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A Carefully Crafted F**k You

Nathan Schneider interviews Judith Butler, March 2010

The gender-theorist-turned-philosopher-of-nonviolence discusses the choices that make people expendable, the violent foundation of nonviolent activism, and the role grief can play in setting a new course.



Judith Butler's philosophy is an assault on common sense, on the atrophy of thinking. It untangles not only how ideas compel us to action, but how unexamined action leaves us with unexamined ideas—and, then, disastrous politics. Her work over the last few years has been devoted to challenging the Bush/Cheney-era torpor that came over would-be dissenters in the face of two wars and an acquiescent electorate. She does so not with policy prescriptions or electoral tactics, but with an analysis of the habits of thinking and doing that stand behind them. It is in response to the suffering of others, she insists, of innocent victims in particular, that we must come to terms with the world as it is and act in it.

Butler is, at University of California at Berkeley, Maxine Elliot Professor in the Departments of Rhetoric and Comparative Literature. Her reputation is secure as the most important theorist of gender in the last quarter century, thanks to books like [Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity](#) (1990) and [Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex](#) (1993). The thrust of her contribution is to destabilize—to queer—identity by disentangling the fragile performances that give rise to it. Whether in gender politics or

geopolitics, her analysis shows how failing to grasp these sources of identity blinds us to the common humanity of others.

Her latest book, [*Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?*](#) (2009), reflects on the past decade's saga of needless war, photographed—even fetishized—torture, and routine horror. It treats these practices as issuing from a philosophical choice, one which considers certain human beings expendable and unworthy of being grieved. The concluding chapter confronts the paradoxical nature of any call for nonviolent resistance—paradoxical because the very identities that we claim and resist on behalf of were themselves formed by violence in the past. Butler does not mistake nonviolence for passivity, as so many critics do. At its best, she writes, nonviolent resistance becomes a “carefully crafted ‘fuck you,’” tougher to answer than a Howitzer.

Many of *Frames of War*'s reviewers comment about the difficulty of Butler's prose. It certainly departs from the usual terms of debate about the subject—say, troop levels or international law—in order to point toward something more fundamental. Her books are notoriously dense, but the sensation of density stems from the very expectations we hold that she is trying to challenge. Butler has written about J.L. Austin, who taught philosophers in the deepest throes of the linguistic turn “how to do things with words,” and that is what she does. Reading her prose is a feat, an act. It is performative, in the sense that the text aspires to change us, not simply inform or explain. Apparently clear language can be more misleading than purposeful obfuscation; clarity sometimes depends on the assumptions and vocabulary that deliver us into war after war, or hate crime after hate crime, or refusal after refusal to admit the personhood of another.

Butler's sentences are an invitation to refute those mistakes, to rethink, and to start again. Whether her particular performance, or philosophy in general, can make any dent in the war machine remains to be seen—though its influence may finally be too subtle to detect.

We had this exchange over a series of emails, during which she traveled to the West Bank and back on a research trip.

—Nathan Schneider for *Guernica*

Guernica: This book, you write, is a response to the policies under the Bush administration. How different would a book about the Obama administration be? Have we learned at all how to expand our circle of grief? Have we adjusted our frames?

Judith Butler: The fact is that the war in Afghanistan has escalated under the Obama administration, and though it seems as if there is a firmer policy against torture, and a clear condemnation of torture on the part of the administration, we still are responsible for an extraordinary number of brutal deaths by war. This administration was fully silent during the massacre on Gaza. And Obama himself has agreed not to disclose the full narrative and visual archive on U.S. torture—we have to ask why. I think we have to learn how to separate our impressions of Obama the man as both thoughtful and inspiring from the policies of the Obama administration. Perhaps then we can begin to see that the politics of the administration are very separate from the impression of the man. This is a painful lesson to learn, and I wonder whether the U.S. public and its European allies will actually learn it.

Perhaps we should cease to ask the question of what kind of person he really is and focus on what he does.

Guernica: That kind of distinction between the man—well, as you say, impressions of him—and the administration is something one hears disappointed progressives making a lot lately. But many still feel that, in Obama, they have an ally on the inside who is doing the best he can against political inertia. Can one afford to trust him? Not doing so could undermine his ability to undo that inertia.

Judith Butler: Those explanations that try to locate all the inertia outside of Obama don't take into account his own unwillingness to speak and act in face of certain urgent issues. His inability to condemn the onslaught against Gaza was not a matter of some external constraint upon him. No one coerced him into escalating the war in Afghanistan, nor was it a matter of externally situated inertia when he abandoned stronger versions of universal healthcare. Perhaps we should cease to ask the question of what kind of person he really is and focus on what he does. He speaks, he acts, and he fails to act; he is explicitly thwarted by entrenched relations. But let us not make excuses for the man or his administration when his actions are weak or, indeed, when he fails to act at all.

Guernica: Obama has performed his presidency as a thinker, a reflecting person, perhaps most ironically when deciding how many tens of thousands more troops to send to Afghanistan. Do you find this heartening?

Judith Butler: With Obama, there is thinking. But it seems to me mainly strategic, if not wholly technical. He has surrounded himself with technocrats, especially on his economic team. So how do we understand the disconnect between the domain of principle and that of policy? What is the relation between the moral vision and principles he espouses and the kind of policy he implements?

All I really have to say about life is that for it to be regarded as valuable, it has to first be regarded as grievable.

Guernica: Let me turn that question back at you. In a world ever more specialized, should articulating a moral vision still be expected of politicians? Might mere bureaucratic competence at the service of their constituent's interests be enough?

Judith Butler: A president is part of a team, and he chooses those with whom he will act in concert. Summers and Geithner were choices, and they were ones that clearly put technocratic free market thinking above questions of social justice and the kind of political thinking it would take to implement norms of justice. One has to be competent at implementing one policy or another. But there is always the question of which policy, and this is a matter of principle.

Guernica: In the book's introduction, you set out a principled vision for how we might go about defining life—

Judith Butler: I am not at all sure that I define life, since I think that life tends to exceed the definitions of it we may offer. It always seems to have that characteristic, so the approach to life cannot be altogether successful if we start with definitions. All I really have to say about life is that for it to be regarded as valuable, it has to first be regarded as grievable. A life that is in some sense socially dead or already "lost" cannot be grieved when it is actually destroyed. And I think we can see that entire populations are regarded as negligible life by warring powers, and so when they are destroyed, there is no great sense that a heinous act and egregious loss have taken place. My question is: how do we understand this nefarious distinction that gets set up between grievable and ungrievable lives?

Guernica: How does your understanding of life differ, for example, from that of the pro-life movement?

Judith Butler: I distinguish my position from the so-called "pro-life" movement since they do not care about whether or not life is sustainable. For me, the argument in favor of a sustainable life can be made just as easily for a woman or girl who requires an abortion in order to live her life and maintain her livelihood. So my argument about life does not favor one side of that debate or another; indeed, I think that debate should be settled on separate grounds. The left needs to reclaim life, especially given how many urgent bio-political issues face us now.

I am trying to contest the notion that we can only value, shelter, and grieve lives that share a common language or cultural sameness with ourselves.

Guernica: What do you mean by “separate grounds”? Must we draw a line between death by abortion and death by war? As opposed, for example, to the “seamless garment” of life in Catholic social teaching?

Judith Butler: We cannot decide questions of reproductive technology or abortion by deciding in advance where life begins and ends. Technologies are already re-deciding those basic issues. We have to ask what kinds of choices are made possible by social configurations of life, and to locate our choices socially and politically. There is no way around the question, “What makes a life livable?” This is different from the question of what constitutes life. At what point in any life process does the question of rights emerge? We differ over how to answer that question.

Guernica: Your account of life depends on being intertwined with other lives; does it really then call on us to be more concerned for the lives of others in distant places and conflicts?

Judith Butler: Along with many other people, I am trying to contest the notion that we can only value, shelter, and grieve those lives that share a common language or cultural sameness with ourselves. The point is not so much to extend our capacity for compassion, but to understand that ethical relations have to cross both cultural and geographical distance. Given that there is global interdependency in relation to the environment, food supply and distribution, and war, do we not need to understand the bonds that we have to those we do not know or have never chosen? This takes us beyond communitarianism and nationalism alike. Or so I hope.

Guernica: Yes, but surely the lines of interdependency are much deeper and immediate between me and my friends, family, and local community than between me and the average Iraqi in Iraq. Can’t I be excused for at least grieving the Iraqi less, proportionate to my dependence?

Judith Butler: It is not a question of how much you or I feel—it is rather a question of whether a life is worth grieving, and no life is worth grieving unless it is regarded as grievable. In other words, when we subscribe to ideas such as, “no innocent life should be slaughtered,” we have to be able to include all kinds of populations within the notion of “innocent life”—and that means subscribing to an egalitarianism that would contest prevailing schemes of racism.

Guernica: What does the grief you call for consist of? How does it act upon us?

Judith Butler: If we were to start to grieve those against whom we wage war, we would have to stop. One saw this I think very keenly last year when Israel attacked Gaza. The population was considered in explicitly racist ways, and every life was considered an instrument of war. Thus, a unilateral attack on a trapped population became interpreted by those who waged war as an extended act of self-defense. It is clear that most people in the world rejected that construal of the situation, especially when they saw how many women and children were killed.

The vast majority of feminists oppose these contemporary wars, and object to the false construction of Muslim women “in need of being saved.”

Guernica: On your recent trip to the West Bank, did you observe any instances of grief at work?

Judith Butler: I certainly saw many commemorations on the walls of Nablus and Jenin. The question is whether the mainstream Israeli press and public can accept the fact that their army committed widespread slaughter in Gaza. I heard private confirmation of that among Israelis, but less in public. Some brave journalists and writers say it. The organization, Zochrot, that commemorates the deaths and expulsions of Palestinians in 1948—the *Naqba*—does some of this work, but so much of it remains partially muted within public discourse. There is now a resolution under consideration in Israel attempting to ban public funding for educational and arts projects that represent the *Naqba*—this is surely a state effort to regulate grieving.

Guernica: Forms of grief are deployed, through certain deplorable exemplars, to justify a military regime—the Holocaust, for example, and now 9/11. Why, then, can't grief just as easily be used to justify more war?

Judith Butler: Well, I do worry about those instances in which public mourning is explicitly proscribed, and that invariably happens in the context of war. I think there were ways, for instance, of producing icons of those who were killed in the 9/11 attacks in such a way that the desire for revenge and vindication was stoked. So we have to distinguish between modes of mourning that actually extend our ideas about equality, and those that produce differentials, such as “this population is worth protecting” and “this population deserves to die.”

Guernica: The hawkish wing in the “war on terror” has quite effectively claimed the banner of feminism. Is feminism as it has been articulated in part to blame for this?

Judith Butler: No, I think that we have seen quite cynical uses of feminism for the waging of war. The vast majority of feminists oppose these contemporary wars, and object to the false construction of Muslim women “in need of being saved” as a cynical use of feminist concerns with equality. There are some very strong and interesting Muslim feminist movements, and casting Islam as anti-feminist not only disregards those movements, but displaces many of the persisting inequalities in the first world onto an imaginary elsewhere.

Guernica: After millions of protesters around the world could do nothing to prevent the Iraq War, what do you think is the most effective form of protest? Disobedience? Or even thinking?

Judith Butler: Let us remember that Marx thought of thinking as a kind of practice. Thinking can take place in and as embodied action. It is not necessarily a quiet or passive activity. Civil disobedience can be an act of thinking, of mindfully opposing police force, for instance. I continue to believe in demonstrations, but I think they have to be sustained. We see the continuing power of this in Iran right now. The real question is why people thought with the election of Obama that there was no reason to still be on the street? It is true that many people on the left will never have the animus against Obama that they have against Bush. But maybe we need to protest policies instead of individuals. After all, it takes many people and institutions to sustain a war.

Guernica: Anyone who went to an anti-war protest during the Bush administration surely saw the violence of the anger directed personally against the president. People have a need to personalize. It seems to me the strength of your book, though, is that it counter-personalizes, turning our focus not so much to policies or policy-makers as to victims and potential victims.

Judith Butler: It is personal, but it asks what our obligations are to those we do not know. So in this sense, it is about the bonds we must honor even when we do not know the others to whom we are bound.

Guernica: Your account of nonviolence revolves around recognizing sociality and interconnection as well. Does it also rely on the kind of inner spiritual work that was so important, for instance, to Gandhi?

Judith Butler: I am not sure that the work is “inner” in the way that Gandhi described. But I do think that one has to remain vigilant in relation to one's own aggression, to craft and direct it in ways that are effective. This work on the self, though, takes place through certain practices, and by noticing where one is, how angry one is, and even comporting oneself differently over time. I think this has to be a social practice, one that we undertake with others. That support and solidarity are crucial to maintaining it. Otherwise, we think we should become heroic individuals, and that takes us away from effective collective action.

Guernica: What can philosophy, which so often looks like a kind of solitary heroism, offer against the military-industrial complexes and the cowboy self-image that keep driving us into wars? At what register can philosophy make a difference?

Judith Butler: Let's remember that the so-called military-industrial complex has a philosophy, even if it is not

readily published in journals. The contemporary cowboy also has, or exemplifies, a certain philosophical vision of power, masculinity, impermeability, and domination. So the question is how philosophy takes form as an embodied practice. Any action that is driven by principles, norms, or ideals is philosophically informed. So we might consider: what practices embody interdependency and equality in ways that might mitigate the practice of war waging? My wager is that there are many.

Guernica: Last year, for one, the Mellon Foundation awarded you \$1.5 million which you are using to found a critical theory center devoted to scholarship about war. How is it progressing? What are your goals?

Judith Butler: I am trying to bring together people to think about new forms of war and war waging, the place of media in the waging of war, and ways of thinking about violence that can take account of new forms of conflict that do not comply with conventional definitions of war. This will involve considering traditional definitions of war in political science and international law, but also new forms of conflict, theories of violence, and humanistic inquiries into why people wage war as they do. I'm also interested in linking this with studies of ecology, toxic soil, and damaged life.

Guernica: Do you mean to say that the concept of war might be recovered, as William James proposes, for instance, in "The Moral Equivalent of War"? Is war's ferocity of commitment possible without the bloodlust and the bloody victims?

Judith Butler: Perhaps the issue is to become less ferocious in our commitments, to question certain forms of blind enthusiasm, and to find forms of steadfastness that include reflective thought. Nonviolence is not so much about the suppression of feeling, but its transformation into forceful intelligence.



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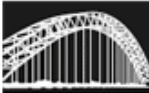
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