive limits of self-knowledge; it is based on an apprehension of discursive limits; it is in principle unsatisfiable; and it refuses the ethical norm of judgement. I outline each of these features below.

In Giving an Account of Oneself, Butler argues that there is a limit to what the self can know about itself. This limit arises because of the way in which the self is constituted outside of itself – "ec-
statically’ – in relations with norms and with others. It is impossible, on Butler’s account, to reconstruct such an ec-static formation; I cannot access and render in narrative form the conditions of my emergence. While an account of the subject as opaque to itself would seem to nullify its capacity to give an account of itself, to take responsibility for its actions, and thus to ground an ethics, Butler argues otherwise. For her, the fact that there are constitutive limits to self-knowledge can form the basis of an ethical practice which avows partiality as constitutive of a non-violent form of recognition. “An ability to affirm what is contingent and incoherent in oneself,” Butler argues, “may allow one to affirm others who may or may not ‘mirror’ one’s own constitution” (GAO: 41). In this way, for Butler, “[it is] precisely my own opacity to myself [that] occasions my capacity to confer a certain kind of recognition on others. It would be,” she continues, “…an ethics based on our shared, invariable, and partial blindness about ourselves” (GAO: 41).

Such a practice of recognition could, Butler suggests, “counter a certain ethical violence” (GAO: 42). This is the violence of recognition which seeks to fix and capture the other in the terms of prevailing norms. One consequence, for Butler, of apprehending the fact of self-opacity is that we come to see that it is not possible to fully capture or represent oneself in discourse; it is impossible, Butler argues, to give a full and complete account of oneself. As a corollary to this claim, Butler suggests that there is an ‘excess’ of the self which falls outside of the categories of identity with which we are discursively marked. This excess forms for Butler the stuff of life, of living, which is not the same as its representation in discourse. Thus, she argues, by avowing the limits of self-knowledge and refusing to expect from the other a form of self-identity, we let life continue:

If the identity we say we are cannot possibly capture us and marks immediately an excess and opacity that falls outside the categories of identity, then any effort ‘to give an account of oneself’ will have to fail in order to approach being true. As we ask to know the other, or ask that the other say, finally or definitively, who he or she is, it will be important not to expect an answer that will ever satisfy. By not pursuing satisfaction and by letting the question remain open, even enduring, we let the other live, since life might be understood as precisely that which exceeds any account we may try to give of it. If letting the other live is part of any ethical definition of recognition, then this version of recognition will be based less on knowledge than on an apprehension of epistemic limits. (GAO: 42-3)

Here Butler posits a certain practice of apprehending limits as central to the way that an ethical practice of recognition must proceed. Such a practice must not seek to know or capture the other in

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8 I discuss this account of ‘ec-static’ constitution in more detail in the following section of this chapter.
the terms that are given by discourse. It must rather understand that the life of the other necessarily exceeds discursive limits. As an ethical ideal, then, recognition must be, for Butler, a practice by which we apprehend the limits of discourse.

It must also be, she argues, a practice which does not ever find satisfaction. For Butler, referencing Hegel and Spinoza, the desire to ‘be’ is fulfilled only through the desire to be recognised (GAO: 43). The desire to persist thus sustains, for Butler, the desire for recognition, impelling the asking of the question, “Who are you?” (GAO: 43). If this question indexes or represents a desire for recognition, then it is, Butler claims, a question which must be kept open, a question that we must ask of each other time and time again. In this sense, Butler argues, the desire to persist is necessary for the process of recognition to take place, and it must be maintained if recognition is to be a form of non-violent reiteration. On Butler’s account, forms of recognition that seek to destroy or to ‘satisfy’ the desire to persist thus prevent recognition from functioning as an ethical practice, a form of non-violence which lets the other live. Hence she argues that “[t]o revise recognition as an ethical project, we will need to see it as, in principle, unsatisfiable” (GAO: 43).

Butler refers to these destructive forms of recognition as forms of ‘judgement’. For Butler, the act of judgement stymies the desire for recognition, the desire to persist, the desire for life, and so forecloses upon recognition as a continuing ethical practice (GAO: 44). As Butler understands them, practices of judgement are claims to know the truth of the other and thus they put an end to the posing of the question, “Who are you?” In claiming to recognise the other – to satisfy the desire for recognition – these practices of judgement, Butler argues, arrest the desire for life:

Spinoza marks for us the desire to live, to persist, upon which any theory of recognition is built. And because the terms by which recognition operates may seek to fix and capture us, they run the risk of arresting desire, and of putting an end to life…. Indeed, a certain desire to persist, we might say, following Spinoza, underwrites recognition, so that forms of judgment that seek to relinquish or destroy the desire to persist, the desire for life itself, undercut the very preconditions of recognition. (GAO: 44)

Butler thus distinguishes the ethical ideal of recognition from the practice of judgement. Judgement, she argues, destroys the capacity for ethical deliberation; it destroys life. For judgement to be ethically productive, it must work in the service of sustaining life, meaning that it must work in the service of sustaining a reiterated practice of recognition, an asking of the question “Who are you?” In this way, recognition, Butler argues, “obligates us to suspend judgment in order to
apprehend the other” (*GAO*: 44). She continues: “It may be that only though an experience of the other under conditions of suspended judgment do we finally become capable of an ethical reflection on the humanity of the other” (*GAO*: 45).

As an ethical ideal, then, recognition, for Butler, must refuse the practice of judgement; it must refuse the attempt to know the other completely. Instead, recognition must be kept open – alive – through a continual renewal of the refusal to judge. Such a reiterated practice of recognition involves, Butler argues, a disposition of humility (about oneself) and generosity (about the other) (*GAO*: 42), both of which can emerge from an appreciation of the opacity of oneself, the way in which the self is constituted ec-statically and thus cannot be fully known. When recognition is non-violent in this way, it does not seek to understand the other in terms of pregiven categories of identity, even as these are required in order to give a narrative coherence to one’s life. Rather, it recognises that the other always exceeds the categories that she uses and inhabits. In this way, Butler argues, such a non-violent practice of recognition lets the other live.

3.3 Ec-Static Constitution

So far in this chapter, I have been concerned with the question of whether there exists in Butler’s thought the possibility for a positive understanding of intersubjective relations. I have shown that Butler develops in her post-9/11 writing a more optimistic approach to the fact of intersubjectivity, theorising the ways in which our constitution in relations of dependency and vulnerability is not only constraining but enabling. While conflict remains central to the account of intersubjective recognition that Butler develops in these texts, she makes clear that the existence of destructive desires does not preclude the development of non-violent relations with others. Indeed, I have shown that recognition itself becomes, for Butler, in her recent writing, an ethical ideal centred on a reiterated practice of non-violence.

In the remainder of this chapter, I take up the related question of the relationship in Butler’s thought between recognition and power. In this part of the chapter, section 3.3, I look at the account of ‘ec-static’ constitution that Butler develops in her post-9/11 writing. While this account first emerges from Butler’s reflections on mourning in the wake of the 9/11 attacks, it receives its fullest articulation in *Giving an Account of Oneself* (2005), and it is this text upon which my discussion is focussed. Here, Butler argues that it is not only in our relations with others that we are constituted ec-statically but also in our relations with norms. Indeed, ec-static constitution comes to reference, in this text, precisely the way in which norms and others are co-implicated in the formation of the
self: we are constituted in scenes of address, Butler claims, wherein norms are communicated and become operable upon us through our relations with others. I argue that this represents a significant development in Butler’s thought: it establishes the possibility that our relations with others could be a way in which we remake our relationship with power. I thus show in this section that in her recent work intersubjectivity becomes, for Butler, an additional vector through which power is reproduced and, at least potentially, resisted.

Butler’s focus in Giving an Account of Oneself is the question of how we become reflective about our actions and how we come to take responsibility for ourselves. As she pursues this question, she develops an account of how subjects are formed in relations with norms and with others in scenes of address and response. I have already discussed in this chapter Butler’s engagement of Laplanche and Levinas in this text. By means of this engagement, Butler establishes that the self comes into existence through the address of another, and is therefore dependent on others for its agency and its capacity to take responsibility for itself. While this might be understood as a mode of ecstatic constitution, in the sense that the self is dependent on what is outside of itself in order to come into being and persist, it is not, on its own, an account that connects norms with others in an understanding of how the subject is formed. This connection is made in the first and third chapters of Giving an Account of Oneself, wherein Butler’s interlocutors are Nietzsche, Hegel, Foucault, and the feminist theorist Adriana Cavarero, and it is this discussion that I take up below.

Butler begins her account with Nietzsche, whom, she claims, “offers a controversial account of … how we become positioned to give an account of what we have done” (GAO: 10). Butler argues that according to Nietzsche, we become reflective about ourselves through a certain experience of fear (GAO: 10-14). On Nietzsche’s view, as Butler reads him, we are asked to take responsibility for our actions by a delegate of authority who can inflict punishment upon us if it can be shown that we are the cause of injury to another. For Butler, then, Nietzsche understands responsibility to emerge from a relation between the subject and the law: moral accountability arises from within a juridical scene of address in which we are asked to reflect on whether or not we have caused the suffering of others (GAO: 10). This juridical scene of address compels a turn against ourselves, as we seek to understand whether we have done the thing of which we are accused. In this way, for Nietzsche, reflexivity emerges on the model of self-beratement as original human aggression is forced inward by one’s accountability to the law. The result is the formation of conscience on the model of guilt as the subject repeatedly directs that aggression not against the law but against itself (GAO: 14).
This is the same account of reflexive self-formation that Butler engages in *The Psychic Life of Power* (1997b) as she seeks to understand the process whereby the subject is formed in submission to power. Here, though, she is less willing to accept Nietzsche’s argument. While Butler thinks that Nietzsche correctly identifies the condition of address as the crucible of moral agency, she argues that he restricts his understanding of moral accountability to a scene of address that is juridical in nature (*GAO*: 14). For Butler, there are other valences to being addressed than the fear and terror produced when one is accused by the law: “There may well be a desire to know and understand that is not fuelled by the desire to punish,” she argues, “and a desire to explain and narrate that is not prompted by a terror of punishment” (*GAO*: 11). Thus, while Butler agrees with Nietzsche that reflexivity emerges through the structure of address, she does not believe that this address is limited to the form of an accusation that issues from the law.

Rather, Butler argues, it is important to consider “the other interlocutory conditions in which one is asked to give an account of oneself” (*GAO*: 14). Importantly, these other interlocutory conditions include those forms of address where one finds oneself in relation with another. Indeed, Butler argues, it is only through our relations with others that the law – or any normative regime – comes to make its claim on us. Butler thus departs from Nietzsche because he does not appreciate that the subject is formed not only in relation to the law but in relation to others. “If I am held accountable through a framework of morality,” she argues, “that framework is first addressed to me, first starts to act upon me, through the address and query of another. Indeed, I come to know that framework through no other way” (*GAO*: 15). While the idea of normative constitution remains central to Butler’s understanding of subject formation, here she introduces another vector through which this constitution takes place: norms are communicated to us and make their claims upon us not through an abstract process of interpellation but through our relations with others. Butler thus comes to include an account of intersubjective constitution in her understanding of the way that subjects are normatively produced. In this way, ec-static constitution names the process whereby a subject is formed in simultaneous relation to norms and to others, as a normative regime becomes operative through the address of another.

By means of her critique of Nietzsche, then, Butler figures ec-static constitution as taking place through a certain scene of address. We are addressed by another, asked to account for ourselves in the terms of a normative framework, and as we respond we constitute ourselves through this response and relation. This is an account of how subjects are formed through a structure of address in which normative regimes come to act upon the self. It is not an account of recognition. Butler argues, however, that understanding the self as constituted by norms as well as by others has
consequences for any attempt to understand recognition as an intersubjective practice. In order to explore what these consequences are, Butler turns to Hegel.

As Butler reads him, Hegel suggests that the self is constituted in its relations with others, through the practice of recognition. Butler thinks that this is right, but at the same time she wants to maintain a focus on the way that these relations are themselves conditioned by a broader relationship with norms. “We are not mere dyads on our own,” she argues, “since our exchange is conditioned and mediated by language, by conventions, by a sedimentation of norms that are social in character and that exceed the perspective of those involved in the exchange” (GAO: 28). For Butler, then, it is not only the case that norms become operable upon us through the address of another, as her engagement with Nietzsche makes clear; the address of another is also shaped and made meaningful through norms. This means, in turn, that the dyadic exchange of recognition always takes place within a normative field. As Butler puts it: “There is a language that frames the encounter [with the other], and embedded in that language is a set of norms concerning what will and will not constitute recognizability” (GAO: 30). For Butler, then, what reading Hegel with Nietzsche makes clear is that we must understand that our relations with others only exist in the context of our relations with norms.

Butler then considers the critique of this understanding of recognition offered by Adriana Cavarero. On Butler’s reading, Cavarero is critical of the way that the self and the other are substitutable in the Hegelian account; she objects to the way that in the normative framing of the dyadic encounter the self and the other are made reducible to each other and, for that matter, to everyone else (GAO: 31). For Cavarero, this position implies that the other is knowable to the self, that recognition is only a matter of encountering the other and, because of the way this interaction is shaped by social norms, finding the self and the other to be interchangeable. Cavarero argues instead that the self and the other must be understood as singular: for Cavarero, we are constituted corporeally in a way that makes us irreducible to each other, exposed to each other as bodily beings in our dependency and vulnerability; for Cavarero, we are non-substitutable and in this way unknowable to each other (GAO: 31-32). There is then, for Cavarero, as Butler reads her, “an other before us whom we do not know and cannot fully apprehend, one whose uniqueness and nonsubstitutability set a limit to the model of reciprocal recognition offered within the Hegelian scheme” (GAO: 31).

For Butler, Cavarero’s critique is important not only for the way that it departs from the Hegelian account, but for the opportunity it provides to reflect on the relationship between norms and others in the constitution of the self. Butler agrees with Cavarero that we are constituted corporeally in a situation of singular exposure: “This exposure that I am constitutes, as it were, my singularity,”
Butler states. “I cannot will it away, for it is a feature of my very corporeality and, in this sense, of my life” (GAO: 33, emphasis in original). However, this formulation also poses, for Butler, a critical question. She asks: “But does the social theory derived from Hegel, in its insistence on the impersonal perspective of the norm, counter by establishing my substitutability after all? Am I, in relation to the norm, substitutable?” (GAO: 33). This is, for Butler, the dilemma that Cavarero poses. The fact that recognition is conditioned by norms, Butler argues, makes the self and the other substitutable; but, Cavarero maintains, and Butler agrees, the fact that the self is constituted corporeally in a situation of exposure to the other means that recognition is also a singular process. Butler’s response to this dilemma is not to try to resolve it by privileging either singularity or substitutability, but to accept that the self and the other are both singular and substitutable in the practice of recognition.

Thus, Butler argues, while it is important to understand that any act of recognition is circumscribed by norms, this does not thereby disqualify the claim that the self is constituted in singular relation to an other. Indeed, she continues, this is the nature of ec-static constitution: we are constituted in a process that moves us outside of ourselves, and this takes place both in our relations with norms and in our relations with others. What this means is that while the norm is indeed impersonal it is nonetheless made operable and meaningful to a subject through his or her encounters with others. “[W]e mainly come into contact with these norms” Butler argues, “through proximate and living exchanges, in the modes by which we are addressed and asked to take up the question of who we are and what our relation to the other ought to be” (GAO: 30). Hence, for Butler, the action of norms in making a subject intelligible means, in a sense, that we are substitutable, but the fact that we come into contact with norms through “living exchanges” introduces an element of singularity, of the specificity of particular scenes of address. Norms, then, might be impersonal but they become, for Butler, specific and singular when they are taken up in our relations with others.

While Nietzsche, Hegel, and Cavarero are important points of departure for Butler’s development of the idea of ec-static constitution, her account receives its fullest articulation in conversation with Foucault. In Chapter Three of Giving an Account of Oneself, Butler charts what she sees as a pivotal shift in Foucault’s thinking. In his work of the 1970s, Butler suggests, Foucault understood subject formation in a mechanistic way: for the Foucault of Discipline and Punish (1979) and The History of Sexuality: Volume 1 (1981), subjects were produced by power and norms were internalised in a way that was more or less unidirectional (GAO: 120; see also “NSV”: 134). Butler argues that in his later work, however, Foucault comes to view subject formation not as a process of ‘production’ but as a form of ethical self-constitution. For Butler, the significance of this development is that it frames self-constitution as taking place through a structure of address, and is
thus more accommodating of the agency of both the self and the other in the formation of the subject (GAO: 130-134). For my purposes, the significance of Butler’s discussion of this development in Foucault’s work is that it makes clear the way in which her own understanding has shifted in line with Foucault’s: Butler no longer figures subject formation in terms of submission to power, but argues that the subject comes into existence through a process of ec-static constitution. Importantly, while norms remain, for Butler, central to this process, they are no longer mechanistically internalised but are rather communicated intersubjectively as we put discourse and power to work in our relations with each other.

Butler’s discussion of Foucault’s later work centres on three texts: the article, “About the Beginnings of the Hermeneutics of the Self” (Foucault 1993); the interview, “How Much Does It Cost for Reason to Tell the Truth?” (Foucault 1989); and the lectures gathered in the volume Fearless Speech (Foucault 2001). Butler discusses the emergence in each of these texts of an understanding of self-constitution figured in terms of a particular form of address: the demand, issued from another, to tell the truth about oneself.

Butler looks first at the way that this understanding emerges from Foucault’s late revision to his account of confession. In “About the Beginnings of the Hermeneutics of the Self” (Foucault 1993), Butler argues, confession becomes, for Foucault, a way of constituting oneself rather than, as in his earlier work, a forcible practice of truth-telling compelled by a regulatory regime (GAO: 112-113). This self-constitution takes place in a scene of address, as one is asked to confess, to tell the truth about oneself. On Foucault’s late account, Butler argues, confession can thus be understood as a performative act, a way of ‘publicising’ oneself, of making oneself appear for another. Butler writes: “Confession in this context presupposes that the self must appear in order to constitute itself and that it can constitute itself only within a given scene of address, within a certain socially constituted relation” (GAO: 113). She continues:

In this context, then, self-examination is a practice of externalizing or publicizing oneself and, hence, at a distance from those theories, including that of the early Foucault, that would assimilate confession to the violence of self-scrutiny and the forcible imposition of a regulatory discourse. (GAO: 113)

In this way, Butler argues, confession is not for the late Foucault an imposition of disciplinary power but a form of ec-static constitution. When the self is manifested, made to appear in the act of confession, its internality dissolves and is reconstituted externally. “[T]he subject must relinquish itself in and through the manifestation of the self it makes,” Butler explains. “In this sense, the manifestation of the self dissolves its inwardness and reconstitutes it in its externality” (GAO: 113).
Hence confession, as Butler understands it, does not express a self but rather constitutes a subject through an act of displacement, wherein “the person who confesses must substitute the manifestation for the inward self” (*GAO*: 114). For the late Foucault, then, as Butler reads him, confession is a way of constituting oneself by making oneself appear for another. As such, it “does not consist in self-beratement or, indeed, the internalization of regulatory norms but becomes a way of giving oneself over to a publicized mode of appearance” (*GAO*: 114). It is, as Butler understands it, “an ec-static movement, one that moves me outside of myself into a sphere in which I am dispossessed of myself and constituted as a subject at the same time” (*GAO*: 115).

This does not mean, however, that norms are absent from this form of self-constitution. They remain, Butler argues, central to the process of subject formation that Foucault describes. While the confessing subject is constituted in a scene of address in which the self is made to appear for another, this appearance does not take place in an intersubjective space that is free of power. Rather, Butler makes clear, for Foucault the scene of address in which confession takes place is itself constituted by norms. “[Foucault] insists”, Butler argues, “that the relation to the self is a social and public relation, one that is inevitably sustained in the context of norms that regulate reflexive relations: How might and must one appear? And what relation to oneself ought one manifest?” (*GAO*: 114). What this means, for Butler, is that self-constitution – the reflexive relation of the self to itself – is a process in which both norms and others are operable. It takes place within a scene of address, in “a certain socially constituted relation” (*GAO*: 113), but this address is delivered in an interaction that is itself shaped by normative regimes.

This point is further developed in Butler’s reading of the interview, “How Much Does it Cost for Reason to Tell the Truth?” (Foucault 1989). In this interview, Foucault tells – ‘confesses’– to his interlocutor that the central concern of his work has always been the question of reflexivity, of telling the truth about oneself. This is, he claims, more important even than his work on power. Butler notes that this is a very un-Foucauldian claim, a “clear and determined pronouncement[] about himself, what he has always thought, and who he finally is,” and, she argues, “we have every reason to be cautious” about what it means (*GAO*: 121). In pursuit of a way to understand this claim, Butler undertakes a dense and complex reading of this interview (*GAO*: 115-125). She argues that we must understand the interview as an interlocutory scene, a scene of address in which Foucault is asked to give an account of himself, to tell the truth about his work. In this context, Butler argues, the claim makes a certain kind of sense: Foucault is responding to his interlocutor’s address. But why, she wonders, does he not respond with the claim that power has always been his central concern? After all, this is how he is usually understood. Why does he claim that the question of the self has always been more important than the question of power? Butler argues that
one way to understand Foucault’s claim is as an argument for – and an enactment of – the idea that the question of power only emerges in response to the question of the self; that the questioning of power arises from the demand to tell the truth about oneself. In Butler’s words:

One way to read Foucault’s insistence that now he is interested in truth-telling, that he was always interested in truth-telling, is to see that one asks the question of power only because of the demand to tell the truth about oneself. Who is asking this of me? What do they expect? In what language will my answer satisfy? What are the consequences of telling and of not telling the truth about myself to this interlocutor? (GAO: 124)

What this means, for Butler, is that at this late stage of his life, truth-telling has become central to Foucault’s account of how power works. For the late Foucault, Butler claims, truth-telling is one way in which power is relayed and reproduced. Thus, for Foucault, and Butler agrees, when I tell the truth about myself I am putting power to work:

If power relations weigh upon me as I tell the truth and if, in telling the truth, I am bringing the weight of power to bear upon others, then I am not simply communicating the truth when I am telling the truth. I am also putting power to work in discourse, using it, distributing it, becoming the site for its relay and replication. I am speaking, and my speech conveys what I take to be true. But my speaking is also a kind of doing, an action that takes place within the field of power and that also constitutes an act of power. (GAO: 125)

In this way, Butler argues, power is made meaningful for the late Foucault through the structure of address. When I am asked to give an account of myself, to tell the truth about myself, I am compelled into the world of norms. I must take norms up and make them my own in order to make myself intelligible. In this sense, when I constitute myself in a scene of address I am not only responding to my interlocutor but I am putting power to work in my relations with another.

Butler provides a final piece of evidence for this reading of Foucault when she discusses a selection of his late lectures, transcribed in Fearless Speech (Foucault 2001). In these lectures, Foucault continues to develop his account of ethical self-constitution, giving, Butler argues, “a final rendition of some of the themes that we have been considering here” (GAO: 125). Foucault argues in his later work that the subject only comes to be within certain forms of rationality. What he means, Butler explains, is that the subject is driven to apply forms of rationality to herself, and through this application emerges a certain form of ethical reflexivity, of understanding and relating to oneself
This is a form of reflexivity that is bound up with normative regimes; it is, as Butler puts it, “enabled by the operation of a historically specific mode of rationality” (GAO: 119). For Butler, what *Fearless Speech* adds to this account is the idea that self-constitution takes place not only in relation to regulatory regimes, but in relation to the address of another. This is, Butler argues, how regimes of rationality are communicated: they are forms of discourse which do not act unilaterally upon a subject but become operable through the structure of address. “The self’s reflexivity is incited by an other,” Butler argues, “so that one person’s discourse leads another person into self-reflection” (GAO: 125). What this means, she continues, is that “[t]he self does not simply begin to examine itself through the forms of rationality at hand. Those forms of rationality are delivered through discourse, in the form of an address, and they arrive as an incitement, a form of seduction, an imposition or demand from outside to which one yields” (GAO: 125).

This is a clear departure from Foucault’s earlier work in which power was conceived primarily as a disciplinary mechanism, something by which subjects are ‘produced’. To the extent that Butler endorses this departure of Foucault’s, it is also, I think, a clear shift both in her reading of Foucault and in her own understanding of the relationship between the subject and power. What Butler’s discussion of Foucault’s late work makes clear is that, for her, while subjects are indeed formed in relation to power, this formation does not take place in a linear or mechanical way. Forms of rationality are not simply taken up by a subject but are communicated to the subject through the address of another. This is the same argument that Butler makes with (and against) Nietzsche, Hegel, and Cavarero, and which I outlined above. Taking these reflections together, it thus becomes clear that in *Giving an Account of Oneself* power comes to shape us, for Butler, not through a simple internalisation of norms but through the communicative practices that constitute intersubjectivity, the relationships that we have with others.

This represents a significant development in Butler’s thought. By introducing another vector through which power acts upon subjects, it establishes the possibility that our relations with others could be a way in which we remake our relationship with norms. It establishes, in other words, that intersubjective relations could be the venue for developing a critical relation to power, and, by extension, that a certain practice of recognition could come to function as a mode of resignification. In this way, I argue, Butler’s account of ec-static constitution deepens and enriches her understanding of the way that power acts upon subjects: it does not flow unimpeded from a regulatory regime onto our bodies and into our psyches, but is taken up and negotiated in our relations with other people – meaning, importantly, that in remaking these relationships we are also remaking regulatory regimes of power. This account thus lays the groundwork for a shift in Butler’s thinking whereby recognition is no longer exclusively a vector through which normative
identities are reproduced, but becomes a way for subjects to resignify norms, an intervention into regimes of power, and a practice, at least potentially, of resistance.

3.4 Apprehending the Human

In this final part of the chapter, I look at Butler’s development in her post-9/11 writing of the concept of ‘apprehension’. I argue that apprehension can be understood to name, for Butler, a practice of recognition that does not proceed according to the terms of prevailing norms. It is, in other words, a way of recognising the life of another that is not determined by normative schemes of recognition. I thus show in this section that, in the idea of apprehension, recognition comes to function for Butler as a transformative practice. Butler’s development of the idea of apprehension takes place in two chapters of Frames of War: the introduction to the book, “Precarious Life, Grievable Life” (FOW: 1-32), and the reflections on the ethical valences of photography which make up its second chapter, “Torture and the Ethics of Photography: Thinking with Sontag” (FOW: 63-100). I discuss each of these essays below.

In the introduction to Frames of War (2009), Butler explains that the text is a continuation of her work in Precarious Life (2004a). Specifically, she makes clear, she is concerned with the idea, so central to efforts to understand how an ethical responsiveness to war arises, that a life cannot be apprehended as injured or lost if it is not first apprehended as living. This is, she argues, a suggestion that some lives do not qualify as lives within the normative schemes that determine the human. “Subjects are constituted through norms,” she argues, “which … produce and shift the terms through which subjects are recognized” (FOW: 3-4). Further, “[t]hese normative conditions for the production of the subject produce an historically contingent ontology, such that our very capacity to discern and name the ‘being’ of the subject is dependent on norms that facilitate that recognition” (FOW: 4). We apprehend or fail to apprehend a life, then, through norms of recognition, which, Butler goes on to argue, are made operable through frames of interpretation that are “politically saturated” (FOW: 1). For Butler, then, frames and norms shape the determination of who appears and matters as human. The question that Butler wants to ask in this text is this (FOW: 2): under what conditions does it become possible to apprehend a life? Under conditions of recognisability that are normatively shaped, how do we recognise a life that does not appear to us as such?

Butler argues that the capacity to apprehend a life is only partially dependent on norms of recognition. Even as they shape our capacity to recognise another, Butler argues, normative
schemes of recognition do not fully and finally control the manner in which an encounter with the other takes place. This is because, for Butler, normative schemes do not act deterministically. To say that a life is produced as recognisable through the action of a norm is not the same as saying that a life is determined by that norm. Rather, Butler claims, we must understand that normative production is only ever partial: there is always something which escapes constitution by the norm (FOW: 7-8). In this sense, Butler argues, normative production entails an other, an abject or ‘spectral’ form of life that is not produced according to norms of recognition, but which nonetheless exists and, in a sense, which ‘lives’. Thus, “[i]f a life is produced according to the norms by which life is recognized,” Butler argues, “this implies neither that everything about a life is produced according to such norms nor that we must reject the idea that there is a remainder of ‘life’ – suspended and spectral – that limns and haunts every normative instance of life” (FOW: 7). In this way, she continues, “[p]roduction is partial and is … perpetually haunted by its ontologically uncertain double” (FOW: 7).

For Butler, then, normative schemes of recognition do not fully construct their subjects. That there are “‘subjects’ who are not quite recognizable as subjects, and …‘lives’ that are not quite … recognized as lives” (FOW: 4) is a function, Butler argues, of the fact that norms work through a process of iterability. Thus, for Butler, to say that there is a remainder of life that exceeds normative production is not to say that there is an ‘essence’ of life that resists normativity (FOW: 4). It means, rather, that normative production must be reiterated in order to be effective – that, in Butler’s words, “it requires time to do its job” (FOW: 4) – and thus that normative production is never finally completed. “This is,” Butler argues, “a limit internal to normative construction itself, a function of its iterability and heterogeneity, without which it cannot exercise its crafting power, and which limits the finality of any of its effects” (FOW: 4). Because of the iterability of normative production, life then, for Butler, always exceeds the conditions of its recognisability. Thus, while normative schemes may shape the practice of recognition, they do not determine our capacity to apprehend a life.

As a consequence of the way that normative schemes do not work in deterministic ways, we must make, Butler argues, an important distinction between ‘recognising’ a life and ‘apprehending’ a life (FOW: 4-5). Apprehension, for Butler, is a form of knowing another – a form of recognition – that is not bound up with prevailing norms. Indeed, apprehension is “less precise” than normative forms of recognition, entailing sense and perception that is not cognition, “not yet [a] conceptual form[] of knowledge” (FOW: 5). In this sense, Butler argues, apprehension is both “not yet recognition” and may remain “irreducible to recognition” when recognition is understood only to proceed within the terms of normative schemes (FOW: 6). Apprehension, then, is facilitated by norms of recognition.
but it is not determined by them. In this sense, it is, for Butler, a way of knowing a life that is not (yet) normatively recognised; apprehension is a way of perceiving the abject – the spectral – within normative life, and as such it is a mode of undoing and unsettling prevailing norms of recognition:

What we are able to apprehend is surely facilitated by norms of recognition, but it would be a mistake to say that we are utterly limited by existing norms of recognition when we apprehend a life. We can apprehend, for instance, that something is not recognized by recognition. Indeed, that apprehension can become the basis for a critique of norms of recognition. (*FOW*: 5)

Here, at the outset of *Frames of War*, Butler establishes the possibility of apprehension as a form of recognition that does not operate as a normative practice. How, though, does such a practice of apprehension arise from within prevailing conditions of recognisability that are by definition hostile to such a non-normative practice? In *Frames of War*, Butler offers two possible answers to this question. The first appears alongside her discussion of apprehension in “Precarious Life, Grievable Life”. In this introductory chapter, Butler locates the possibility of apprehension in the iterable structure of the ‘frame’.

Recognition, Butler argues throughout *Frames of War*, is shaped by norms, and norms of recognition are made operable through interpretive frames which shape how we come to see and perceive the other. In this way, frames, for Butler, in the same manner as norms do, shape the determination of which lives are recognisable and which are not. Frames thus operate, she argues, through the same form of iterability that impels the formative action of norms. On Butler’s account, just as norms must be cited in order to persist, frames must circulate in order to continue to exert their interpretive power (*FOW*: 10). As they circulate, Butler argues, frames break from themselves in order to establish themselves in new contexts, to move through space and time. However, as they break from themselves they become vulnerable to redirection – to subversion, reversal, and, Butler argues, forms of “critical instrumentalisation” (*FOW*: 10). It is in this sense that the frame is an iterable structure, for Butler, and thus never fully efficacious. Moreover, there is, Butler argues, an ‘outside’ to the frame, and this outside ‘troubles’ the interpretation of reality that the frame represents. “The frame,” she argues, “never quite determine[s] precisely what it is we see, think, recognize, and apprehend. Something exceeds the frame that troubles our sense of reality” (*FOW*: 9). Frames, then, produce a form of spectrality in the same way that Butler argues norms do. Thus, for Butler, while frames may interpret the meaning of an object they do not determine that meaning.

It is, Butler argues, the iterable structure of the frame that produces the possibility of apprehension. As a frame breaks from itself as part of its effort to circulate and persist, the possibility is created
for a subversion of the frame. Part of the effect of this subversion is that the ‘outside’ of the frame becomes perceptible; we are alerted to what has exceeded the frame, to what is ‘living’ but has not been framed as life. This perception of the ‘outside’ is what constitutes, for Butler, a practice of apprehension:

[T]he frames that … decide which lives will be recognizable as lives and which will not, must circulate in order to establish their hegemony. This circulation brings out or, rather, is the iterable structure of the frame. As frames break from themselves in order to install themselves, other possibilities for apprehension emerge. When those frames that govern the relative and differential recognizability of lives come apart – as part of the very mechanism of their circulation – it becomes possible to apprehend something about what or who is living but has not been generally ‘recognized’ as a life. (*FOW*: 12, emphasis in original)

Thus, one way to understand the possibility of apprehension in Butler’s work is as a function of the iterable structure of frames of recognition. The other way that the possibility of apprehension emerges for Butler is as a function of the interpretive activity of the image. Butler develops this way of understanding the possibility of apprehension in the essay “Torture and the Ethics of Photography” (*FOW*: 63-100). Here she articulates as an example of apprehension a response to a photograph, to a visual representation of the suffering of another. Photographs, Butler argues, convey affect in a particular way, and this makes them uniquely placed to communicate the ‘grievability’ of a life. In this sense, for Butler, the photograph possesses the potential to let us see and feel the humanity of the other.

Butler’s concern in this essay is the question of how we become ethically responsive to the suffering of others, especially when that suffering takes place at a distance (*FOW*: 63). She argues that the manner in which suffering is presented to us affects our capacity to respond; it affects whether we feel grief, outrage, or indifference. In this sense, the way in which we respond to the suffering of others depends upon frames and norms of recognition. In order to respond ethically to the suffering of another that life must first have been established as a recognisable life. It must, Butler argues, have been established as “grievable” (*FOW*: 74). Ethical responsiveness thus depends upon a field of intelligibility, a “perceptible reality” that has already been established (*FOW*: 64). Yet Butler also argues in this essay that under certain conditions we become ethically responsive despite the prevailing terms of recognisability being hostile to such a response. This non-normative form of responsiveness constitutes, I argue, a practice of apprehension.
For Butler, the photograph is a mode of communicating the suffering of another that is particularly likely to make possible an act of apprehension. This is because, Butler argues, photographs convey affect, and in this sense they have the capacity to produce in the viewer an ethical response. Butler develops this position in conversation with Susan Sontag (2003). Despite arguing against the capacity of a photograph to offer an interpretation of reality, Sontag allows that photographs perform a transitive function: they do not merely represent reality but convey and relay affect (FOW: 68). Hence, Butler argues, this would seem to mean that photographs possess the potential to communicate suffering in such a way that the viewer is motivated to respond, that “an ethical pathos” is produced and incited (FOW: 69). For Sontag, however, as Butler reads her, this seems a potential unlikely to be realised. Sontag maintains that a narrative is more likely to be effective in mobilizing people against the suffering of others (FOW: 69). For Sontag, photographs only momentarily produce an ethical responsiveness in us, if they ever do, while narratives are more likely to take hold and endure (FOW: 69).

Butler’s view is different. She diagnoses in Sontag’s position a “persistent split between being affected and being able to think and understand” (FOW: 70). For Sontag, a photograph may convey affect, but this is not the same as inciting us to think, and, as such, a photograph is not likely to produce a response to suffering that forces a change in political position. In fact, Sontag argues, the way that photographs convey affect – the way that sentiment “crystallize[s] around a photograph” (Sontag 2003: 85, quoted in FOW: 70) – can, in her view, “forestall[] thinking” (FOW: 70). Photographs do not make us understand, Sontag argues, they merely “haunt us” (Sontag 2003: 83, quoted in FOW: 69). In this sense, Butler speculates, “[t]o the extent that photographs convey affect, they seem to invoke a kind of responsiveness that threatens the only model of understanding Sontag trusts” (FOW: 69). Departing from this view, Butler argues that the fact that the photograph communicates by way of conveying affect does not thereby mean that it fails to make us think and understand. On the contrary, Butler claims, it is precisely because the photograph communicates affectively that it is able to work against prevailing norms of recognition and incite an ethical response.

Butler develops this position through a consideration of the photographs of torture at the Abu Ghraib war prison in Iraq. Butler’s reading of these photographs is complex (see FOW: 78-96) and I do not have the space here to elaborate it in full. What I would like to focus on is Butler’s suggestion, towards the end of her analysis, that these photographs incite an ethical response in their viewer and thus institute a practice of apprehension. Butler argues that while the victims of torture who are represented in the photographs are not easily recognisable as human, the fact – and the nature – of their presence in the photographs nonetheless testifies to their humanity:
The question of reconstructing or, indeed, restituting the ‘humanity’ of the victims is made all the more difficult by the fact that faces, when not already shrouded as part of the act of torture, had to be deliberately obscured to protect the privacy of the victims. What we are left with are photos of people who are for the most part faceless and nameless. But can we nevertheless say that the obscured face and the absent name function as the visual trace – even if it is a lacuna within the visible field – of the very mark of humanity? This is a mark, in other words, not registered through a norm, but by the fragments that follow in the wake of an abrogation of the normatively human. In other words, the humans who were tortured do not readily conform to a visual, corporeal, or socially recognizable identity; their occlusion and erasure become the continuing sign of their suffering and their humanity. (FOW: 94)

What we see, Butler claims, when we look at these photographs is a version of the ‘spectral’ life that haunts every instance of the norm. The victims of torture, Butler makes clear, were not admitted to the norm of the human; their lives were not grievable within the terms of the US-led war. But, she argues, in these photographs, the humanity of the victims – a humanity which was never destroyed but rather made abject – is rendered again as perceivable. Thus, Butler states, the photographs constitute an instance “when human life … exceeds and resists the norm of the human” (FOW: 95). What is this gap, she wonders, this incommensurability, between the norm and the life it is meant to produce and regulate? “Is this not,” she posits, “the scene in which a life is apprehended that is not yet ordered by the norms of recognition?” (FOW: 95).

In this way, for Butler, to look at the photographs of torture at Abu Ghraib is to apprehend the life of another. It is to recognise a life that has not been produced as such within the terms of the normatively human, but which, nonetheless, is living. At the close of her remarks in this chapter, Butler returns to Sontag to inquire again into what it is about the form of the image that facilitates such apprehension. She seizes upon Sontag’s remark in the final chapter of Regarding the Pain of Others (2003) that we must “[l]et the atrocious images haunt us” (Sontag 2003: 65, quoted in FOW: 96). This is, Butler argues, a late admittance that haunting is not only a form of being affected but an incitement to understanding. For Sontag, Butler argues, at this late stage in her life, “[w]e see the photograph and cannot let go of the image that is transitively relayed to us. It brings us close to an understanding of the fragility and mortality of human life, the stakes of death in the scene of politics” (FOW: 96). Butler then speculates that perhaps, for Sontag, the photograph haunts us because it establishes the grievability of a life (FOW: 96-97). The photograph, Butler suggests, drawing on Barthes, is particularly well placed to communicate grievability because of the
way that it operates in the tense of the future anterior. As Butler understands it, the photograph confers upon a life a quality of “absolute pastness” (FOW: 97), and through this conferral it establishes that the life in question is grievable. “To confirm that a life was,” Butler argues, “…is to underscore that a life is a grievable life” (FOW: 97, my emphasis). “In this sense,” she continues, “the photograph, through its relation to the future anterior, instates grievability” (FOW: 97).

This is one way to understand Butler’s claim that the Abu Ghraib photographs incite a practice of apprehension. It is not only that these photographs show the “the visual trace … of the [] mark of humanity” (FOW: 94), the ways in which a life has exceeded the normative construction of ‘life’, but the way in which they establish that this life is grievable. In this sense, Butler argues, the photographs do not only convey affect; rather, they ‘haunt’ us, where haunting is understood as the way that grievability is communicated and thus as the precondition to an act of apprehension:

It is not only or exclusively at an affective register that the photograph operates, but through instituting a certain mode of acknowledgement. It ‘argues’ for the grievability of a life: its pathos is at once affective and interpretive. If we can be haunted, then we can acknowledge that there has been a loss and hence that there has been a life: this is an initial moment of cognition, an apprehension … and it requires that we conceive of grievability as the precondition of life, one that is discovered retrospectively through the temporality instituted by the photograph itself… Thus the anticipation of the past underwrites the photograph’s distinctive capacity to establish grievability as a precondition of a knowable human life – to be haunted is precisely to apprehend that life before precisely knowing it. (FOW: 98)

To be sure, Butler is not arguing that photographs necessarily incite apprehension. Indeed, she argues elsewhere in this chapter that the Abu Ghraib photographs do not determine a particular response, and that the ambivalence in their effect is due to the different ways in which they have been circulated, the changing contexts of their appearance and reception (FOW: 78, 91-92). Thus, Butler argues, it is important to acknowledge that the photograph “has no magic moral agency” (FOW: 91). It does not always make visible the humanity of the other, and it does not always facilitate our capacity to apprehend the precariousness of life. “[T]he photograph,” Butler argues, “…can be instrumentalized in radically different directions, depending on how it is discursively framed and through what form of media presentation it is displayed” (FOW: 92).

Under certain discursive conditions, then, and in certain contexts of reception, a practice of apprehension is made possible, for Butler, by the way that the photograph communicates the
grievability of a life. In this way, I argue, Butler develops in *Frames of War* an account of recognition as a non-normative practice. In the concept of apprehension, she acknowledges that forms of recognition can proceed within conditions of recognisability that are hostile to such a non-normative practice. When recognition is loosened from its conception as purely normative, apprehension can be conceived as recognition done differently: as a way of knowing a life that is not yet normatively recognised – as a way, that is, of seeing the abject within normative life – apprehension is a mode of undoing and unsettling prevailing norms. Recognition thus undergoes profound changes in Butler’s recent work: its relationship with normativity is fundamentally rethought such that recognition becomes a practice that is both a mode of and a challenge to the reproduction of normative regimes of the human.

### 3.5 Conclusion

In this chapter, I engaged those persistent feminist questions addressed to Butler’s understanding of recognition. I argued that in her post-9/11 texts Butler significantly develops her understanding of recognition, and in ways that can be understood to constitute a response to the concerns that feminist critics have raised. I showed that while recognition is conceived in Butler’s earlier work in a largely pessimistic fashion, her post-9/11 reflections on human dependency, vulnerability, and the conditions for ethical responsiveness find her, perhaps surprisingly, in a more positive frame of mind: recognition comes to name, in this work, both a non-violent way of encountering the other and a means of intervening upon the normative field. My analysis thus suggests that recognition becomes, for Butler, an important part of a feminist ethics that does not abstract the sphere of the ethical from its political determinants.

In the first part of the chapter, I charted a development in Butler’s understanding of human dependency. I showed that dependency comes to be viewed in Butler’s post-9/11 texts not only as a vector through which submission to power is secured, but as a means of ethical connection with others and a provocation to ethical agency. In this way, I argued, dependency is no longer conflated with subordination in Butler’s thought, as feminist critics have claimed (Magnus 2006; Allen 2008), but is understood as a fact of human existence that is not only constraining but enabling.

In the second part of the chapter, I outlined the development in Butler’s post-9/11 texts of an account of recognition as a practice of non-violence. I argued that what this account makes clear is that Butler does not view intersubjective relations as necessarily destructive but, rather, as constituted by the risk of destruction, meaning that recognition, for Butler, is an active struggle, one
that must be continually renewed. In this way, I showed that while destructive desires remain a fundamental part of what Butler understands it is to be human, she makes clear in her more recent work that this does not preclude, as critics have charged her (Dean 1996; Benjamin 1998; Oliver 2001; Diprose 1999, 2002; Allen 2008), the development of positive relations with others.

In the third part of the chapter, I examined the account of ec-static constitution that Butler develops in her more recent work. I showed that what this account establishes is the importance, for Butler, of intersubjectivity in the process of subject formation, and, more particularly, in mediating the relationship between the subject and power. In this way, I argued, this account lays the groundwork for a shift in Butler’s thinking whereby recognition is no longer exclusively a vector through which normative identities are reproduced – a conservative understanding of recognition for which Butler has been criticised by her feminist interlocutors (Grosz 2001, 2011; Allen 2008; Davis 2012; Stark 2014) – but becomes a way for subjects to resignify norms, an intervention into regimes of power, and thus a practice, at least potentially, of resistance.

In line with this reading, the fourth part of the chapter focussed on Butler’s development of the concept of apprehension, which, I argued, can be understood to name precisely this form of transformative recognition. As a non-normative practice, apprehension takes place intersubjectively despite – not because of – existing conditions of recognisability; it is less precise than normative forms of recognition, entailing sense and perception that is not yet cognition, not yet a conceptual form of knowledge. Because apprehension proceeds from sensory perception, and because an important way that reality is framed is through visual representations, Butler allocates a special role to photographs in the process of apprehension: photographs convey affect and, because of what Butler understands with Sontag and Barthes as their unique relationship to the tense of the future anterior, they are particularly well placed to communicate the grievability of a life – to make us see and also feel the humanity of the other. In this sense, apprehension forms the basis of an intersubjective encounter, but it also disrupts the reproduction of the normatively human. Thus, in the concept of apprehension, recognition becomes, for Butler, an ethico-political practice that far from participating in the reproduction of normative violence actually works to ameliorate the most detrimental of its effects.
Chapter Four

Politics

In this chapter, I look at the relationship between Butler’s post-9/11 texts and those persistent feminist questions focussed on Butler’s understanding of politics. I show that questions of politics are central to Butler’s post-9/11 writing, and I demonstrate that in these texts her earlier understanding of politics undergoes significant and broad-ranging development. Further, I argue, this development not only constitutes a nuanced response to changing social and political contexts, but responds in notable ways to the questions that feminist critics have posed to her earlier work.

The chapter is structured in three parts, each of which corresponds to a persistent feminist question about Butler’s political thinking identified in Chapter One. In section 4.1, I look at developments that bear on the question of normativity. I show that Butler significantly expands and clarifies her normative thinking in the texts under consideration here. For the first time in her philosophical writing, she is explicit about the normative grounds of her politics: she develops a conception of politics oriented to the normative goal of ‘liveability’ – of protecting and enhancing life – and she bases such a politics in the values of equality, universality, and freedom. At the same time, though, she continues to stress that norms must be subject to contestation, advancing in these texts what might be called a critical ethos of responsibility. In this way, I argue, Butler’s post-9/11 texts reveal a more sophisticated account of normativity than critics have thus far acknowledged, one that does not turn away from positing norms but maintains that to do so entails a complementary set of ethical obligations.

In section 4.2, I consider developments in Butler’s understanding of political community. I discuss the expanded critique of identity politics that Butler develops in her post-9/11 texts, wherein the relevant problems for political coalition are generated not only by a representational form of feminism but by a liberal framework of identity and difference that produces obstacles to cross-cultural alliance. I explicate the way that this critique of liberal multiculturalism leads Butler to posit in these texts the concept and practice of non-violence as an alternative framework for
political community, both in terms of producing the shared political goal of opposing state violence, and as a guide to coalitional practice conceived as ethical obligation. When taken together, I argue, these developments in Butler’s post-9/11 texts provide a better sense than her earlier work did of how a post-identity political community is not only possible but desirable.

In section 4.3, my focus is on the forms of political action that are validated in Butler’s thought. I discuss two developments in this area which I view to be significant. First, I look at Butler’s reframing of her politics of resignification as a practice that acts on the norms that constitute the human, a politics of resignification which is, I show, more deeply contextualised than that contained in her earlier work. Second, I discuss Butler’s development of a politics directed towards the creation of a ‘sensate’ democracy. This conception is noteworthy, I show, for the new forms of political action it introduces in Butler’s thought, including a renewed focus on the politics of critically engaging the state. My argument is that while they may not satisfy all of her feminist critics, these developments in Butler’s post-9/11 texts disclose a more expansive sense than her earlier work did of the forms of political action available to a democratic and globally engaged feminism.

4.1 Normativity

Questions about normativity have been central to the feminist interpretation of Butler’s thought (Anderson 1992, 1998, 2006; Fraser 1995a, 1995b; Allen 1999; Nussbaum 1999; Stone 2005; Zerilli 2005; Barthold 2014; Karademir 2014). What, critics have asked, are the normative grounds of Butler’s politics? What are the criteria by which she would judge a policy, programme, or action to be politically worthwhile and how would she determine if it were problematic? In this part of the chapter, I look at developments in Butler’s post-9/11 texts that bear upon these questions. I show that in these texts Butler both expands and clarifies her normative thinking, largely providing answers to the questions that feminist critics have posed.

My discussion is structured in three parts. In the first part (4.1.1), I outline the way that Butler’s post-9/11 reflections on the possibility of developing an ethical response to suffering lead her to posit the precariousness of life as the grounding problem for politics, while the persistence of life – specifically, life that is ‘liveable’ – becomes that which any polity must protect and secure. In the second part (4.1.2), I discuss the normative values inherent in such a politics, which Butler names in Frames of War (2009) as equality and universality, and to which I add a third value, freedom, which emerges most explicitly in Undoing Gender (2004b). I argue that this ‘pro-life’ politics constitutes
a significant development in Butler’s thought: it represents the first time that Butler has been explicit about her normative framework, and in this sense it constitutes a response to her feminist interlocutors who have long asked her to elaborate the normative grounds of her politics. However, this is not the limit of Butler’s post-9/11 thinking on normativity. Even as she posits and defends the norm of liveability, Butler continues to stress that norms must be subject to contestation, and in the third part of this section (4.1.3) I discuss the way that this position is developed in her recent writing. I show that in these texts Butler advances a critical ethos of responsibility, meaning that to make a normative claim, for Butler, is to be responsible for keeping that claim open to contestation, for refusing to settle for normative certainty as a form of political defensiveness.

In this way, normativity in Butler’s thought comes to have a double valence: we need norms by which to live and act but we need as well to contest those norms, to subject them to a critical labour of denaturalisation that guards against their exclusionary operation. For Butler, then, the practice of positing norms is not opposed to the practice of contesting norms, as critics of her work have tended to imply. Indeed, as her post-9/11 texts make clear, these positions are not contradictory in Butler’s work but complexly related. I thus argue in this section that Butler’s post-9/11 writing reveals a more sophisticated account of normativity than feminist critics have generally allowed, one that exhibits strong normative commitments but which locates these commitments within a revitalised ethical framework that emphasises anew their necessary contingency.

4.1.1 A Pro-Life Politics for the Left

Butler opens both Precarious Life (2004a) and Undoing Gender (2004b) with a reflection on the experience of mourning. Her context is the heightened feeling of exposure that characterised life in the United States in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks. For the US state, Butler argues, this heightened sense of vulnerability is a temporary aberration that must be ameliorated via the use of spectacular and overwhelming force. For Butler, however, vulnerability is a fact of human existence, one that we usually disavow in favour of maintaining a fiction of sovereign mastery, but one that is made undeniable in the wake of suffering loss. Her argument is that the experience of mourning provides an opportunity to “stay with” (PL: 29) this condition of vulnerability, to think about what it means for the way that we organise human life, and to attend to what it can tell us about the possibility of developing an alternative response to injury that does not partake in a righteous and vengeful violence. “If we are interested in arresting cycles of violence to produce less violent outcomes,” she thus postulates, “it is no doubt important to ask what, politically, might be made of grief besides a cry for war” (PL: xii). One way that Butler answers this question is to
posit the precariousness of life revealed by the 9/11 attacks as the foundation for a new kind of politics.

Taking in the queer lives lost as a result of AIDS, the heightened exposure to violence that minority communities experience, and the ongoing loss of life as a result of global violence and humanitarian crises, Butler suggests that grief is a universal experience. “Despite our differences in location and history,” she posits, “…all of us have some notion of what it is to have lost somebody” (PL: 20). It follows, she argues, that love is a universal experience, and so is desire: “if we have lost, then it follows that we have had, that we have desired and loved” (PL: 20). What, then, do love and loss tell us about being human? What grief makes clear, for Butler, is that we are constituted relationally, dependent on the lives of others for our own lives to exist and persist, and vulnerable to their loss. What love and desire – and, indeed, violence – reveal is that this vulnerability takes corporeal form: we are not only emotionally attached to others, and in this way vulnerable to grief when those others are lost, but as bodily beings we are physically dependent on others for our survival and our flourishing. Grief thus discloses the way in which we are constituted in relationality, vulnerable by virtue of the sociality of our bodies to violence, love, and loss.

While grief is commonly understood as privatising, and in that sense depoliticising, Butler argues that grief can in fact serve a political purpose. Reflecting on George W. Bush’s swift declaration in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks that the time for mourning must end, Butler wonders what might have happened if instead of attempting to restore sovereign mastery the US state had allowed its citizens to grieve – is there something to be learned, something to be gained, Butler asks, by staying with the experience of mourning? By alerting us to the ways in which we are radically dependent on one another, grief, Butler argues, gives the lie to the claim that we are sovereign and autonomous subjects (PL: 30). Grief thus exposes the actions of the US state in the wake of 9/11 as a violent attempt to restore inviolability, but one that was always destined to fail. If we understand that we are dependent on others for our own survival, then the attempt to eradicate dependency, to eradicate vulnerability, becomes, in the end, a self-defeating exercise. Grief thus offers us, Butler argues, a political choice: we can decide to foreclose acknowledgement of human vulnerability in an attempt to shore up our sovereignty, or we can stay with grief and acknowledge vulnerability as we try to develop an alternative response to the pain of injury and loss.

Such an alternative response to injury is, Butler argues, one in which we comprehend the way that vulnerability is not only constitutive of what it is to be human, but a political artefact. “There are radically different ways in which human physical vulnerability is distributed across the globe,” she states. “Certain lives will be highly protected, and the abrogation of their claims to sanctity will be
sufficient to mobilise the forces of war. And other lives will not find such fast and furious support and will not even qualify as ‘grievable’” (UG: 24). In this sense, Butler argues, while vulnerability is a universal experience, it is also ameliorated and exacerbated under certain social and political conditions (PL: 29). We are not made to feel our vulnerability equally. Thus, Butler asks: “Is there something to be learned about the geographical distribution of corporeal vulnerability from our own brief and devastating exposure to this condition?” (PL: 29). Her response is that when we are made to feel our vulnerability, when it can no longer be disavowed, it can alert us to the suffering of others, to the way that some people never have the privilege of forgetting that they are vulnerable. When we stay with grief, then, we have an opportunity to see that vulnerability is a political issue, its differential distribution something for which, moreover, we may have some responsibility. In this way, grief becomes, for Butler, “the slow process by which we develop a point of identification with suffering itself” (PL: 30).

From this appreciation of common vulnerability, this identification with the suffering of others, Butler wants to posit the possibility of a political reorientation. She acknowledges that many forms of contemporary politics involve claims for autonomy, and that in a legal context informed by “liberal versions of human ontology” (PL: 25) we are compelled to make these claims in a way that presents us as bounded beings, as “subjects before the law” (PL: 24). Yet, Butler states, the fact of human vulnerability makes clear that we are definitively not bounded in this way. Thus, she argues, while the language of liberalism may establish legitimacy for a range of political claims, it does not do justice to the ways in which our lives are bound to those of others. Hence Butler wants to explore the politics that arises not from privileging the ideal of autonomy but from the “normative aspiration” (PL: 26) of attending to our common corporeal vulnerability.

This aspiration produces a politics in which a certain form of relationality is at the centre of political activity, not only as a description of the way that we emerge in a situation of dependency on others, but as a continuing normative consideration, a fact of human existence that has political implications and effects. It affirms relationality, then, “as an ongoing normative dimension of our social and political lives” (PL: 27). While such a politics does not do away with the normative ideal of autonomy, it does dispute the claim that autonomy is a social fact, privileging, instead, what Butler calls “the fundamental sociality of embodied life, the ways in which we are, from the start and by virtue of being a bodily being, already given over, beyond ourselves, implicated in lives that are not our own” (PL: 28). This sociality brings to the fore of political consideration the way in which life is precarious, sustained only by virtue of our relations with others and in the presence of enabling conditions. Politics thus becomes, for Butler, in this post-9/11 context, the consideration of what forms of social organisation best sustain the precariousness of life.
From this positing of a political orientation based in the normative aspiration of attending to human vulnerability, Butler then sets out, in *Frames of War* (2009), the outlines of what might be called a “pro-life” politics. Building on her earlier claim that humans are united by a common corporeal vulnerability, such a politics begins, for Butler, with the contention that precariousness is what characterises the human condition. As a corporeal state, precariousness references the fact of human mortality, the condition of being in which life is always accompanied by the possibility of death (*FOW*: 30). Precariousness, however, is not only about the way that an individual negotiates the fact of his or her mortality. Rather, Butler argues, precariousness is a socially facilitated condition that produces us all alike: by virtue of our corporeal constitution, precariousness makes us similar in the way that we are dependent on social relations, social and institutional systems of support, in order to remain in existence, a being that persists and endures. Hence, as Butler puts it, “[o]ver and against an existential concept of finitude that singularizes our relation to death and to life, precariousness underscores our radical substitutability and anonymity” (*FOW*: 14).

Precariousness is, then, for Butler, a condition both social and corporeal. But if this is the case for precariousness, she argues, then so too it is for persistence and flourishing. At the most basic level, persistence requires a body, Butler notes; it requires that the body survives and endures (*FOW*: 30). However, Butler argues, while it is true to say that the body is “a physically persistent organism” (*FOW*: 30), it relies for this persistence on structures of support which are outside of itself. In other words, bodies have needs that cannot be solipsistically satisfied, needs for food, shelter, care, love. Hence, for Butler, “[t]o say that life is precarious is to say that the possibility of being sustained relies fundamentally on social and political conditions, and not only on a postulated internal drive to live” (*FOW*: 21). For this reason, Butler argues, claims to bodily persistence must be qualified by an understanding of bodily vulnerability and its social and political implications. The body is dependent on forces outside of itself for its persistence and flourishing and this dependency cannot be willed away.

This condition of dependency means, Butler argues, that a distinction must be made between precariousness and precarity. Precariousness is, she states, a feature that characterises all life, an existential condition that arises from a corporeal reality. Precarity, however, is a more specifically political concept and refers to the situation of being differentially exposed to precariousness (*FOW*: 25-6). Butler acknowledges that political orders are designed to address the needs of precariousness that each of us has, needs for food and shelter, for security, for work. However, they can, she claims, also create and designate precarity (*FOW*: 26). It is in this sense that the existential state of precariousness is not reducible, for Butler, to the political artefact of precarity. Precariousness is something that we cannot escape, something that in its very commonality can orient us to
identifying with the suffering of others and to acting to ameliorate this suffering. Precarity, however, is something that we may rightfully strive to eradicate, something that may incite us to act on political conditions in order that it be defeated and overcome. It is, therefore, the differential allocation of precarity that forms the basis of Butler’s pro-life politics.

While this is a politics that centres the preservation of certain conception of life, it is not, Butler is at pains to point out, the same as the conservative form of pro-life politics that dominates discussion about reproductive rights and bioethics in the United States and elsewhere. For Butler, not everything that can be characterised as ‘life’ is equally worthy of protection, determined outside of any context. At the same time, though, it is not right to extrapolate from this position to claim that in certain circumstances some human lives are worthy of protection while others are not, for example under conditions of war (FOW: 18). In order to clarify issues such as these, Butler explains that her politics is not about determining what counts as a life, but about determining whether the requisite conditions are in place for any given life to persist and flourish. This is because, she argues, her pro-life politics implies a social ontology that calls individualism into question: life can only exist, on this account, while a range of social conditions are secured. Hence the question, for Butler, “is not whether a given being is living or not, nor whether the being in question has the status of a ‘person’; it is, rather, whether the social conditions of persistence and flourishing are or are not possible” (FOW: 20).

Life then, for Butler, as the grounding problem for politics, seems not to be the pure biological sense of life with which we are most familiar. Indeed, there are, she postulates, at least two senses of life with which we must contend when we seek to make the persistence of life into a political goal. There is life as a state of nature, “the minimum biological form of living” (UG: 226), and there is life as “a conditioned process” (FOW: 23), a form of living that requires a set of sustaining conditions if it is to be what might be considered ‘liveable’. It is this latter sense of ‘liveable’ life with which Butler is primarily concerned. This is a sense of life in which political questions are there at the start: “[w]hen we ask what makes a life livable,” Butler argues, “we are asking about certain normative conditions that must be fulfilled for life to become life” (UG: 226). A pro-life politics thus centres, for Butler, on the question of “what humans require in order to maintain and reproduce the conditions of their own livability” (UG: 226).

Liveability thus figures in Butler’s account as a way to complicate the notion of ‘life’ and to capture its social determinants. It is a way for Butler to anchor and clarify the normative implications of making the persistence of life the centre of progressive politics. When liveability becomes the primary political goal, Butler argues, it becomes possible to distinguish between claims which aim
to sanctify the biological presence of life, and claims which aim to ensure that the conditions are in place for life to persist and flourish. Thus, Butler claims, “we can understand those modes of justifying stem-cell research when it is clear that the use of living cells may increase the possibilities for livable life” (*FOW*: 22). In the same way, “the decision to abort a fetus may well be grounded in the insight that the forms of social and economic support needed to make that life livable are lacking” (*FOW*: 22). In this way, Butler states, “[o]ur obligations are precisely to the conditions that make life possible, not to ‘life itself’” (*FOW*: 23). The norm of liveability thus distinguishes Butler’s pro-life politics from a conservative politics centred not on a social conception of precarity but on a minimally biological understanding of what it is to maintain life.

There is one final point that I would like to make about this development in Butler’s thought. While a pro-life politics involves a focus on material needs, it does not do away with the symbolic concerns for which Butler is so well known and, in some contexts, disparaged. Indeed, Butler is careful to make clear that the differential distribution of precarity is, for her, both a perceptual and a material issue. A life must first be recognised as living, she argues, before it can be protected, before the conditions can be secured for its persistence and flourishing. A life that is not recognised is a life that is not grievable, and, Butler argues, “without grievability, there is no life, or, rather, there is something living that is other than life … sustained by no regard, no testimony, and ungrieved when lost” (*FOW*: 15). Such ungrievable lives are not only denied social recognition, Butler argues, but are made to bear the material burden of disease, poverty, and violence (*FOW*: 25). In this way, our survival depends, for Butler, not only on material support but on the existence of norms of recognition that produce and sustain our viability as human, that make our lives not only liveable but grievable, able to be perceived by others as lives worthy of protection. “Life itself requires a set of sheltering norms,” Butler argues, “and to be outside it, to live outside it, is to court death” (*UG*: 34). For this reason, a pro-life politics must include within its purview not only an argument for the equal distribution of the material supports for life but the claim that recognisability itself should be distributed in a more egalitarian way.

Butler’s pro-life politics is thus a politics oriented to securing the conditions for life to persist and flourish. It does not work with a pure biological sense of life but rather understands life as a socially conditioned process. Such a politics emerges from an appreciation of the precariousness of human life, and it aims to mitigate the differential exposure to this condition, to equalise the distribution of precarity. It directs critical attention to those circumstances under which life is unlikely to flourish, unlikely to persist as ‘liveable’, and it requires vigilance in creating and maintaining the normative and material conditions that sustain and nourish life, “putting those conditions in place,” Butler argues, “and militating for their renewal and strengthening” (*FOW*: 23).
In this way, a politics grounded in the precarity of life, in the normative aspiration of ‘liveability’, is, for Butler, “a way to retrieve thinking about ‘life’ for the Left” (FOW: 15-16).

4.1.2 Equality, Universality, Freedom

Towards the end of her discussion in Frames of War, Butler poses herself a problem (FOW: 21-22): can the idea of a liveable life be used to distinguish between those lives that are worth living and those that are not? Can the norm of liveability, in other words, be used to make a moral distinction between lives that matter, that have achieved a minimum level of liveability, and lives that do not, that remain outside of the realm of the liveable? This would be an egregious use of such a norm, Butler argues, and it is one that she is opposed to. It is not possible to use the norm of liveability to distinguish between lives worth protecting and lives that can be destroyed with impunity, Butler argues, because precariousness is a generalised condition, one which implies equality in its recognition. All lives are precarious, for Butler, though some are made more precarious than others. In this sense, the shared human condition of precariousness entails positive obligations to ensure that egalitarian standards shape the determination of what is a liveable life (FOW: 22). For the same reason, a pro-life politics seeks to extend the conditions for life to be ‘liveable’ in a way that is broad and inclusive. “The recognition of shared precariousness introduces,” Butler thus argues, “strong normative commitments of equality and incites a more robust universalizing of rights that seeks to address basic human needs for food, shelter, and other conditions for persisting and flourishing” (FOW: 28-29).

Here Butler names the norms of equality and universality as central to the pro-life politics that she outlines in Frames of War. However, there is, I believe, another norm at work in her post-9/11 texts, and that is the norm of freedom. Freedom emerges as a normative aspiration, for Butler, most clearly in Undoing Gender (2004b), a text in which she develops her account of human vulnerability in the context of gender and sexuality. In both “Beside Oneself” (UG: 17-39) and “The Question of Social Transformation” (UG: 204-231), Butler addresses directly the claim that her work does not provide normative criteria with which to distinguish among possible forms of political action. Critics have claimed, Butler states, that she seeks only to make forms of gender diversity possible; she does not, they argue, provide norms with which to distinguish among forms of gender possibility that are valuable and those that are not (UG: 30-31). In response, Butler argues that this only becomes an issue if we fail to understand that, in the context of gender, possibility itself is a normative aspiration: “Is the problem that we have no norm to distinguish among kinds of possibility,” she asks, “or does that only appear to be a problem if we fail to
comprehend that ‘possibility’ itself is a norm?” (UG: 31). This is, Butler makes clear, a form of politics that is concerned with the question of persistence, “of how to create a world in which those who understand their gender and their desire to be nonnormative can live and thrive not only without the threat of violence … but without the pervasive sense of their own unreality” (UG: 219). In this sense, Butler argues, to increase the possibilities available for gendered life is to put into practice a normative aspiration centred both on securing the conditions for persistence and flourishing and on the value of a certain kind of freedom:

The normative aspiration at work here has to do with the ability to live and breathe and move and would no doubt belong somewhere in what is called a philosophy of freedom. The thought of a possible life is only an indulgence for those who already know themselves to be possible. For those who are still looking to become possible, possibility is a necessity. (UG: 31)

Butler locates this normative aspiration with reference to Spinoza and Hegel. From Spinoza she takes the claim “that every human being seeks to persist in his own being” (UG: 31), that persistence is a basic human desire. From Hegel she takes the claim that desire is always the desire for recognition, which means, she argues, “that to persist in one’s own being is only possible on the condition that we are engaged in receiving and offering recognition” (UG: 31). In this way, Butler links recognition to the normative aspiration of possibility: to be possible requires that one be recognised as such. “If we are not recognizable,” Butler claims, “then it is not possible to persist in one’s own being, and we are not possible beings; we have been foreclosed from possibility” (UG: 31). Persistence and possibility thus depend on there being norms of recognition that make one’s life socially intelligible.

In this sense, freedom, for Butler, is not autonomy in the liberal sense but a socially conditioned achievement. The fact that persistence is dependent on norms of recognition means, Butler argues, that the basis of one’s autonomy – “one’s persistence as an ‘I’ through time” (UG: 32) – is dependent on social categories that always exceed oneself. One does not, then, Butler posits, simply determine one’s gender, one’s possible life, outside of any social context. While the desire to persist in one’s own being is a fundamental desire, it is conditioned by the presence – or absence – of social norms. Hence, Butler argues:

One only determines ‘one’s own’ sense of gender to the extent that social norms exist that support and enable that act of claiming gender for oneself. One is dependent on this ‘outside’ to lay claim to what is one’s own. The self must, in this way, be dispossessed in sociality in order to take possession of itself. (UG: 7)
In this way, the subject of freedom is, for Butler, an ‘ec-static’ subject, a subject that finds its possibility outside of itself. Butler thus contests a liberal ontology of the autonomous subject at the same time that she posits what might be considered a liberal norm. For Butler, this is not a contradiction. It is, rather, a rethinking of the liberal norm of freedom on the basis of a non-liberal ontology, a social ontology of corporeal vulnerability and ec-static constitution. To be a body, Butler argues, is to be given over to others, to be vulnerable; it is the way in which we form relations with other people, and the way in which we become recognisable subjects (UG: 20-22). Our bodies thus constitute us in community, make us vulnerable to others, and give the lie to autonomy conceived as ontological fact. This does not mean, though, that we must abandon autonomy as a norm. We must still pursue freedom as a normative aspiration, Butler argues, but we must understand that when we do so, we are not disavowing our social constitution, our condition of dependency on others, but are rather seeking to put in place the social conditions for life to persist as ‘liveable’.

There is another way in which Butler contests a liberal understanding of freedom at the same time that she maintains freedom as a norm. In the essay, “Sexual Politics, Torture, and Secular Time” (FOW: 101-136), collected in Frames of War, Butler takes issue with the way that sexual freedom has come to signify the virtues of a particular conception of secular modernity. In the post-9/11 context, Butler argues, claims to sexual freedom are often appropriated by a discourse which seeks to prove its progressiveness in relation to what is conceived as “a pre-modern temporality” (FOW: 102) pertaining to the cultural ‘others’ of liberalism. In Butler’s words:

[V]ery often claims to new or radical sexual freedoms are appropriated precisely by that point of view – usually enunciated from within state power – that would try to define Europe and the sphere of modernity as the privileged site where sexual radicalism can and does take place. (FOW: 102)

Butler wants to contest this appropriation. She thus questions the link that is made between freedom and temporal progress. There is, she argues, a certain ‘progressive’ position within contemporary politics which relies on a conception of freedom as something which emerges through time, an achievement, usually conceived as ‘Western’, which is “temporally progressive in its structure” (FOW: 104). This is not, Butler makes clear, the kind of freedom that she has in mind when she posits possibility as a normative aspiration for politics. This freedom, the freedom of secular modernity, is a freedom that is used as coercion, a freedom that incites bigotry and hatred. It is also, Butler argues, a restrictive norm which is used to divide the contemporary Left, to create a false antinomy between struggles for sexual freedom and struggles against religious discrimination.
For these reasons, it is important to contest that sense of freedom that is bound up with claims about the progress of secular modernity. This does not mean, Butler makes clear, that we cannot posit the norm of freedom. It only means that we must be aware of the coercive uses to which the norm of freedom has been put, and work against its “coercive instrumentalization” (FOW: 105) as we seek to rethink its meaning.

### 4.1.3 Critical Responsibility

While Butler’s articulation of the normative grounds of her politics constitutes a significant development in her thought, it is not, I argue, the limit of her post-9/11 thinking on normativity. Alongside her development of a pro-life politics, Butler advances, in her recent work, a critical ethos of responsibility: at the same time as norms are posited, she argues, they must be subject to contestation. Below I outline the way that this argument takes shape across Butler’s post-9/11 texts.

My discussion is focussed on three developments: Butler’s argument in *Undoing Gender* (2004b) that normativity has a double valence; her comparison in *Giving an Account of Oneself* (2005) of an ethics of responsibility with an ethics of conviction; and her claim in *Frames of War* (2009) that if normative thinking is to be non-violent it must take a critical and comparative form. Taken together, I argue, these developments complicate the simple assertion that Butler has transcended her reluctance to posit norms of political judgement, and indicate that her approach to questions of normativity is more complex than critics have tended to assume.

In the essay which opens *Undoing Gender*[^9], Butler reflects on the opportunities and challenges which exist for an international politics of gender and sexual rights in the post-9/11 context. Exploring the politics of the human, Butler argues that we must find a way to avoid both relativism and imperialism in the pursuit of the human rights of gender and sexual minorities (UG: 36-8). As a form of false universalism, imperialism exists, Butler argues, when the human is defined restrictively, in a way that reflects the cultural norms and assumptions of only some of the world’s population. In contrast, relativism exists when the human is taken only to have specific and local meanings, which, moreover, cannot be generalised beyond their cultural contexts. In both cases, Butler argues, we refuse to subject the human to a process of cultural translation, to “a critical democratic project” (UG: 37) in which we attend to what the human can collectively mean. In such a project, the human is a category that “is still in process, underway, unfulfilled” (UG: 37), a category that remains open, whose content is never settled. The open-ended nature of the human means, Butler argues, “that we must follow a double path in politics”: we must assert the right to

[^9]: This essay is titled “Beside Oneself: On the Limits of Sexual Autonomy” (UG: 15-39).
freedom in matters of gender and sexuality, to possible and liveable lives, but we must also subject the categories through which we make these assertions to critical scrutiny (UG: 37) – “[w]e must find out the limits of their inclusivity and translatability, the presuppositions they include, the ways in which they must be expanded, destroyed, or reworked” (UG: 38). To avoid relativism, then, we must assert norms, but to avoid imperialism, we must contest them. We must, Butler argues, contest norms at the same time as we assert norms. This is our ‘double path’.

Butler herself pursues this double path when she considers the politics of marriage equality. In the essay, “Is Kinship Always Already Heterosexual?” (UG: 102-130), also collected in Undoing Gender, Butler maps what she calls a “normative crisis” (UG: 106). In queer communities, debates about gay marriage, she argues, produce two possible positions: one can be in favour of gay marriage, a position that demands that the illegitimate be allowed to become legitimate by means of state recognition; or one can be against gay marriage, occupying what is usually thought of as a critical position that refuses state legitimation, “a site of pure resistance, a site unco-opted by normativity” (UG: 107). However, each of these positions comes, Butler claims, with a set of problems (UG: 107-8). To argue for state legitimation for same-sex relationships delimits the field of sexual relations, foreclosing options other than marriage as the sexually unspeakable. But to argue against state legitimation can be perceived as a refusal of politics, a failure to contest the homophobia that continues to deny recognition to same-sex couples. How, then, does one proceed? Which is the better normative option?

The answer, for Butler, is neither. Rather, she argues, we must ask how this has become the question; we must ask how debates about gay marriage have produced the positions of ‘for’ and ‘against’ as the only acceptable political options (UG: 107). On Butler’s account, our capacity to operate within this binary has defined what counts as political within the discourse of gay marriage, meaning that it has functioned to shut down our capacity to ask how the field of intelligible sexuality is circumscribed when we accept those terms of debate. This is a way of defining that circumscription as itself outside of what we understand as political. It is a way of locating the delimitation of the sexual field as a pre-political act, as outside of the field of contestation, “as if it were not part of power, as if it were not an item for political reflection” (UG: 107). In this sense, Butler argues, the politics of gay marriage “relies fundamentally on an unknowingness – and depoliticization – of the very relations of force by which its own field of operation is instituted” (UG: 107).

How, then, should a politics of marriage equality proceed? Can one be critical of the way that arguments in favour of gay marriage circumscribe what counts as a legitimate relationship at the
same time as contest the inequality and homophobia involved in arguments against legalising gay marriage? Butler’s response is to argue for a *critical* politics of marriage equality wherein we attend to the acts of delimitation that making political claims can perform. In this sense, Butler argues, we must “maintain a double-edge” in politics – we must “keep the tension alive between maintaining a critical perspective and making a politically legible claim” (*UG*: 108). Importantly, Butler is not arguing that one must remain critical rather than political, occupying a site of radical unthinkable through a pure act of will. Nor is she arguing against the making of normative political claims. What she is arguing, rather, is that when we make political claims, when we posit political norms, we must maintain a critical perspective: we must ask after the political consequences of our political acts.

In this sense, Butler argues in “The Question of Social Transformation” (*UG*: 204-331), normativity has a double valence. Norms, she claims, are both constraining and enabling: while we need norms in order to make political claims, we need as well to contest the violence and exclusion that norms can create. “[A]lthough we need norms in order to live, and to live well, and to know in what direction to transform our social world,” Butler writes, “we are also constrained by norms in ways that sometimes do violence to us and which, for reasons of social justice, we must oppose” (*UG*: 206). The fact that norms have this double valence does not therefore mean, though, that we must abandon all claims to normativity. Rather, Butler argues, we must work with the double nature of norms, demonstrating both that “we cannot do without them, and [that] we do not have to assume that their form is given or fixed” (*UG*: 206-7). Butler thus advocates a critical practice of reflecting on the norms that we assert. It is not, she argues, simply a matter of choosing and applying a pre-determined norm in order to determine which action in politics is right to pursue. Any norm that we apply or consult must be subjected to critical reflection in order to guard against the possibility of normative violence. “When we come to deciding right and wrong courses of action,” Butler argues, “…it is crucial to ask: what forms of community have been created, and through what violences and exclusions have they been created?” (*UG*: 225). This critical reflection forms, for Butler, part of a radical democratic practice in which we contest norms and decide upon norms by subjecting them to a process of cultural translation. In this sense, Butler argues, for norms to be non-violent they must become “collective sites of continuous political labour” (*UG*: 231).

Butler takes up questions of normativity again in *Giving an Account of Oneself*. Here, though, her discussion has a distinctly ethical inflection. Thinking about what it means to act in a way that is ethically responsible, Butler discusses Adorno’s critique of forms of moral narcissism (*GAO*: 103-110). She argues that Adorno makes a distinction between the moral meaning of self-assertion and the ethical valence of self-restraint. While self-assertion – the assertion of a will – may seem
necessary to morality conceived in terms of deciding what is right, Adorno argues that it forms the basis of a moral narcissism that precludes engagement with others and the world: “if self-assertion becomes the assertion of the self at the expense of any consideration of the world, of consequence, and, indeed, of others,” Butler argues, “then it feeds a ‘moral narcissism’ whose pleasure resides in its ability to transcend the concrete world that conditions its actions and is affected by them” (GAO: 105). In this sense, for Adorno – and contrary to our usual way of thinking about ethical responsibility – “morality consists in refraining from self-assertion” (GAO: 105).

Indeed, Butler argues, what Adorno makes clear is that self-assertion belongs to a problematic form of morality that she calls “an ethics of conviction” (GAO: 107). Such an ethics constitutes a form of moral judgement that refuses an engagement with the other in favour of the practice of denunciation. It is an individualistic and narcissistic ethics that is grounded in the practice of self-assertion. Adorno pursues instead, Butler argues, an ethics of responsibility. This is an ethics that does not rush to judgement and certainty, an ethics that refrains from self-assertion. Rather, an ethics of responsibility is one in which action is always thought through with its consequences in the world. In this sense, Butler argues, an ethics of responsibility is a critical ethics, a form of critical responsibility. “Adorno claims,” Butler argues, “that it makes no sense to refer in an abstract way to principles that govern behaviour without referring to the consequences of any given action authorized by those principles” (GAO: 110). She continues:

Our responsibility is not just for the purity of our souls but for the shape of the collectively inhabited world. This means that action has to be understood as consequential. Ethics, we might say, gives rise to critique or, rather, cannot proceed without it, since we have to become knowing about the ways in which our actions are taken up by the already-constituted social world and what consequences will follow from our acting in certain ways. (GAO: 110)

When we assert a moral norm, then, or make a moral judgement, we are also, according to Adorno, under an ethical obligation to think about the effects of our judgement on the world. In this sense, ethical deliberation must take the form of critical reflection on the ways in which the social world is instituted and regulated, and how our actions might impact on this already-existing world. In the absence of this practice of critique, Adorno argues, and Butler agrees, the assertion of moral norms constitutes a form of normative violence.

While Butler’s concern here is the violence of a particular conception of ethical deliberation, it is not difficult to read these remarks as a parallel development of the account of normativity that she presents in Undoing Gender. Here too she argues for the importance of working against the
violence of norms, even as we must assert them in order to make ethical judgements. Here too she argues for the necessity of critical practice conceived as taking responsibility for the social and political effects of the normative claims one might make. And here, again, she figures this critical practice, this time with Adorno, as “a double movement” (*GAO*: 103), one in which we assert moral norms at the same time as we inquire into the conditions under which we make that assertion. This is, she suggests, what Adorno means when he talks about “becoming human” (*GAO*: 101): to become human is to “be[] in a predicament that one cannot solve” (*GAO*: 103), vacillating between the positing of moral norms on the one hand and the refusal of moral certainty on the other.

In the essay, “Non-Thinking in the Name of the Normative”, collected in *Frames of War*, Butler issues a similar warning against the assumption of moral certainty, but here her context is the violence wrought by the normative framework of liberalism. According to Butler, a liberal multicultural framework assumes an antinomy between sexual and religious minorities that produces difficulties for progressive politics: it assumes sexuality and religion to constitute discrete and self-contained identities, identities which, in a liberal democracy, can only clash and produce an impasse whereby the rights of one must be traded off for the rights of the other (*FOW*: 143-5). Such a framework is problematic, Butler argues, because it does not inquire into the way that religion and sexuality are actually organised in any given social and political context. It assumes, instead, to know all that is necessary to secure a judgement about how these identities might exist and interact. In this sense, Butler argues, “it is a form of non-thinking ratified by a restrictively normative model, one that wants a map of reality that can secure judgment even if the map is clearly false” (*FOW*: 144). In rushing to judgement, in rushing to apply a set of predetermined categories for organising life, such a framework inflicts violence upon, as Butler earlier put it, ‘the already-constituted social world’.

Butler’s point, though, as she is careful to make clear, is not to argue against the making of normative claims, but to argue for a different way of going about this politically crucial task. She desires, she claims, “not to paralyze judgment … but to insist that we must devise new constellations for thinking about normativity if we are to proceed in intellectually open and comprehensive ways to grasp and evaluate our world” (*FOW*: 145). While it is possible to argue that the reduction of complex realities that the liberal framework performs is a necessary reduction, in the sense that it enables moral certainty and makes possible normative judgements, this would be, Butler argues, a misunderstanding of what normative inquiry can be. Rather than the process by which we arrive at moral certainty, normative thinking is, for Butler, the critical practice by which we evaluate “the violence effected by the normative framework itself” (*FOW*: 150). This is an alternative understanding of normativity, one that is “based less on ready judgment than on the sorts
of comparative evaluative conclusions that can be reached through the practice of critical understanding” (*FOW*: 150). In this way, Butler argues, we do not need to abandon the forming of political conclusions, but “our conclusions need to be based upon a field of description and understanding that is both comparative and critical in character” (*FOW*: 157).

With her account in *Undoing Gender* of the double valence of normativity, and her advocacy in *Giving an Account of Oneself* of an ethics of responsibility over one of conviction, this argument for the positing of norms in a critical and comparative way can be read as a necessary companion to the pro-life politics that Butler elsewhere develops in her recent work. When read together, these developments in Butler’s thought bespeak a complex approach to questions of normativity. Norms are necessary to the making of political claims, Butler comes to argue, and indeed she takes up this challenge, positing the norm of liveability – and its correlates of equality, universality, and freedom – as she makes an argument for the political importance of securing the conditions for life to persist and flourish. At the same time, though, norms are prone to creating violence and exclusion, and these consequences must be guarded against by putting into place a critical practice that asks after the consequences of normative claims. In this way, it is not a contradiction, for Butler, to posit norms at the same time as arguing for their contestation. This is what her post-9/11 texts make clear: these positions are not contradictory for Butler but related through a multidimensional understanding of normativity that emphasises our critical responsibility.

### 4.2 Political Community

In this section of the chapter, I look at the way that Butler understands political community. While the question of community has not been as remarked upon as that of normativity in the feminist interpretation of Butler’s thought, critics have nonetheless drawn attention to what they perceive as a lacuna in Butler’s thinking: she does not, they claim, put forward a satisfactory alternative to identity politics as a way of thinking about political community (Dean 1996; Weir 1996; Allen 1999, 2006; Stavro 2007). While critics acknowledge that Butler posits coalition politics as a superior form of political organising, they argue that she does not develop this conception very far, neglecting to specify the form that such a coalition politics might take. In short, critics have claimed, Butler does not offer a positive account of how a post-identity political community takes shape and is sustained as an effective form of political opposition.

Taking up this critique, I show in this section that Butler continues to develop her understanding of political community in her post-9/11 texts. Specifically, I argue, in the post-9/11 context she posits
non-violence as that which might sustain an oppositional political community in the absence of the unifying structure of identity. I develop this argument in two steps. First, in section 4.2.1, I describe the way that Butler’s critique of identity politics is expanded and developed in her post-9/11 writing. In a political context characterised by war and renewed forms of racism and xenophobia, I show that the target of Butler’s critique is not only the exclusionary tendencies of feminism, but the problems generated by what she calls a liberal multicultural approach to the possibility of cross-cultural alliance. Second, in section 4.2.2, I outline Butler’s development of a positive account of post-identity political community anchored in a shared commitment to non-violence. Such a community possesses four features: it is based on an understanding of the subject as itself coalitional; it views difference as politically generative; it entails the ethical responsibility of cultural translation; and it pursues the shared political goal of opposing state violence. In this way, I argue, Butler’s post-9/11 texts provide a better sense than her earlier work did of how a post-identity political community is not only possible but desirable.

4.2.1 Identity Politics and Liberal Multiculturalism

Throughout *Frames of War* (2009), Butler is concerned with the possibilities for progressive politics in the post-9/11 context – a context which is dominated, she argues, by xenophobic policies, state coercion, and interventionist military violence. In this section, I focus on the essay “Sexual Politics, Torture, and Secular Time” (*FOW*: 101-135), in which Butler discusses the implications of a liberal framework of multiculturalism for Left solidarity and coalition politics. She argues that through its positing of a particular ideal of secular modernity, liberalism produces obstacles to the possibility of cross-cultural alliance. She identifies three ways in which these obstacles take shape in the post-9/11 context: first, she argues, liberalism produces an unnecessary antinomy between claims to religious rights and claims to sexual freedoms; second, it operates with a restrictive understanding of culture that closes off possibilities for cultural contact and exchange; and third, liberalism has, Butler posits, its own culture, and it is a culture which tends to a particular form of violence. Below, I elaborate these claims and argue that they constitute both an expanded critique of identity politics and the basis, for Butler, of an alternative form of political community grounded in the practice of non-violence.

Butler opens this essay with the claim that sexual politics is imbued with the question of ‘time’ (*FOW*: 101). By this she means that in the context of liberalism claims for sexual freedoms are bound up with claims about progress and modernity. There is, Butler argues, a tendency in liberal polities – especially, she claims, in Europe – to posit sexual freedom as the sign of a certain form of
progress, of having arrived in modernity. As she understands it, this is an effort “to define … the sphere of modernity as the privileged site where sexual radicalism can and does take place” (FOW: 102). Reflecting on what is known as the Dutch Civic Integration Exam, wherein prospective immigrants to the Netherlands are asked to view photos of affection between gay couples and to report on whether those photos are offensive to them, Butler argues that acceptance of homosexuality has become linked, in Europe, with the acceptance of a certain version of secular modernity. “We can see,” she argues, “…how modernity is being defined as linked to sexual freedom, and the sexual freedom of gay people in particular is understood to exemplify a culturally advanced position, as opposed to one that would be deemed pre-modern” (FOW: 105). On this formulation, sexual freedoms acquire special status as emblematic of the progress of secular modernity, while those positions which might object to the photographs, whether on religious grounds or ‘moral’ grounds or grounds of public decency, are designated as anachronistic, and thus not suitable for admittance to the secular European polity.

Butler makes clear at this juncture that she is not arguing against sexual freedom but is objecting to the way in which this freedom has been instrumentalised in the service of state coercion. As Butler understands it, the Civic Integration Exam uses freedom of sexual expression as a way to shore up exclusionary policies; acceptance of sexual freedom is the ‘norm’ against which the prospective immigrant is measured and is either found to be culturally acceptable or is denied citizenship. Thus, while it is tempting to think that sexual freedoms are being defended here, this would be, Butler claims, to lose sight of the way in which the state is using those freedoms as an instrument of coercion. “Is the exam a means for testing tolerance,” she thus asks, “or does it in fact represent an assault against religious minorities that is part of a broader coercive effort on the part of the state to demand that they rid themselves of their traditional religious beliefs and practices in order to gain entry into the Netherlands?” (FOW: 107). She continues:

Is the test a liberal defense of my freedom with which I should be pleased, or is my freedom here being used as an instrument of coercion – one that seeks to keep Europe white, pure, and ‘secular’ in ways that do not interrogate the violence that underwrites that very project? (FOW: 107)

Liberalism thus produces, Butler argues, an antinomy between sexual politics and anti-racist politics, wherein struggles against religious racism are disarticulated from struggles against homophobia. Indeed, to the extent that they are understood as emblematic of secular modernity, struggles for sexual freedom come to depend, in the liberal framework, on the restriction of rights of religious freedom, producing, Butler argues, “an antinomy within the discourse of liberal rights
itself” (*FOW*: 109). In other words, liberalism poses the pursuit of religious freedom in opposition to the pursuit of sexual freedom, and in this way closes down the possibility that there might be grounds for political cooperation and alliance between these two positions.

In the post-9/11 context, this is, Butler claims, a problem. Not only does it ignore or refuse those social and political formations in which these positions may already be in alliance, it works to fracture a possible unity on the Left that coalesces around the critique of state violence. Hence the point, Butler argues, “is not to trade sexual freedoms for religious ones, but, rather, to question the framework that assumes there can be no political analysis that tries to analyse homophobia and racism in ways that move beyond this antinomy of liberalism” (*FOW*: 109). What is at stake in such an analysis is whether the struggle against homophobia can ally with the struggle against racism, and in this way strengthen Left opposition to policies that enact violence and exclusion. Butler thus argues that “if, in place of a liberal conception … we focus on the critique of state violence and the elaboration of its coercive mechanisms, we may well arrive at an alternative political framework” (*FOW*: 110). This alternative framework is one in which politics is not understood in terms of a restrictive concept of personal liberty, wherein the freedoms of religious minorities must be sacrificed for the ‘modern’ and ‘secular’ freedoms of sexual minorities, but is rather a process through which different social formations come into contact with each other around a common political goal.

For such an alternative political framework to be possible, Butler argues, we must not only challenge the false antinomy between sexual politics and anti-racist politics, we must understand ‘culture’ in a way that is different to that presented by the liberal model. Butler thus contests models of cultural homogeneity and cultural pluralism alike, both of which, she argues, construct culture as a closed system. On this understanding, to have a culture is to be, Butler argues, “assimilate[ed] to a set of cultural norms that are understood as internally self-sufficient and self-standing” (*FOW*: 108). These norms are not understood as spatially or temporally dynamic – they are not “in conflict, open to dispute, in contact with other norms, contested or disrupted in a field in which a number of norms converge – or fail to converge in an ongoing way” (*FOW*: 108). Rather, Butler argues, in liberal models of homogeneity and pluralism, “culture is a uniform and binding groundwork of norms, and not an open field of contestation” (*FOW*: 108). Thus, when one culture comes into contact with another, on this model, there are a limited number of outcomes: these cultures either clash and produce “encounters of violence and exclusion” (*FOW*: 110), or, if they do not clash, they remain as closed frameworks, each untouched by their encounter with the other.
Butler argues instead for a model of culture that can accommodate processes of cultural contact, exchange, and translation. Such a model still approaches culture as a set of norms; the difference, Butler argues, is in the way that these norms are understood. Norms are, for Butler, here as elsewhere in her work, dynamic and contingent entities. Thus, to understand culture as a normative framework is to understand culture as iterable: any given culture is sustained, Butler argues, only insofar as it is cited and lived, and it is, as a consequence, open to change through a variation in its patterns of citation. In this sense, culture is, for Butler, a “normative scheme[] that [is] dynamically or critically in flux … a model of cultural contact, translation, convergence, [and] divergence (FOW: 109). On this account, the event where one culture comes into contact with another culture is a process through which culture can change. This is, for Butler, an understanding of culture which provides both a more accurate representation of how culture is lived, and a more enabling framework for a form of coalition politics that seeks freedom from the cultural antinomies of liberalism.

There is one final difficulty with the liberal framework that Butler articulates in this essay. As we reflect on the antinomy that liberalism produces between sexual and religious freedoms, it becomes clear, Butler argues, that liberalism has its own culture, a culture of secular modernity, and this culture produces problems for cross-cultural exchange and alliance. In the way that liberalism trades one set of freedoms for another, we can see, Butler argues, that “liberal freedoms are now being understood to rely upon a hegemonic culture, one that is called ‘modernity’ and that relies on a certain progressive account of increasing freedoms” (FOW: 109). Within this framework, the freedom of personal expression – a quintessential liberal freedom – depends upon that expression conforming to the norms that make up the culture of modernity. In the example discussed above, it is the freedom of sexual expression which conforms to those norms – specifically, to a “developmental narrative” (FOW: 123) in which sexual freedom becomes emblematic of progress – while the freedom of religious expression is understood to fall outside of this normative framework. Hence, within the liberal framework, religious freedom must be sacrificed in order to preserve the culture of modernity.

Butler argues that what is operating in such a framework is a construction of cultural difference as inferiority. Within this framework, a culture which does not manifest the norms of secular modernity is understood to constitute “an aberrant anachronism” (FOW: 124), a resurgence of secular modernity’s own past which must be banished from its contemporary formation. For Butler, what this means is that “[t]his uncritical domain of ‘culture’ functioning as a precondition for liberal freedom … becomes the cultural basis for sanctioning forms of cultural and religious hatred” (FOW: 109). In this way, Butler argues, cultures which do not conform to the norms of modernity
are constructed as the less than human, a construction whose consequences, she makes clear, can be devastating:

If the Islamic populations destroyed in recent and current wars are considered less than human, or ‘outside’ the cultural conditions for the emergence of the human, then they belong to either a time of cultural infancy or to a time that is outside of time as we know it. In both cases, they are regarded as not yet having arrived at the idea of the rational human. It follows from such a viewpoint that the destruction of such populations, their infrastructures, their housing, and their religious and community institutions, constitutes the destruction of what threatens the human, but not of the human itself. \((FOW: 125)\)

In this way, a culture of secular modernity constitutes, for Butler, in the post-9/11 context, a culture of violent imperialism, and thus cannot serve as the basis for a Left cross-cultural alliance. Here it is clear that Butler’s primary concern in her post-9/11 writing is no longer the exclusionary tendencies of feminism but the problems for progressive coalition which are generated by a liberal multicultural approach to questions of culture and difference. While the language of identity is not as prevalent in Butler’s recent critique of liberalism as it was in her earlier work, I argue that this critique is nonetheless continuous with that presented in her earlier work. In this essay, Butler is critical of the way in which a liberal framework makes political agency contingent upon the existence of an already constituted subject unified with others around a common social identity. Within the liberal framework, a claim to sexual rights issues from a subject whose sexual identity is their defining attribute in the political field. In the same way, a claim to religious rights issues from a subject whose religious identity defines their political possibility. When politics is figured in terms of competing rights claims, Butler argues, the complexity of identity is reduced to a form of “cultural metaphysics” \((FOW: 147)\) in which a politically unproductive antagonism can be the only outcome. For me, this critique is resonant with Butler’s claim in the concluding chapter of \textit{Gender Trouble} \((GT: 181-190)\) that a politics based on identity is a politics prone to reproducing normative violence and thus to proceeding on the basis of exclusion. Here, however, she provides a more detailed analysis and critique of what is problematic about basing politics in a pre-constituted conception of identity.

4.2.2 Non-Violent Coalitions

In this section of the chapter, I outline the positive account of political community that emerges in Butler’s post-9/11 texts. I argue that what sustains a ‘progressive’ political coalition in the post-
9/11 context is not, for Butler, the unifying structure of identity but a common commitment to non-violence. I show that for Butler this commitment takes shape not only as the shared political goal of opposing violence and but as an ethical grounding for coaltional practice. In this sense, non-violence becomes, in these texts, both a driver of political critique and a means of building political community across putative divisions of culture and identity.

Butler’s account of non-violent coalition is not presented in any single essay but emerges across her post-9/11 texts. Hence I draw on several sources to elaborate the way that this account is developed in Butler’s post-9/11 writing. These sources include essays collected in *Precarious Life* (2004a), *Undoing Gender* (2004b), and *Frames of War* (2009). From these various remarks can be discerned, I argue, an account of non-violent coalition as possessing four features: it is based on an understanding of the subject as itself a form of coalition; it does not seek to resolve antagonisms but rather views them as politically generative; it posits the practice of cultural translation as a guide to coaltional communication; and it coheres around a shared political opposition to state violence. I discuss each of these features below.

**The Coalitional Subject**

There are two ways in which an account of the coalitional subject emerges in Butler’s post-9/11 texts. The first is as a version of the ‘ec-static’ subject that Butler theorises throughout her post-9/11 writing. The ec-static subject is a subject that is formed in a process which moves it outside of itself. There are, for Butler, two sets of relations that are implicated in such an ec-static formation: our relations with others, and our relations with norms. It is the way in which we are formed in relations with others that becomes significant for Butler’s renewed understanding of a non-violent political community. This version of the ec-static subject is developed in *Precarious Life* (2004a) and *Undoing Gender* (2004b).

When we undergo loss, Butler argues in *Precarious Life* (2004a), and when we mourn, something is revealed about the human condition: we are constituted relationally, composed of ties and bonds to others (*PL*: 22). As loss severs the tie to another, Butler postulates, it changes our understanding of who we are and makes us inscrutable to ourselves. “What grief displays,” she thus argues, “…is the thrall in which our relations with others hold us, in ways that we cannot always recount or explain, in ways … that challenge the very notion of ourselves as autonomous and in control” (*PL*: 23). In this sense, she states, we are both constituted and dispossessed by these relations, where

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dispossession is “a mode of being for another or by virtue of another” (PL: 24, emphasis in original). What this fact of dispossession means, Butler claims, is not only that we are constituted relationally, but that we are constituted ‘ec-statically’ in a process that moves us outside of ourselves, a “disposition,” she argues, “[that] seems to follow from bodily life, from its vulnerability and its exposure” (PL: 25).

In Undoing Gender (2004b), Butler argues that the idea of the ec-static subject can become the basis for rethinking political community. For Butler, understanding the subject as ec-statically constituted foregrounds the fact that we are dependent on others for our survival – for our lives to persist and flourish. The idea of the ec-static subject foregrounds “the fundamental sociality of embodied life, the ways in which we are from the start, and by virtue of being a bodily being, already given over, beyond ourselves, implicated in lives that are not our own” (UG: 22). For this reason, Butler claims, it can lead us to think very carefully about the deployment of violence. On Butler’s account, violence is an exploitation of our primary ties with others, an exploitation of our bodily vulnerability. Acknowledging – indeed, ‘living’ – our corporeal vulnerability could thus produce, for Butler, a non-violent community (UG: 22). In this way, Butler argues, understanding the subject as ec-statically constituted “exposes the constitutive sociality of the self, a basis for thinking a political community of a complex order” (UG: 19). This is a community for which violence is not an acceptable practice. For Butler, violence exploits the way in which we are ec-statically constituted; it disavows the fact that we are dependent on others for our persistence and our flourishing. When we understand this dependency, we understand that violence works as much to break the bonds of our own sociality as it does to break the sociality of others. Violence, on this account, is a way of destroying community, while non-violence can be a way to restore it.

This is why, for Butler, an understanding of the subject as an ec-static formation is an improvement on those positions which would understand the subject as bounded and sovereign. An ec-static subject is a subject for whom dependency is acknowledged rather than disavowed, and it is this acknowledgement of constitutive dependency that can form the basis of a non-violent community. In Butler’s words, “does the insistence on the subject as a precondition of political agency not erase the more fundamental modes of dependency that do bind us and out of which emerge[s] … the basis of our vulnerability, affiliation, and collective resistance?” (PL: 49). It is for this reason that Butler posits an account of the ec-static subject as a more promising basis for thinking about political community in the post-9/11 context.

The second way in which an account of the coalitional subject emerges in Butler’s post-9/11 texts is as a direct corrective to the problems posed for cross-cultural alliance by the subject of liberalism.
This account of the coalitional subject is developed in *Frames of War* (2009). In “Non-Thinking in the Name of the Normative” (*FOW*: 137-163), Butler argues that liberal multiculturalism assumes and requires a stable and unified subject. This is a subject understood through the terms of identity: it is determined by the social categories it occupies, and in this sense it tends to be reduced in the liberal framework to that social category which is most visible in the public sphere. It is this form of “cultural metaphysics” (*FOW*: 147), Butler argues, which produces the binary framework of (for example) ‘gay’ versus ‘Muslim’ which is so problematic for progressive coalition. Within the terms of the binary framework, Butler argues, “religion and sexuality are both singly and exhaustively determining of identity (which is why there are two identities, distinct and opposed)” (*FOW*: 144). In the political imagination of liberalism, then, the subject exists as either one identity or another, and the fact of persons who occupy more than one category at once is either occluded or treated reductively as a case of ‘multiple’ determination.

It is, Butler argues, the subject of liberal multiculturalism that becomes a problem for political community. When the liberal subject becomes the grounds of politics, it becomes immunised against critical contestation. It thus becomes instituted as a norm, and, like all norms that are not actively contested, it acts as a form of exclusion. In Butler’s words: “The multiculturalism that requires a certain kind of subject actually institutes that conceptual requirement as part of its description and diagnosis” (*FOW*: 161). She continues: “What formations of subjectivity, what configurations of life-worlds, are effaced or occluded by such a mandatory move?” (*FOW*: 161). In this way, she argues, the norm of the liberal subject restricts our capacity to think about how ‘identities’ might come into contact with each other through a framework other than conflict and exclusion. It provides no resources with which to think about political community beyond an identitarian framework in which subjects are reduced to their social determinants. Hence, Butler argues:

If the terms of multiculturalism and the politics of recognition require either the reduction of the subject to a single, defining attribute, or the construction of a multiply determined subject, then I am not sure that we have yet faced the challenge to cultural metaphysics posed by new global networks that traverse and animate several dynamic determinations at once. (*FOW*: 147)

For Butler, a more promising basis for political coalition is a conception of the subject as itself a coalitional exchange. The coalitional subject is not co-extensive with a concept of social identity but is continually being formed and reformed as it comes into contact with others. “[T]here is,” Butler argues, “no singly or multiply determined subject, but a dynamic social process, a subject
who is not only under way, but constituted and reconstituted in the course of social exchange” 
\(FOW: 139-40\). This description is resonant with the idea of the ec-static subject discussed above. 
The coalitional subject, like the ec-static subject, is formed in its social relations. It is not 
determined by social structures of identity but nor is it free to determine itself. It emerges, rather, 
through concrete and located exchanges, and is thus in continual flux. For Butler, the coalitional 
subject – a subject that is not reducible to a social identity but is rather “an active and transitive set 
of interrelations” \(FOW: 147\) – is not an obstacle to political organising but is the grounds of 
coalitional practice. “[C]oalition,” she thus argues, “itself requires a rethinking of the subject as a 
dynamic set of social relations” \(FOW: 162\).

\textit{Difference and Antagonism}

To propose that a coalition must be non-violent is not, for Butler, to propose that it be free of 
antagonisms. On the contrary, she argues in her post-9/11 texts, antagonisms are central to a 
political coalition that remains open and mobile. This is a clear development of the argument put 
forward in Butler’s earlier work that the activity of politics is not to settle differences but to work 
with difference in a continuous and generative process of agonistic exchange. The difference is that 
in the post-9/11 context, Butler is less concerned with the politics of feminism than she is with the 
possibilities for cross-cultural alliance on the broadly conceived Left. In this context, her target, 
again, is the politics of liberal multiculturalism.

In \textit{Frames of War} (2009), Butler argues that a non-violent coalition is bound together not by the 
structure of ‘identity’ but by a shared political opposition to violence. This is an opposition “to 
certain state and other regulatory policies that effect exclusions, abjections, partially or fully 
suspended citizenship, subordination, debasement, and the like” \(FOW: 147\). A coalition that is 
based on what it is opposed to is a coalition that is based on shared political goals rather than on a 
shared experience of social identity. In this sense, Butler argues, “‘coalitions’ are not necessarily 
based on subject positions or on reconciling differences among subject positions” \(FOW: 147\). 
Rather, coalitions are based on “provisionally overlapping aims,” she continues, “and there can be – 
perhaps must be – active antagonisms over what these aims should be and how best to reach them” 
\(FOW: 147\). Butler thus does not seek to avoid antagonism in a practice of non-violent coalition 
but rather builds the existence of antagonism into her understanding of what such a practice of 
coalition must entail.

In this way, Butler views the existence of antagonism not as an obstacle to political unity but as 
generative of a certain form of ‘mobile’ alliance. Returning, again, to the antinomy that liberalism 
generates between sexual politics and anti-racist politics, Butler states that by proposing a form of
coalitional practice as an alternative to the liberal framework she does not mean to suggest “a ‘seamless’ alliance between religious and sexual minorities” (FOW: 148). Rather, she argues, it is better to assume that such alliances will be structured by conflict, “that they will contain within them certain fractures, failures, and continuing antagonisms” (FOW: 148). Butler is clear that the goal of political alliance is not to resolve such antagonisms. “On the contrary,” she maintains, “I would continue to argue that antagonism keeps the alliance open and suspends the idea of reconciliation as a goal” (FOW: 148). In this sense, antagonism is, for Butler, what “keeps an alliance mobile” (FOW: 149); it is a necessary part of coalitional practice when coalition is defined in terms of shared political goals – “provisionally overlapping aims” (FOW: 147). Thus, “[w]hat might keep an alliance together,” Butler argues “is different from the question of what keeps an alliance mobile” (FOW: 149). For Butler, a mobile alliance is one that is focussed not on policing the boundaries of what keeps it together but on that to which it is opposed. “What keeps an alliance mobile,” Butler states, “is … the continued focus on those formations of power that exceed the strict definition of identity applied to those included in the alliance” (FOW: 149). In the post-9/11 context, this focus would be on forms of state violence and coercion.

Thus, for Butler, antagonism is what drives the mobility of cross-cultural alliances. It is a necessary part of coalitional practice understood as coming together around provisionally overlapping aims. The existence of antagonism thus “does not imply contradiction or impasse as necessary conclusions” (FOW: 144) but is a part of the process of working together to bring about change in the world. In this sense, Butler argues, antagonism does not need to be an obstacle to maintaining a non-violent political community but “can be lived … as a dynamic and productive political force” (FOW: 144).

Cultural Translation

In Precarious Life (2004a), Butler argues that an international feminist coalition against war and militarism is possible, but it will be a coalition in which ‘epistemological issues’ are never settled. “We could [thus] find ourselves joined in the fight against violence,” Butler states, “without having to agree on many epistemological issues” (PL: 48). She continues: “We do not need to ground ourselves in a single model of communication, a single model of reason, a single notion of the subject before we are able to act” (PL: 48). For Butler, what enables a feminist coalition is not recourse to epistemological certainties, not recourse to the categories of identity, but rather the “ethical responsibility” (PL: 49) of ‘cultural translation’. In this section of the chapter, I outline the way in which cultural translation emerges in Butler’s post-9/11 texts as an ethical grounding for a
non-violent coalition. The focus of my discussion is the articulation of cultural translation as a communicative practice that Butler provides in *Undoing Gender* (2004b).

In this text, Butler understands cultural translation as a mode of communicating that respects difference. It is not a practice that attempts to communicate *across* difference, but rather accepts that differences exist and seeks to work *with* them in a process of dialogue and exchange. In this sense, cultural translation requires, Butler argues, that we be willing to submit our political categories to a process of resignification. This is a process wherein the meaning of categories is altered by virtue of their being taken up and lived in different contexts; as such, it is a way in which we are compelled to meet the limits of our categories. “Cultural translation is,” Butler argues, “…a process of yielding our most fundamental categories, that is, seeing how and why they break up, require resignification when they reach the limit of an available episteme” (*UG*: 38).

In “The Question of Social Transformation” (*UG*: 204-231), Butler discusses ‘the human’ as one such political category that must yield to resignification. There is a tendency, she posits, within “western forms of rationalism” (*UG*: 222), to posit the human as something that we already know. “We might say,” Butler argues, “[that] ‘we must know the fundamentals of the human in order to act in such a way that we preserve and promote human life as we know it’” (*UG*: 222). Butler suggests that the human that we already know tends to be characterised by modes of reasoning and justification that are imagined as universal, or at least as the terms for a communicative practice to which we can universally agree to submit. For Butler, however, the problem with such a formulation is that it does not take into account the way that ‘the human’ is normatively produced. “Through recourse to norms,” Butler argues, “the sphere of the humanly intelligible is circumscribed” such that “the very categories of the human have excluded those who should be operating within its terms” (*UG*: 222).

What this means, Butler claims, is that the human operates as an exclusionary norm. Thus the task for “a critical international human rights discourse and politics” (*UG*: 222) – for, in other words, a non-violent coalition – is not to posit the human as a unifying norm but to subject the human to resignification and a process of cultural translation. “If we take the field of the human for granted,” Butler argues, “then we fail to think critically – and ethically – about the consequential ways that the human is being produced, reproduced, deproduced” (*UG*: 222). In this way, the task of political coalition, for Butler, is not to find what unites us and thus put an end to political contestation, but to agree to undergo an encounter with difference the outcome of which we cannot know in advance. Hence she asks:
Do we need to know that, despite our differences, we are all oriented toward the same conception of rational deliberation and justification? Or do we need precisely to know that the ‘common’ is no longer there for us, if it ever was, and that the capacious and self-limiting approach to difference is not only the task of cultural translation in this day of multiculturalism but the most important way to nonviolence? (UG: 221)

In this sense, cultural translation can be understood, for Butler, as an “ethical disposition” (Rushing 2010) that supports the capacity to enter into a non-violent community. It requires, she argues, that one remain open to the future, to not knowing the outcome of politics in advance of political action itself (UG: 39). For Butler, this disposition is an important part of how we encounter difference and how we experience challenges to our own way of understanding the world. As such, the practice of not knowing which characterises the process of cultural translation is not, for Butler, the function of a passive kind of ignorance but an ethical practice which must be actively maintained. In this sense, Butler argues, cultural translation is a practice of non-violence, a way of encountering the other (UG: 35).

As an ethical disposition of uncertainty, then, cultural translation is resonant both with Butler’s argument for the political value of antagonism, and her development of an ethos of critical responsibility, wherein even as norms are posited they must be subject to contestation. It is also a way to think about the basis for political identification when it is no longer understood as a shared identity, a form of social ‘sameness’. When differences are central to the form that political community must take, as, indeed, Butler argues, then an ethical disposition that supports a non-violent encounter with difference becomes an important part of how such a community might be sustained.

**Opposing State Violence**

In *Frames of War* (2009), Butler takes up the question of how to think politics on the Left in the context of war, militarism, and new forms of violence and exclusion. She argues that “ongoing war has structured and fissured the subject of social movements” (FOW: 27) with the consequence that claims for freedom, for example of sexual and artistic expression, have been pitted against claims for religious and cultural rights, especially as they have emerged (in the US and Europe) from new immigrant communities. For Butler, this situation of impasse has arisen from a failure to think critically about how war has structured social life in the US even as it prosecutes its battles in places that are far from ‘home’. It is a failure, she argues, to think critically about the ways in which “the terms of domestic politics have been disturbed and deployed by the wider aims of war” (FOW: 27).
In the context of war, Butler argues, foreign policy is the frame through which domestic politics proceeds, and, moreover, this fact must alter the focus of social movements on the political Left.

What might unify the Left in this context, Butler argues, is not a politics of identity but a shared political opposition to the violence of the state. “A refocusing of contemporary politics on the illegitimate and arbitrary effects of state violence,” Butler argues, “may well reorient the Left beyond the liberal antinomies on which it currently founders” (FOW: 28). On Butler’s account, this political opposition would have two features. First, it would involve a critique of state violence, of the ways in which the state both constructs lives as differentially grievable and enacts policy on the basis of this differentiation (FOW: 28). In concrete terms, this means opposing policies which enact violence, exclusion, and abjection; which suspend citizenship and create stateless populations; and which construct certain people as threatening and thus as the legitimate targets of military violence. It also means, Butler argues, opposing the violence of the secular state that takes specific form in the civilisational mission (FOW: 132). We must therefore enact, she claims, “a critique of state violence and the power it wields to construct the subject of cultural difference” (FOW: 135).

The second feature of a Left opposition to state violence involves a focus on precarity and its differential distribution rather than on claims of identity. Such an opposition takes as its object of critique “those forms of legalized violence by which populations are differentially deprived of the basic resources needed to minimize precariousness” (FOW: 32). This includes, Butler states, attention to the neoliberal erosion of the welfare state as well as to the destruction of social safety nets that occurs when the state mobilises its resources not in the service of minimising precarity but in the service of waging war (FOW: 32). “Precarity,” she argues, “cuts across identity categories as well as multicultural maps, thus forming the basis for an alliance focused on opposition to state violence and its capacity to produce, exploit, and distribute precarity for the purposes of profit and territorial defense” (FOW: 32).

In this way, for Butler, we come to see that precarity constitutes “an existing and promising site for coalitional exchange” (FOW: 28). She continues: “Such an alliance would not require agreement on all questions of desire or belief or self-identification.” Rather, “[i]t would be a movement sheltering certain kinds of ongoing antagonisms among its participants, valuing such persistent and animating differences as the sign and substance of a radical democratic politics” (FOW: 32). It would also, I argue, proceed within the terms of a guiding ethic of non-violence, practising cultural translation as a form of coalitional communication, and refusing to be limited by the violence of the prevailing norms of liberalism. Such a non-violent coalition is what constitutes, for Butler, an
oppositional political community that stands a chance of intervening critically in the post-9/11 normative field.

4.3 Political Action

The question of which forms of political action are prioritised in Butler’s work has been a persistent point of controversy in the feminist interpretation of her thought (Hennessy 1994-1995; Fraser 1995b; Lloyd 1999, 2005a, 2005b, 2007a, 2007b; McNay 1999; Nussbaum 1999; Mills 2000, 2003; Jenkins 2001; Passavant and Dean 2001; Schwartzman 2002; Weston 2002; Lovell 2003). The central problem has been what critics view as Butler’s unnecessary reduction of political action to the practice of resignification. For critics, Butler validates resignification over and above alternative forms of political engagement, neglecting, as she does so, questions of context and efficacy. Critics have therefore asked of Butler: Why limit political action in this way? What is gained and what is lost when acting politically is conceived restrictively as the resignification of norms?

In this third and final part of the chapter I take up these feminist concerns. My aim is to demonstrate that in her post-9/11 texts Butler develops a more expansive sense of the range of political action available to feminism in a context that demands engagement with new forms of violence and exclusion. I look firstly at the way that Butler’s politics of resignification is developed in her recent work. I show that in the post-9/11 context, Butler reframes this politics as one that is less concerned with subverting the binary norms of gender than it is with resignifying the norms that constitute the human. Neither an identity politics nor a new form of humanism, this is a politics oriented towards a more equitable distribution of the capacity to apprehend the precariousness of life. I then look at the introduction in Butler’s thought of a politics directed toward the creation of a ‘sensate’ democracy. I show that Butler’s reflections on the regulation of affective responses to suffering lead her to posit the idea of sensate democracy as a way to capture the importance of the senses in shaping political awareness and, by implication, the way that we register political responsibility: a sensate democracy is, for Butler, one in which the suffering of others is felt and cannot be easily dismissed. It thus has implications for the way that the state communicates with its citizens as well as the regulation and circumscription of the public sphere.

I argue that these developments are significant because together they clarify that Butler does not conceive of the practice of resignification as the only or the best political strategy, determined outside of any context. Rather, her post-9/11 texts make clear that there are specific conditions
under which resignification both emerges and recedes as a preferable form of political action. Further, Butler acknowledges in these texts that resignification is most likely to be effective when it is supported by other forms of political activity. This is why she turns to the idea of sensate democracy, to specify that we must act on the conditions that shape our capacity to perceive that exclusionary norms are in operation, and which delimit the space within which the resignification of those norms takes place. This project requires forms of political action oriented to making visible the way that reality is framed, a task which involves the deployment of a critical aesthetic practice that is not reducible to resignification. It also requires that action is directed towards the creation of a free and accessible public sphere, one in which the precariousness of life can appear and stand a chance of being apprehended, and in this sense, I argue, Butler comes to acknowledge that a critical engagement with the state is an important part of the way that a politics of resignifying the human must proceed.

4.3.1 Resignifying the Human

There are two ways in which Butler reframes her politics of resignification in the post-9/11 context as a practice which acts on the norms that constitute the human. The first takes place in Precarious Life (2004a). Here Butler argues that if common corporeal vulnerability is to serve as the basis for a pro-life politics, then we must act on the norms that shape our capacity to perceive that such vulnerability exists. This is a politics of resignifying the norms which determine who appears and matters as human, and hence which determine whose vulnerability can be apprehended in a context shaped by war and the coercive power of the state. The second way in which a politics of resignifying the human emerges in Butler’s recent writing is as part of the reformulated politics of human rights that Butler discusses in Undoing Gender (2004b). As Butler reflects upon the promises and challenges of a politics of sexual freedom in the post-9/11 context, she posits the claiming of sexual rights as a politics of performatively remaking the norm of the human by occupying its terms without prior authorisation. In what follows, I discuss each of these developments and explain how a politics of resignifying the human cannot be reduced to either an identity politics or a new form of humanism. It is, rather, as I show below, a politics oriented to creating a more equitable distribution of the capacity to apprehend the precariousness of life.

In “Violence, Mourning, Politics” (PL: 19-49), Butler argues that the human is brought into being through the action of norms. This action has as its effect what Butler calls “the violence of derealization” (PL: 33). This is the violence by which some persons are cast out of the normatively human, are produced as the abject, the other of the norm. As Butler puts it, “the derealization of the
other means that it is neither alive nor dead, but interminably spectral” (PL: 33-4). Such derealising violence is produced, Butler claims, less as a result of a dehumanising discourse than as a refusal of discourse that produces an omission. “[T]here is,” she argues, “a limit to discourse that establishes the limits of human intelligibility” (PL: 35), and thus, for Butler, “dehumanization emerges at the limits of discursive life” (PL: 36). Butler discusses as an example of a derealising process the refusal to publish in a San Francisco newspaper an obituary for Palestinian families killed by Israeli troops. In this case, we can see, she claims, that there is a prohibition on the public grieving of these lives and, in this sense, that these lives are constructed as ungrievable, as lives that do not really count. This, she argues, is how the norm of the human is constituted.

For Butler, the fact that the human is normatively produced means that vulnerability must be conceived as not only ontological but political. It is political, she argues, in the sense that it is a condition that we are differentially exposed to, a condition that political orders both create and minimise. (PL: 29) However, it is also political in the sense that our capacity to perceive the vulnerability of others is shaped by norms of recognition, norms which determine whose lives count as human and thus grievable. In this sense, Butler argues, vulnerability must be understood as both that which is prior to power, that which forms the condition of being human, and that which is produced by power, brought into being by normative regimes of recognition. Butler thus insists that any notion of common corporeal vulnerability must be thought together with “a theory of power and recognition” (PL: 45):

A vulnerability must be perceived and recognized in order to come into play in an ethical encounter, and there is no guarantee that this will happen… if vulnerability is one precondition for humanization, and humanization takes place differently through variable norms of recognition, then it follows that vulnerability is fundamentally dependent on existing norms of recognition if it is to be attributed to any human subject. (PL: 43)

Thus, for vulnerability to serve as the basis for a new form of politics it must first appear and be recognised as such. In this way, Butler makes clear, when she posits a common corporeal vulnerability as a new normative aspiration for politics, she is not arguing for a new form of humanism but for a politics which resignifies the norm of the human. This is a politics which acts upon the norms that define whose life counts as a human life, and whose vulnerability can be recognised. It is not a politics which seeks only to include more people within the norm but a politics which seeks to change that norm, to loosen it from the way it has been restrictively defined and to resignify its meaning. A politics of resignifying the human is not, then, in Butler’s words, “a
matter of a simple entry of the excluded into an established ontology, but 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?” (PL: 33). This is one way in which Butler’s politics of resignification comes to be reframed in her post-9/11 texts.

The other way is through its deployment in the service of a reformulated conception of human rights. In the chapter which opens Undoing Gender, Butler is focussed on the possibilities for sexual politics in the post-9/11 context. She frames this politics as centrally concerned with the question of the human: “who counts as the human, and … whose lives count as lives” (UG: 17). She suggests that discrimination and violence suffered by sexual minorities can be understood as a function of the way that these minorities are dehumanised. To be dehumanised, she argues, is to be discursively constituted as the other of what is human. It is to be ‘unreal’, to have the life that one is living deemed as not quite a life. In this sense, to live outside of the norm of the human, to maintain modes of social organisation for sexuality that do not conform to the heterosexual matrix, is, Butler argues, to have the truth and reality of one’s social relations denied (UG: 27). It is also, Butler suggests, to be vulnerable to a form of violence that traverses the distinction between the symbolic and the material. “On the level of discourse,” Butler states, “certain lives are not considered lives at all, they cannot be humanized … and their dehumanization occurs first, at this level. This level then gives rise,” she continues, “to a physical violence that in some sense delivers the message of dehumanization which is already at work in the culture” (UG: 25).

In this context, the claiming of rights to sexual freedom must be understood, for Butler, as a critical intervention into ontologising processes. To assert sexual rights in a context where sexual minorities do not qualify as human means that one is transforming the meaning of the human in the process of claiming rights. Thus, “when we struggle for rights,” Butler argues, “we are not simply struggling for rights that attach to my person, [] we are struggling to be conceived as persons” (UG: 32, emphasis in original). We are struggling, in other words, to be considered as real, to be considered ‘human’ with the attendant assumptions about the meaning and value of our intimate relations, even if they do not assume a normative form. In this way, for Butler, “[t]he assertion of rights becomes a way of intervening into the social and political process by which the human is articulated” (UG: 32).

On this formulation, the politics of human rights comes to be framed as a politics of resignification. Butler makes clear that to claim rights in a context in which one has not been deemed worthy of rights is a process of reconstructing reality. It is to struggle to be conceived as human and thus to

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11 This chapter is titled, “Beside Oneself: On the Limits of Sexual Autonomy” (UG: 17-39).
be conceived as real. In this way, Butler suggests, asserting the reality of queer lives calls into question what counts as reality and what counts as a human life. This is, she argues, the basis of a politics of resignification: “[W]hen the unreal lays claim to reality,” Butler argues, “...something other than a simple assimilation into prevailing norms can and does take place. The norms themselves can become rattled, display their instability, and become open to resignification” (UG: 28). In this way, resignification is driven, for Butler by an impossible and unauthorised claim, an act of signification by which the abject lay claim to reality and intervene in the normative production of the human.

Butler makes clear in this essay, as she did in Precarious Life, that a politics of resignifying the human is not a new form of humanism. She argues that even as we lay claim to the human we must not presume to know the human or to ground our political claims in ideas about what the human is, or even what the human should be. In other words, Butler argues, we must avoid positing the human as a foundation. As Butler puts it: “An anti-imperialist … conception of international human rights must call into question what is meant by the human and learn from the various ways and means by which it is defined across cultural venues” (UG: 37). A politics of resignifying the human thus entails the acknowledgement that one’s own position is not sufficient to elaborate the spectrum of the human. It is a politics that requires coalitional work and as such it requires a certain willingness to be disoriented, to be exposed to what one does not know and thus to undergo a process of cultural translation (UG: 36). In this sense, Butler argues, even as we resignify the human we must “keep[] our notion of the human open to a future articulation” (UG: 36).

In this way, resignification is framed in Butler’s recent work as a politics less concerned with subverting the binary norms of gender than it is with performatively remaking the human. This is not to suggest that gender has become unimportant to Butler. Even as she posits a politics centred on the norm of the human she maintains that to resignify this norm is to produce a more expansive range of possibilities for living one’s gender, and to put in place the normative conditions under which such possibilities can be extended recognition and shelter. By positing the development in Butler’s post-9/11 texts of a politics of resignifying the human, I am not suggesting, then, that gender has been transcended in Butler’s work; I am suggesting, rather, that gender has come to be framed and thought in terms of the way in which it is constructed in relation to the normatively human. In a sense, this is less a development in Butler’s thought than “a rendering explicit of what has always been implicit in her work” (Stark 2014: 89). What makes this reframing significant, in my view, is that it connects a politics of resignification with the broader aim to expand the capacity

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12 Stark makes this comment with reference to the centrality of ethical questions in Butler’s work.
to apprehend the precariousness of life – to apprehend the human – and in this way it clarifies how Butler understands resignification to operate as a political strategy.

Before I move on in the next section to develop this argument about the role of resignification in a politics of apprehending the human, it is important to make clear that Butler does not intend the practice of resignifying the human to function as a form of identity politics. Resignification, here as in her earlier work, is a way of changing the meaning of norms rather than a way of seeking entry to those norms on the basis of the recognition of identity. Thus, while Butler might be said to advocate in her post-9/11 texts a politics of recognition, in the sense that she argues for expanding the way that norms of recognition operate to include more lives in the category of what is recognisable, this is not the same as a politics that seeks recognition for an already-constituted identity. It is, rather, a politics that contests the way in which norms of recognition determine who counts as human. As Butler puts it: “If certain lives are deemed worth living, protecting, and grieving and others not, then this way of differentiating lives cannot be understood as a problem of identity or even of the subject. It is rather a question of how power forms the field in which subjects become possible at all or, rather, how they become impossible” (FOW: 163).

4.3.2 Sensate Democracy

While resignification remains, for Butler, an important form of political action, there is, in her post-9/11 writing, another development which bears on the question of which forms of action are prioritised in her thought. This is Butler’s development of the idea of sensate democracy. I argue that this constitutes a significant development in Butler’s thought because it introduces new forms of political action in her writing. These new forms of action are not reducible to resignification but rather work alongside a politics of resignifying the human to minimise the differential distribution of precarity. Butler’s development of the idea of sensate democracy emerges across three key essays: “Precarious Life” (PL: 128-151), “Survivability, Vulnerability, Affect” (FOW: 33-62), and “Torture and the Ethics of Photography” (FOW: 63-100). I discuss each of these essays below.

In “Precarious Life”, Butler turns to Levinas to think about the question of how we become ethically responsive to the suffering of others. For Levinas, she argues, we develop ethical responsiveness when we are addressed by “the face” of the Other: the face communicates the precariousness of life, the vulnerability that is shared with the other, and thus prohibits a violent response (PL: 131-140). As is made clear by her claim, made elsewhere in Precarious Life, that appreciating common vulnerability is the basis for a non-violent response to injury, Butler largely accepts this Levinasian account of the development of ethical responsibility, at least as a normative
aspiration. Here, though, she poses a critical question to the Levinasian account: under what conditions does the face of the Other appear to us in its vulnerability? How, in other words, do we become able to perceive the precariousness of life?

In order to answer this question, Butler distinguishes between two senses of “the face” (PL: 141-143). There is, she reiterates, the Levinasian sense, in which we encounter the face of the Other as it makes an ethical demand upon us, a demand to which we are compelled to respond. But there is also a more everyday sense in which we encounter the face of the other through various forms of representation, usually visual, which enable us to perceive the other across the divide of geographical distance. While this latter sense of encountering the other holds important promise for developing ethical responsiveness under conditions of globalisation, it is not, Butler makes clear, the same as the Levinasian encounter with Otherness. Indeed, she argues, to represent the face of the other does not necessarily produce an ethical response to suffering. While representation can “humanise” in the sense of bringing the other into the frame of the normatively human – this is, Butler argues, how the photographs of Afghani women removing their burkas after the US invasion worked to “humanise” (PL: 142) – this is not the same as encountering the precariousness of life. It is, rather, an act of representation which serves to shore up the human as a restrictive norm. In this sense, Butler argues, “personification does not always humanize” (PL: 141): under some conditions, representing the face of the other succeeds only in distorting us from the human, from perceiving the precariousness of life.

What this means, Butler argues, is that the face of the other only appears to us within the context of normative schemes of intelligibility. Humanisation must therefore be understood in terms of the way that norms of intelligibility shape the determination of who is human (PL: 146). There is, Butler argues, at least two ways in which this happens: norms can work to produce an ideal of the human, to differentiate between the more and less human, and thus to manage the way that we do or do not identify with a given representation of the face; and norms can work to delimit the sphere of the human itself, an act of “radical effacement” (PL: 147) such that some faces are never represented, never appear to us at all. “In the first instance,” Butler writes, “something that has already emerged into the realm of appearance needs to be disputed as recognizably human; in the second instance, the public realm of appearance itself is constituted on the basis of the exclusion of that image” (PL: 147).

Hence, one way in which norms work, for Butler, is by regulating what and how we perceive. “[P]olitics,” she writes, “– and power – work in part through regulating what can appear, what can be heard” (PL: 147). This is, Butler argues, one reason why the US state was so ready to work with
the commercial media – a readiness evident, for example, in the widespread practice of embedding journalists with the military – in representing the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan: influencing the media is also influencing “what will and will not be publicly recognizable as reality” \((PL: 147)\). In this sense, Butler argues, forms of representation became, in the post-9/11 context, a military strategy, whereby “shock and awe” was as much applicable to the sensory effects produced by images of war on the US population as it was to the destruction wrought on the targets of US invasion \((PL: 148-149)\). Butler argues that these sensory effects largely took the form of desensitisation. In the US, war was experienced, she claims, as “a visual spectacle that numbs the senses and … puts out of play the very capacity to think” \((PL: 148)\). In this way, she posits, the US state entranced its citizens with the sublimity of destruction, numbed their senses, and closed off the capacity to respond ethically to the suffering of others wrought by military violence.

The question that Butler wants to ask is: How do we intervene in such a sensory landscape? How do we perceive the precariousness of life under these sensory conditions? What the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq make clear, she argues, is that we cannot become ethically responsive unless we become “sensate” – we must be able to see, and to hear, and to feel the suffering of others if we are to become responsive to the ethical demand that is communicated by the face:

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\text{[I]f the media will not run those pictures, and if those lives remain unnameable and ungrievable, if they do not appear in their precariousness and their destruction, we will not be moved. We will not return to a sense of ethical outrage that is, distinctively, for an Other, in the name of an Other. We cannot, under contemporary conditions of representation, hear the agonized cry or be compelled or commanded by the face. (PL: 150)}
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Thus, Butler argues, we must contest those conditions of representation that shut down our capacity to perceive the precariousness of life. This is not exactly a practice of resignification. While it is a practice that remains concerned with norms, in the sense that norms restrict our capacity to perceive the humanity of the other, it is a form of action directed not to changing the meaning of existing norms or even to expanding their reach, but to acting on the broader conditions that shape our capacity to perceive that such restrictive norms are in operation. It is, then, better conceived as a practice of critique, an encounter with the limits of a given regime of intelligibility, one in which, as Butler put is, we “interrogate the emergence and vanishing of the human at the limits of what we can know, what we can hear, what we can see, what we can sense” \((PL: 151)\). Such a critical practice involves contesting the state’s monopoly on the representation of the violence it inflicts, and in this way, Butler argues, it implicates the citizen in a practice of “dissent” \((PL: 151)\). For this
reason, it must also involve the effort to create a discursive space in which such dissent can be heard, “a sense of the public in which oppositional voices are not feared, degraded, or dismissed, but valued for the instigation to a sensate democracy that they occasionally perform” (PL: 151).

This is, Butler argues, how sensate democracy does its work: it allows into speakability the contestation of state violence, and it creates the conditions under which the limits of the human are able to appear, be perceived, and, in this way, be altered through a practice of resignification.

This conception of sensate democracy is developed further in Frames of War. In “Survivability, Vulnerability, Affect” (FOW: 33-62), Butler addresses directly the question of the conditions under which a certain form of politics becomes possible. How, she asks in this essay, do we assume responsibility for acting politically to minimise precarity? How do we perceive a responsibility to resignify the norms that define the human? In order to answer these questions, we must understand, Butler argues, that to assume responsibility is a socially conditioned process (FOW: 33-34). It is not that we simply decide that in one case we have a responsibility and in another case we do not. These “decisions” are shaped by social conditions that are not of our making and which are not necessarily perceived as influencing the actions that we ultimately take up. It is this socially conditioned assumption of responsibility that Butler is interested in exploring.

Butler argues that responsibility emerges from and is shaped by our affective responses to the world in which we live. This is a situation of impingement that cannot be avoided, and it arises, as Butler puts it, form “the socially ecstatic structure of the body” (FOW: 33). The body, for Butler, as we have already seen, is a social phenomenon: it is dependent on social conditions and institutions in order to persist. As a result, to be a body is to be in unwilled proximity to others and to the world at large. The body, in Butler’s words, “invariably comes up against the outside world” (FOW: 34). “And yet,” she continues, “this obtrusive alterity against which the body finds itself can be, and often is, what animates responsiveness to that world” (FOW: 34). This responsiveness includes a wide range of affects; Butler names, for example, “pleasure, rage, suffering, hope” (FOW: 34). These affective responses are what shape our capacity to perceive and assume political responsibility.

There is, Butler argues, something important to understand about the character of this political responsiveness. It emerges from within a situation of impingement, from the various ways in which we encounter what is outside of ourselves. In this sense, while our affective responses seem to be primary, without or before interpretation, they are in fact socially mediated (FOW: 49-50). This mediation does not only refer to the shaping of responses that occurs though our interactions with others, but includes as well, Butler argues, the ways in which our responses are shaped by our
encounters with regulatory regimes of power, with normative schemes of intelligibility. This means, Butler claims, that our affective responses “call upon and enact certain interpretive frames” (*FOW*: 34). They are, in other words, bound up with norms and frames of recognition that define who can be perceived as human.

Affect is normatively regulated, then, and this has, Butler argues, important consequences for our capacity to assume responsibility. When we think about what responsibility we may have for those we do not know, those who do not belong to the community of which we understand ourselves to be a part, the question of the way in which those “others” are represented to us becomes important (*FOW*: 36). How do the lives of others appear to me? Through what frames of recognition are they made perceptible, or fail to appear at all? In times of war, Butler argues, these questions are especially important as frames of recognition determine whose lives are deemed worthy of protection from violence and whose lives can be destroyed with impunity. These determinations are made, Butler claims, in part through defining whose lives are considered “grievable” (*FOW*: 38). Norms of recognition therefore work by regulating a specific affective response: they determine for whom we can publicly grieve. Our affective responses to war and violence do not emerge in a vacuum, then, but rather depend on social structures of perception wherein some lives appear to us as grievable and others do not.

What this means, Butler argues, is that the question of political responsibility must begin with the question of how we perceive a life. “[W]hat,” Butler asks, “allows a life to become visible in its precariousness and its need for shelter, and what is it that keeps us from seeing or understanding certain lives in this way?” (*FOW*: 51). Perceiving a life takes place through the senses, Butler claims; this is why the normative regime of war seeks to regulate our capacity to sense and perceive – it is acting on our capacity to apprehend the precariousness of life (*FOW*: 51). In this way, Butler argues, war, as both a normative framework and a regime of state power, “works to undermine a sensate democracy” (*FOW*: 52): it restricts what and how we feel, and thus it acts on the conditions that shape our capacity to develop an ethical response to suffering, to take political responsibility for contesting the differential distribution of precarity. If a politics of resignifying the human is to become possible, Butler thus argues, “a struggle must be waged against those forces that seek to regulate affect in differential ways” (*FOW*: 52).

Butler posits a range of political strategies that might be used to wage such a struggle. In addition to those already mentioned in her earlier discussion – the dissenting practice of contesting the state’s monopoly on the representation of the violence it inflicts, and the fostering of a free and accessible public sphere in which such dissent can be heard – Butler outlines, in this essay, another
form of possible action. There is, she argues, the political option of “offering alternative matrices for the understanding of war that question and oppose the dominant interpretations” (*FOW*: 52). These alternative frameworks both contest the prevailing conditions of representation that shape our affective responses, and incite alternative responses to war. They are, Butler argues, “interpretations [of war] that not only act upon affect, but take form and become effective as affect itself” (*FOW*: 52). These alternative frameworks constitute then, a form of affective politics: they incite a particular form of feeling, acting upon our capacity to perceive the suffering of others, contesting the way that this capacity has been restrictively shaped and used by regimes of war.

As an example of such an affective practice, Butler considers the text *Poems from Guantanamo* (Falkoff 2007), in which are collected 22 poems written by detainees. Noting the widespread censorship of poetry written in the camp, Butler considers what it is about the Guantanamo poetry that makes it particularly dangerous from the perspective of the US state. Why, she asks, as the state itself has claimed, does the “content and form” of this poetry present a “special risk” to national security (*FOW*: 55)? Butler suggests that the reason these poems have been so heavily censored is because they convey – and thus risk to incite – a moral and affective response to the war that is different to that produced by the state (*FOW*: 58). Even as they emerge from an inhuman context – a context of solitary confinement and torture – the poems, for Butler, articulate a common humanity: they make clear the vulnerability of the body, and they suggest the precariousness of life that none of us can avoid (*FOW*: 59-62). We can therefore see that “[t]he overwhelming power of mourning, loss, and isolation becomes a poetic tool of insurgency” (*FOW*: 58). In this sense, Butler argues, the poems – “their writing and their dissemination” – are “critical acts of resistance, insurgent interpretations, incendiary acts” (*FOW*: 62) which not only testify to the capacity of the human to persist within inhuman conditions but which act politically by inciting us to feel.

In “Torture and the Ethics of Photography” (*FOW*: 63-100), Butler outlines another way of acting politically to cultivate a sensate democracy. This is the production and dissemination of what she elsewhere calls “the critical image” (*PL*: 146) – or, the image that makes visible the way that reality is normatively framed. Here Butler remains concerned with the shaping of affective responses, especially in the context of war, but rather than positing a politics of inciting alternative feelings, she advocates a critical aesthetic practice whereby the framing of reality is made visible and thus open to contestation.

Butler’s discussion begins with a reflection on the way that the US state, and especially the military, shaped public perceptions during the US-led war in Iraq. Butler pays particular attention to the practice of embedded reporting, “an arrangement whereby journalists agreed to report only from the
perspective established by military and governmental authorities” (*FOW*: 64). This was, she argues, an arrangement whose purpose was to enable the state to dictate what could be seen and known about the war; it aligned the perspective of journalists with the perspective of the military, and so made unlikely the taking of a critical position on the part of reporters about the prosecution of the war (*FOW*: 65-6). Embedded reporting was, then, according to Butler, a way of “interpreting in advance what will and will not be included in the field of perception” (*FOW*: 66).

What the practice of embedded reporting makes clear, Butler argues, is that the framing of reality is also an interpretation of reality, and in this way is not a politically neutral act. Because they are forcibly framed, images are, for Butler, always already implicated in the normative field. This is, she acknowledges, a particular way of understanding how images work. Butler contrasts her account with Susan Sontag’s argument that the photographic image cannot offer an interpretation of reality without an accompanying narrative (*FOW*: 66-7). For Sontag, “although photographs have the capacity momentarily to move us, they do not allow for the building up of an interpretation” (*FOW*: 67). For Butler, however, the practice of embedded reporting makes clear that images are interpretive acts. “[I]t seems important to acknowledge,” she argues, “that in framing reality, the photograph has already determined what will count within the frame – and this act of delimitation is surely interpretive” (*FOW*: 67). Thus, for Butler, images are not static representations of reality but actively structure perception through the delimiting action of the frame.

The frame is active, then, in both presenting and delimiting reality. It usually operates without any sign of its operation and thus the viewer of the image assumes herself to be, Butler argues, “in an immediate (and incontestable) relation to reality” (*FOW*: 73). Only rarely, Butler posits, do we come to see the way that reality is framed. However, she argues, on those occasions when we do see the frame, when the frame becomes visible in the image itself, the assumption of an incontestable relation to reality is brought into crisis. When the photograph makes visible the way that it is framed, it “yields its frame to interpretation [and] thereby opens up to critical scrutiny the restrictions on interpreting reality” (*FOW*: 72). It becomes, in other words, a critical image. Such a photograph is, for Butler, a particularly powerful photograph in social and political terms: it compels us to question the interpretation of reality that we have been given, and in this way produces “a social critique of regulatory and censorious power” (*FOW*: 72).

The critical image makes visible, then, the way that reality is framed. It shows us, in Butler’s words, “the structuring effects that certain [] norms … have on what is provisionally called ‘reality’” (*FOW*: 74). It is important to become critical about these structuring effects, Butler argues, because the normative framing of reality affects our capacity to perceive the humanity of the
other. When the face of the other appears to us in its suffering, in its vulnerability to violence, “our capacity to respond with outrage, opposition, and critique will depend in part on how the differential norm of the human is communicated through visual and discursive frames” (*FOW*: 77). We must, therefore, become critical about the ways in which reality is presented to us, and the ways in which these frames and norms “delimit or orchestrate our ethical responsiveness to suffering” (*FOW*: 77).

Thus it is, Butler concludes, “our inability to see what we see that is [] of critical concern” (*FOW*: 100). It is our inability to see the way that war is visually framed and our perceptions forcibly delimited that prevents us from responding to the suffering of others. In the political opposition to war, there is thus a critical role for aesthetic practice, and that is to enable us to see the frames, to reflect on the delimiting of perception and the shaping of ethical responsiveness that is necessary to uphold the power of regulatory regimes. As Butler puts it: “[I]f there is a critical role for visual culture during times of war it is precisely to thematize the forcible frame, the one that conducts the dehumanizing norm, that restricts what is perceivable and, indeed, what can be” (*FOW*: 100). She continues:

[T]his restriction we have been asked to live with imposes constraints on what can be heard, read, seen, felt, and known, and so works both to undermine a sensate understanding of war, and the conditions for a sensate opposition to war. (*FOW*: 100).

A sensate democracy is, then, a polity in which we register the suffering of others, in which we stand a chance of apprehending the precariousness of life. It requires that we contest the power of the state to determine the way that reality is framed and presented, and thus to become critical about the way that normative regimes of power shape our affective responses. While a politics of sensate democracy works alongside a politics of resignifying the human, in the sense that the differential distribution of precarity must first be perceived before it can be acted upon, it is not reducible to resignification and in fact relies on a distinctive set of political activities. These include the fostering of a free and accessible public sphere, one in which dissenting perspectives can be heard, and a critical engagement with the power and violence of the state. It also involves acting on the incitement of affect, on how we feel about political events, and making visible the way that our capacity to perceive reality has been forcibly shaped. Critical forms of aesthetic practice – the production and dissemination of certain images, certain pieces of writing – are central to these activities. In this way, I argue, Butler’s post-9/11 texts make use of a much broader range of political action than that contained in her earlier work.
In this chapter, I took up the set of persistent feminist questions which have been directed to Butler’s politics. I showed that Butler’s approach to politics undergoes, in her recent texts, significant and broad-ranging development, and I argued that these developments can be understood to respond to the concerns of feminist critics in ways that are significant. The conception of politics which emerges in Butler’s post-9/11 texts is one in which feminism is centrally bound up with contemporary contestations of war, violence, and the coercive power of the state. Thus, what my analysis suggests is that feminism, for Butler, is not a politics for women, nor even a politics of gender, but a way of entering into a diverse and contingent community in order to intervene critically in the normative production of the human.

In the first part of the chapter, I looked at the feminist question of normativity. I showed that in her post-9/11 texts Butler significantly expands and clarifies her normative thinking: in the post-9/11 context, she becomes explicit about the normative grounds of her politics, positing the norm of ‘liveability’ as that which must drive and impel political engagement. I also showed that at the same time that Butler comes to posit norms of political judgement, she maintains a critical relation to those norms, developing an ethos of critical responsibility wherein norms must be subject to contestation in a way that is focussed and ongoing. In this way, I argued, normativity, for Butler, comes to have a double valence: we need norms by which to live and act, she argues, but we need as well to guard against the possibility of normative violence.

In the second part of the chapter, I took up the feminist question of political community. I argued that Butler continues to develop her understanding of political community in her post-9/11 texts, positing non-violence as that which might unify a post-identity political coalition in the contemporary context. I showed that this context is characterised, for Butler, less by the exclusions wrought by representational forms of feminism than by the obstacles to cross-cultural alliance generated by the normative framework of liberalism. Against this backdrop, it becomes clear that non-violence, for Butler, is a better approach to coalitional practice than the normalising structure of identity.

In the third and final part of the chapter, I looked at the feminist question of which forms of political action are prioritised in Butler’s work. I argued that what Butler’s post-9/11 texts make clear is that she does not consider resignification to be the only or the best political strategy, considered outside of any context. I showed that in Butler’s recent work there are specific conditions under which resignification both emerges and recedes as a preferable form of political action. In the post-9/11
context, what makes resignification a useful practice, for Butler, is the way that it acts upon the norms that shape the determination of who appears and matters as human. She acknowledges, however, that resignification is more likely to be effective in this area if it is accompanied by other forms of political activity. To this end, I explicated the development in Butler’s thought of a politics oriented toward the creation of a ‘sensate’ democracy, a polity in which the suffering of others cannot be dismissed. Such a politics involves the deployment of critical forms of aesthetic practice that work upon our capacity to perceive the precariousness of life. It also involves the maintenance of a free and accessible public sphere, a space in which the life of another stands a chance of being apprehended, and in this sense, I argued, Butler comes to advocate in her post-9/11 texts a critical engagement with the state as an important part of the way in which a politics of resignification must proceed.
Chapter Five

Conclusion

This thesis has explored the relationship between Judith Butler’s post-9/11 texts and established debates in the feminist reception of her thought. It has been motivated by a desire to bring a set of persistent feminist questions about Butler’s thought into conversation with her more recent work, an act of analysis and interpretation that has not elsewhere been undertaken in a systematic way. In pursuing this desire, I have had three aims: to extend the feminist interpretation of Butler to take in her more recent writing; to deepen and complicate this interpretation by highlighting the way that Butler herself has responded to and developed key points of feminist contention about her work; and to emphasise the continuing relevance of Butler’s thinking for feminist questions, reinforcing her writing as a key site for the development of contemporary feminist thought.

In this concluding chapter, I reiterate the way in which the thesis has pursued these aims, and reflect upon the extent to which it might be understood to have been successful in this pursuit. The chapter is divided into three parts. In the first part, I re-state and summarise the main arguments of the thesis. In the second part, I identify and reflect upon the limitations of the thesis. In the third and final part, I broaden my focus to articulate some possible implications of the analysis I have presented.

5.1 Summary of Arguments

In Chapter One of the thesis, I identified seven questions posed to Butler by her feminist critics that I claimed have remained ‘persistent’ – both in terms of their longevity, and in terms of the depth of feminist engagement with Butler that has been generated in their name. I described the way that these questions cluster around three themes in Butler’s work – agency, recognition, and politics – and I argued that their persistence establishes these questions as worthy of continued exploration. I
also argued that these questions have been posed to a relatively narrow selection of Butler’s texts, and made the case for extending consideration of these questions to Butler’s more recent writing.

I then took up the task of exploring the ways in which Butler’s post-9/11 texts might be understood address or respond to these persistent feminist questions. In Chapter Two, I looked at those questions that feminists have posed to Butler’s understanding of agency. As outlined in Chapter One, these questions make up two distinct lines of inquiry. The first is centred on Butler’s claim that subjects are constituted in a process of submission to power in which the achievement of autonomy is impossible. How, critics have wanted to know, does agency emerge if autonomy from power is no longer a possibility? Acknowledging Butler’s argument that agency consists in the practice of performative subversion, these critics have nonetheless wanted to know from Butler how this performative agency comes about if the self depends for its persistence on normative regimes of power. The second line of inquiry concerns Butler’s framing of agency as the practice of resignifying norms. The problem for these critics has not been whether agency is possible for Butler but has rather consisted in the abstraction of Butler’s account from social and subjective life. They have thus asked of her: What happens to the lived complexities of agency when it is defined narrowly as a practice of resignification?

I argued in this chapter that while they are not as prominent in Butler’s post-9/11 texts as they were in her earlier writing, questions of agency remain in these texts a present if underlying concern. I engaged a selection of interviews and articles alongside the monographs that Butler published in the post-9/11 period to argue that while not always obvious, Butler’s recent work does relate to her earlier ideas about agency, autonomy, and the resignification of norms, and it does ‘respond’ – sometimes directly – to feminist questions on this theme.

I made this argument in two parts, each of which corresponded to one of the persistent feminist questions identified above. On the first question, I argued that Butler’s recent writing provides a clearer sense than her earlier work did of the ways in which the possibility of agency does not depend on autonomy. I identified and discussed three moments in Butler’s post-9/11 writing in which she develops her understanding of agency in this way: I looked first at her engagement with the Foucauldian idea of critical desubjugation; next, I took up her expanded discussion of the ways in which subjection is an iterable process; and finally, I discussed her clarification of the claim that the subject is attached to its own subjection. Taken together, I argued, these developments in Butler’s thinking provide a fuller account than her earlier work did of how the structures of power in which we are formed do not only constrain us but enable us to act.
On the second question, I argued that Butler’s post-9/11 texts develop a more nuanced account of resignification than that contained in her earlier work, one that acknowledges the variety of ways in which power is inhabited and negotiated. In support of this claim, I discussed the expanded account of gender norms that Butler develops in her recent work, arguing that it implies a conception of resignification not as a structural abstraction but as a form of change that depends fundamentally upon human action. I also looked at her recent framing of resignification as an ethical practice, a framing which, I argued, enacts a shift in Butler’s thinking such that agency is no longer figured restrictively in terms of subversion but entails a more complex process of negotiating with norms. I concluded that what these developments in Butler’s thinking make clear is that she no longer understands resignification in the way that critics have claimed: it is not a potentiality residing in the structure of signification but a form of embodied action that centrally involves the subject in a ‘living’ relation with norms.

In Chapter Three, I moved on to consider those persistent feminist questions which have been directed to Butler’s conception of recognition. As indicated in Chapter One, there exist two relevant lines of inquiry. Firstly, feminist critics have asked whether Butler views self-other relations as necessarily violent or whether there is room in her thought for a positive account. Secondly, they have wondered whether recognition, for Butler, must always occur within the terms of prevailing norms, and therefore whether it must always function to reify normative identities and to reinforce existing patterns of regulation. On both questions, critics have argued that Butler views recognition in an overly negative way: she tends, they have claimed, to emphasise the destructive potential of human relationships over and above our capacity to positively sustain one another, and to stress the regulatory function of recognition while remaining pessimistic about the possibility of resisting normative patterns of identification.

Taking up these questions, I argued that there are developments in Butler’s post-9/11 texts that largely allay these concerns. I showed that in these texts Butler’s understanding of recognition undergoes sustained and profound development. Reflecting on the fact of human vulnerability exposed by the 9/11 attacks, Butler is compelled in these texts to explore the ways in which we are not only constituted by power but are constituted in our relations with other people. Following Butler in her exploration of the ethical and political implications of this fact, I demonstrated the ways in which a more optimistic account of recognition emerges in Butler’s post-9/11 writing, one in which the possibility of recognition persists despite the challenges posed by human destructiveness and the existence of normative violence.
To make this argument, I considered four developments in Butler’s thinking. I looked firstly at her claim that dependency is constitutive of ethical connection and agency, arguing that this represents a significant departure from her earlier work in which dependency was the condition for a certain form of subordination. I then looked at the relationship in Butler’s thought between recognition and human aggression. I showed that in her recent work Butler makes clear that destructive desires do not constitute recognition essentially, but rather constitute the problem with which recognition must continually struggle, meaning that recognition comes to exist for Butler as a practice of non-violence. The third development that I considered was Butler’s elaboration of an account of ‘ecstatic’ constitution, in which norms are communicated and become operable upon the subject through her relations with others. I argued that this account is significant because it establishes the possibility of recognition as a transformative practice. Finally, I looked at Butler’s positing of the concept of ‘apprehension’, a concept which, I claimed, names the existence in Butler’s thought of a practice of recognition that does not proceed according to the terms of prevailing norms but rather disrupts and intervenes in their regulatory operation. Together, I argued, these developments demonstrate that for Butler recognition is indeed possible, both as an intersubjective practice that does not reiterate violence and as a form of political intervention into the prevailing norms that constitute the human. In this sense, they constitute a response to feminist critics who have long pressed Butler to think more deeply about the positive aspects of human sociality.

Chapter Four was focused on those feminist questions which have been posed to Butler’s politics. In this chapter, I showed that political questions are central to Butler’s post-9/11 writing, and I demonstrated that in these texts her earlier account undergoes significant and broad-ranging development. I argued further that this development not only constitutes a nuanced response to changing social and political contexts, but responds in notable ways to the questions that feminist critics have posed to her earlier work.

As discussed in Chapter One, these questions constitute three lines of inquiry. The first is centred on Butler’s genealogical approach to critique and her subsequent reluctance to ground her politics in a prescriptive normative framework. Feminist critics have asked: What are the normative grounds of Butler’s politics? What are the criteria by which she would judge a policy, programme, or action to be politically worthwhile and how would she determine if it were problematic? The second line of inquiry concerns Butler’s critique of identity-based forms of political community. The issue for critics here has been the absence in Butler’s thought of a plausible alternative to identity as a form of political organising. They have thus asked of her: What does a post-identity political coalition involve, and how is it held together in the absence of the unifying structure of identity? The third line of inquiry is focussed on Butler’s framing of political action as a practice of resignifying
norms, which feminist critics have argued validates resignification over and above alternative forms of political engagement, neglecting important questions of context and efficacy. Their question has thus been: Why limit political action in this way? What is gained and what is lost when acting politically is conceived restrictively as the resignification of norms?

The chapter was divided into three parts, reflecting these three lines of inquiry. In the first part of the chapter, I took up the question of normativity. I argued that Butler significantly expands and clarifies her approach to normativity in her post-9/11 texts. To this end, I described the development in her thought of a conception of politics oriented to securing the conditions for life to persist and flourish, and I argued that such a politics entails the normative values of equality, universality, and freedom. I also showed that alongside this positing of a pro-life politics, Butler maintains in her post-9/11 texts that to posit a norm entails the corollary obligation to subject that norm to critique. I thus argued that Butler’s recent work reveals a more sophisticated account of normativity than critics have tended to acknowledge, one that does not turn away from positing norms but maintains that to do so entails a complementary set of ethical obligations.

In the second part of the chapter, I looked at the question of political community. I discussed Butler’s argument that in the post-9/11 context the challenges for political community are generated not only by the exclusionary tendencies of representational forms of feminism, but by a form of liberal multiculturalism that reifies difference and produces obstacles to cross-cultural alliance. I then explicated Butler’s development of an alternative form of political organising, wherein coalitional unity is located in the practice of non-violence. I argued that these developments in Butler’s thinking provide a better sense than her earlier work did of how a post-identity political community is not only possible but desirable.

In the third and final part of the chapter, I considered the feminist question of which forms of political action are validated in Butler’s thought. I identified and discussed two developments in Butler’s work which I took to be significant: firstly, I looked at Butler’s reframing of resignification as a politics that acts on the norms that constitute the human, and secondly, I discussed Butler’s development of a form of politics oriented towards the creation of a ‘sensate’ democracy. I argued that together these developments provide a fuller sense than Butler’s earlier work did of the conditions under which resignification both emerges and recedes as a preferable form of political action. They also make clear that Butler does not understand a politics of resignification to operate in isolation but rather understands the practice of resignification to be most effective when supported by other forms of political engagement, including, notably, a critical engagement with the coercive power of the state. In this way, I demonstrated that these developments in Butler’s thought...
represent a more expansive understanding than that contained in her earlier work of the forms of political action available to a democratic and globally engaged feminism.

This thesis has thus argued that despite their thematic variance and relative neglect in the feminist critical literature, Butler’s post-9/11 texts do bear crucially upon her earlier interventions in feminist theory. I have established that in these texts Butler significantly develops certain aspects of her earlier writings, and I have shown that these developments speak in important and interesting ways to persistent questions posed in the feminist interpretation of her thought. In this way, the thesis has demonstrated that while Butler’s post-9/11 texts may differ thematically from her earlier work in feminist theory, they remain in a significant sense continuous with this work, and should be approached as important sources for furthering feminist engagement with Butler’s thought.

5.2 Limitations of the Thesis

My aim in this thesis has been to extend the feminist interpretation of Butler’s thought by exploring a set of persistent questions about her work in the context of her more recent writing. The critical account of Butler that has emerged through this endeavour is thus a limited one: while I have undertaken a close and detailed reading of Butler’s post-9/11 texts, my critical engagement with these texts has necessarily been confined to the question of whether and how they might respond to the persistent questions I have identified. In maintaining this critical focus across the body of the thesis, there are several lines of inquiry into Butler’s thought which I have not been able to pursue.

Firstly, I have not explored the ways in which the various developments that I have described in Butler’s thought might relate to one another. I have not attempted to unify these developments into a coherent body of thought, despite the existence of several recurring themes in my discussion of Butler’s post-9/11 writing, and the emergence of some intriguing lines of connection between what might appear to be rather distant elements of her work. For example, a conception of non-violence as an ethico-political practice runs throughout the analysis of Butler’s thought presented in this thesis, as does a sense of the vitality of life and living, and an appreciation of the political salience of desire, affect, and sensation. While the centrality of these themes suggest Butler’s development of a particular form of feminism in these texts, one that refuses to understand the subject as sovereign but which continues to uncover subjective resources for ethical and political agency, I have not pursued in this thesis such a unifying analysis, following, instead, the various lines of critical inquiry which have characterised feminist engagement with her thought.
Nor have I pursued potential contradictions between different developments in Butler’s thought, even when these have promised to be revealing. For example, one question suggested by my engagement with Butler’s work but which I have been unable to take up centres on the relationship in her thought between her account of recognition as an ethical practice, in which mutual recognition is possible as a form of non-violence, and a more directly political conception of recognition as a practice that is always circumscribed by norms. While I have suggested that Butler moves towards an account of non-normative recognition in the concept of apprehension, thus addressing critics who have problematised the strong link in her work between recognition and the reproduction of normative regimes, I have not probed further to ask how this account of non-normative recognition might relate to the parallel account of non-violent recognition developed in her post-9/11 texts. Do these two accounts converge in their optimistic positioning of recognition as a practice that challenges normative constraints, or do they exist in tension, the ethical rendering of recognition suggesting that norms can be transcended while the political rendering maintains that to act on norms remains a slow labour of resignification?

Secondly, I have not related my reading of Butler’s post-9/11 texts to current controversies in the critical literature engaging her recent work. The thesis is built on a desire to extend the feminist critique of Butler to her more recent writing; I have thus limited my engagement with the literature focussed on her post-9/11 texts because, as I suggested in the introduction to this thesis, it takes up a different set of concerns to the feminist critique of her thought. Thus, I do not relate my reading of Butler’s recent work to critical controversies such as the status of what has appeared to some to be a new form of humanism in her post-9/11 writing, or the question of how to understand the relationship between ethics and politics in her thought. I would like to make clear that this is not because I think these discussions are unimportant; on the contrary, I think they raise issues which are central to developing a sophisticated understanding of Butler’s post-9/11 work, and there have been critical contributions to these discussions which I have found to be illuminating. Nor is it because I do not have anything to contribute to these debates. Rather, I have maintained a distance from these questions because they are tangential to the thesis’s overall purpose, which is to explore the way that Butler’s post-9/11 texts might be responding to a different set of questions, even as they establish new grounds for critical inquiry. Indeed, this distance from the interpretive literature engaging Butler’s post-9/11 texts might be viewed as the thesis’s strength, as it is what has allowed a different (though not unrelated) reading of these texts to emerge.

Thirdly, while I have been centrally concerned with the ways in which Butler’s post-9/11 texts might relate to established debates in the feminist interpretation of her thought, I have not evaluated her recent work beyond the question of how it might respond to the persistent points of feminist
contention that the thesis has identified. In other words, I have not evaluated developments in Butler’s post-9/11 texts for their adequacy to feminist politics, outside of the questions that feminists have posed to her earlier work. In this sense, the critical enterprise of the thesis has been limited by the nature of the questions which have been important to critics. For example, what feminist critics have wanted to know from Butler is whether there is any normative grounding to her thought, and why she has been so reluctant to make this grounding explicit. In exploring how Butler’s recent work might respond to these inquiries, I have outlined the explicit positing in her post-9/11 writing of the norm of liveability, as well as her development of a more complex account of normativity as a double movement, a practice of critical responsibility. What I have not done is evaluate the norms which Butler posits in these texts for their political adequacy. I have not asked, for instance, whether the norm of freedom that emerges in her recent work is an adequate one for contemporary feminist struggles, for example those centred on the continuing prevalence of gendered violence. Nor have I explored whether Butler’s norm of liveability is sufficiently well developed to serve as the basis for feminist claims to reproductive rights – a question which would seem important given Butler’s advocacy of a politics centred on the protection and persistence of life.

Again, I would like to make clear that this is not because I think that these questions are unimportant. Rather, within the space that has been available to me, I have restricted my critical focus to exploring the ways in which Butler’s post-9/11 texts might respond to a pre-existing set of questions, making other lines of inquiry tangential to the thesis’s overall aim. I hope to have the opportunity to take up these questions in future bodies of work.

5.3 Implications of the Analysis

The core claim of this thesis is that much can be gained from reading Butler’s post-9/11 texts as a space in which she works through some of the tensions identified by her feminist interlocutors in her earlier work. Such a move, I have suggested, enables the continued recognition of Butler as a significant feminist theorist. Precisely what, however, is to be gained from such an exercise? Why read Butler’s post-9/11 texts as an attempt to work through the tensions that have haunted her earlier writing and not, as others have characterised them – and, it must be pointed out, not without reason – as an attempt to develop a post-9/11 ethics or to respond to the depredations of the War on Terror? Indeed, why, given the marked broadening of her political concerns in the post-9/11 context, continue to read Butler as a feminist theorist at all?
In what little remains of this thesis I would like to briefly sketch an answer to these questions. There are two points that I would like to make in response to such a query. Firstly, what is suggested by reading Butler’s post-9/11 texts as a working through of certain tensions is a way to move beyond the debilitating meta-theoretical arguments that dominated feminist discourse from the 1990s onwards. While Butler’s earlier work was taken to be emblematic of poststructuralism, her post-9/11 texts make clear that she is in fact far more complexly positioned: she combines poststructuralist insights with other theoretical positions (including those as varied as Hegel, Freud, and Levinas, not to mention Sontag, Cavarero, Anzaldua, and Klein) in a way that is productive and illuminating. What becomes very clear in Butler’s recent work is that feminists do not need to choose between postmodernism and critical theory; we do not need to sacrifice a sense of the agency of the gendered subject in order to understand her dependency on regimes and relations of power, nor do we need to abandon a vision of feminist politics in order to address normative violence and exclusion in the feminist movement. Specifically, what Butler’s post-9/11 texts put beyond doubt is that a poststructuralist or postmodern critique of the subject does not in any way preclude the development of an ethics or a politics. In this sense, approaching Butler’s post-9/11 texts in the way that I have in this thesis suggests a far more complex account of the theoretical bases of Butler’s feminism than is sometimes acknowledged, and brings into relief what might finally have been gained by the seemingly intractable meta-theoretical debates that feminism has found itself encumbered with in its recent past.

Secondly, by insisting on Butler’s significance as a feminist theorist over and above her importance as an ethicist or a political theorist or a critic of the Bush administration, this thesis has demonstrated her distinctive contribution to feminism as a social and political movement. Specifically, what my analysis of Butler’s post-9/11 texts suggests is that they develop and enact a conception of feminist politics that is much broader than that which has sometimes been attributed to her. The politics that emerges in these texts is not limited to the symbolic reshaping of gender norms (or, in more reductive readings, to the practices of ‘drag’ or ‘parody’), but involves instead a far-reaching critique of militarism, precarity, and state violence. This suggests a feminism that is significantly global in scope, and one that must forge alliances with other political movements if it is to be effective in pursuing its goals. Feminism, for Butler, is not only a proliferation of the possibilities for living one’s gender, but a critical intervention into global configurations of power. Hence by reading Butler’s post-9/11 texts as an important body of feminist thought, the thesis insists on the contribution that feminism can – and indeed must – make to contemporary global politics.
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